

# IN FINE WORKING ORDER

It takes expertise, money, innovation, and a stubborn sense of thrift to keep Montana's 50 state parks and 320 fishing access sites clean, safe, and functional.

**By Will Harmon**

**Photos by FWP Parks Division**

It's a fine and typical Montana spring morning—alternately sunny and snowing—as my tires crunch on the gravel road leading into Salmon Lake State Park just north of the intersection of Montana Highways 200 and 83. Other than a few fidgety chickadees in the pines, the place is deserted, a ghost town of picnic tables and campfire grills.

Deserted, but clearly not neglected. There's not a speck of litter on the ground, the picnic tables are in good trim, and the fire rings have been cleared of trash and coals. The restroom is spotless and odor-free but for a faint whiff of bleach. And there's no trace of graffiti, bullet holes, or other vandalism that can plague remote public recreation sites. The tidiness is palpable, a welcome respite, making it easy to





**FIRED UP** FWP Parks Division maintenance workers say they enjoy the diversity and challenge of their jobs, whether it's installing signs outdoors, sharpening blades in the maintenance shop, or attending to the hundreds of other chores required to maintain state parks and fishing access sites across Montana.

# The tasks and skills required of maintenance workers run the gamut

On any given day they can be building fences or signs, painting structures, or installing new concrete vault latrines or boat docks. Their responsibilities are wide-ranging. Maintenance workers mow lawns, clean boat ramps, haul gravel, and build roads. They install culverts, cattle guards, and gates, as well as control weeds. They winterize irrigation systems, pour concrete sidewalks, build and maintain trails, replace doors and locksets on latrines, and test drinking water. Additionally, they install traffic counters, and locate site boundaries. At historic sites such as Bannack State Park, they also do historical renovation such as replacing windows. In the regional shops, maintenance crews overhaul equipment and tools as well as build cabinets, gates, signs, self-pay stations, picnic tables, bullet

enjoy the sunlight dappling the trees and the murmur of the water lapping on the beach. Salmon Lake is a well-kept oasis of public access and recreation. It's also just one of nearly 400 recreation sites managed and maintained by the Parks Division of Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks.

Most people don't notice the finer points of site maintenance. "We aim to get the job done with the least disturbance to visitors as possible," says Doug Frazier, regional maintenance supervisor in Missoula and a 29-year Parks Division veteran. "We try to take care of litter and vandalism as soon as it happens, so the next people who arrive won't have to see it."

Frazier notes that when a park is kept clean and in good repair, it takes less effort to keep it that way. "We've found that people are less likely to mess up a tidy park," he says. "Good 'curb appeal' reduces littering, vandalism, and other problems."

Reduce perhaps, but never eliminate. Maintenance remains a daunting task. In 2005, there were more than 1.75 million visits to Montana's 50 state parks, and an estimated 4 million visits to the 320 designated fishing access sites (FAS) the Parks Division also manages. (Most site users—70 to 80 percent—are Montana residents.) Though maintaining parks is done by everyone in the Parks Division, it's the primary responsibility of roughly 19 permanent, full-time staff. These maintenance workers are charged with accommodating the steady stream of visitors while preserving the scenery, habitat, facilities, and other features that draw people to the sites in the first place. In addition, a small army of caretakers and other seasonal employees handles day-to-day maintenance

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at specific parks and clusters of FAS during the busy summer months. Jerry Dean, southeastern region maintenance supervisor in Miles City, likes to hire retired Montana ranchers and farmers for this seasonal work. "They know maintenance as well as anyone alive, and they have a strong work ethic," Dean explains.

Volunteers from local communities also help with light maintenance, such as cleaning, fencing, and minor repairs. When necessary, FWP contracts with private businesses for services such as pumping vault toilets, grading roads, abating dust, and controlling weeds.

## Many uses, many duties

Montana's state parks system supports a wide array of uses, including boating, fishing, hiking, wildlife watching, hunting, camping, picnicking, photography, educational field trips, historical and archeological research, and cultural interpretation. Some parks are also used for weddings, family reunions, and other special events.

