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# Outdoors

## A 'Great' history



IR photo by Peggy O'Neill

Jamie Williams has been the state director of The Nature Conservancy for four years.

### TNC's state director works to localize organization's mission

By PEGGY O'NEILL  
IR Outdoors Editor

Thirty years ago, a 10-year-old kid from Oklahoma took a trip down the South Fork of the Flathead River. He spent the rest of his life trying to get back to Montana.

After spending his college and graduate school years at Yale University in Connecticut, and his early career with The Nature Conservancy in Colorado, Jamie Williams finally made it back to Montana four years ago when he became the state director of The Nature Conservancy of Montana.

While the state of Montana may seem an overwhelming landscape in which to apply the TNC mission of preserving "the plants, animals and natural communities that represent the diversity of life on Earth by protecting the lands and waters they need to survive," Williams tackles his job community by community. "My goal has been to decentralize the programs," he said. "We are a national organization, but we're very decentralized and community driven."

There are five locally staffed TNC community-based offices in Montana including those in Bozeman, Bigfork, Malta, Billings and Choteau, and a community-based program for the Black River corridor, which is based out of the state office here in Helena. TNC employs 40 people, including 14 people who work with the Montana Natural Heritage Program.

Much of Williams' time is spent driving around the state visiting with TNC's 5,000 members and communities who can benefit from TNC programs.

"More than anything, I'm in the people business," Williams said. "It's about people coming together to conserve Montana's rich natural heritage. We spend a lot of time helping families and meeting different family members' needs. We spend a lot of time drinking coffee in people's kitchens — the most important thing is listening."

Williams sees Montana as a prime example of how conservation and agriculture can be symbiotic.

"The transactions we've had with ranchers have been beneficial for all involved," he said. "It's a win-win situation."

As an example, Williams spoke about the work TNC has done to preserve a big chunk of the Rocky Mountain Front. One of the early steps in the project was the purchase of a conservation easement on ranchland that otherwise would have been subdivided.

The Dellwo family was looking for a way to make their ranching operation more economically viable. So before the family had to sell off part of their land, they met with TNC and were able to reach an agreement that was mutually beneficial. With the conservation easement, the Dellwos were able to keep their fifth-generation ranch intact and in the family and TNC was able to permanently protect some of the most important prairie, wetlands and grizzly habitat on the Rocky Mountain Front.

Another example Williams gave was the work that TNC has done in the Centennial Valley.

"The ranchers in the Centennial

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Photo courtesy of Bill Downs

### The building of Belmont Ski Hill began 60 years ago

By CURT SYNNESS  
Special to the IR

Sixty years ago last fall, on a search for a sweet spot of snow, five local skiers — Les Alke, Roy Riley, Milt Rudio, Ken Kinney and Bob Samson — discovered a mountainside they thought would serve the areas need for a ski hill. The site was originally called the Belmont Ski Hill, and as evidenced by the present-day Great Divide Ski Area, it turned out to be a pretty good choice.

According to Bill Downs, one of the original members of the Belmont Ski Club and local snow-skiing historian, the very first report of skiing in the Helena Valley occurred in the winter of 1868 when gold miner Sven Peterson cross-country skied supplies into his camp.

In the fall of 1935, when Downs was 14 years old, he helped clear the rocks off the north slope of Mount Helena for the purpose of a ski run. John Morrison Sr., 99, (co-founder of Morrison-Maierle Inc.) was the first president of the Mt. Helena Ski Club.

Due to lack of snow on Mount Helena, the enthusiasts continued their quest for an ideal location. Lump Gulch, Golconda Gulch, Elkhorn Peak and Rimini were some of the first places tried. Another site was the extreme south end of Chaucer and Raleigh Streets, where they used the streetlights after dark for night skiing.

Around 1936-37, Alke, Roy and Tiny Riley, Morrison, John and Jean Baucus, Clyde Kneedler, Ken Kinney, Tom Power, Court Sheriff and others helped establish a ski run on the west side of MacDonald Pass. A 3/4-inch steel



Photo courtesy of Bill Downs

Top, skiers at the sand dam are standing in the rope tow line for the 'Highballer' run in 1947. In the background is the warming tent. The chalet was not built until 1949.

