

Free Flows

A Quarterly Publication

Fall 2017

In This Issue

Hyde Boat Raffle Winner
Board Member Changes
Cooperative Efforts
102 Birds Identified
Native Fish Restoration
Big Hole River Day Results



BIG HOLE RIVER
FOUNDATION

The Big Hole River Foundation's mission is to conserve, enhance and protect the free-flowing character of the Big Hole River, its unique culture, fish and wildlife.

Upcoming Events

Annual Christmas
Dinner with Board and
Staff - December TBD

2018 Kid's Day - May 5

Hyde Drift Boat Raffle Winner

Congratulations to Todd Rakich of Butte on winning the Hyde Drift Boat Raffle. Enjoy your new boat, Todd!

Thank you to everyone who purchased raffle tickets this year and the outlets around the area that sold tickets for us.



Big Hole River Day - Fun for all Ages



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Brittany's Message

A lot has happened since our last newsletter- Big Hole River Day, board changes, and restoration in the Valley. Let's catch everyone up!

In July, we partnered with Wise River Club to host our annual fundraiser and community event-- Big Hole River Day. The day was packed full of fun activities and entertainment. Even though a midday rainstorm swept through providing intense, but much-needed precipitation, Big Hole River Day was still a success. We were able to raise funds towards our important conservation, education, and outreach efforts. Thank you to everyone who attended, donated, and purchased-- especially those who traveled and braved the downpour to support the River!

Also, over the past few months our board has changed! Tom Welsch, stepped down as our board Chairman to step up his chase of topnotch fishing! Thank you, Tom, for your relentless pursuit to protect, conserve, and enhance the beloved Big Hole River. Also leaving due to heavy workloads and family obligations are Bill Melvin and Zac and Sarah Sexton. Good luck to each of you and we look forward to seeing you return in the future.

Stepping into the Chairman role is our own Wade Fellin. Wade has served as a devoted Big Hole River Foundation board member and officer for many years and will now step into the captain's chair. We also welcomed new board member and officer, Sarah Ashworth. Sarah recently joined the Wise River community from Virginia and we are happy to gain her expertise and knowledge.

Over the summer, Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks continued work on native fish restoration projects, which aimed to prevent extirpation of native westslope cutthroat trout in two Big Hole tributaries. Landowners and residents raised concerns about the projects in print and during a community meeting in Wise River. People's passions showed through and the conversation was contentious at times, but open dialogue, community involvement, and transparency are all necessary for successful conservation efforts. Learn more about the Big Hole's native fish restoration efforts in this newsletter.

Lastly, we are entering our end-of-the-year fundraising push. We are at the end of our third and final year of the Foothills Foundation Challenge. Created by philanthropist and business executive Gary Bechtel, the Foothills Foundation challenges small non-profits to raise \$25,000 per year in new donations. If successful, Foothills will match the funds. Currently, we are about \$9,000 shy of our fundraising goal. These funds go a long way in helping us implement our programs and achieve our conservation and restoration goals. All new donations or those that are a significant increase over a donor's normal yearly donation count towards this challenge. Please make a "challenge" tax-deductible gift today to help us get over the finish line!

We have a lot of work ahead on some new and exciting programs that will help us achieve our mission and conserve the Big Hole River Watershed for generations to come!

Brittany

Wade's Message

This is a new beginning for the Big Hole River Foundation. Thanks to the generosity of the Foothills Foundation, we are poised to unveil a new strategic plan that will help all the communities of the Big Hole valley benefit next year and beyond.

We have built a new platform for this organization on the firm foundations laid by our President, Tom Welsch, who has constructed a successful organization through many years of hard work. I personally extend a huge thank you to Tom for his leadership and commitment to the Big Hole River community through his service as president of the Big Hole River Foundation.

We are going to operate from now on with a new structure to better deliver the goals targeted in our strategic plan, goals that are of widespread benefit to all who live in this state. From now on there will be an Executive Committee comprised of Chairman, Vice-chair, Secretary, and Treasurer who will lead our general board of directors. Brittany Trushel now operates as President of the Big Hole River Foundation and is tasked with carrying out our mission.

