

Seeley Lake Trails Survey

Final Report



The Trust for Public Land creates parks and protects land for people, ensuring healthy, livable communities for generations to come.

In the Northern Rockies, The Trust for Public Land works with communities to protect the land and water that keep us healthy, inspired, and connected with nature and each other.

The Seeley Lake Trails Survey: Final Report was created by:

Amy McNamara, Seeley Lake Project Director
Ben Donatelle, Intern
Ethan Burns, Intern

COVER PHOTO: A young boy with fishing gear rides his bike on the paved pathway that parallels Highway 83 in downtown Seeley Lake. Photo: Amy McNamara

THIS PAGE: Located on the southeast edge of town, the Horseshoe Hills are open to dispersed non-motorized activities including horseback riding, mountain bike riding, hiking, and dog walking. In the winter, several of the roads are groomed and marked as designated snowmobile routes. In many places, visitors to the Horseshoe Hills can gain spectacular views of the Clearwater River, Seeley Lake (seen here), Salmon Lake, and the Swan and Mission mountain ranges. Photo: Lee Boman

Northern Rockies Office

The Trust for Public Land
1007 E Main St., Suite 300
Bozeman, MT 59715
406.522.7450
tpl.org/montana



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The Trust for Public Land works with communities across the country to create locally-driven solutions for connecting people to the lands that surround them. Among other things, we protect land, create access to trails and public lands, develop community-inspired parks, and facilitate development of community plans to serve as guideposts for cooperative implementation. In addition, we develop resources, like the *Seeley Lake Trails Survey*, to support community stakeholders, agencies, and local governments in their efforts to work together to make informed decisions about parks, trails, and other public resources.

This past summer, in partnership with Montana Conservation Corps and the U.S. Forest Service, we hosted two AmeriCorps interns in Seeley Lake to complete a trails survey to help inform future trail efforts in the area. I am pleased to share the results of this work with you.

The Trust for Public Land works with communities across the country to ensure that everyone has a park, garden, playground, trail, or other natural place within a ten-minute walk from home. Trails, parks, and other natural outdoor environments promote exercise, improve emotional health, offer settings for community gatherings, and can improve local economies. We hope this report will be a valuable resource to the entire Seeley Lake community as it works together with agencies and other stakeholders to determine priorities for stewardship and enhancement of the trails and other recreational opportunities in the area.

Happy trails,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Dick Dolan".

Dick Dolan
Northern Rockies Director

Table of Contents

3 Acknowledgements

4 Executive Summary

6 Background, Purpose, Goals

Seeley Lake's Connection to Trails and Public Lands

9 Methods

Limitations and Assumptions

12 Findings

Ongoing and Long-Term Projects

- Winter Trails Grooming
- *Connecting the Community Trails*
- Fawn Creek Nordic Trails

Local Perspectives

- Agencies
- Missoula County
- The Nature Conservancy
- Community Groups

29 Future Considerations

Near-Term Trail Opportunities

Longer-Term Trail and Recreation Opportunities

Building and Supporting a Trails Community

33 Conclusion

34 Appendix I: General Survey Area Descriptions

43 Appendix II: Detailed Trail Descriptions

53 Appendix III: List of Those Interviewed for the Project

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valuable input and supported the project in many other ways. The Seeley Lake Community Foundation and Seeley Lake Elementary School provided necessary workspace and meeting rooms for the AmeriCorps interns throughout the summer. Many other individuals were interviewed for this report or contributed to this report in one way or another – the list is very long. Kristen Baker-Dickinson, Chris Bryant, Scott Eggeman, Rachel Feigley, Katie Knotek, Ladd Knotek, Jake Long, Lisa Moisey, Pat O’Herren, and Ryan Sokoloski reviewed early drafts of this report. Finally, The Trust for Public Land is grateful to the U.S. Forest Service; Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks; Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation; Missoula County; and other land managers who work day in and day out to provide quality recreational experiences to those who visit the lands they manage in Seeley Lake and the surrounding area.

Executive Summary

SEELEY LAKE, MONTANA, is an unincorporated community of approximately 2,000 year-round residents in Missoula County, located approximately an hour northeast of Missoula. The community is nestled between the Swan and Mission mountains and surrounded by an abundance of natural and recreational assets. Approximately 90 percent of the land surrounding the community of Seeley Lake is managed by the U.S. Forest Service (Forest Service), the State of Montana, or owned by The Nature Conservancy. Because Seeley Lake is an unincorporated community and owns no land, the Seeley Lake Community Council, local organizations, and community leaders must depend on their relationships with Missoula County, state and federal land management agencies, and private landowners to accomplish trail objectives and support the community's outdoor-oriented culture.

Seeley Lake is actively building its outdoor culture from within. The community benefits from passionate and active community leaders and outdoor-minded ownership at the helm of some of its leading businesses. Residents appreciate and enjoy the outdoors in many ways: hiking, biking, fishing, OHV-riding, water sports, snowmobiling, and skiing, among others. In addition, the Seeley Lake

Elementary Outside program provides regular outdoor experiences to every student who attends.

Some community members and businesses seek to provide area residents and visitors with higher quality and more diverse recreational experiences than currently exist. Despite its proximity to substantial outdoor resources and the steady caravan of traffic that passes through the town, some Seeley Lake residents and business owners say they struggle to take advantage of the existing recreation opportunities themselves, and



Seeley Lake is host to a handful of competitive events each year. Kids as well as adults are active participants in Seeley Lake's outdoor recreation culture. Photo: Lee Boman

to direct visitors to suitable recreation opportunities that meet their respective needs and expectations. Those who share that sentiment want recreational experiences to begin in town with quality walking and biking paths and to radiate from the town's center to area campgrounds, swimming holes, and more heavily used trails. To achieve those goals, user groups and additional stakeholders wish to partner with state and federal land managers to connect the in-town recreational infrastructure with the recreational opportunities that are right at the community's doorstep.

In 2014, recreational user group representatives and interested community members in Seeley Lake established the Seeley Lake Trails Advisory Council. The Council has brought together interested stakeholders, land managers (e.g., Forest Service; Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks [Montana FWP]; and Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation [Montana DNRC]); and The Nature Conservancy to discuss a suite of trail-related issues. In addition, this group expressed interest in a community-led trail planning effort for the Seeley Lake area.

Understanding the opportunities and challenges to improving front- and backcountry recreation is one step in planning for a future that provides diverse recreational opportunities, sustains healthy businesses, and attracts visitors to the area in a manner that respects the natural resources and succeeds in supporting a sustainable economy and livable community. Having a broader – and more complete – sense of community sentiment about these issues is also essential to supporting a healthy dialog in the community about its future and how recreation fits into the picture. Engaging land management agencies meaningfully in all steps of community dialog is necessary to increase understanding between all parties and to develop partnerships that are capable of stewarding trail resources for the long term.

The Trust for Public Land completed a trail survey project during the summer of 2015 in Seeley Lake. The goal of the project was to inform

any future trail planning process and provide those engaged in trail efforts with information about existing trail infrastructure in the area. To accomplish this, The Trust for Public Land, in partnership with the Montana Conservation Corps placed two AmeriCorps conservation interns in Seeley Lake to complete a trails survey of the Seeley Lake area. In addition, the Forest Service supported the project through a cost-share agreement. Finally, members of the Seeley Lake Trails Advisory Council, businesses, and additional community stakeholders were invited to provide feedback and supported the project in many other ways.

This report includes user group perspectives on current infrastructure and desired conditions, agency roles and feedback, and near- and long-term opportunities for Seeley Lake's trail system. The report contains the following:

- A summary of ongoing and long-term trail projects in Seeley Lake;
- Perspectives from recreational user groups in Seeley Lake;
- Feedback from state and federal land managing agencies, Missoula County, and The Nature Conservancy;
- Future considerations regarding trails in the Seeley Lake area; and
- Detailed area and route descriptions from the trail inventory.

The Trust for Public Land intends for this report to be a resource for the Seeley Lake community, area land managers, and those who care about the future of trails and trail management in Seeley Lake. It hopes the contents of this report can support positive conversations and an open dialog about the future of trails and trail management in the area. Finally, The Trust for Public Land hopes this report informs the development of new trails and trail enhancements within the community of Seeley Lake and to the public lands in and around the area that can support a healthy and livable community for generations to come.

Background, Purpose, Goals

APPROXIMATELY 90 PERCENT of the lands surrounding Seeley Lake are managed either by the Forest Service, the State of Montana, or owned by The Nature Conservancy.¹ In addition to the maintained system trails on the Lolo National Forest, the lands in the area have “infrastructure” (open-system roads, gated roads which are either closed except for land management activities or managed under seasonal restrictions, and historic but currently unmaintained trails), some of which is currently used by the public for dispersed recreational purposes.

