



NEW INTERPRETIVE TRAIL OPENS THROUGH WETLAND PRESERVE
NEAR WHITEFISH LAKE

Preserving the Whitefish Wetlands

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Andy Merrill walks a section of the Living Wetlands Interpretative Nature Trail in Whitefish with his niece, Angela Merrill. The two were on an afternoon bike ride when they decided to check out the recently opened area in the Averill's Viking Creek Wetland Preserve.

The Living Wetlands Interpretive Nature Trail in Whitefish had its grand opening celebration on July 13, with more than 100 people attending and taking to the new path through the important ecosystem.

The trail meanders through the Averill's Viking Creek Wetland Preserve, which consists of 28.82 acres of land the Averill family donated to the Whitefish Lake Institute in order to protect it from development.

Lori Curtis, manager of the wetlands trail and the science and education director at the Whitefish Lake Institute, said the trail has been in the works for several years, and has now finally come to fruition.

"We're so excited about it," she said. "The interest has been very high."

It all started when the property located along Wisconsin Avenue, which included partial wetlands, began to attract interest from potential developers. A local group of concerned residents called the Friends of Wisconsin Avenue Wetlands formed in an attempt to protect the area.

The group contacted Whitefish Lake Institute executive director Mike Koopal, and together they started going through the proposed development ideas.

Eventually, the group got in touch with the Averill family, who owns the Lodge at Whitefish Lake and who purchased 40 acres of land across for a lodge expansion, most of which was wetlands.

After two years of negotiations with the Averills, the Friends of Wisconsin Avenue Wetlands and the Whitefish Lake Institute, a solution came to light. The lodge would expand on the property, but would mitigate any developed wetlands at a 10-to-one ratio. Curtis noted the typical ratio for such a deal is usually around two-to-one.

The lodge then gifted the 28.82 acres of wetlands to the Whitefish Lake Institute. Protecting this area is incredibly important for the local ecosystem, Curtis said, because the wetlands filter the water in Viking Creek, which eventually makes its way into Whitefish Lake for recreating and drinking water.

"It's really important, because that water is coming from a lot of upland sources and it's cleansed in that wetland area before it reaches the lake," she said.

Wetlands also serve to protect the land throughout various hydrological happenings. For example, in the event of too much rain, the wetlands can help prevent flooding by holding on to the excess

precipitation, and in the reverse, wetlands can release this water in the event of a drought.

Anyone walking the new interpretive trail has the opportunity to learn how wetlands affect the local flora and fauna. There are dozens of species of birds that call the wetlands either their home or their stop-over place, much to the delight of the local Audubon Society, Curtis said.

And the native plant identification garden at the entrance has attracted all types of people seeking to learn about the local landscape. Part of the deal that created the trail and the preserve included \$110,000 for restoration and infrastructure, and that money paid for bike racks, the parking area, a large restoration area and more, Curtis noted.

The trail is mostly flat, with some gradual hills along the way. It is wheelchair and walker friendly, making it an easy and delightful trip for the senior population, Curtis said. Children also have plenty of fun on the trail, because many of the educational signs are placed at their eye level.

“It’s really kind of a slow-down-and-relax-and-learn-something trail,” she said.

Building and maintaining the trail was possible through grants, with a bulk of the money coming from the Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks Recreational Trails Project, Curtis said. Local organizations and businesses also contributed to building the trail, and the community also donated its services. Todd Bergett of Todd Bergett Designs donated the drawings for the illustrations for the trail guide and the educational signs along the trail, Curtis said.

“The project turned into a community project, funded by community money and supported by just a ton of people,” she said.

Another major fundraiser for the trail is the annual Whitefish Wine Auction, taking place on July 25 and 26. The two-day event includes a wine tasting on Thursday and a multi-course dinner on Friday.

Tickets to the event are available online at www.whitefishwineauction.org, or by calling the Whitefish Lake Institute at 406-862-4327.

The money earned at the auctions will go toward maintenance and other costs associated with the trail and preserve, Curtis said.

“The future wine auctions will put money in the bank for us to continue taking care of it forever,” she said.