I am honored to step into the role of Chairman after eight years on the board. I know I have the commitment but I also have the lineage. My mother's family helped homestead the Big Hole Valley five generations ago and my father cinched my bassinet to his rubber raft when he founded the Big Hole Lodge two generations ago.

I owe more to this beautiful river valley than I can ever repay, but with your collaboration and good old-fashioned elbow grease, we can ensure the last, best river continues to be the last, best river.

Because of the good work of our Foundation, the Watershed Committee, and local Trout Unlimited chapter, I am passionate about water quality, advocate maintaining it, and in that way, give back to the Big Hole River at least some of what it has given to me and to my family.

It is far more than a picture postcard watercourse with a fly fisherman in one corner and a cattle ranch in the background. This river we all love is the lifeblood of a ranching community, the epitome of a western trout stream, the dream setting for retirement, and home to dwindling populations of numerous aquatic native species.

At the same time, the landscapes and waterways of Southwest and West-Central Montana are changing. More people, changing land use and climate change are affecting local fisheries and water quality from the mainstem Missouri to headwaters in the Big Hole. Algal blooms, housing development, low flows, and high temperatures threaten many of Montana's rivers.

The Big Hole River community must work together to mount a balanced response to our unique set of challenges. We have to work together now because our fisheries are on a slippery slope. We owe our children and theirs a pristine, free-flowing Big Hole River characterized by exemplary water quality and sustainable, healthy wildlife and cold-water fisheries. Everyone benefits when water is pure. And everyone loses when it is not.

We are now led by our new, energetic science expert, Brittany Trushel. We are directed by hardworking representatives from the science community, ranching community, fishing community, local business, and former-business-retiring-to-Montana community. In this way, the Big Hole River Foundation is redoubling its efforts to conserve, enhance, and protect the free-flowing character of the Big Hole River, its unique culture, fish, and wildlife.

We ask you to redouble your commitment to us as we roll out our strategic plan in 2018.

Wade

Thank You

We are grateful to the following members and donors who have renewed or made recent contributions and gifts in support of our mission as of October 2, 2017. Every effort has been made to maintain accuracy in our donor lists. If we have made any errors, please call 406-560-7089 or email bhrf@bhrf.org.

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Free Flows

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Board Member Changes



Good Bye Tom Welsch

We say good bye this month to Tom Welsch. Tom has been our board chairman for three years and has decided to retire to chase his passion of fishing the world over. We wish Tom much success. His calm presence will be missed.

Wade Fellin New Board Chair

Wade has been a member of our board for many years and has served as our Secretary since 2013. Wade was elected as our new Chair at our annual planning meeting this month and is hitting the ground running.



Sarah Ashworth New Board Vice-Chair

A native Virginian, retired business owner and country girl, Sarah relocated to Wise River in July 2016. The move was inspired by her numerous fly fishing trips to the area over the last several years. As she likes to say... "the peace and pace of the Big Hole Valley are divine. Coming from the East, I cannot emphasize enough the preciousness I feel for Nature's treasures here and I am committed to contribute in some small way to their healthy sustenance and protection."

Bill Melvin

We kind of say good bye to Bill Melvin this month as a full board member.. Bill has taken on the heavy load of Chairman of the Butte Chamber of Commerce and has had to reduce his other volunteer activities for the time being. Bill will remain a valued member of our events planning committee.



Zac & Sarah Sexton

We say good bye to Zac and Sarah Sexton this month. They have both been ardent volunteers with our Kid's Day activities for many years but with their very busy lifestyles and a toddler, they are taking a break as board members. Thank you Zac and Sarah!



Big Hole River Day 2017



Native Fish Restoration in the

In recent months, Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks (FWP) started native fish restoration projects in two Big Hole River tributaries, resulting in contentious discussion within the Valley. Essentially, if conservation steps are not taken within these tributaries, including removing nonnative trout, the native fish populations contained within will be extirpated (i.e., permanently destroyed) within a decade.

Nearly a century ago, agencies introduced exotic trout species, such as rainbow (*Oncorhynchus mykiss*), brook (*Salvelinus fontinalis*), Yellowstone cutthroat (*Salmo clarki bouvieri*), and brown trout (*Salmo trutta*), into the Big Hole River to create new angling opportunities. During this time, warming temperatures, low flows, sedimentation, and overharvest began affecting the Big Hole's native fishes, leading to significant population declines of two native trout species: fluvial Arctic grayling (*Thymallus arcticus*) and westslope cutthroat trout (*Salmo clarki lewisi*). These declines are exacerbated by nonnative trout as they outcompete natives for resources, prey on young natives, and change the genetics of native populations.

