

Off to a Wild Start

I'm excited to announce that, after five years of planning, fund-raising, and construction, Montana Wild is officially open.

Montana Wild is FWP's new outdoors learning center and wildlife rehabilitation facility, along with 5 acres of land, all of which are part of the Spring Meadow Lake State Park complex in Helena. The learning center occupies a fully refurbished building, originally built in 1892, that once housed the Stedman Foundry and Machine Company. Inside the 7,000-square-foot building are meeting areas—already being used by local conservation groups—and a hands-on science laboratory with microscopes and animal skulls. A central exhibit area features a stream aquarium soon to contain live trout, sauger, and channel catfish. In the works are plans for interpretive displays and a diorama, as well as video cameras that will show visitors live black bears at the wildlife rehabilitation facility next door.

Funding to acquire and refurbish Montana Wild came from the Helena-based

Foundation for Animals, state and federal grants, insurance money after two fires at the foundry building, and some fishing and hunting license revenue.

Outside, work is almost complete on Montana Wild's new youth archery range, a paved trail to Spring Meadow Lake, and a fishing dock. Raptor perching pens will allow visitors to see the great horned owl and other "ambassador birds" at the rehab center. Also in the works are demonstration gardens, a birding trail, a natural play area with trails and shallow water discovery sites, and an outdoor amphitheater.

Montana Wild was created to sustain our state's high quality of life. Montana is famous for its wildness. Hunting, fishing, camping, hiking, and wildlife watching in scenic mountains and open prairies are what make us who we are—not to mention attracting visitors who fuel our state's valuable tourism economy. But to conserve clean water, healthy

forests, diverse sagebrush steppes, and fish and wildlife populations, we need people who value the natural world and help out in its stewardship.

People care about what they understand and experience firsthand. That's the purpose of Montana Wild—to provide an entry-level opportunity for Montanans to learn about and enjoy the outdoors so they become stewards of our natural resources.

Staff at Montana Wild have been working with the state Office of Public Instruction, school districts, and the Governor and First Lady's Math and Science Initiative.

Kids can learn about the physics of a grizzly bear's jaw, or how algebra assists in trout management.

One idea is for the center to inspire students to study and pursue careers in science, mathematics, engineering, and technology. Promoting these academic fields through the outdoors may sound odd, but it actually makes sense. Many kids are intrigued by wildlife but not math and science. At Montana Wild they can learn how, for instance, the laws of physics allow a grizzly bear's jaw to crush a moose femur, algebra assists in trout management, and chemistry makes a prairie rattlesnake's venom deadly to small mammals.

There's no guarantee such lively lessons will create new physicists, mathematicians, or chemists, but education experts think it could help. What's more, this approach will bring students outdoors during some science and math classes, which can help offset the increasingly sedentary lifestyle of so many young people these days.

At FWP, we want to see kids fired up about spending time outdoors. Montana Wild is just the place to ignite that flame.

—Joe Maurier, Montana FWP Director

To volunteer at the outdoors learning center or make a donation for interpretive displays, e-mail Laurie Evarts at levarts@mt.gov.



KENTON E. ROWE

FWP's new outdoors learning center introduces young people to nature and its wild inhabitants.