



Affiliate Corner

Helena Hunters and Anglers (HH&A)

The first sporting club organized in the Montana Territory was organized in 1871 (Helena Rifle Club). Members Granville and James Stuart fashioned Montana's first fish and game protections in 1871, 5 years before Colonel George Armstrong Custer and his 7th Cavalry troops were killed on the Little Bighorn River. Paraphrased from the preamble of HH&A's by-laws: "It is therefore fitting that the hunters and anglers of Helena, Montana's Capitol city, have an association honoring and extending the conservation legacy of the Stuarts and all the other conservationists who delivered Montana's exceptional hunting and angling heritage into our custody."

This statement gives a rather poignant reflection of the integrity of our MWF affiliate, Helena Hunters & Anglers.

Throughout Helena's history several hunting/fishing organizations have come and gone. By 1955 the original HH&A had lingered into inactivity, so the Prickly Pear Sportsmen was formed to provide a venue for sportsmen to engage in wildlife issues. Early members like Bill Orsello, Sr., Bob Kokoruda, and Fred Jorgenson coordinated with then Montana Fish and Game trapper, Jim McLucas to assist in the transplanting of Yellowstone National Park elk into the Elkhorn Mountains, stocking and transplanting ring-neck pheasants, and even trapping and the ill-advised shooting of black-billed magpies thought to be impacting gamebird populations. Hunters and anglers can credit much of our current wildlife abundance to these early sportsmen who volunteered thousands of hours to restoring public wildlife and that crafted regulations that are in force today to conserve wildlife.

Helena Hunters and Anglers emerged in 2001 when several former Prickly Pear members were seeking involvement in Montana conservation efforts and issues. While Prickly Pear still provides the community with a high-class shooting range, HH&A dedicated its efforts towards the following objectives: 1.) protect and restore fish and wildlife to all suitable habitats; 2.) promote the education of hunters, anglers, and the general public to conserve all natural resources as vital to our general welfare, and the public trust management of them; 3.) develop and support protective legislation; and 4.) cooperate with local, state, and federal government, along with private conservation organizations to attain the objectives of the Association. HH&A is dedicated to the premise that the Helena area is a very special place for hunters and anglers. HH&A's passion for protecting wildlife and wildlife habitat is evident.

In recent years HH&A joined several other conservation groups to express grave concerns about the future of McDonald Pass, 12 miles west of Helena on the Continental Divide, as a wildlife corridor due to a proposed Montana National Guard biathlon range. What on the surface appears to be a benign project could exert a significant cumulative negative influence upon wildlife habitat connectivity when taken in context with other pressures. Mine reclamation in nearby Rimini, rapidly expanding subdivisions on nearby private lands, and the presence of US Highway 12, a major artery between Helena and Missoula collectively pressure native wildlife and reduce secure habitats. Due to its narrow width, McDonald Pass remains an easily impacted, narrow corridor of essential wildlife habitat connecting to larger ecosystems. The wildlife that depends upon the corridor are therefore much more susceptible to additional stresses and less resilient to additional activities.

On the surface, McDonald pass can be regarded simply as an extension of Helena, albeit an enjoyable place to recreate. HH&A believes that the Helena National Forest minimized the values and consequences to wildlife when it approved the project. While local hunters regard the Pass as good elk and mule deer hunting, its importance to some of our larger charismatic predators has not had universal recognition. Recent independent wildlife studies confirmed that endangered Canadian lynx utilize the Pass area throughout the winter; roadkilled lynx and gray wolf carcasses found on US Highway 12 further validate HH&A's contention that "Mac Pass" is a crucial wildlife migration corridor. Additional human use during crucial winter periods simply cannot be absorbed by this narrow strip of habitat. McDonald Pass does not deserve the disregard that it is simply JUST McDonald Pass. HH&A, in effect, offers area sportsmen a "reality check", and chooses to nurture an attitude change with their concerted efforts to challenge the weaknesses of the proposal. HH&A recently filed a formal appeal on the Helena National Forest decision to approve the biathlon project.

Planning future projects to inspire more youth involvement in outdoor activities, HH&A will enlist Montana Wilderness Association's infrastructure to offer local hikes and outings while coordinating with Exploration Works in Helena to connect with local youth groups.

HH&A is maintaining a strong involvement in wildlife habitat and conservation issues by providing public input into federal and state public processes, especially the Fish, Wildlife and Parks season setting deliberations.

The club meets the second Thursday of each month at the MWF Board Room at 5530 North Montana Avenue. To accommodate conflicting board member schedules, their upcoming meeting will be held earlier in the month than normal, September 4, 2008 at 7PM. Rich DeSimone will present a strong program on his Mountain Lion research project in the Garnet Mountains of Western Montana. For more information contact us at MWF, 1-406-458-0227 or President Stan Frasier at 406-442-2705. HH&A has stepped up their recruitment efforts to enlist new members, and plans to build a solid constituency of local hunters, anglers and wildlife enthusiasts. Please join them, you will be welcome.