Arctic grayling was once found throughout the Missouri River drainage, but within the past century the native range has been reduced to a single, stream-dwelling population in the Big Hole River. Because of sedimentation of spawning habitat from land use practices, grayling spawning habitat is restricted to a 100-kilometer stretch upstream of the North Fork River. In addition, low flows and high water temperatures cause grayling mortality and decrease the availability of suitable habitat, affecting distribution of grayling within the River. However, nonnative trout can tolerate poorer water quality and occupy habitat and areas grayling cannot; both rainbow and brown trout increase in abundance as moving downstream in the Big Hole, while grayling abundance decreases.

Competition, predation, and changes in genetics from nonnatives threaten westslope populations in the Big Hole. Westslope spawn and mature in headwater streams, which is also preferred brook trout habitat. Brook trout spawn in the fall and fry emerge in early spring of the following year, whereas westslope spawn in late-spring and fry emerge in August. Because of this difference in life histories, brook trout young-of-year are twice the size of westslope and brook trout juveniles either prey on westslope or outcompete them for food resources. Also of concern is hybridization of westslope with nonnative Yellowstone or rainbow trout. Historically, westslope inhabited over 25,000 stream kilometers throughout Montana, but now occupy less than 30% of the historic range. Of this, only 9% contains genetically pure fish. Westslope-cutthroat hybrids (also called cutbows) not only produce fewer offspring than genetically pure westslope, but offspring also have a lower survival rate. In addition, hybridization breaks up the genetic combinations that evolved over millennia to make westslope ideally adapted to local streams and tributaries.

The Big Hole Watershed is home to 47 populations of westslope, but only one population is considered secure; the remaining 46 populations are designated "at-risk", meaning the population is unlikely to persist because of poor habitat, small population size, and/or presence on nonnative trout species. To conserve westslope populations in the Big Hole, managers restore habitat, improve water quality, and increase availability of water, but removing nonnative trout in key locations is also necessary for successful recovery. Montana FWP is focusing restoration efforts on French and Bender creeks, which both have small populations of genetically pure westslope. These popu-



*Sedimentation of spawning habitat has reduced Arctic grayling (*Thymallus arcticus*) to a 100-kilometer stretch of river above the North Fork River confluence, indicated by the bold line.*

The Big Hole Watershed

by Brittany Trushel



*Westslope cutthroat trout (top), rainbow trout (middle), and cutthroat-rainbow hybrid cross (bottom).
Photos courtesy of National Park Service.*

lations are estimated to be completely eradicated by nonnative brook trout within 5-10 years, if no management action is taken.

To protect these two populations, barriers built at the mouths of the tributaries will prevent recolonization of nonnative brook trout, while resident brook trout will be culled with a plant-based piscicide (i.e., a chemical poisonous to fish), rotenone. Resident westslope will be rescued prior to rotenone application and released back into the stream after the rotenone is deactivated by adding potassium permanganate. In addition, riparian restoration efforts will address habitat degradation within the tributaries, improving spawning habitat for westslope. These two tributaries will serve as refugia where westslope populations can grow in the absence of nonnative trout and serve as a population source for downstream areas.

Without these restoration measures, two westslope populations will be lost, making the plight of native fish in the Big Hole even more precarious. Communities, organizations, and managers have been working together for over a decade

to prevent federal listings of native fishes in the Big Hole. These westslope restoration projects continue those efforts; by taking proactive steps to protect an at-risk species, communities may avoid the costs associated with a federal listing and enjoy the economic value of retaining a unique fishing opportunity for anglers and recreationists.

In less than a century, two of the Big Hole's keystone fish species have been almost entirely decimated. Native species are part of both our cultural and natural heritage. We support reasonable and appropriate conservation efforts, which are based on sound science and decision-making, to pursue projects and strategies to ensure the Big Hole River's fishery, which includes native fish species, remains healthy, diverse, and exceptional.



