

From To Abstraction Reality

At FWP's **Montana WILD** education facility, kids and adults discover, appreciate, and take pride in the natural surroundings where they live.

By Tom Dickson
Photos by Thom Bridge



CENTER STAGE Surrounded by wildlife mounts in the Montana WILD education facility, FWP Angler Education Program coordinator Dave Hagengruber explains to Billings-area fourth-graders the difference between native and non-native fish species. Students travel to Montana WILD from throughout the state to learn about fish, wildlife, state parks, and how FWP and citizens work together to conserve these resources for the good of Montana.



EYE OPENER “A lot of these kids have never been outside of Billings before,” says one teacher. “Coming here lets them see what Montana is all about.”

On a breezy Wednesday morning in May, two chartered buses pull into the Montana WILD parking lot in Helena, open their doors, and disgorge 67 fourth-graders from Big Sky Elementary School in Billings. When the kids enter the education facility, they don’t know where to look. The bright, high-ceilinged building is filled with dozens of wildlife mounts.

A mountain lion prowls a rock archway. Two mule deer bucks run across a prairie. A mother black bear stands below a tree where her cub has climbed. While a herd of bighorn sheep graze nearby, a pronghorn crawls under a fence. Museum-quality aquariums designed to look like real rivers contain live trout, walleye, bass, suckers, and other fish. Kids are encouraged to touch

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and handle most items on display.

As their teachers check in with Ryan Schmaltz, who runs the front desk and helps with education programs, the children race about looking at exhibits. One wide-eyed boy stops and stares at a full-size grizzly bear and her two cubs, saying to no one in particular, “This place is awesome.”

Montana WILD is no ordinary science classroom. The building is a restored limestone foundry built in 1892, now staffed by Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks education

specialists who run science and conservation education programs. Throughout the school year, students from across the state visit the center to learn about Montana mammals, fish, reptiles, and ecosystems, along with fisheries and wildlife management and the role of citizens in conservation. During free evening programs, instructors teach kids and adults about fly-fishing, kayaking, archery, raptors, and more. Several times each summer, volunteer bat experts lead twilight tours, showing participants how to use ultrasound equipment to identify the species of winged mammals flitting overhead.

By tailoring programs to where people live, Montana WILD sends visitors home with a new appreciation of their local environments. “What we ultimately aim for here is more than just learning,” says Thomas Baumeister, chief of the FWP Conservation Education Bureau. “We want to see an awakening, where youth and adults who come here understand and then value their own environment and feel excited and proud about their wild neighbors—the deer, the



ALL EARS Ryan Schmaltz explains the day’s activities to students. A North Dakota game warden before moving to Montana, Schmaltz says he enjoys the kids’ enthusiasm and attention. “At this age, they listen to everything you say about wildlife and fish.”

antelope, the trout, the raptors—that make Montana the special place we love.”

BUSY DAY

Schmaltz divides the Billings students into three groups and explains the day’s activities: a scavenger hunt in the main exhibit hall, a science field investigation and bird survey at adjacent Spring Meadow Lake State Park, and a bear awareness program in the facility’s auditorium.

Friends Zoe and Gracie team up for the scavenger hunt. Rushing from one exhibit to the next, they count the teeth in a deer skull (32), measure the tail of a mountain lion pelt (31 inches), learn how many cutworm moth larvae a grizzly bear consumes in a day (about 40,000), weigh bighorn sheep horns and elk antlers (24 and 26 pounds, respectively), and learn what a lynx likes to eat (snowshoe hares). Zoe studies a display on ospreys and tries to

figure out why discarded baling twine is bad for the raptors. “I think they might get tangled up and die,” she says.

Julie Dawkins, one of three teachers accompanying the group, marvels at the buzz of activity. “A lot of these kids have never been outside of Billings before,” she says. “Coming here lets them see what’s in Montana, what this state is all about.”

At the aquariums, a dozen students who had been studying fish identification as part of the scavenger hunt surround aquatic education specialist Dave Hagenrubler.

“How do you tell a cutthroat from a rainbow?” he asks.

“The cutthroat has a ‘cut’ throat,” shouts one boy, referring to the orange slash below the fish’s lower jaw.

“Right. How do you identify a catfish, using the right term?”

“By the *barbels*,” one girl quickly answers. Outside, two dozen students follow a path

to Spring Meadow Lake. Kurt Cunningham, a veteran FWP educator, leads them near the shoreline. “These are water-loving shrubs,” he says, pointing to a stand of willows. “Does anyone know what *kind* of shrubs they are?”

