



Mike Koopal, right, who is executive director of the Whitefish Lake Institute, points out some of the various plants that live in the newly-opened Averill's Viking Creek Wetland Preserve while leading a group tour on Saturday, July 13

Natural beauty of wetlands showcased at newly-opened preserve and nature trail

It's sort of like Whitefish's own miniature national park.

A grand opening for a wetland nature preserve along Wisconsin Avenue drew a crowd of over 40 people to the Living Wetlands Interpretive Nature Trail in the Averill's Viking Creek Wetland Preserve on Saturday, July 13.

"It's such a beautiful area. But I think true beauty will be to reconnect those people back to nature," said Mike Koopal, executive director for the Whitefish Lake Institute.

A series of accessible trails which are under one mile long meander through the 28.82-acred preserve. Visitors will see Viking Creek, a beaver-chewed tree stump, trees marked with bear scratches, and a forest of aspens which might make one feel as if they've stepped into an Ansel Adams photograph.

"The actual nature trail that you'll get on today isn't a typical wetland trail, so if you're expecting to see a bunch of cattails or something like that you're not going to see that," Koopal told the crowd. "It's actually an upland wetland mosaic."

"It's dominated by spruce and skunk cabbage with aspen and cottonwood and a number of really unusual wetland species," he said.

Koopal said numerous development proposals had been considered for the area before the Friends of Wisconsin and the Averill family teamed up to make it a preserve. The WLI owns the property and will manage it for perpetuity.

The main trailhead is located just south of the Viking Lodge at the Lodge at Whitefish Lake on the east side of Wisconsin Avenue. There are two other trailheads: one near the Viking Lodge and a third at the city's tiny Crestwood Park.

Koopal took a group on a tour of the preserve's gravel-and-boardwalk ADA-accessible trail. He pointed out its various natural features. The area was cool and quiet. Three footbridges cross sections of Viking Creek, which cuts through a 15-18-inch layer of "lacustrine" (lake-deposited) soils which were deposited thousands of years ago when Whitefish Lake was larger. Beneath the soil is a harder clay base, he said, upon which the water rests thus creating the wetland.

Mark Bostrom with the Montana Department of Environmental Quality said wetlands were important for wildlife, for water quality, to control flooding and to recharge groundwater.

“Prior to European settlement it’s estimated there was 220 million acres of wetlands in the U.S.,” Bostrom said. “As of the mid-80s there’s about 103 million. So that represents a net loss of 54 percent of the wetlands. That’s mainly driven by the attitude that wetlands are a wasteland or a bog and there’s no value to them because they’re not dry. And so wetlands have been filled in and drained through the years.”

Wetlands were once widespread near Bozeman and Montana, he said, but have been largely covered with suburbs now, gone pretty much forever.

“So when you see a project like this [preserve] that can reclaim some of that it’s just awesome,” Bostrom said.