*Fish barriers prevent nonnative trout from recolonizing upstream reaches, while allowing westslope to emigrate downstream.
Photo of current Cherry Creek barrier courtesy of MTFWP.*

Maintaining Big Hole River Flows Requires Cooperative Efforts - Mike Roberts, Hydrologist, DNRC

During the summer of 1988, the Big Hole River at Wisdom was dry for 24 days. In early May of 2004, during the peak period of fluvial Arctic grayling spawning, the river was flowing less than 10 cfs. The combination of low snowpack, warmer than average temperatures, early runoff, low summer precipitation, and a high demand for irrigation resulted in a “perfect storm” of critical low flow, or no flow, conditions in these situations. While all or some of these environmental factors as well as the high demand for irrigation continues to exist on an annual basis, the resultant instream flows and habitat have improved in the last 11 years thanks to the cooperative efforts of landowners in the upper basin, State and Federal agencies, and the Big Hole Watershed Committee.

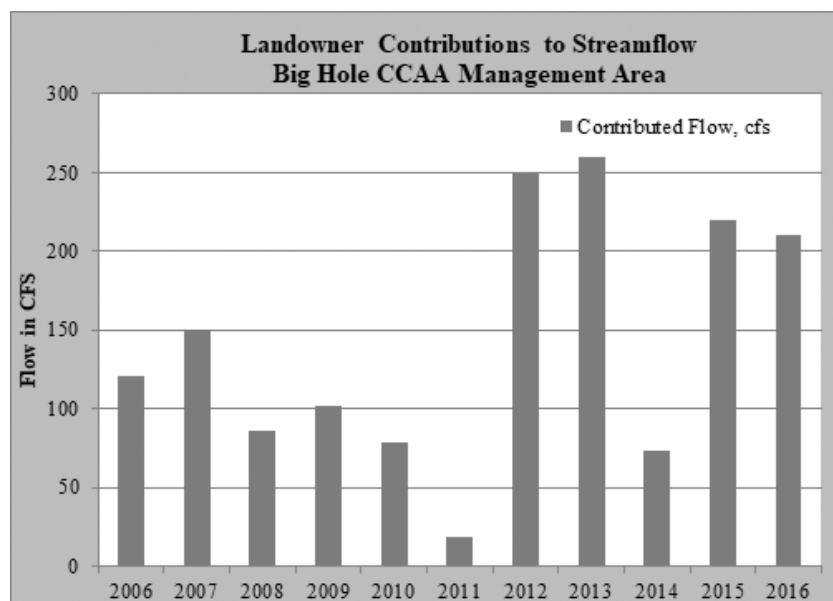
The Candidate Conservation Agreement with Assurances (CCAA) is an agreement between the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) and any non-Federal entity that provides the non-Federal entities assurances against additional regulatory requirements should a species get listed as long as those entities agree to develop conservation practices on their lands to eliminate threats to the species, in this case the fluvial Arctic grayling. As of 2017, 34 landowners and over 160,000 acres have been enrolled in the CCAA. The agreements between the Agencies and the irrigators requires diversionary flow reductions when instream flows drop to potentially biologically harmful levels. For example, when the Big Hole River at Wisdom reaches 60 cfs during the summer, upstream irrigators enrolled in the program are required to reduce their diversions to enhance instream flows. The histogram below represents over 1600 cfs of instream flow contributions during low flow periods over the past 11 years as documented by the Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (DNRC). The result of these efforts has kept enough water in the river and it’s tributaries to support the upper basin fishery at times

when historically it may have gone to critically low levels or even dried up. In fact, since the emplacement of the CCAA, instream flows were maintained thanks to the diversion reductions by the irrigators during water years with snowpack, temperature, and precipitation similar or worse than 1988 and 2004 (e.g. 2007 and 2013).

It’s Not Just the Water

Clearly, streamflow is critical to fishery restoration, but other conservation efforts cannot be overlooked. The CCAA also addresses riparian health, entrainment, and removal of fish barriers. In the past 11 years, the Agencies and landowners in the upper basin have fenced over 110 miles of riparian areas, restored over 30 miles of streambank, installed over 70 measuring flumes, 85 headgates, 40 fish ladders, and 60 stock water wells. All these efforts have contributed to improvements in fish habitat and stream temperatures not to mention the ancillary benefits to wildlife and aesthetics that comes with improved riparian areas.

