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Eye on the Environment

Wildlands Volunteers

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The summer of 2010 may have been short, but we managed to pack in two field projects and along the way involve a stellar bunch of young people hailing from Whitefish to Missoula.

Our Wildlands Volunteer Corps (WVC) offers high school students the rare opportunity to engage in field biology surveys and monitoring work. The WVC's mission is to both inspire young people to pursue education and careers in ecology and natural resources as well as to teach them tangible skills along the way.

This year, with funding from a US Forest Service grant called "More Kids in the Woods," 20 young people put in a total of 46 field days in the Swan Valley.

This year, our Wildlands Volunteers joined us for two distinct efforts. First, they helped us continue our work with the USGS, following on the heels of the Northern Divide Grizzly Bear Project: namely, hiking to barbed wire sets situated around the valley to collect bear hair which will yield genetic information about grizzly populations in the region.



Wildlands Volunteers Jake Morison and Tanner Thomas collecting bear hair. Photo by Colleen Ferris.

Volunteers also helped with our survey work in the far-flung upper tributaries of Cold Creek searching for cutthroat trout. This fish survey work is intended to identify the population distribution of cutts across the whole Cold Creek drainage and to gather minute tissue samples for genetic analysis. The genetic work, which may not be complete for a year or more, will determine whether – and to what extent – Cold Creek's remaining native cutthroat have hybridized with non-native rainbow trout.

Our volunteers experienced all the thrills of victory and the agonies of defeat typical of field work. Armed with heavy gear and nets, it might take over a half-hour to bushwhack a mere several hundred yards through the Mission Mountain's finest yew and devil's club

patches. And the crew might not find one fish.

But there was the afternoon, also, of barely being able to keep track of all the tailed frog tadpoles turning up inadvertently in our nets (74 in one memorable 50 meter reach of stream!). Sometimes a crew would drive and hike a full morning to reach a bear hair set only to find it empty, while occasionally running across a motherlode – multiple clumps of long, wiry guard hairs caught all over the wire and tree bark.

These young folks practiced their map reading and navigation skills, learned how to use a gps unit, figured out how and what to pack for a full day's field work, how to travel safely through bear country, how to take careful scientific notes and just how enthusiastic adults can be about studying native fish and large mammals in the field. They learned how to tell a brook trout from a cutthroat trout, grizzly hair from black bear hair, and what alpenglow looks like on the Swan crest.

Alumni of the WVC have, indeed, gone on to careers with, among others, the BLM and Forest Service. Some are currently pursuing Master's and Doctorate degrees in ecology and environmental science. One alum, Signe Leirfallom, works at the Forest Service's Fire Lab in Missoula.

Signe joined Bob Keane, a Fire Lab researcher, on a hike across Napa Ridge with our volunteers on the final day of the WVC season. They had both driven up from Missoula to share stories about whitebark pine, Clark's nutcrackers, grizzly bears, and fire science. And to let our teenagers know that big decisions

about restoration and conservation of native species would ultimately wind up in their hands.

It turns out that it was Signe who was instrumental in helping us obtain the More Kids in the Woods grant because she wanted to see other teens have the same opportunity she did to do field work, even if it meant they'd be swatting clouds of mosquitoes, pouring buckets of water out of their waders at lunch time, and having to be endlessly vigilant about bears, moose and lions.

We hope to continue working with high school students on these and other field projects and hope to hear from alumni about where their experiences here took them.