“Water-loving shrubs!” the kids cry out in unison.

These are fourth-graders, after all.

Cunningham takes the students to the water’s edge. A red-winged blackbird scolds from a nearby cattail marsh, while tree swallows swoop over the lake surface. A double-breasted cormorant dives then surfaces with a small trout in its bill, swallowing the fish in one gulp. “Cool!” the kids shout out. Cunningham points to a robin’s nest in a cottonwood, the mother’s tail peeking out from the small basket of woven twigs. “She’s sitting on her eggs,” he whispers. “The chicks will probably hatch in a few days.” The children scribble in their notepads in preparation for a quiz back inside.

For older students, lessons at Montana WILD are more complex. Working in teams, some hone math skills to determine how many fish live in a river. Others devise ways to reduce conflicts between mountain lions and people. Students learn how fisheries and wildlife biologists use math (modeling elk populations), science (analyzing DNA to survey fisheries), and technology (tracking wolverines with GPS radio collars).

Students also hear conservation success stories. “We show them how regular people are out doing things to restore and preserve Montana, like conserving grasslands with rotational grazing or planting native prairie plants,” says Education Section supervisor Laurie Wolf. “Then we have them actually do things for conservation, like decorate plastic markers that prevent sage-grouse from flying into barbed-wire fences.”



RESTORATION From left to right: The Montana WILD site in Helena originally contained a sand and gravel pit and the Stedman Foundry and Machine Company. The renovated building is now a learning center.





AWARE OF BEARS Students answer questions posed by Laurie Wolf, Education Section supervisor, during a presentation on grizzlies. Her talk includes information on safety in bear country, the importance of protecting habitat, and the role of hunters in funding management work.

CRAVING INFORMATION

Evening adult and family events can be standing room only, like several this past winter on grizzly bear awareness and bear spray training that attracted dozens of mountain bikers, anglers, hunters, hikers, trail runners, and others. Like so many Montana WILD sessions, the bear programs were led by volunteers, in this case Bill and Marti Cook of Helena, who've been volunteering at the education center for five years. "Our volunteers are just amazing," says Wolf. "We couldn't provide this service without them."

Upstairs in the Montana WILD offices, FWP staff coordinate statewide educational programs such as Hooked on Fishing, which teaches students about Montana's rivers, lakes, fish, and other aquatic life. Wayde Cooperider and assistant Sara Smith run the Hunter and Bowhunter Education Programs, through which 1,500 volunteer instructors across Montana teach youth and adult hunters the basics of firearms and bowhunting safety, hunting ethics, and game animal identification. Becoming an Outdoors-

Woman, coordinated by longtime FWP educator Liz Lodman, provides opportunities for adult women to learn outdoor skills such as fishing, shooting, archery, and kayaking while building confidence in the outdoors.

In a typical year, Montana WILD sees 3,500 to 4,000 school kids, bused in from across the state thanks to special funding from the Montana Legislature. Roughly 1,000 kids from youth groups visit, too, along with 2,000 to 3,000 children and adults who participate in programs at the site, and another 3,500 who attend off-site programs. "This really has become the epicenter for learning about wildlife and the outdoors in Montana," Baumeister says.



For information on youth and family programs, hours, and dates, visit fwp.mt.gov/education/montanaWild or call (406) 444-9944.

By now, the students in the building have crowded around Lisa Rhodin, who carries a great horned owl on her leather-gloved wrist. The raptor, whose wing is irreparably damaged, is an "ambassador bird" from the FWP Wildlife Rehabilitation Center next door, which Rhodin supervises. Rhodin, local veterinarians, and other devoted volunteers treat and release, back into the wild when possible, wounded birds of prey and orphaned black bears.

The kids stand transfixed as Rhodin explains how the bird's talons work for killing prey and its head shape and ear position allow it to hear mice scurrying under snow. "What you see here is the process of making connections," Baumeister says. "In a school classroom, kids may learn about owls, but here we make that concept real and relevant. They see a live great horned owl up close. They learn that these birds live all over Montana, probably near where they live. Suddenly, you see it in their eyes. They're thinking about when they go home and how they will be out looking for owls. That's how you get a



ACTION-PACKED PLACE Top: Several times each summer, Helenan Matt Bell and other bat experts lead twilight tours and show participants how to use ultrasound devices to identify the species of winged mammals flying overhead. Bottom left: Becoming an OutdoorsWoman coordinator Liz Lodman says the education program builds confidence in the outdoors for participants, many of whom learn to cast a fly rod, fire a gun, and set up a tent for the first time in their lives. Bottom right: Montana WILD includes a 50-foot range where kids and adults learn about and practice archery.