Between May and August of 2015, The Trust for Public Land completed a survey of a portion of the existing trails and infrastructure on the lands surrounding the community of Seeley Lake, and interviewed community stakeholders and agency representatives to help assess the status of the current trail system and the potential for

enhancing the system. The survey and this report were informed by: 1) community and agency knowledge of the existing trails and recreation infrastructure; 2) community and user group feedback on opportunities to enhance this infrastructure and connect it with the community of Seeley Lake; and 3) an on-the-ground trail conditions survey.

The goals for this survey project were as follows: 1) complete a survey and conditions analysis of existing trail infrastructure using the Forest Service trail standards and guidelines as a framework; 2) compile and reflect agency and community stakeholder feedback; 3) catalog opportunities for near-term projects to enhance the existing recreational trails infrastructure; and 4) catalog potential opportunities for long-term projects to modify, enhance, and build upon the existing infrastructure.

In addition to focusing on trail infrastructure, this survey report discusses several themes related to the benefits of trails that were heard in stakeholder interviews and at Seeley Lake Trails Advisory Council meetings. These themes include the benefits of trails for public health, public safety, and community livability, and positive returns to local businesses and the local economy.



The beach at Big Larch Campground is a popular lake access and swimming area for local residents and visitors. Photo: Ben Donatelle

¹ Seeley Lake Area Chamber of Commerce, Demographics, <http://www.seeleylakechamber.com/information-desk/demographics/> (8/3/15).

SEELEY LAKE'S CONNECTION TO TRAILS AND PUBLIC LANDS

THE COMMUNITY OF Seeley Lake sits in the picturesque valley between the Swan Mountains and the Mission Mountains. The valley is drained by the Clearwater River and contains a set of six inland lakes that are unique to this part of Montana. The area is framed by wilderness: the Mission Mountain Wilderness and Mission Mountain Tribal Wilderness to the west and the Bob Marshall Wilderness Complex to the east.

Among other things, residents of the town of Seeley Lake enjoy the area for its wildness, its recreation opportunities, and its wildlife. Area residents are actively engaged in trail activities and programs that make Seeley Lake a special place to live and work, such as the extensive grooming of both snowmobile and cross-country skiing trails, a robust outdoor education program at the local elementary school, and the *Connecting the Community* town trails system. Seeley Lake is a community that enjoys its outdoor amenities.

Tourism is a significant economic driver in Montana² and the Seeley Lake area is well-positioned to take advantage of this due to its proximity to the Bob Marshall Wilderness Complex, Mission Mountains Wilderness, Glacier National Park, and the non-wilderness lands managed by the Lolo and Flathead national forests. Montana

Highway 83 bisects the Swan Valley and is a major corridor for people traveling between Glacier and Yellowstone national parks. According to the Montana Department of Transportation, an average of over 2,300 vehicles per day traveled on Highway 83 north of Clearwater Junction in 2014.³ Also, Seeley Lake is located within 150 miles of five of seven of Montana's largest cities — including Missoula, Kalispell, Helena, Butte, and Great Falls.

When Seeley Lake promotes itself for events or provides reasons for people to visit, people enjoy what the community has to offer. In the winter months, the regularly groomed snowmobile and ski trails are a main attraction. The community has more than 350 miles of groomed snowmobile trails and attracts on average 20,000 snowmobile visits each winter.⁴ Seeley Lake hosts several winter events that attract spectators and participants from near and far. Last year, the annual Seeley Lake Challenge Biathlon and Over Seeley's Creeks and Ridges (OSCR) cross country ski race brought in 105 and 181 participants, respectively.⁵ What might be more impressive, however, is that on a daily basis, the Seeley Creek Ski Trails averaged 110 skiers per day during the 2015 ski season.⁶ While the majority of this visitation — as recorded by the yurt visitation logbook — is local (from Seeley Lake, Ovando, and Missoula), the logbook recorded visitors from other western Montana communities such as Great Falls, Helena, and Kalispell, and communities in the Bitterroot Valley, as well as international guests from Guatemala, Switzerland, and multiple Canadian provinces.⁷ In 2014, the Seeley Lake Pond Hockey Tournament, which benefits the Seeley Lake Elementary School, hosted 48 teams from as far away as California and Illinois.⁸ Summer visitation is more difficult to quantify, but on weekends in July and August the motels are booked and the campgrounds are full.

² Montana Office of Tourism and Business Development, Fast Facts & Funding, <http://tourism.mt.gov/> (8/3/15). In 2014, 10.9 million non-resident visitors contributed \$3.9 billion to the State economy.

³ Montana Department of Transportation, Interactive Traffic Map, www.mdt.mt.gov/publications/datatats/traffic_maps.shtml (8/3/15)

⁴ Kristi Pohlman, Secretary of the Seeley Lake Driftriders, email communication with Amy McNamara, October 6, 2015. Data based on a four-month season.

⁵ Chris Lorentz, *Seeley Lake ROCKS Yurt Visitation Summary, 2014-2015*, 5.

⁶ *Seeley Lake ROCKS Yurt Visitation Summary, 2014-2015*, 3. Visitation is tracked for 59 days in January, February and March.

⁷ *Seeley Lake ROCKS Yurt Visitation Summary, 2014-2015*, 6.

⁸ Katherine Haake, "Pucks Fly at Weekend Pond Hockey Tournament in Seeley Lake," *The Missoulian*, January 12, 2014 (http://missoulian.com/news/local/pucks-fly-at-weekend-pond-hockey-tournament-on-seeley-lake/article_e9c30656-7c03-11e3-a411-0019bb2963f4.html).



The Seeley Lake Ranger District permits both the Seeley Lake Challenge Biathlon and the OSCRC cross country ski race referenced above – and all other events in Seeley Lake that take place on lands managed by the Forest Service – as Recreational Events. Several local community organizations view the development and hosting of events as one possible opportunity to extend the recreation season into both the spring and autumn months. If these events occur on agency lands, organizations are required to coordinate well in advance with the respective agencies to discuss the proposed event, seek the appropriate permits, and allow for application processing. At this time, the Forest Service is able to accommodate the current level of permitted recreation events, but this may change if budgets continue to decline.

In the midst of this activity, the community of Seeley Lake has struggled economically, and some residents interviewed for this project expressed a desire to see trails as part of a larger effort to diversify the community's economic base. Pyramid Mountain Lumber, the largest employer in the community, has seen its business ebb and flow with fluctuations in the timber market and

Rainy Lake is the second lake in the area's unique chain of six lakes drained by the Clearwater River. The trail at Rainy Lake (TR 396) offers magnificent views of the Swan Range. Photo: Lee Boman

the availability of timber. Many who work in Seeley Lake – including those who work at the mill, the Forest Service, and the schools – choose to commute from Missoula on a daily basis rather than live in Seeley Lake. Positioning Seeley Lake as an attractive place to live for the town's current workforce and the area's visitors, and as a destination for a greater diversity of potential residents who are able to bring their telecommuting jobs or other flexible businesses to town is one natural way to capitalize on the scenic beauty and attractive small-town lifestyle the area offers.

Based on the interviews conducted, some residents want to build on the existing recreational infrastructure and enhance the community's access to its natural resources. Some local organizations, businesses, and individuals want to work with agencies and other interested stakeholders and are looking for partners to help the community build more connections with its natural landscape.

Methods

TWO AMERICORPS CONSERVATION interns lived in Seeley Lake for twelve weeks during the 2015 summer. During that time, and prior to and following their time in Seeley Lake, the following activities took place:



The AmeriCorps interns used a GPS handheld device to collect trail and weed data on area trails. Photo: Montana Conservation Corps

- In April and May, maps created by the Seeley Lake Ranger District were distributed to all trail user groups through the Seeley Lake Trails Advisory Council. The maps displayed trails and roads from the district's northern boundary to the southern extent of Salmon Lake. East to west the focus was on trails in the Clearwater Valley below the Wilderness boundaries.
- Individuals were asked to draw on the maps, highlighting the trails they use and the places they like to visit, and to describe why they choose to recreate in those areas. Participants were also asked to identify needs that are currently unmet by the current infrastructure.