Our changing climate provides new challenges every year. While our streams are dominated by snowpack runoff and an above average snowpack can be a harbinger of a good water year, it is clear that the timing of that runoff, as well as spring and summer precipitation and air temperature play key roles in the sustainability of our streamflows throughout the year. The other significant contribution comes from the active conservation role played by those who use the water. Having the engagement of the upper Big Hole basin landowners in the CCAA provides resiliency to address the ever present potential drought conditions and that engagement provides benefits to all who use the river.



Birding along the Big Hole – June 3, 2017 by Steve Parker

In our ninth year of this annual birding trip along the Big Hole my good friend Bill Good and I were determined to finally break the 100 birds in a day barrier. We have been in the 90's for most of the years of this count. We also had great help from Kyle Richardson who joined us for the day. Always good to have a younger set of eyes on board.

The day started at 6 am in Twin Bridges and we were immediately rewarded with a couple of Short-eared owls. All day long the list of sightings kept getting longer with a number of great birds such the Yellow-breasted chat and Bobolink (both firsts on this count). We had dinner in Wisdom and the tally was up to 97 species at that time. The evening leg along the Lower North Fork Road proved very successful with a number of waterfowl sightings in the various ponds along the road. The final tally was 102, so we broke the 100 species ceiling.

The day ended with a view of a gorgeous sunset over the Pintlars. It was a terrific day of birding and a great day to spend time along the river.

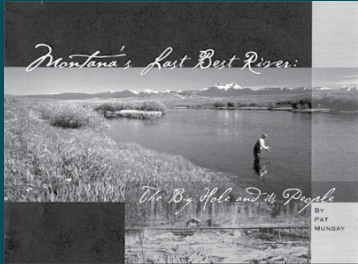
1. Canada Goose
 2. Gadwall
 3. Eurasian Widgeon
 4. American Widgeon
 5. Mallard
 6. Blue-winged Teal
 7. Cinnamon Teal
 8. Northern Shoveler
 9. Northern Pintail
 10. Green-winged Teal
 11. Canvasback
 12. Ring-necked Duck
 13. Lesser Scaup
 14. Common Goldeneye
 15. Hooded Merganser
 16. Common Merganser
 17. Ring-necked Pheasant
 18. Wild Turkey
 19. American white Pelican
 20. Great Blue Heron
 21. Turkey Vulture
 22. Osprey
 23. Bald Eagle
 24. Northern Harrier
 25. Sharp-shinned Hawk*
 26. Swainson's Hawk
 27. Red-tailed Hawk
 28. Ferruginous Hawk
 29. Golden Eagle
 30. American Kestral
 31. Prairie Falcon
 32. American Coot
 33. Sandhill Crane
 34. Killdeer
 35. Spotted Sandpiper
 36. Long-billed Curlew
 37. Wilson's Snipe
 38. Wilson's Phalarope
 39. Rock Pigeon
 40. Eurasian-winged Dove
 41. Mourning Dove
 42. Great Horned Owl
 43. Short-eared Owl
 44. White-throated Swift
 45. Belted Kingfisher
 46. Red-naped sapsucker
 47. Northern Flicker
 48. Olive-sided Flycatcher
 49. Western Wood Peewee
 50. Willow Flycatcher
 51. Least Flycatcher
 52. Say's Phoebe*
 53. Western Kingbird
 54. Eastern Kingbird
 55. Warbling Vireo
 56. Black-billed Magpie
 57. American Crow
 58. Common Raven
 59. Horned Lark
 60. Tree Swallow
 61. Violet-green Swallow
 62. Northern Rough-winged Swallow
 63. Bank Swallow
 64. Cliff Swallow
 65. Barn Swallow
 66. Rock Wren
 67. House Wren
 68. Marsh Wren
 69. American Dipper
 70. Ruby-crowned Kinglet
 71. Mountain Bluebird
 72. Swainson's Thrush
 73. Hermit Thrush
 74. American Robin
 75. Gray Catbird
 76. Sage Thrasher
 77. European Starling
 78. Cedar Waxwing
 79. Northern Waterthrush
 80. Common Yellowthroat
 81. Yellow Warbler
 82. Yellow-rumped Warbler
 83. Yellow-breasted Chat
 84. Green-tailed towhee
 85. Chipping Sparrow
 86. Brewer's Sparrow
 87. Vesper Sparrow
 88. Lark Sparrow
 89. Savannah Sparrow
 90. Song Sparrow
 91. Western Tanager
 92. Lazuli Bunting
 93. Bobolink
 94. Red-winged Blackbird
 95. Western Meadowlark
 96. Yellow-headed Blackbird
 97. Brewer's Blackbird
 98. Common Grackle
 99. Brown-headed Cowbird
 100. Bullock's Oriole
 101. House Finch
 102. House Sparrow
- *tentative ID