Given this variety of uses, it's not surprising that parks run from unspoiled natural areas to highly developed urban playgrounds. Some state parks only have a parking lot and trails. Others feature showers,

flush toilets, playground equipment, boat ramps and docks, concession buildings, and state-of-the-art visitor centers. All of it requires maintenance.

Because the scope of their work is so broad, maintenance team members must master many trades. I got to see that as Frazier and his right-hand man, Morgan Dollinger, closed Placid Lake State Park for the winter season. Within 45 minutes they repaired a jammed lockset on a restroom door, drained and winterized the plumbing in the main shower building, shut down the electrical system, covered signs and windows, and welded a broken fire grill. Without missing a beat, they also scoured the grounds for litter, checked the perimeter fence line, and made notes for next year's road grading and tree pruning.

Dollinger says the variety of work is a major attraction of the job, but the sheer volume of maintenance tasks requires careful planning. "We keep a list of all the maintenance needs at every site, so we have several jobs in mind before we drive all the way out here," he says. "Our van is stocked with a wide range of tools, bolts, nuts, and other supplies so we can be as efficient as possible when we're out in the field."

Dollinger makes major repairs and fabrications at the shop, and then trailers the project to the site for installation. "This minimizes any intrusion on park visitors," he says.

Nevertheless, maintenance crews spend much of their time at the parks and fishing access sites, where they frequently come into contact with anglers, picnickers, and other visitors. "It seems like I'm always answering questions about fishing, wildlife, vegetation, local history, and general Fish, Wildlife & Parks information," says John Taillie, a maintenance worker based in Bozeman.

Maintenance work is expensive. Most of the

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## nut from plumbing to plowing.

Also include repairing broken water lines in latrines and roofing buildings. Cut hazard trees, and do landscaping. Also on the work list: Repair and maintain that the building of jack-leg fence, picking up trash, mowing roadsides, installing sill logs and cedar shingles, re-glazing windows, and chinking log cabins. Building boards, cattle guard wings, and trailers.



### ALWAYS SOMETHING

Clockwise from top right: Maintenance workers stain a fee station, mow a picnic area, clean a restroom, and build a picnic shelter.



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FWP Parks Division’s \$5 million annual budget goes to maintenance and related expenses. FWP buys or hires heavy equipment such as road graders and backhoes as well as dump trucks, trailers, mowers, tractors, weed trimmers, and water tanks. Prices for lumber used to build signs, sheds, picnic shelters, and other buildings continue to rise. In the Missoula region alone, maintenance crews maintain more than 350 picnic tables and install nearly 4,000 rolls of toilet paper each year. Contractors charge up to \$150 an hour to pump out a vault toilet—and with nearly 6 million visits to state parks and FAS each

year, the roughly 300 toilets at those sites need constant attention.

Mileage is another major expense, especially with constantly fluctuating fuel prices. Though maintenance workers schedule multiple site visits for each trip afield, some parks and FAS can be two or more hours from the regional headquarters.

Several years ago, FWP faced an alarming backlog of essential maintenance work due to lack of funds. Increased funding from the \$4 voluntary license plate fee (instituted in 2004) has helped. “We’re finally beginning to get ahead on what for years were chronic

maintenance issues like road repair, restroom vandalism, and fencing,” says Tom Greason, maintenance supervisor in the Bozeman region. This past October, his crews reconstructed the gravel road into Grey Cliff FAS on the lower Madison River, the most heavily fished river in Montana.

The new funding helps, but it’s still not enough to fill all the park and access site maintenance needs. John Harwood, former maintenance supervisor in the Billings region, says that one way FWP gets things done with limited resources is through teamwork. Each regional maintenance supervisor regularly

## MY WELL-LIT OFFICE

by John Taillie

It’s 7 a.m. on a Monday. The sky is a brilliant blue, with a few low clouds hanging over the mountains that surround the Gallatin Valley. A few feisty magpies balance on a fence and chatter while I load my pickup with tools and supplies for the day. I pull out of the yard and head into what I like to think of as my “office.”