SEEING FOR THEMSELVES Youth Education Program manager Kurt Cunningham shows fourth-graders a robin's nest. "She's sitting on her eggs," he whispers. "The chicks will probably hatch in a few days." Experiences like these can motivate kids to learn more about the outdoors.

young person engaged with wildlife and plant the seed for wildlife conservation."

THE KIDS GET IT

You'd think nine- and ten-year-olds would be bored by a one-hour PowerPoint presentation. But in the darkened Montana WILD auditorium, students watch intently as

Laurie Wolf shows photos of black bears and grizzlies while explaining how to tell the species apart. "Grizzlies have a muscular hump on their back, longer claws, and round ears," she explains. "Don't use color to try to identify bears, because many black bears can be cinnamon or even brown." She moves through slides of the grizzly's histor-

ical range and explains how habitat loss and poaching led to the species' decline. Then Wolf raises a question that even many adults can't answer correctly.

"Where do we get the money to conserve grizzly bears, along with black bears, mountain lions, elk, and other wildlife?"

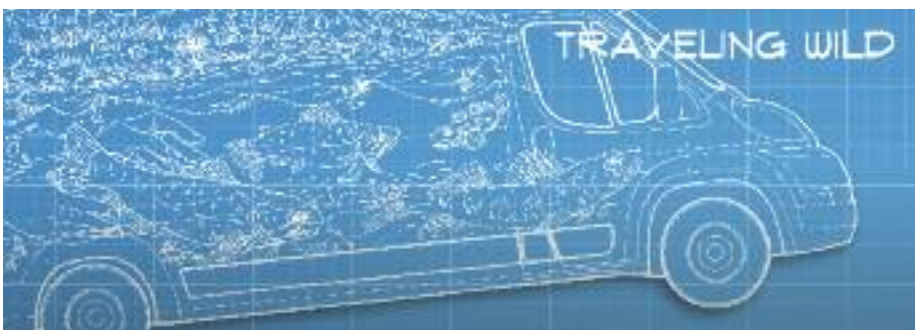
The kids don't know. She waits a few more seconds. Then one boy raises his hand: "Hunters?"

"Yes, exactly," Wolf says. "Hunters pay for almost all wildlife management we do in Montana, including the work to conserve grizzly bears."

Wolf next shows the kids pictures of biologists fitting radio collars on sedated grizzlies so the bears' movements can be tracked and analyzed. Then she shows them a video of a grizzly rubbing its back on a tree, from which researchers later gathered hair for DNA analysis. She talks about bear safety and how and when to use bear spray.

"Let's say you're on a trail, and you see a bear that's 100 yards away. What do you do?" she asks.

These fourth-graders know the answer. If you don't, you might want to consider visiting Montana WILD one of these days. 🐻



Coming soon to a town near you

Starting this summer, FWP is sending an outdoor educator on the road to deliver Montana WILD programs to far-flung communities across Montana. The "Traveling WILD" education van will visit fishing events held by local conservation clubs and groups like Walleyes Unlimited and Trout Unlimited, as well as community fairs. At the events, a Montana WILD educator will conduct free fishing clinics for kids and adults. Afterward, Traveling WILD will hold additional outdoor education programs at the local library or community center before heading on to the next town. Funding for the vehicle and staff time comes from a \$110,000 grant from the Montana Outdoors Legacy Foundation, which raises money to help fund FWP fish and wildlife conservation projects (mtoutdoorlegacy.org).



RAPT BY RAPTOR "Bringing people face to face with one of our ambassador raptors like this adult male kestrel keeps wildlife from being just an abstraction," says Lisa Rhodin, who coordinates the wildlife rehabilitation center next to Montana WILD. "Showing people raptors also puts a friendly face on FWP. Below: FWP intern Sarah Roberts hands out binoculars to each student and shows them how to focus on distant objects. "What we ultimately aim for here is more than just learning," says Thomas Baumeister, chief of the FWP Conservation Education Bureau. "We want to see an awakening among visitors, who then go home and feel excited and proud about their wild neighbors."

