

FLATHEAD AUDUBON RECOGNIZES RAILS-TO-TRAILS

Flathead Audubon's second 2003 Recognition of Outstanding Conservation Achievement was presented to Helen Piling at our February meeting. Helen is the President of Rails-to-Trails of Northwest Montana, the group that works to develop trails here in the Flathead.

Below is a history of the local rails-to-trails effort that was presented at the February meeting by FAS member Don Snow. Don is also a member of the local Rails-to-Trails group. Because Helen was not able to attend the meeting, Don was entrusted with a Flathead Audubon coffee mug to give to her.

The local Rails-to-Trails group is currently raising funds for trails in the Flathead. Donations can be sent to: Rails-to-Trails of NW Montana, PO Box 11-3, Kalispell, MT 59903-1103.

A great way to donate is to buy a Rails-to-Trails brick for \$50 which will be mounted in a wall at the head of a local trail. Each brick you buy can be inscribed with your name, or the name of someone who you wish to honor by your donation. For each brick, send to the above address \$50, the name you wish to have inscribed, and where you want the brick to be mounted (the Meridian entrance to Ashley Creek Trail or the Somers entrance to the Somers Trail).

A HISTORY OF RAILS-TO-TRAILS

The rail/trail movement came into being in the early 1980s. About 1984 a National Rail to Trail Conservancy was founded. A few years later a couple in Kalispell came to a Bicycle Club meeting with a proposal for looking into the possibility of making a trail on the former Great Northern Railroad bed to Marion. Several of the Bike Club members listened, liked the suggestion and agreed to meet for a discussion of the possibility. At that meeting it was decided that we should incorporate, get 501 C tax-exempt status, and see what we could accomplish.

That was in late 1988. From then until now, years were spent trying to learn what needed to be done, getting out the message about our goals, and raising funds to accomplish them. Our first success was in 1992 when the county decided to allow us to use the one mile of railroad bed that extended east from Dern Road. In October of that year the first section, which we called the Ashley Creek trail, was formally opened.

Then came several years of frustration due to not knowing how to get cooperation from Burlington Northern Railroad to allow a rail with trail. Someone who lives just off Highway 2 and used the trail joined our group. She was determined to find a way to get the Railroad to respond and she did. After many delays, stalling and setbacks, Burlington Northern finally caved in and agreed it was possible. Upon getting the agreement with Burlington Northern we then had to set about raising the matching funds to get federal CTEP funds to build it. Permits and engineering and design took what seemed like forever, but eventually things were in place. In October 2001 a paved mile of 10-foot wide trail going west from Meridian Road to our first (unpaved) section was formally opened.

That actually was the third mile of trail. About four years before, the Flathead County Parks Department planned to purchase the Burlington Northern right-of-way from Somers north to Highway 83 and keep it available for a trail. The amount they set aside for the purchase was far more than the appraised value of the right-of-way. So the Parks Department decided to use the excess to build the trail right then. The opening was in fall 1998. That was a one and one-quarter mile paved trail, and a very nice one at that.

That brings us to the present. If all goes as expected (and hoped), the trail we called Ashley will be completed this spring, and likely also, a non-railroad section from Dern road along Highway 2 to Whalebone. Also probable this spring is the opening of a non-paved portion west from Whalebone Drive to where the trail first crosses Ashley Creek, near Julie's Restaurant.

The goal is to have the trail into Kila finished as soon as matching funds can be raised. Each \$13.40 we can raise will be matched with \$86.60 of federal funds to give a full \$100 for the project. The folks in Kila are very anxious to see the trail there to protect children going to and from school. The Kila people have contributed immensely in time, effort, and money to help this project on its way. This summer and fall with a grant from Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks and contributions of time, labor, and equipment from several generous excavating companies, nine culverts were put in place to make the trail useable. But at this point it is still unpaved. Because the trail crosses Ashley Creek twice, it may be a few years before a paved trail will be completed to Kila. The delay is due to the cost of bridges over Ashley Creek. The Montana Department of Transportation plans to rebuild Highway 2 west of Kalispell and the first thing they must do is replace the Ashley Creek bridges, which are in deplorable shape. The Department of Transportation has told us they will add a sidewalk/bicycle path on the outside of the bridges when they are replaced, which will spare our group from having to raise a very large sum of money for the two bridges.

Anyone interested in learning more about the National Rails to Trails Conservancy can visit their web site, Traillink.com. This site provides information about which states have how much trail. I believe there are 11, 313 miles in 1,109 trails in the whole United States. Minnesota, Michigan and Wisconsin have 3,769 miles together. As of now, Montana has 11 trails with a total of 42 miles.

By Don Snow