

Picking Up After Others

Concerned citizens team up with FWP and other public agencies to clean trash from the Blackfoot, Bitterroot, and Clark Fork rivers.

BY PAMELA J. PODGER

Angler Jacqueline Lanser stands knee deep in the Blackfoot River. But instead of catching rainbow trout, her usual quarry, today she is snagging cans, bottles, shoes, and other debris from the sparkling waters. Helping out are her two nieces, Kyleigh and Danielle Ritchason, along with 135 other anglers, rafters, landowners, business owners, and public agency staff taking part in the sixth annual Blackfoot River Cleanup. “The Blackfoot is a good part of our lives,” says Lanser, who lives in nearby Missoula. “Rivers give to us and we wanted to give back.”

NICE CATCH A young volunteer hoists one of the 1,551 aluminum cans that cleanup crews pulled from the Blackfoot River in a single day last year. Below left: Growing numbers of anglers and floaters mean more trash in some rivers.

BRYAN FRENCH

Montana’s rivers may look clean, but in recent years some have been littered with trash—aluminum cans, glass bottles, plastic water containers, sunglasses, flip-flops, and other garbage tossed or lost by growing numbers of floaters, inner-tubers, kayakers, and anglers. Glass shards, sharp cans, and fish hooks can impale bare feet. And plastic bottles, beer can insulators, and other garbage on river bottoms and banks are eyesores. “It’s really frustrating when you’re outdoors and come across other people’s trash,” says Missoula math teacher Lee Brown, who volunteered for the cleanup with his daughter, Alex.

Montana’s rivers have long been popular. But in recent years, river

use appears to have outpaced the state’s population growth. “We don’t have hard data, but everyone in the river business—agencies and users—seems to agree more people are floating the Blackfoot, Bitterroot, and Clark Fork than ever before,” says Chet Crowser, FWP regional river recreation manager in Missoula. Crowser suspects that several scorching-hot summers over the past decade sent people to rivers for relief, and they’ve continued to return. “After FWP responded to hot temperatures and low river flows with fishing closures, summer angling tapered off and we saw a transition toward floating, swimming, and sunbathing,” he says.

Some litter comes from floaters unwilling to stash their trash.

Some comes from minors dropping their alcohol containers into the river before reaching take-out sites so they aren’t ticketed. But most littering is likely accidental. “A lot of people are floating in inner tubes with coolers, and when they flip, they lose everything,” he says. “It’s not intentional.”

But it is a problem. “When you spot a broken bottle or a beer can reflecting sunlight from the river bottom, it’s not what you want to see on a beautiful river like the Blackfoot,” Crowser says.

Glass containers are now banned on the Blackfoot. The Bureau of Land Management and FWP provide mesh bags to Blackfoot River floaters for personal items and trash. The agencies have also installed



additional latrines and stepped up enforcement of littering laws. Another response has been a growing number of citizen-led river cleanups.

The biggest is on the Blackfoot, where each year volunteers tackle the lower 13 miles of the river upstream of Missoula. FWP estimates the river stretch receives nearly 40,000 “user-days” each year—residents and tourists, college kids and families, inner-tubers out for fun, and serious fly anglers reverently fishing the hallowed waters immortalized by Norman Maclean.

The event is organized by Marietta Pfister, who with her husband, Bob, lives on the river near Bonner. The energetic grandmother runs the cleanup like a military operation. On the morning of the cleanup, volunteers gather at her riverside home, where she displays aerial maps of the Blackfoot and giant organizational whiteboards showing where volunteers will be dispatched throughout the day. FWP Blackfoot River recreation manager Chris Lorentz gives a safety talk to the volunteers before heading out to the river to issue \$85 citations to anyone caught with glass bottles. Ground crews and amateur ham radio operators drive to various checkpoints and help patrol the banks. Other volunteers walk, wade, float, or snorkel while picking up trash. Twenty-two volunteer scuba divers help retrieve bottles, deflated inner tubes, and other unwieldy debris that builds up in the river’s deeper holes.



Among the items collected during the 2009 Blackfoot River Cleanup

- 1,551 aluminum cans*
- 72 glass bottles
- 178 plastic bottles
- 89 shoes
- 14 inner tubes
- 1 raft
- 11 baseball caps and other hats
- 24 sunglasses, most broken
- 1 wallet inside a fanny pack, which was taken to the sheriff's office

*Recycled, with proceeds donated to the local fire department.

Clark Fork River 30 miles west of Missoula. Volunteers in boats and along riverbanks bagged 1,600 pounds of trash, including 40 car, truck, and tractor tires. “We’re getting stuff that’s been in the river for years,” says Crowser, who coordinated the event. In September, roughly 100 people helped remove 1 ton of trash along 55 miles of the Bitterroot River from Painted Rocks

River downstream from Holter Dam.

Charlie Sperry, who coordinates statewide river recreation management for FWP, says the cleanup efforts show that citizens are willing to take on responsibilities for river management. “FWP and other agencies can’t manage all the diverse issues related to rivers on our own,” he says. “We need to work with people who will help us. That’s the kind of relationship building we’re seeing at these cleanup events.”

To help inform people about trash, crowding, and other river problems, FWP, concerned citizens, and a conservation-minded Bozeman ad agency have put together a lively public information campaign called Respect Your Rivers. FWP’s Citizens’ Advisory Committee in southwestern Montana enlisted the help of Brickhouse Creative to produce, at no charge, television and radio PSAs that feature a character called Granny Trout, who chides river users for crowding others, littering, and clogging boat ramps. “Sometimes we can’t solve our problems with more regulations, rationing, or allocation systems,” says Jerry Walker, FWP regional parks manager in Bozeman. “But if we can influence the behavior of people positively, we might be able to solve the problem in a different fashion.”

As the afternoon shadows fall across the Blackfoot, volunteers trickle back from the river. They empty their bags of trash onto a growing pile, culling the recyclables, before washing up and digging into a complimentary barbecue. Over burgers, hot dogs, baked beans, and watermelon, they swap stories about their day—and talk about the bizarre items they extracted from the river, including hypodermic needles, pitchforks, and cell phones.

Marietta Pfister thanks all of the volunteers while ensuring they get enough to eat. “I want people to know the river cleanup is aimed at more than one day,” she says. “I hope to change people’s habits. My goal is that on cleanup day a few years from now, we won’t find any trash in the river.”

See *Granny Trout* videos and other information on river ethics at respectyourrivers.org.



OPERATION CLEAN RIVERS Clockwise from above: Volunteers receive assignments at the Blackfoot cleanup check-in station; FWP and the Bureau of Land Management provide mesh bags to floaters and cleanup crews for carrying trash; scuba divers scour the deepest holes on the Blackfoot River for sunken debris; Blackfoot River volunteers with bags of salvaged cans; FWP regional river recreation manager Chet Crowser (left) and Missoula game warden Aaron Berg with some of the 40 car, truck, and tractor tires pulled from Alberton Gorge on the Clark Fork last year.



More information
To start your own river cleanup or take part in existing efforts, call or e-mail FWP Blackfoot River recreation manager Chris Lorentz at (406) 677-6804, clorentz@mt.gov.

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The Blackfoot cleanup has inspired similar efforts on other western Montana rivers. Last August, FWP coordinated a community cleanup of Alberton Gorge on the lower

Writer Pamela J. Podger recently moved from Missoula to Vermont.

Reservoir to Florence. Organizer Don McGourty says volunteers on the third annual cleanup retrieved car parts, beer cans, tires, hubcaps, and discarded cell phones. For the past two years, Adventures Unlimited and Save the American River Association have sponsored a cleanup along the Missouri



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