- At the beginning of June, the interns met with trail user group representatives to collect the maps and learn about priority interest areas. A standard set of questions was used to guide the conversations with the user group representatives to learn more about varying perspectives on trail use, the area's existing trail and recreation amenities, user conflicts, and future recreation needs. In addition, feedback was collected on trail values and benefits.
- Out of conversations with user groups and feedback from agency representatives, three areas were prioritized for fieldwork: the Horseshoe Hills, the Morrell Creek/Rice Ridge area, and the area surrounding the Marshall Creek Wildlife Management Area. The Trust for Public Land did not survey any trails in Wilderness areas.
- Over the course of the summer and into the fall, the interns and/or The Trust for Public Land's Seeley Lake project director met with staff from the Forest Service, Montana DNRC, Montana FWP, Missoula County, and The Nature Conservancy to discuss the project, learn about priorities from these representatives, and to answer questions about the project. Many informal follow-up meetings occurred with user groups and agency representatives.
- The methodology used for the trail condition survey was based on the Trail Assessment and Conditions Surveys (TRACS) tool used by the Forest Service. TRACS methodology is intended to be comprehensive and periodic, detailing the location and condition of every feature (*e.g.* bridge, culvert, water bar, switchback) along a trail segment. Because the Seeley Lake Ranger District has completed a TRACS survey for every trail within the last ten years,⁹ a modified TRACS survey was used to identify the most pressing maintenance needs and to highlight trail segments where the current conditions deviated from the standards to which they were built.
- In addition to collecting data on the condition of the trails themselves, the field crew secured waypoints that located the position and species of weeds found along each trail segment.
- Field data collection was conducted using a Trimble® Juno® handheld GPS device. Data collection software was developed by the Dixie National Forest. To catalog trail features and maintenance needs, the data collection program used a series of dropdown menus containing various options. These data were coded to existing Forest Service trail terminology to ensure consistency and transferability.
- After the first week of data collection, the interns met with the Recreation and Trails staff from the Seeley Lake Ranger District and the appointed Forest Service GIS contractor to download the first set of data and ensure that data being collected met the needs of the Forest Service. Regular data transfers and ongoing conversations with the Recreation and Trails staff at the District ensured that data was being collected in a consistent and accurate manner and fit with both the goals and objectives of the project and the needs of the Forest Service. The final data transfer from the Juno® handheld to the Forest Service's database resulted in a substantial loss of GIS trail data and weed data that had been collected in the area.¹⁰
- An initial draft of the report was provided to the Seeley Lake Ranger District in October for review. In December, a later draft of the report was provided to the Seeley Lake Ranger District, Montana FWP, Montana DNRC, Missoula County, and The Nature Conservancy. These rounds of review ensured accuracy of the information provided in the survey; the feedback from these agencies and landowners greatly improved the quality of this report.

⁹ Jake Long, personal communication with Ben Donatelle, July 14, 2015.

¹⁰ Data was lost for the following trails: TR 12, TR 96, TR 373, TR 380, TR 396A & B, the Seeley Creek Ski Trails, and in-town trails. In addition, survey data was lost for roads that were being assessed for recreational value in the following areas: Marshall Creek Wildlife Management Area, Archibald Loop, Fawn Peak, and Placid Lake.

LIMITATIONS AND ASSUMPTIONS

DUE TO ITS limited duration, this trail inventory project did not survey every trail and road with recreational potential in the Seeley Lake area. The interns reached out to representatives from a broad cross-section of recreation interests, including, but not limited to, agency personnel, summer and winter motorized vehicle (snowmobile and OHV) users, mountain bikers, hikers, equestrians, and the business and non-profit community. As part of this effort, The Trust for Public Land did not have the time or capacity to assess the recreational interests or desires of all residents in the Seeley Lake area. The areas chosen for surveying were based on the greatest interest from the community members and agencies interviewed. Consequently, there may or may not be other recreational opportunities that are not listed or mentioned in this report.

As noted above, The Trust for Public Land did not complete a survey of all Seeley Lake residents for this report. As such, we made the assumption that the trail benefits and values that we heard raised repeatedly in interviews and discussed at Seeley Lake Trails Advisory Council meetings were more widely appreciated in the community at large. These trails benefits and values include: public health, public safety, community livability, and positive returns to local businesses and the overall local economy. Significant research exists that documents the benefits of trails and trail use on public health, public safety, businesses, and local economies, among other things.¹¹ In the future, it would be valuable to survey community members more broadly on these topics when time and money allows.

¹¹ Headwaters Economics, Trails Benefits Library, <http://headwaterseconomics.org/trail> (12/29/15).

Findings

ONGOING AND LONG-TERM PROJECTS

THE COMMUNITY OF Seeley Lake has a handful of trails projects that are currently underway or have been ongoing for some time. Some of these projects are recurring, such as the grooming of the snowmobile and Seeley Creek Nordic Ski Trails, which are managed with state and federal entities under a variety of administrative agreements. Others are long-term projects that are in various stages of implementation. They are presented below in no particular order.

Winter Trails Grooming

The Seeley Lake Driftriders Snowmobile Club, in partnership with Montana FWP, and the Forest Service grooms and maintains more than 350 miles of snowmobile trails around the Seeley Lake area. In addition, the Driftriders Snowmobile Club assists the Seeley Lake Nordic Club by grooming the 18 kilometers (11 miles) of Seeley Creek Nordic Ski Trails just north of town. A comprehensive map of snowmobile opportuni-



More than 350 miles of snowmobile trails are groomed throughout the winter in Seeley Lake using PistenBully trail groomers. Photo: Montana FWP

ties was developed cooperatively between the Driftriders, Montana FWP, the Forest Service, and several local businesses. The maps are available at various locations around the Seeley Lake area. Maps of the Seeley Lake Nordic Ski Trails were developed by the Forest Service and are available online, around town, and at the Seeley Lake Ranger District office.

Connecting the Community Trails

For the past 15-plus years, the Seeley Lake Community Council has worked informally and cooperatively with the Forest Service and Missoula County to complete the *Connecting the Community* trail system in town and around Seeley Lake. Recreational Trail Program and Community Transportation Enhancement Program funds have been secured to construct the existing network of trails in a piecemeal fashion. Continued expansion of these trails was identified in the Missoula County Parks and Trails 2012 Master Plan as a priority for residents in Seeley Lake. At this time, legal access has not been secured on all trail segments.

Fawn Creek Nordic Trails

Seeley Lake Regional Outdoor Center for Kinetic Sports (Seeley Lake ROCKS) is in the process of developing a proposal for a Nordic trail system in the Fawn Creek area to complement the existing Seeley Creek Nordic Ski Trails. A feasibility study and design have been completed and Seeley Lake ROCKS is currently preparing a formal application to the Forest Service. As currently designed, the Fawn Creek trails include a loop system capable of hosting world-class sanctioned races. The trails are also designed to connect families and novice skiers to the sport through a high-quality trail system that supports all levels of skier abilities. The trails could provide additional opportunities for the growing Seeley Lake Elementary School District's outdoor programs, while also facilitating a family-friendly recreation opportunity close to Seeley Lake. If the proposal were to be accepted and permitted by the Forest Service, the development, operation, and use of the trail system could provide additional economic return to the community in the future.

LOCAL PERSPECTIVES

SEELEY LAKE IS an unincorporated community. One of the consequences of this is that the community has no land that it manages itself – and, for this discussion, no ability to establish and manage trails. Therefore, the Seeley Lake Community Council, local organizations, and community leaders must work closely with – and depend upon – state and federal land managing partners, Missoula County, non-profits, and private landowners to accomplish its trail objectives. In the Seeley Lake area, approximately 90 percent of the land is managed by the Forest Service or the State of Montana, or owned by The Nature Conservancy. The remaining ten percent of land is private. While state and federal agencies are

mandated to be responsive to a larger public, local “gateway” communities have special and unique relationships with those lands and those who visit them.

Interviews with community members, representatives from land management agencies, and a few other relevant stakeholders informed the prioritization of survey areas and provided insight into the needs and concerns of the community as they pertain to trail and recreation development. This section characterizes that feedback.

Agencies

Each agency has its own set of management standards and guidelines, land management plans,

legal constraints, environmental and permitting processes, and funding levels. In addition, each agency houses a wealth of information about recreation opportunities on the lands it manages. Each agency's staff is the conduit to understanding the unique mandates, constraints, and opportunities involved in working across multiple jurisdictions. Cultivating positive working relationships with the staff is critical to the success of any trail effort. Agencies expressed an interest in building lasting partnerships with the community of Seeley Lake to develop and implement shared goals.

COMMON FEEDBACK

This section details feedback that was heard consistently across the three land-managing agencies (Forest Service, Montana FWP, and Montana DNRC). It focuses on broadly identified needs and goals articulated by agency staff either at public meetings or during information-gathering conversations. Feedback is presented in no particular order.

Engage Early and Often

All three agencies expressed a strong desire to be engaged early in any community-based conversation about the use, improvement, and promotion of existing recreation assets. Agency staff expressed willingness and strong desire to serve as technical and information resources and to work with the community to build a shared understanding of the challenges, constraints, and opportunities involved with each ownership land base. Each agency has offered access to their extensive information resources to provide the community with information to help inform conversations.

Additionally, land managers expressed willingness to consider opportunities for enhancing the existing recreation infrastructure, so long as those opportunities fit within the sideboards that direct their management activities. An in-depth understanding of those sideboards, therefore, is

critical. Actively engaging agencies early in any community dialog to identify the constraints and limitations they face, and help the community understand how those constraints impact future recreation opportunities will ensure the most productive conversations and help develop a strong foundation for working and planning together.

Build Trust and Shared Understanding

All agency representatives expressed that building a relationship of trust and mutual understanding between the community and agencies takes time. High recent staff turnover within the Forest Service and the state agencies means that relationships with new managers must be established and deepened. One way to begin cultivating trust is by creating partnerships on projects that maintain and improve existing recreation assets. Through such partnerships, the agency and the community can establish relationships that will benefit each other moving forward.

