

## Owen Sowerwine Natural Area Fall Report October 2020

Dear Committee members and other interested parties – in lieu of holding a fall meeting, we have decided to send a written report. We currently don't have items that would require action by the Committee, so this is intended as an update so you can catch up on the work Flathead Audubon has been doing in their capacity as managers and DNRC special use permit holders of OSNA, in conjunction with Montana Audubon. We are currently operating under an annual special use permit rather than a 10-year lease because DNRC would like to see a long-term arrangement rather than continuing as we have over the past few decades. They have agreed to at least 2 one-year permits to allow time for us to investigate long-term arrangements. Cory Davis, who coordinates our exploration team, will offer an update of this later in this report.

If you have questions, please feel free to contact one of the co-chairs of the Owen Sowerwine Committee: Pam Willison ([pam@flatheadaudubon.org](mailto:pam@flatheadaudubon.org)), Cory Davis ([cory@flatheadaudubon.org](mailto:cory@flatheadaudubon.org)), or Bob Lee ([bob@flatheadaudubon.org](mailto:bob@flatheadaudubon.org)).

### **OSNA News, Volunteer Work, and Invasive Control - by Pam Willison**

In May and June of this year, FAS President Gael Bissell and I worked with the County Road Department to find some solutions to the parking issues and complaints, which were mostly on Treasure Lane. Most of the problems stem from the fact that Treasure Lane is only a 30' right-of-way, so there is no legal way to park on the shoulders of that road, without intruding on private property or obstructing the roadway. The final result was action by the Flathead County Commissioners to approve the installation of No Parking signs the length of Treasure Lane, and to approve work by the Road Department to improve the parking areas with some clearing and installation of fill to create a wider and more well-defined area for parking. Although everything didn't exactly turn out as we might have wanted, these actions do at least finally resolve the questions about where visitors to OSNA can legally park. We also purchased some signs to install that designate the parking area, and these should be up soon. There are essentially 3 parking spots at Treasure Lane, and 2 at Greenridge. However, at Greenridge, people can legally park off the edge of the road because it's a 60' right-of-way.

To meet reporting requirements, I prepared the Bi-Annual report and sent it to DNRC in February 2020. Also, I prepared and sent the weed log to the County Weed Department at the end of 2019, summarizing all the volunteer and contractor work that was done in 2019. A weed log will also be done in December 2020. In July I met with Noel Jinings of the County Weed Department and we walked through the mainland area of OSNA. She feels we are doing a good job and encouraged us to maintain our progress.

Weeds and invasive plant species continue to be addressed as time and money allow. We were awarded a 75% matching grant for up to \$2000 for weed control through the Flathead Conservation District to be used in 2020. To date, we have had weed contractors spray targeted areas of OSNA on six visits. We targeted the south and west fence lines where we

border neighbors, the entrances and trails, and the interior area of the education trail. The last brief fall treatment was directed toward an outbreak of cheat grass and daisy on the NE bank of the slough.

In addition to spraying by contractors, we have made progress through volunteer work. Denny Olson, Will Beyer, Rod Walette, Derrick Rathe, and I did some work on Common Buckthorn by cutting and treating of stumps along the Education Trail and entrance, along a section of Greenridge Trail, and at the Treasure Lane entrance. However, due to the pervasiveness of this invasive, the possibility of eradication is beyond the physical and financial limits of Flathead Audubon, so no future work on Common Buckthorn is planned.

We continue to make progress in cutting and bagging seed heads for houndstongue and Canada thistle, and digging or pulling and removing oxeye daisy along trails, and removing minor spots of spotted knapweed. Will Beyer has stepped forward to be a stalwart volunteer, making numerous trips to OSNA this summer to spend hours cutting and bagging houndstongue seed heads to support the efforts of spraying. Houndstongue is a two-year plant, so by removing mature seed heads, it reduced the seed supply in the area, which reduces the new plants in the coming years. Also, in the early spring the invasive Daphne is showing beautiful and fragrant lavender stocks of blossoms, making them easy to locate and cut. In April, I worked several days on the Treasure Lane trail, and Denny Olson and I spent a day cutting Daphne on the Education Trail and entrance.

Rick Mace and several other volunteers were busy this year clearing fallen trees and large limbs, as a result of the many intense wind events we've had since last fall. We lost a few large cottonwood trees or treetops, but there were still plenty of nesting and feeding sites for all the birds that call OSNA home. The wind damage was a great example of the life cycle and resilience of cottonwood.

Eight enthusiastic volunteers reported to work on October 3<sup>rd</sup> for the fall work day at Owen Sowerwine. We worked from 9 - noon on a beautiful fall day. Many thanks to: Rod, Will, Gael, Rick, Tom, Cindy, Denny, and Pam. The projects for the day were intended to separate people so they could work at a safety level at which they felt comfortable. Rod trimmed back shrubs along the trails; Gael cut and bagged thistle and houndstongue seed heads at the Greenridge entrance; Will ran the mower to trim the grass on the edges of the trails; Rick cleared fallen trees and assisted Will; and Denny, Tom, Cindy and Pam worked on the Education Trail where they gathered brush, limbs, and logs and did some fancy weaving to create blinds at the 2 observations points that overlook nesting box sites on the river and slough.

It was obvious last spring and throughout the summer, that the visitation to OSNA was above average. Last spring, it was common to see an adult with several school aged kids walking the trails. With kids at home and doing school online, it looks like people were looking for places to get outside and get some fresh air and exercise to counteract the effects of the shutdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic. We are proud that Owen Sowerwine was being explored and appreciated by some many people this year, but it's unfortunate that the parking in not

adequate to accommodate the demand. This continues to be something that needs a solution, possibly to be addressed in association with a new long-term management arrangement.

Also, because of the COVID-19 pandemic, Denny Olson, Conservation Educator for Flathead Audubon, was not able to conduct field trips on the new Education Trail. So, although we were finally able to create the trail in 2019, had an agreement with Kalispell Montessori to use their parking area for bus unloading and loading, had the trail markers installed, and Denny had written a trail guide for field trip leaders, the wind got taken out of our sails. We still anxiously await the chance to bring school groups onto the Education Trail and share the natural wonders of OSNA with them.

### **Status of a long-term conservation option - by Cory Davis**

Gael Bissell, Cory Davis, and Amy Seaman (MT Audubon) have been meeting monthly with staff of DNRC and Montana FWP to explore long-term conservation options for OSNA. At this point, we have exhausted most of our options, and are currently working on what a conservation easement held by Flathead Land Trust (FLT) would like for all parties. Laura Katzman and Paul Travis of FLT have been very helpful and encouraging as we pursue this avenue. The management roles for Flathead Audubon and Montana Audubon in this type of arrangement are still unclear. We still have many conversations and decisions ahead of us regarding this option and will bring any proposal to the full Board of Directors for both FAS and MT Audubon before a decision is made.