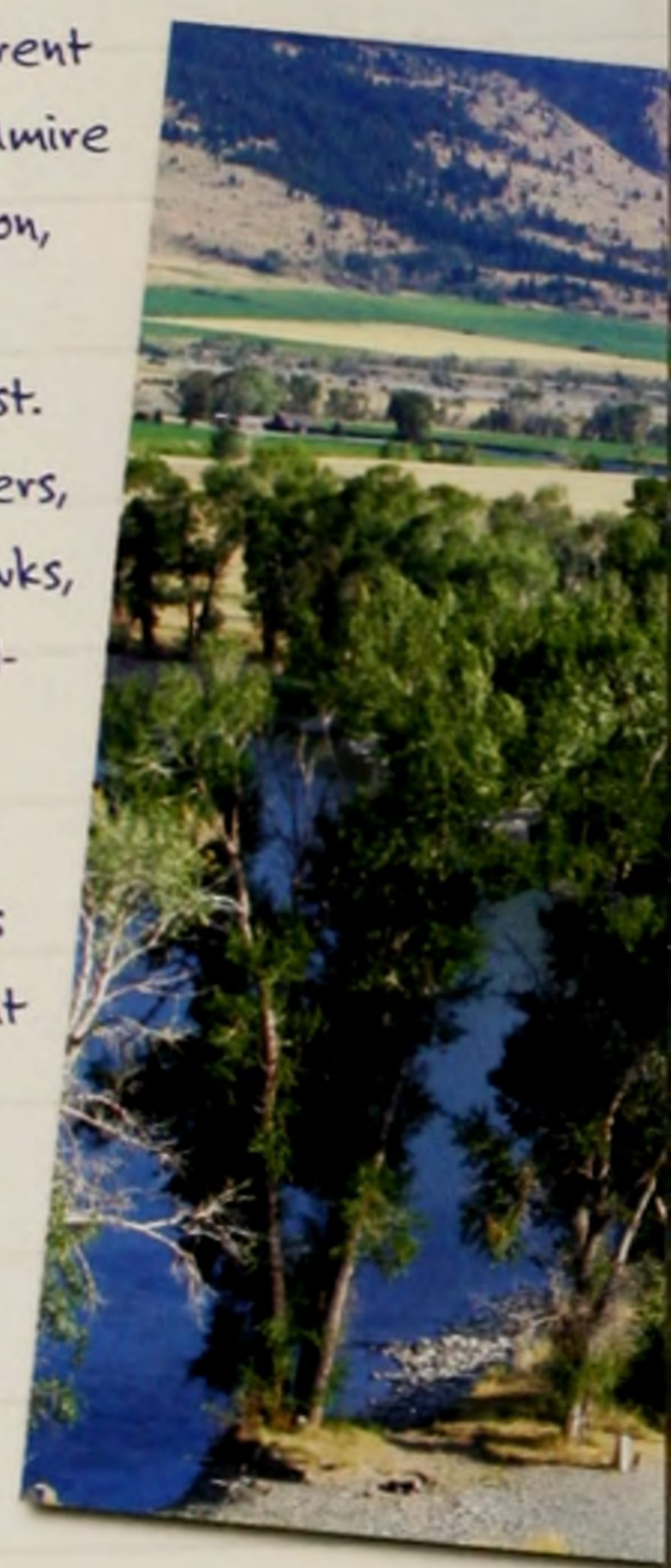
It’s a big space with some mighty fine views. It encompasses over 90 fishing access sites on nine different river drainages in southwestern Montana. One day I might work along the Yellowstone River and get to admire the rugged peaks of the Absaroka Range. The next I could travel to the Big Hole, Ruby, Madison, Jefferson, Beaverhead, Gallatin, or Missouri rivers.

The fishing access sites I maintain have names like Paradise, Salmon Fly, Grey Owl, and Mallards Rest. As the names indicate, I share my office with others. Among my fellow occupants are antelope, elk, beavers, moose, coyotes, deer, and bears. Trout and grayling rise for caddis flies and mayflies. Eagles, swans, hawks, cranes, pelicans, and various waterfowl also frequent these renowned waters that wind through lush valleys often shadowed by towering mountains.

My office is not climate controlled. A thundershower may appear from nowhere and soak me to the skin. Snow squalls are common during the winter, and it gets hot here in midsummer. Yet the air is always clean, and the full-spectrum lighting is always on. My workspace lacks carpeting and framed artwork, but it does have the distinction of being decorated with living wildflowers, cottonwoods, willows, and pines.