Additionally, each agency expressed the need to work with neighboring agencies to ensure consistency of management priorities and prescriptions across jurisdictional boundaries. Building good working relationships between agencies and the community cannot only improve management throughout the landscape, but also create opportunities to leverage one another's strengths to address shared resource and funding problems.

Organize a Consistent, Collaborative Voice

The agencies shared that a collaborative trails group can help organize varying points of view and streamline communication with agencies as long as the group has broad representation from the community. And, from the agencies' perspective, there are benefits to working together: it is easier to distinguish who is working on what and where the needs and desires of different groups are represented in the same room; the more a collaborative proposal addresses multiple uses/user groups, the more easily the agencies could potentially justify implementing new ideas; and given the significant demands on agency staff time, attending one collaborative meeting is easier than

attending many meetings of individual groups. All the agencies expressed that a unified point of contact and organizing entity to serve as the voice for recreation interests in the community would help with overall ease and accuracy of communication.

Staff Capacity and Budget Constraints

Every agency has capacity, staffing, and budget constraints that make keeping up with deferred maintenance a challenge. Development of new opportunities is an even bigger challenge. Building capacity within the community to assist the agencies in maintaining and improving existing trails and amenities would be one way for the community to help alleviate these fiscal barriers to improved recreation.

Legal Responsibility

Each agency has unique management goals and regulatory guidelines that protect the varied assets of public lands. Outdoor recreation, forest products, wildlife habitat, clean water, and historic and cultural resources are some of the assets that managers must consider when weighing management options and balancing management prescriptions. Communities must be conversant with and mindful of the unique laws, regulations and processes that provide sideboards within which resource management decisions are made.

Development and recreation activities can pose habitat disturbances and other unacceptable impacts to threatened and endangered species. Much of the landscape surrounding Seeley Lake sits within designated grizzly bear recovery habitat or critical lynx habitat. In addition, the streams and lakes around Seeley Lake are critical bull trout habitat. Much of the restoration work occurring throughout the forested landscape is directly tied to improving habitat and security for these threatened or endangered species.

Increasing human use within sensitive wildlife habitat increases the likelihood of conflict and loss of security for these species. Managers must be mindful of and analyze the possible effects of increased recreation on threatened and endangered wildlife.

FEEDBACK UNIQUE TO EACH AGENCY

Forest Service: Seeley Lake Ranger District, Lolo National Forest

The Seeley Lake Ranger District of the Lolo National Forest covers 400,000 acres of forested and subalpine landscape framed by the Swan and Mission mountain ranges and also includes the upper Blackfoot River drainage north and east of Ovando. The Clearwater River flows through the heart of the valley connecting a chain of lakes that provides substantial opportunities for water-based recreation. The following details unique feedback from the Seeley Lake Ranger District about recreation opportunities in the area.



Interpretive signs help visitors and residents learn about the area's history and ecology. Photo: John Mercer

Existing Recreation Infrastructure

The district hosts an extensive trail and road system. Every legally managed or designated trail (as opposed to user-generated trails) on the Forest Service System has a trail number and a Trail Management Objective associated with it.¹² The Trail Management Objective outlines allowable uses and the standards to which the trail has been constructed and is maintained.

The Forest Service also maintains seven campgrounds on the district and ensures they are safe, clean, and available to the public. Other day-use sites include boat launches, beaches, trailheads, and picnic areas. In addition to developed recreation opportunities, the Forest Service offers substantial opportunities for what is known as dispersed recreation.

Dispersed Recreation Opportunities

Dispersed recreation occurs away from the designated and developed roads, trail systems, campgrounds, and other facilities. These activities include hunting, fishing, backcountry or primitive style camping, cross-country hiking, mountaineering, and backcountry skiing. Dispersed non-motorized use can take place off or on non-system trails or those trails not designated, mapped, or maintained.

¹²Trail standards are guided by the designated and allowed uses for which that trail is constructed. For example, a trail that is designated as a hiking trail will have certain specifications for bench width, tread width, brush and overhead vegetation clearing, maximum and overall grade (steepness), and the like. Each objective is intended to guide the sustainable development and maintenance of the trail based on the intended use. While a trail is designated for a particular use, such as hiking or mountain biking, that does not mean that is the only activity for which that trail is managed. Allowed uses are also outlined in the Trail Management Objectives and set the spectrum of multiple-use opportunities that that trail provides. For example, a trail that is designated as a hiking trail may also allow for mountain biking and equestrian use. The trail will be built to the standards that guide a hiking opportunity, but mountain biking and horseback riding remain legitimate uses of that trail. It is up to the user to know which uses are allowed on an individual trail. Uses are typically delineated on the forest visitor maps available from the Ranger District.

¹³U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, The Northern Region Sustainable Recreation, Heritage, Wilderness (RHW) Strategy 2015-2020, August 3, 2015, 26. According to the Strategy, each Region One forest will "assess and right size the Region's trail system through a consistent and systematic process which utilizes existing inventory data, and establishes criteria and tools by which individual units define their desired and sustainable trail system. The assessment will consider other transportation and travel management planning to ensure the trail system complements access to and through Forest Service lands and provides linkages to surrounding communities and adjacent public lands."

Forest Service is a Source of Information

Forest visitor maps, Motor Vehicle Use Maps, ski and snowmobile maps, and informational brochures are all publicly available to help guide residents and visitors towards recreation opportunities that meet their individual needs. The community should view the Forest Service as a partner in identifying recreation opportunities and directing visitors to experiences that match their individual expectations. When developing promotional materials, the community should not only consider the availability of these resources, but also work with the Forest Service to provide consistent and reliable information to the public. Finally, Forest Service maps and other information resources can be distributed through other outlets besides the District Office.

Forest Service Budgets Require Building Stewardship Partnerships

Budgetary and staffing reductions have placed limitations on the ability of the Forest Service to maintain the existing infrastructure to the standard to which it was built. Maintenance priorities and schedules are set by use; therefore, if the public infrequently uses a trail it will be less likely to be maintained. Maintenance tasks that don't get addressed in a given year become known as deferred maintenance and get shelved until the next field season, or longer. As a reflection of the problem of deferred maintenance, the Region One Office of the Forest Service is beginning to consider how to "right size" its trail system.¹³

Partnering on trail stewardship projects is one way for the community to become involved in maintaining and improving the existing recreation assets on the Forest. The Seeley Lake Ranger District is looking for opportunities to develop partnerships with local organizations that have trail stewardship skills and capacities. In 2015, the Seeley Lake Ranger District worked with a handful of partner organizations to steward trails on the District. For example, the Blackfoot Challenge has a partnership agreement with the District for a trails and invasive weed liaison to assist Forest Service personnel in planning, coordinating, and

implementing trails and invasive weed work in the Southwest Crown of the Continent project area on the Seeley Lake Ranger District. In addition, Montana Conservation Corps has a long history of providing trail crews and weed management crews to the district, and will again be working in partnership with the district on these efforts in 2016. If trail work is expected to be long-term, partnership commitments must also be long-term.

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks

Montana FWP manages four sites in the Seeley Lake area: Salmon Lake State Park, Placid Lake State Park, the Blackfoot-Clearwater Wildlife Management Area, and the Marshall Creek Wildlife Management Area. The State Parks Division manages the campgrounds and day-use facilities at Salmon Lake and Placid Lake. Both state parks offer campgrounds with full RV hook-ups and day-use facilities that include picnic areas and public boat launches. Recreation activities include opportunities for boating (motorized and non-motorized), hiking, camping, swimming, picnicking, and wildlife viewing. In addition, the State Parks manager for these sites works collaboratively with the Forest Service, Montana DNRC, and The Nature Conservancy to coordinate and facilitate necessary permitting and funding operations for the winter snowmobile trail grooming activities between Seeley Lake and Lincoln.

In 2011, Montana FWP acquired the 24,170-acre Marshall Creek Wildlife Management Area from The Nature Conservancy as part of the Montana Legacy Project (640 acres of the purchase was facilitated by Five Valleys Land Trust with financial support from Missoula County). Managed primarily for wildlife habitat and security, the area hosts prime bull trout and west-slope cutthroat trout spawning grounds as well as excellent summer and fall big game habitat. The greater Seeley Lake Ecosystem sits within the

Grizzly Bear Recovery Zone and has one of the highest density Canada lynx populations in the contiguous U.S.

The following feedback relates to the management of the Marshall Creek Wildlife Management Area:¹⁴

Critical Wildlife Habitat

Marshall Creek is unique as a Wildlife Management Area because its primary management goal is protecting and restoring habitat for threatened and endangered species, specifically bull trout, grizzly bear, and lynx. Additional goals include providing secure cover and summer/fall habitat for big game species, and opportunities for dispersed recreation. In managing the area, the agency must prioritize wildlife and cannot make management decisions that compromise the security of wildlife habitat within the area. However, when the Marshall Creek Wildlife Management Area was purchased, major accommodations were made to incorporate the existing



The greater Seeley Lake Ecosystem sits within the Grizzly Bear Recovery Zone and has one of the highest Canada Lynx populations in the contiguous U.S. Photo: Randy Smith

¹⁴ Scott Eggeman, personal communications with Ben Donatelle, June 29 and August 11, 2015.

snowmobile and open roads network to provide year-round recreational opportunities that were viewed as compatible with Wildlife Management Area management goals.