Left, five early-day Belmont Ski Club members work on the 'Highballer' rope tow, circa 1950. Left to right are: Les Alke, unidentified, Hal Erickson, Roy Riley and Con Mannix.

cable tow took the skiers to the hilltop, and a chalet was built at the bottom.

Another venue for the local skiers in the late 1930s was a train ride to Blossberg. Several passenger cars would make round-trips to the Blossberg hill, and park right on the tracks while the sportsmen sped down a nearby hillside on skis, toboggans and sleds. The coaches were used for warming and refreshments throughout the day.

Morrison, Brooke Ricker, Kneedler and the Rileys were selected as some of Montana's first National Ski Patrolmen.

The very first Montana Ski Championships were held in 1938, at Rimini Hill. Claiming the women's State Championship was Helena's own Alice "Tiny" Heath Riley. Buck O'Donnell of Butte won the men's title, and Morrison topped all local entries by placing 10th.

In 1941, the search for the best site ended at 7,329-foot Mount Belmont, named after a

Marysville gold mine. An enthusiastic group calling themselves "The Ski Mountaineers" cut "The Highballer," which possessed NSA specifications of a downhill run — a drop of 1,800 feet in one mile. A rope tow was installed, powered by a 1930 car motor.

Alke, considered by some to be "The Father of the Belmont Ski Hill," said he would never forget the first day the tow was utilized. "After we came down from the hill," he said, "we learned about the bombing of Pearl Harbor." It was December 7, 1941.

Before all of the guys went into the service, the Northern Rocky Mountain Ski Association championships took place at Mount Belmont in February 1942. The winner was a Swedish skier named Jürgen Pauley.

"A tent was pitched at the bottom of the hill for a warming station," reported IR sports-

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### Data shows walleye doing well in Canyon Ferry

#### Perch big but scarce

By THOMAS MENDYKE  
IR Assistant Outdoors Editor

More than 80 people jammed into the conference room of Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks headquarters Tuesday night for an update on the health of Canyon Ferry, Hauser and Holter Reservoirs.

FWP fisheries biologist Steve Dalbey, chief fisheries biologist for Hauser and Holter reservoirs, started by restating the original goal of the 10-year Upper Missouri Reservoir Management Plan.

"We entered into the management plan with a 10-year, long term plan for working toward high quality fisheries and naturally reproducing populations," Dalbey said.

A show of hands at the beginning of the program clearly indicated that most of those at the meeting were most interested in the status of Canyon Ferry Reservoir. Fisheries biologist Eric Roberts presented a series of slides that featured charts and graphs depicting population trends for walleye, rainbow trout and yellow perch in Canyon Ferry. The data collected is based on fish caught in either sinking or seine nets sampled during April, May, August, September and October. Other data collected is the result of summer creel (those fish caught by anglers) surveys and a January ice fishing creel survey.

#### Canyon Ferry walleye

According to the plethora of data presented, walleye are doing

well in Canyon Ferry, and the catch rate of 7.4 walleye per sink net this past year meets the objective for walleye stated in the management plan for Canyon Ferry. Other data showed:

■ The average length of walleye captured in sink nets increased from 19.2 inches during the year 2000, to 19.7 inches for walleye netted in 2001.

■ The number of fish netted that measured over 28 inches decreased in 2001. As a result, the only regulation change proposed for walleye during the 2002 fishing season is anglers will be allowed to keep only one fish longer than 28 inches.

■ Young of the year walleye (hatched during the spring of 2001) are the highest since data began being collected in 1986. Yearling walleye numbers for

2001 were up from previous two years.

#### Canyon Ferry perch

Yellow perch are something of a mystery in Canyon Ferry. This winter anglers have been catching the largest average size perch that anyone can remember. However, there is a general absence of the average-sized perch that usually make up the bulk of a healthy perch population.

Ron Spoon, chief fisheries biologist for Canyon Ferry, reported that yellow perch had an incredibly successful spawn this past spring and it produced the greatest number of young of the year perch he has seen in Canyon Ferry.

The importance of yellow perch

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