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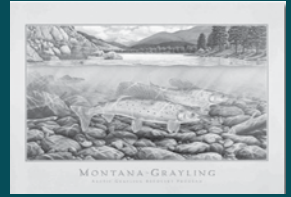


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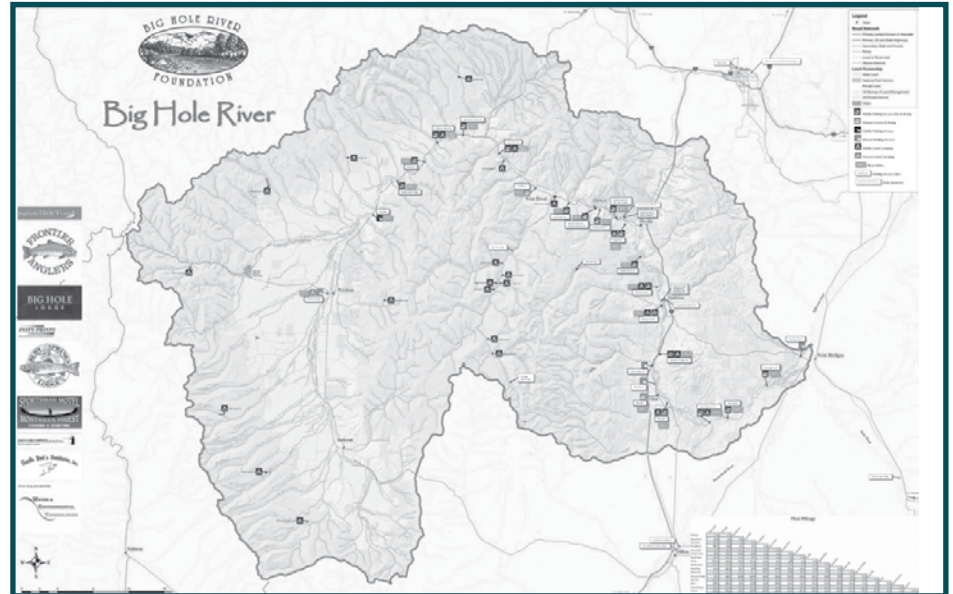


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Big Hole River Maps available in local shops or order online at www.bhrf.org for \$9.95 + S&H



Corporate Sponsors - Thank you!



Big Hole River Day Results

Big Hole River Day (see photos on Page 5) moved to Wise River this year and the community came out in droves to help and attend the event. Local businesses jumped in with volunteers to erect tents for the event and vendor and beer garden space. Three bands kept the music going all day and well into the late evening. Over 150 people attended our dinner and auction with a record amount of almost \$10,000 raised in the live auction alone. Our Hyde Drift Boat raffle winner was a young man from nearby Butte. Congrats again to Todd Rakich on your new boat.

This year we had five breweries from Butte, Dillon, Philipsburg, Bozeman and Anaconda donate beer for our brewfest fundraiser helping raise over \$2,000.

Vendors came from far and wide selling their wares. Being able to set up right along the main street through town gave them maximum exposure.

The fly casting pond was revamped this year and was a huge hit with casters from every age group. Although the competition got rained out, everyone still had fun during the nice morning weather.

A wonderful prime rib dinner was served by the Wise River Club followed by our live and silent auctions. Although a gully washing thunderstorm came through later in the day, it did not dampen anyone's spirits.

Overall, this year's event will be one of most successful ever. We raised over \$20,000 net for our programs on the Big Hole. A huge thank you goes out to all our donors, attendees, vendors, breweries, fly shops, the Town of Wise River, our great bands and everyone else involved in the event.

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