Dispersed Recreation Opportunities

Marshall Creek is open to dispersed recreation activities such as camping, fishing, hunting, wildlife viewing, hiking, mountain biking, horseback riding, and boating (on Marshall Lake). Approximately 35 miles of roads are open to wheeled motorized activities during the snow-free season, and snowmobiling is allowed throughout the Wildlife Management Area between November 30 and April 1. After April 1, snowmobiling is allowed on groomed roads only. As management activities within the area focus on improving fish and wildlife habitat, opportunities for primitive camping, hunting, and fishing within the area may also be enhanced and could be highlighted as additional public assets.

Planning for the Future

When Montana FWP acquired the Marshall Creek Wildlife Management Area, it understood that public demand for recreation in the area existed both within the community of Seeley Lake and the surrounding area. For this reason, major accommodations were already made to incorporate recreation and motorized trails opportunities that are not typical of most Wildlife Management Areas. The agency has indicated a willingness to work with recreation interests to create additional recreation opportunities, but they will likely be limited in scope and must be compatible with the property's primary goal of fish and wildlife management. In addition, management of the Marshall Creek area will be consistent with the management priorities of neighboring land management agencies where their lands adjoin.

A formal process to develop a resource management plan for the Marshall Creek area began in the fall of 2015. A travel management plan will be one component of the resource management planning process and will account for all current recreation opportunities available within the

area. Additionally, Montana FWP will analyze the feasibility of the proposed Fawn Creek Trail System where it crosses onto state lands as part of its travel management planning process.

Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (Montana DNRC)

At the time of statehood, "the Congress of the United States granted to the State of Montana, for common school support, sections sixteen and thirty-six in every township within the state."¹⁵ The lands were granted for the sole purpose of generating income for common schools and other endowed institutions. Montana DNRC is responsible for management of the State's School Trust Lands. Montana DNRC's mission is to help ensure that Montana's land and water resources provide benefits for present and future generations.

In the Seeley Lake area, Montana DNRC manages both individual sections and a large block of consolidated land to the south of Woodworth Road called the Blackfoot-Clearwater Wildlife Management Area. The Blackfoot-Clearwater Wildlife Management Area is cooperatively managed with Montana FWP under a comprehensive Conservation Management Plan, which dictates the type, level, and seasonal access restrictions to the area. The current plan has been in place since 2004 and emphasizes protecting the security of winter range habitat for big game species such as deer, elk, and moose. No commercial outfitting is allowed within the Blackfoot-Clearwater Wildlife Management Area and all recreational use of the Wildlife Management Area is subject to seasonal closures to protect wildlife.

The following feedback was captured through several conversations and public meetings with the local Montana DNRC manager:¹⁶

¹⁵ Montana DNRC, State Trust Beneficiaries, <http://dnrc.mt.gov/divisions/trust/trust-lands-beneficiaries> (08/14/15).

¹⁶ Kristen Baker-Dickinson, personal communications with Ben Donatelle, May 22 and August 17, 2015.

Dispersed Recreation Opportunities

Montana DNRC recognizes that the demand for recreation opportunities on their lands is increasing in Seeley Lake and other areas across the state and the agency is working internally to better address that demand. Montana DNRC lands are generally open to hunting, fishing, and trapping to all persons possessing the appropriate license from Montana FWP. Persons desiring to conduct non-commercial and/or non-concentrated types of activities on Montana DNRC lands falling within the definition of “general recreational use,” such as camping, hiking, skiing, sightseeing, day horseback use, etc., unless such activities are conducted in conjunction with and incidental to licensed hunting, fishing, and trapping, will be required to possess a "State Land Recreational Use License."¹⁷ State Land Recreational Use Licenses are available from any authorized Montana FWP license agent or through the Montana FWP online license service.¹⁸ Public access, or use of specific areas, may be subject to availability of legal access, seasonal closures, or restrictions as needed to ensure consistency with management priorities.

Focused Recreation

Focused recreation (planned events as well as commercial or concentrated use on constructed trails or other routes) requires a Special Recreational Use or Land Use License depending on the proposed activity. Authorization for non-motorized routes (trails) and qualifying motorized use on existing open routes across Montana DNRC lands require a Land Use License that can be held by any legally organized entity (*e.g.*, non-profit organization, land trust). Authorization for newly constructed, non-winter, motorized routes must be held by a governmental entity or agency (*e.g.*, municipal or county government, Forest Service, Montana FWP) due to concerns over liability.

Curbing Unauthorized Access

Montana DNRC has spent significant time cataloging activities occurring on its lands. The

agency is especially concerned with the number of unauthorized non-winter, motorized routes across its land. Local managers have agreed to help Seeley Lake users identify which routes are open for legal use. They have also indicated that the unauthorized, commercial- or concentrated-use routes need to be resolved before they can begin to consider any future expansion of recreation opportunities in the area. Resolving these routes either requires authorization (see *Focused Recreation* above) of the routes in question or abandonment of the use.

Missoula County

Missoula County covers 2,600 square miles and includes land owned by the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes. While Missoula County is not a major land manager like the Forest Service, Montana FWP, or Montana DNRC, it does own and manage recreational lands and trails in Seeley Lake for the benefit of the community.

Missoula County manages three parks, totaling 48 acres. Drew Creek Park, 37 acres in the Double Arrow Subdivision, is managed as open lands and provides access between the Double Arrow and adjacent Forest Service land. Priority Park, comprising five acres along Canyon Drive, is managed for open space and includes creek frontage. Clearwater Lions Park, three acres on Cedar Lane, is managed by the Seeley Lake Lions Club, which maintains the park for picnicking, hiking, and wildlife viewing as well as ice-skating in the winter.

Missoula County has constructed several shared-use trails, located adjacent to County road right-of-way that are part of the Seeley Lake’s developing community pathway system. These paths are located along Riverside Drive and Boy Scout Lane. In 2016, Missoula County will construct a pathway along Locust Lane from Highway 83 to the Seeley-Swan High School.

Missoula County is working to implement

¹⁷ Montana DNRC, Recreational Use of State Land, <http://dnrc.mt.gov/index/divisions/trust/recreational-use-of-state-land> (12/30/15).

¹⁸ Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks, Hunting, Fishing, and Recreational Licenses, <https://app.mt.gov/als/index/index.html> (12/29/15).

the *Parks and Trails Master Plan*, which includes supporting community trail projects that provide connections between communities and connections from community centers to adjacent public lands, and supporting trails that provide connectivity within communities.¹⁹

In the *Parks and Trails Master Plan*, Seeley Lake residents identified strong interest in trails that connect major focal points in town with existing trails and with public lands outside of town for improved walkability and bicycle safety.²⁰ Residents expressed goals to provide connections between parks, schools, and the business corridors. The County's 2015 Trails Bond Program is a \$3 million funding initiative available to support the community trails goals across the County.²¹

The Nature Conservancy

In January 2015, the Nature Conservancy acquired 117,000 acres of Plum Creek Timber lands as part of its Great Western Checkerboards Initiative. The land is located between the Blackfoot River Corridor and the Marshall Creek Wildlife Management Area on the west side of Montana State Highway 83. Known as the Clearwater-Blackfoot Project, this area has been used for intense timber production for decades, but it still includes prime wildlife habitat and recreation opportunities within the region. In the years ahead, the Conservancy will work with local communities and partners to develop locally-driven plans to place the lands into permanent conservation ownership.²²

The Nature Conservancy is currently completing an inventory of the lands it acquired.²³ As part of this inventory, it is identifying and prioritizing road and fisheries restoration activities, identifying and managing noxious and invasive weeds, and beginning to identify areas for forest restoration work. The Nature Conservancy, in partnership with the Blackfoot Challenge, has established the Clearwater-Blackfoot Project Working Group to engage interested members of the public to help craft and implement long-term stewardship and

ownership solutions.

The Nature Conservancy's holdings are open to recreation opportunities outlined in its Open Lands Policy.²⁴ There are many opportunities for activities such as hiking, horseback riding, and mountain biking. Dispersed camping is allowed throughout the area. The Nature Conservancy has a winter motorized recreation permit in place with the Seeley Lake Driftriders. The Nature Conservancy understands that continued recreational use on this land is an important community value, and has stressed the importance of working



Together, Blackfoot Challenge and The Nature Conservancy are coordinating the Clearwater-Blackfoot Working Group to identify the many resource, economic, social, and cultural values associated with the Clearwater-Blackfoot Project lands. Photo: Blackfoot Challenge

¹⁹ Missoula County, Community & Planning Services Plans and Documents, *Parks and Trails Master Plan*, 2012. <http://www.missoulacounty.us/government/community-development/community-planning-services/plans> (12/29/15).