The work I do is not easy. But I enjoy spending each workday making Montana state parks and fishing access sites cleaner, safer, and more accessible and experiencing the diversity and richness of Montana’s natural beauty right from my office.

—John Taillie is a Parks Division maintenance worker in Bozeman.



The firewood dispenser at Salmon Lake State Park shows how maintenance workers keep costs down while improving customer service. When a visitor puts money in the slot, an electric motor slides a wood bundle onto a conveyor belt, which delivers it to a small door. The device saves time and ensures park users always have wood available in peak season.



meets with the regional parks manager and park managers to identify the most pressing maintenance needs and who should do what. “Some routine maintenance can be done by park staff more cost effectively than bringing in maintenance crews,” Harwood says.

Another way state parks do more with less is by teaming up with community and civic groups. Members of the Apsáalooke (Crow) Tribe, for example, participate in much of the management and maintenance of Chief Plenty Coups State Park to keep the heavily visited site in tiptop shape. The cooperation also helps fulfill a wish by the great Apsáalooke leader for his people and whites to foster closer ties.

Maintenance crews also use innovation to help keep costs down while improving customer service. One example is at Salmon

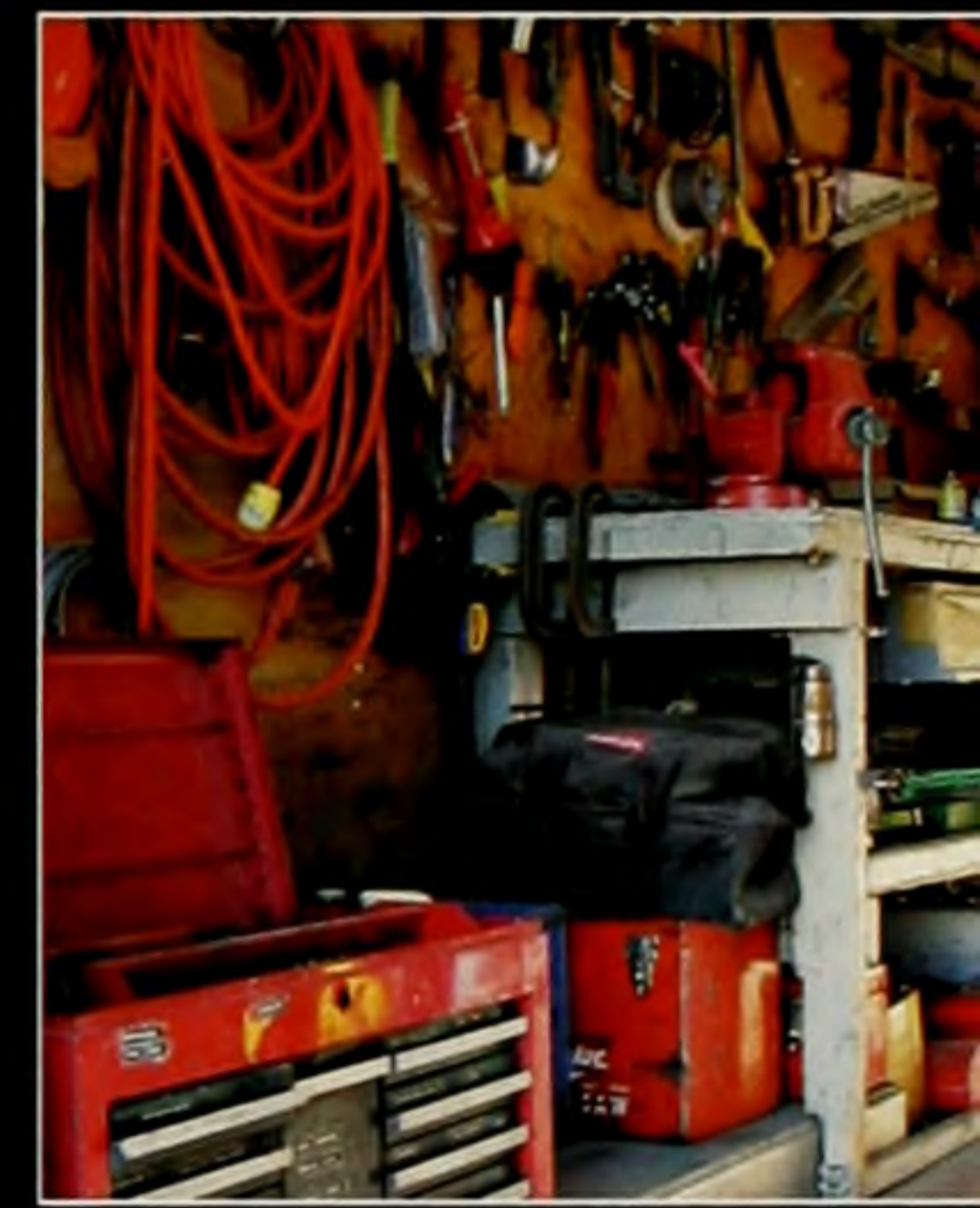
Lake State Park, where the campground host spent hours each week during the high season stocking and selling firewood. To free the host to do other chores, Frazier and Dollinger invented, designed, and built an automatic firewood vending machine. Housed in a small wooden hut that blends into the natural surroundings, the machine supplies firewood to campers like a soda machine dispensing cans of pop.