²⁰ *Parks and Trails Master Plan*, 59-60.

²¹ Missoula County, Trails Bond Program, <http://www.missoulacounty.us/government/community-development/community-planning-services/parks-trails/trails-bond-program> (12/29/15).

²² The Nature Conservancy, Clearwater Blackfoot Project, <http://www.nature.org/blackfoot> (12/29/15).

²³ Chris Bryant, Land Protection Specialist, The Nature Conservancy, personal communication with Ben Donatelle, June 22, 2015.

²⁴ The Nature Conservancy, Open Lands Policy, <http://www.nature.org/ourinitiatives/regions/northamerica/unitedstates/montana/open-land-policy-2014.pdf> (9/21/2015).

with future agency managers on any potential projects on the land.

Community Groups

The Trust for Public Land sought community input to gain an understanding of community needs related to trails. As much as possible, The Trust for Public Land worked through the Seeley Lake Trails Advisory Council to engage the trail user groups in Seeley Lake. The Seeley Lake Trails Advisory Council is a nascent collaborative group for recreation interests in Seeley Lake. The Council consists of representatives from most of the area's recreation user groups, including mountain bikers, equestrians, outfitters, OHV riders, snowmobilers, and Nordic skiers. However, no representatives sit on the council to speak for organized hiking interests, hunters, or anglers. It should be noted that no agencies sit on the Council either.

The goal of the Council is to bring together organizations in order to leverage collective strengths and resources on behalf of trails and trail management in the area. The Council provided the connection with many community members that – along with agencies – helped shape the direction and focus of the fieldwork for this survey. Additional businesses and individuals outside the Council were engaged to gain more local perspectives on trails. Without the cooperation and support of the Council and other interested stakeholders, the field surveys would have been more difficult and community priorities harder to discern.

The feedback below details common themes and unique ideas that were collected through conversations with user group representatives as described in the *Methods* above. The ideas presented here do not reflect any particular agency or landowner's ability or commitment to implement.

COMMON FEEDBACK

While every user group has unique needs and desires for recreational opportunities, some of

the feedback gathered from community members overlapped. General themes that were commonly heard from all the community groups are outlined below:

Trails Bring People Together

The trails conversation in Seeley Lake is embedded within a larger dialog about identifying and achieving positive outcomes for the community. People working on trails are looking to provide opportunities for people of all ages to enjoy and appreciate the landscape and to encourage individuals to come together to develop solutions to community problems and create a shared vision for the place they call home. For those interviewed, trails feel like an issue where people can develop common ground, work together, strengthen relationships, and accomplish good things for their community.

Area's Recreational Assets are Underutilized

Those interviewed in the community agreed that they live in a very special place. Seeley Lake and the surrounding wildlands provide a high quality of life. The proximity to the Bob Marshall Wilderness Complex, the front-country terrain, and the culture of community involvement are all things that make Seeley Lake a great place to live. Many of those interviewed also expressed that the area's recreation assets are underdeveloped and thus underutilized. As a result, local residents interviewed report feeling limited by current recreation opportunities and struggling to share this community and its trails with those who visit and patronize area businesses and lodging facilities. Of the many issues that were raised associated with this topic, the most prominent were: inadequate signage and route-marking of trails and pathways; fragmented or incomplete pathways connecting the community to area destinations; lack of good tools to tell area visitors where to go to meet their recreation needs; lack of a concerted effort to promote area recreation opportunities; lack of adequate accommodations during peak seasons; and the seasonality of the tourism economy.

Connecting the Community Trails

Many who were interviewed shared a desire to provide safe trails and pathways that both facilitate alternative transportation options through town and connect to nearby destinations such as campgrounds and swimming beaches. The *Connecting the Community* trail system has been pieced together over the past 15-plus years, but remains incomplete and fragmented in several places. Completing the trail and pathway connections between the community and area recreation opportunities around Seeley Lake is a high priority for those who live there.²⁵ This would include:

- Improving the safety of the existing Highway 83 pathway north from Cory's Market through town and extending the pathway towards Big Larch Campground.
- Extending the Highway 83 pathway south from Cory's Market to the Double Arrow Resort.
- Creating Highway 83 pedestrian crosswalks



Hikers can wind their way through the Girard Grove throughout the year as they enjoy the *Connecting the Community* trails. Trails are also open to cyclists as conditions permit. The community seeks to eventually have legal trail access all the way around Seeley Lake. Photo: Lee Boman

and associated crossing infrastructure (i.e., flashing lights) at Riverview Drive, Boy Scout Road, Downtown Seeley Lake (at The Ice Cream Place), and Morrell Creek Road to alert and stop traffic for safe crossings.²⁶

- Completing construction of the pathways and trails that connect local neighborhoods to the high school and elementary school. *Note: In 2016, Missoula County will construct a pathway along Locust Lane from Highway 83 to the high school.*
- Creating an authorized route across Montana DNRC-managed Section 36 behind Seeley-Swan High School to provide a community connection to Cottonwood Lakes Road, the Seeley Creek Nordic Ski Trails, and other recreation opportunities in the Morrell Creek area.
- Improving trail navigation and connectivity from town to the Seth Diamond Interpretive Trail and Seeley Lake Campground. Creating an authorized route across Montana

DNRC-managed Section 4. Improving trail signage across all ownerships. Revamping the interpretation at the Seth Diamond Interpretive Trail, which is faded, and in need of attention. Consider adjusting the grade and width of the Seth Diamond Interpretive Trail to meet ADA-specifications in an effort to expand the recreational opportunities for individuals with disabilities residing in or visiting Seeley Lake.

- Completing the trail around the lake including: improving the trails along Highway 83

²⁵ Completing any one of these would require partnering with one or multiple agencies, securing grant or other funding to complete the project, and coordination within the community.

²⁶ Seeley Lake Community Council, *Seeley Lake Community Council Speed Limit and Pedestrian Crossing Submission*, October 2015. <http://seeley-lakecommunitycouncil.com/traffic.pdf> (11/16/15). The report also outlines speed limit reductions, secondary crosswalks, and other requests the Community Council is making of Montana Department of Transportation.

between Big Larch and the Seeley Lake Ranger District Office and along the Clearwater Canoe Trail pathway; perfecting a route from the Clearwater Canoe Trailhead around the north side of Seeley Lake to Boy Scout Road; and connecting to the Seth Diamond trailhead. This effort entails obtaining legal access across a variety of land ownerships on route segments, which make up the “trail” around the lake.

- Including public trails within future subdivisions that would provide community connections to public lands, schools, and other community assets and more broadly provide safer access to close-to-home recreation and a safe means to move about and through the community.
- Developing a community park or open space that is central to downtown and a gathering place for community events.

Signage and Wayfinding

Community feedback and field surveys indicate that trailhead and route signage is inadequate in most areas of the valley. Where signs do exist, they are often small or not very prominent. Many of the lesser-known trails are difficult to find and lack sufficient signage. As a result, explaining trailhead locations and routes to area visitors is challenging. And, lack of good signage to direct people to the right places to recreate can inadvertently lead to trespass issues on private lands. Community members requested an opportunity to work with agencies to address this need in the following places:

- Signing routes in the Horseshoe Hills for hiking, mountain biking, and horseback riding. (Some signs do currently mark groomed snowmobile routes.)
- Improving signs along the *Connecting the Community* trails and pathways.
- Improving trailhead visibility and route-marking on trails in the Morrell Creek/Rice Ridge area including: Crescent Lake (TR 390), Richmond Peak (TR 183), Florence Lake (TR 451),

Rice Ridge (TR 429), Morrell Creek (TR 30.1), and Upper Morrell Creek (TR 383).

Marketing and Promotions

“We don’t have a trails problem, we have a marketing problem,” was an often heard phrase during community interviews. Residents and business owners expressed frustration at the lack of resources to help customers, friends, and visitors find and navigate many of the local trails. In 2015, the Seeley Lake Community Foundation created a simple guide for the Seeley Lake area that was a first step in developing a recreation resource for area visitors. Additional ideas to address this problem include:

- Partnering with agencies to improve signage, mapping, and highlighting of the best existing recreation opportunities in the area.
- Developing a Seeley Lake community recreation brand identity similar to the Whitefish Legacy Trails or Methow Valley Trails.
- Creating additional wayfinding maps and/or guides to help people find the trails in the area and ensure their safety once they are on them. These guides should provide information about what users can expect on the trails, direct them to appropriate experiences based on their skill level, and help them get to know the area and be prepared to recreate in it (including taking appropriate precautions based on the area’s wildlife).
- Working with the Montana Office of Tourism and Glacier Country Tourism to promote existing opportunities in and around Seeley Lake.

Given that so many of Seeley Lake’s trails are on state and federal agency lands, or on land owned by The Nature Conservancy, partnering with respective land management agencies or landowners on any of the aforementioned trail promotion projects will be critical.

FEEDBACK UNIQUE TO EACH USER GROUP

Each user group has unique needs and desires for trail construction and trailhead facilities. Much can be done to support compatible uses on existing infrastructure, but in some cases new trails or connections were identified that could improve user experiences or minimize conflicts.

What follows is the feedback that was unique to individual user groups. As noted above, the ideas presented here do not reflect any particular agency or landowner's ability or commitment to implement. The feedback is provided in alphabetical order. Detailed maintenance needs for specific existing trails will be outlined in the *Trails Descriptions* section of this report.

Backcountry Horseback Riding and Outfitting

Overall, opportunities for horseback riding are plentiful in the area. The Bob Marshall Wilderness Complex hosts some of the best backcountry terrain in the contiguous U.S. to ride a horse. The front country trails that lead into the Wilderness, such as Pyramid Pass (TR 416), Monture Creek (TR 27), and Dunham Creek (TR 400), receive significant Forest Service maintenance attention and

are used by day users and outfitters alike. Some local outfitters also donate time clearing and maintaining the trails they use most heavily.

Unique needs at trailheads and campsites were identified, such as sufficient space for trailer turnaround and parking, and the availability of water, forage, and corrals or hitching posts. Some users expressed a concern over conflicting uses on some heavily used trails and suggested that working within the community to develop educational materials around trail ethics could help to alleviate many issues. Some other lesser-known opportunities were identified as highly valued by backcountry horseback riders but in need of maintenance or re-establishment:

- Designating and signing routes on gated roads in the Horseshoe Hills, the Marshall Creek Wildlife Management Area, and the lands west of Placid Lake recently acquired by The Nature Conservancy.
- Reconstructing some historic trails on the lands now owned by The Nature Conservancy to the west of Placid Lake, including trails to Boles Creek, Spook Lake, Belmont Peak, and Elk Meadows. These trails were specifically highlighted as not being well-marked, being difficult to find on the ground, and in need of rehabilitation.



In 2015, the Seeley Lake Community Foundation completed a pocket-sized guide to recreation opportunities in the Seeley Lake area. This is a portion of that map, which is distributed for free in area businesses.



The Pyramid Pass Trail (TR 416) is a popular trail for entry into the Bob Marshall Wilderness Complex. Here, riders use the trail for a day ride. Photo: Rich Ranch

Hiking

No organized hiking group exists in Seeley Lake, nor are hiking interests specifically represented on the Seeley Lake Trails Advisory Council. Nevertheless, feedback on hiking opportunities was compiled from a variety of sources for this effort. There are ample hiking opportunities within the Bob Marshall and Mission Mountains Wilderness Areas. It was noted that there are several local day hikes close to town that are in need of maintenance or rehabilitation so that they could be promoted to visitors and more readily enjoyed by locals. Specific recommendations, include:

- Designating and signing a route to the top of Mt. Baldy in the Horseshoe Hills.
- Clearing or re-establishing Sunday Mountain (TR 430), Grizzly Basin (TR 409), Upper Morrell Creek (TR 383), Jocko Divide (TR 96), Sunset Ridge (TR 308), Florence Lake (TR 451), Rice Ridge (TR 429), and Richmond Peak (TR 183) trails.

- Implementing trailhead improvements, signing, and maintenance of the Crescent Lake Trail (TR 390). *Note: Equestrian users also offered that realigning the entrance to this trail with the Pyramid Pass trailhead would facilitate a better user experience and centralized place for loading/unloading of stock.*

Mountain Biking

There are no trails in the Seeley Lake Ranger District that are currently designed and maintained primarily for mountain bike use. That said, mountain biking is an allowed use on area trails outside of the Wilderness. Local mountain bikers identified several trails that need maintenance in order to provide a better quality mountain bike experience. They also identified several trails in need of rehabilitation. The lower Morrell Creek Trail (TR 30.1) has been a main focus for the mountain bike community over the past several years. Several “trail gnomes” have

helped clear this trail of downfall and maintain the tread in recent years and would be interested in formalizing a partnership with the Forest Service to continue stewardship of local mountain bike trails. The lollipop loop that follows Morrell Creek Trail (TR 30.1), the road to Pyramid Pass trailhead, and Chaffin Trail (TR 388) is a popular route that is (uniquely) mostly on single-track. Trail 382 is part of the Great Divide Mountain Bike Route and could be used to facilitate a 30-mile mountain bike ride. Mountain bikers suggested creating direct connections between this trail, the Morrell Creek Trail (TR 30.1), and the Rice Ridge Trail (TR 429) to provide a loop opportunity. Other identified opportunities that mountain bikers would like to see maintained or rehabilitated include:

- Designating and signing routes in the Horseshoe Hills to make loop opportunities of varying lengths (5 to 15 miles) easily identifiable.

- Creating a single-track tread along the Seeley Creek Nordic Ski Trails to provide ride-from-town, quick-loop opportunities.
- Clearing and re-establishment of the Rice Ridge Trail (TR 429) to provide a 30-mile “epic ride.”
- In the Blackfoot-Clearwater Stewardship Project’s proposal, the Center Ridge Trail (TR 246) to the east of town was identified as a potential “backcountry” bicycling experience. This group has adjusted the wilderness boundary in its proposal to accommodate mountain bike use along this trail, and outfitters have agreed that this trail would be a good option for further promoting mountain biking.²⁷
- Creating a skills park, BMX, or pump track to provide a place for local kids to practice and ride close to town.



A mountain biker out on the Swan Divide Trail (TR 382).
Photo: Ben Donatelle

²⁷ While the Center Ridge Trail is not in the Clearwater drainage, it is in the Seeley Lake Ranger District and is a trail that would be enjoyed by residents of Seeley Lake and visitors to the area.

Nordic and Backcountry Skiing

Several feasibility studies completed over the past decade have identified Seeley Lake as a community that is uniquely situated to become a world-class destination for Nordic skiing. Currently the Seeley Creek Nordic Ski Trails offer 18 kilometers of groomed classic and skate ski trails just outside of town. This opportunity is made possible through an agreement between the Forest Service and the Seeley Lake Nordic Ski Club. There is a warming yurt located at the Seeley Creek Nordic Trails trailhead that is permitted by the Forest Service and managed by Seeley Lake ROCKS. Other dispersed Nordic ski opportunities are prevalent on the network of old, gated roads throughout the area. Seeley Lake ROCKS is currently developing a proposal for the Fawn Creek area to expand upon and complement the existing Seeley Creek Nordic Ski Trails (see *Fawn Creek Nordic Trails* above under *Ongoing and Long-Term Projects*).

Three backcountry ski areas were identified that, if better promoted, could draw a constituency of users that isn't yet well-established in the Seeley Lake area. Yurtski operates a guide service and seasonally offers two backcountry yurts at the base of Morrell Mountain under special use permit with the Forest Service. Visitors can rent the yurts, hire a guided tour, or ski or snowmobile in on their own to enjoy multi-day backcountry adventures near the Morrell Fire Lookout. Effectively engaging this business in future recreation planning around Seeley Lake could bring a new constituency and energy to the community.

Two other backcountry ski areas were suggested for additional promotion and further development of similar yurt operations – Red

Butte, just west of Lindbergh Lake on the Flathead National Forest, and Jenny Creek on the northeast side of Monture Mountain.²⁸ Coordinating with the Forest Service to promote one or both of these areas could benefit businesses in the Swan Valley, Seeley Lake, and/or Ovando. This use at Monture Mountain has been supported by the Blackfoot-Clearwater Stewardship Project.

Summer Motorized

Currently there are no OHV or motorcycle trails on the Seeley Lake Ranger District. However, the Forest Service produces a Motor Vehicle Use Map annually, which designates 360 miles of roads in the district as open to all motorized travel, including OHVs and motorcycles.²⁹ While OHV use is allowed on all roads open to motorized traffic, those interviewed feel frustrated by the lack of dedicated trails. The Seeley-Swan ATV Club indicated they might be able to play a unique role in assisting with road maintenance, weed control, and monitoring or patrolling the trails/roads to help educate users. The Seeley-Swan ATV Club prioritized several projects in the Seeley Lake area:

- A route through the Horseshoe Hills that follows the snowmobile trail to provide access between Placid Lake Road and Cottonwood Lakes Road to reach Ovando and the motorized opportunities near Lincoln.
- Two connections in the Marshall Creek area to provide loop routes: 1) from the Snowmobile Warming Hut south to the Jocko Lakes Road (follows snow route 63.19 on Seeley Lake Ranger District Over Snow Vehicle Use Map); and 2) from Mount Henry Road (through an area referred to as Moose Gap) to Fawn Creek Road near the “Green Gate” (follows snow route 63.18 on Seeley Lake Ranger District Over Snow Vehicle Use Map).
- A route south of Placid Lake through The Nature Conservancy property to access Sunset Hills Road and Garnett Ghost Town.

²⁸ While neither of these areas is in the Clearwater drainage, they are both very close and could be positive additions to the area's recreation offerings.