Thriftiness is another hallmark of the maintenance staff. Supervisors buy supplies in bulk and use one brand of chainsaw and weed cutter to save costs on replacement parts. Southeastern region maintenance supervisor Dean and his crew routinely rebuild old mowers salvaged from state stocks, often eking out five more years of hard use. Dean is particularly proud of a 1978 dump truck his crew uses regularly. It has 1.2 million miles on it. “You can always overhaul these old diesel engines,” says Dean. “My mechanic, a retired rancher, is of the mind that when something’s broken, you don’t replace it, you just take it apart and fix it.”

Thrift, innovation, expertise, and pride are all hallmarks of the maintenance crew members who keep state parks and fishing access sites in fine working order. It’s difficult work, especially considering Montana’s brutal winter and summer weather, along with ever-increasing visitation, which combine to put a constant strain on the buildings, grounds, and other facilities across the state. “But the work has its rewards,” says Taillie, the Bozeman-based maintenance worker. “We enrich people’s experience while they are hunting, fishing, boating, camping, and recreating all across Montana.” 🐾

## From bolts to backhoes

A typical FWP maintenance garage holds a wide array of tools and supplies required to keep state parks and FAS clean, safe, and functional. Maintenance workers must know how to use this equipment safely and keep it in good repair. Open the door of a maintenance shop and you’ll see a water pump, power auger, compressor, generator, jackhammer, paint sprayer, cement mixer, sand blaster, power washer, and several chainsaws. On a rack hang ladders, axes, shovels, rakes, picks, pitchforks, sledge hammers, crosscut saws, spud bars, log peaveys, Pulaskis, and brooms. Stacked on the floor



are rolls of wire, wire stretchers, post-pounders, and electric fence, along with pumps, fittings, pipe, and gaskets. Cleaning supplies include cases of toilet paper and boxes of garbage sacks. In one area sit sacks of cement, lime, and sand. In another are buckets of chain, spools of electrical wire, chest waders, plywood, and a cabinet full of fasteners. Another storage garage contains lawn mowers and tractors, weed trimmers, an ATV, and a large farm tractor with attachments including a mower, post-pounder, and auger. Lumber is stacked on racks.

Outside sits a dump truck and equipment trailer, backhoe, utility trailers, fencing materials, culverts, cattle guards, a rack of PVC and galvanized pipe, new picnic tables, and a water tank. A flammables cabinet contains adhesives, paint, stains, solvents, thinners, varnish, brushes, rollers, and a spray gun. The shop also has a table saw, radial arm saw, and power miter saw. Beside a green canvas welding screen there is a steel workbench with vise, fume exhauster, drill press, acetylene torch, wire feed welder, grinder, chop saw, and a cabinet full of clamps, welding rods, helmets, and gloves. Additional cabinets contain even more tools and hardware that are used, like everything in the shop, to maintain Montana’s system of state parks and fishing access sites.