²⁹ U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, *Motor Vehicle Use Map Lolo National Forest Seeley Lake Ranger District*, Jan 01, 2015.



There are 20,000 snowmobile visits to Seeley Lake every winter. Photo: Courtesy of Yamaha Snowmobiles

- A short road connection between the Clearwater Lake Loop Road and the existing road infrastructure (FS Rd 9567) in the Owl Creek drainage on the Flathead National Forest. During the winter, snowmobiles can travel this road to drop into the Holland Lake area from the south, but motorized use in the summer is not currently permitted.³⁰
- Trail authorization that would provide legal access from town to Cottonwood Lakes Road.³¹

Driftriders, Montana FWP, and the Forest Service. A comprehensive map of snowmobile opportunities was developed cooperatively between the Driftriders, Montana FWP, the Forest Service, and several local businesses. Additionally, the Forest Service produces an Over Snow Motor Vehicle Use Map similar to the summer map, which designates specific routes and areas as open to snowmobile use.³² No access issues were identified through conversations with local snowmobilers.

Winter Motorized

Snowmobile users indicated that winter motorized access overall is excellent. More than 350 miles of groomed snowmobile trails currently exist and are maintained jointly by the Seeley Lake

³⁰ While Owl Creek is not in the Clearwater drainage it connects Seeley Lake to Holland Lake, a highly-valued recreation asset in the area.

³¹ Note: Seeking a connection from behind the Seeley-Swan High School would entail obtaining a trail authorization from the Forest Service on Section 35 and from Montana DNRC on Section 36.

³² U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, *Over Snow Motor Vehicle Use Map Lolo National Forest Seeley Lake Ranger District*, Dec 01, 2014.

Future Considerations

ONE GOAL OF this trail survey project and subsequent report was to provide information for the community of Seeley Lake, managing agencies, and other stakeholders as they move forward with any trail planning and other trail efforts in the area. Following are some considerations based on the synthesis of field surveys and interviews conducted during the project.



Seeley Lake Elementary School classes get outside regularly to learn and apply new skills. Photo: Bridget Laird

NEAR-TERM TRAIL OPPORTUNITIES

A HANDFUL OF near-term trail projects were identified that would enhance currently existing trail infrastructure in the Seeley Lake area. All projects require coordination with and approval by appropriate management agencies.

- Improve the *Connecting the Community* trails from Boy Scout Road to Girard Grove and out to the Seth Diamond Interpretive Trail. Specifically, address trail authorization issues on Montana DNRC land and improve signage along the length of the trail and to the two campgrounds on the west side of Seeley Lake.
- Revamp the interpretation at the Seth Diamond Interpretive Trail, which is faded, and in need of attention. Consider adjusting the grade and width of the Seth Diamond Interpretive Trail to meet ADA-specifications in an effort to expand the recreational opportunities for individuals with disabilities residing in and visiting Seeley Lake.
- Identify and mark routes in the Horseshoe Hills for hiking, biking, and equestrian use.
- Establish single-track tread on the Seeley Creek Nordic Ski Trail prisms to facilitate a more enjoyable, close-to-town biking experience.
- Complete minor reroutes, bridge reconstruction, tread work, and signing on TR 30.1, which is currently being used by many locals as a mountain bike trail. Signing or route marking is especially needed at trail junctions and along the south end of the trail. Establish a single-track tread on the old, grassed-over road prism at the south end of the trail.
- Prioritize and address ongoing deferred maintenance associated with many of the area's trails, which are in need of minor tread work,

clearing of downed trees, cleaning of water bars and/or improvements to drainage features, and erosion mitigation. See "Inventory Notes" in *Appendix II: Detailed Trail Descriptions* for current deferred maintenance needs on individual trails surveyed as part of this project.

- Develop and install consistent signage throughout the area at road junctions, trailheads, and along trails including trailhead signs at: Florence Lake, Lake Dinah, Swan Divide, and Rice Ridge.
- Use information from the Forest Service's Motor Vehicle Use Map to create a more user-friendly summer motorized use map to guide area users to legal routes and popular destination areas. A model for this is the popular snowmobile trails map.



At the Seth Diamond Interpretive Trail, most of the educational panels are sun- or water-damaged and in need of replacement. This trail's close-to-town location and proximity to two popular campgrounds makes it a valuable community asset and worthy of investment. Photo: Ben Donatelle

LONGER-TERM TRAIL AND RECREATION OPPORTUNITIES

THE FOLLOWING LONGER-term trail projects and recreation opportunities would modify, enhance, and build upon the existing trail infrastructure.

- Develop a visible, centralized community park that could serve as a gathering place and nexus for the *Connecting the Community* trail system.
- Improve public access to Seeley Lake.
- Invest in extending and upgrading the alternative transportation pathway along Highway 83 so it extends from one end of town to the other.
- Complete the goal of a “Seeley Lake Trail” that has a legal right-of-way all the way around Seeley Lake.
- Work with other regional communities, agencies, and local governments to connect local trails to the communities and trail systems that exist outside of Seeley Lake including Condon and the Swan Valley, Lincoln, Ovando, Potomac, and Arlee.
- Work with Montana DNRC, the Forest Service, and Missoula County to identify and find creative solutions to resolve all unauthorized routes.
- Expand the community trails network within Seeley Lake by encouraging future subdivisions to include public trails in their designs to ensure safe community connections between area destinations and encourage residents to bike or walk when headed to school, work, or other destinations.



Motorized recreation is currently allowed on 360 miles of roads in the area, which are designated on the Motor Vehicle Use Map. Photo: Polaris

BUILDING AND SUPPORTING A TRAILS COMMUNITY

FOLLOWING ARE IDEAS and specific upcoming opportunities for individuals and the Seeley Lake community at large to work together to develop public-private partnerships to support trail stewardship and development in the Seeley Lake area.

- Develop trust and build long-term partnerships and collaborations with agencies to steward the area's trail resources.
- Identify and apply for sources of funding for trail development and trail rehabilitation projects. Specifically, in the near term, take advantage of Missoula County Trails Bond funding by proposing a priority project or a package of projects to Missoula County before the bond funds are completely spoken for by other communities.
- Reach out to those within the community and surrounding areas who can bring resources, knowledge, and support to these efforts. Take advantage of offers of assistance and find ways to leverage each other's capacities.
- Identify and prioritize small, implementable projects on which to collaborate and gain momentum, while filling the gaps in existing infrastructure.
- Build a community of volunteer trail stewards who are organized, skilled, and formally engaged and coordinated with the Forest Service and other land managers to assist in the maintenance and stewardship of the existing trail system.
- Survey a larger sample of Seeley Lake's population to gain a better understanding of community values and expectations for trails, prioritize trail opportunities, and expand engagement in the trails dialog.
- Participate in the Clearwater-Blackfoot Project Working Group.
- Participate in Montana FWP's Resource Management Plan development for the Marshall Creek Wildlife Management Area (initiated fall 2015).
- Participate in the Lolo National Forest Plan Revision process scheduled to begin in 2018.



Area trails are great ways for kids and adults to explore the Seeley Lake area together. Photo: Bridget Laird

CONCLUSION

SEELEY LAKE, MONTANA is fortunate to have incredible natural assets and a community that is committed to working together to build upon and improve the many recreational opportunities that currently exist for those who live in and visit the area. The Trust for Public Land is hopeful that this trails survey report will be a resource for all of those who care about the future of Seeley Lake and a productive tool to identify concrete ways to work together to advance the future of its trails system.

Appendix I: General Survey Area Descriptions

FOLLOWING ARE DESCRIPTIONS of the survey areas chosen for this project. Each of these areas is easily accessible from the community of Seeley Lake. As a result residents and visitors frequently use them. Not all of the identified routes mentioned in Appendix I are maintained system trails but rather some are unmanaged dispersed recreation opportunities. Where this occurs on an ownership such as the National Forest, this is important to understand as they are not built to a safe standard or maintained, and therefore cannot be placed on maps to share as recreational opportunities.



The Swan Range is one of Seeley Lake's natural assets. It can be enjoyed from trails throughout the valley. Photo: Lee Boman

In-Town Pathways and Trails

Seeley Lake has a number of paved and gravel pathways in town and around portions of the west and north ends of the lake that constitute the multi-jurisdictional *Connecting the Community* trail system. Residents and visitors use this system of trails to commute to school and work and to recreate. The main pathway through town parallels Highway 83 and is paved from just south of Cory's Valley Market on the south end of town, to the Veterans Memorial Park on the north end of town. Two pathways — one along Boy Scout Road and

another along Riverview Drive — connect to this paved path. There are benches along the northern half of the pathway through the heart of town.

The trails on the west side of Seeley Lake wind through Girard Grove and the Seth Diamond Interpretive Trail and connect to the two campgrounds on the west side of Seeley Lake. They provide opportunities to walk, run, or bike relatively close to town. At the center of Girard Grove sits Gus, the largest Western Larch in the United States and one of the Seeley Lake's well-known tourist attractions.³³ These trails make up the majority of a

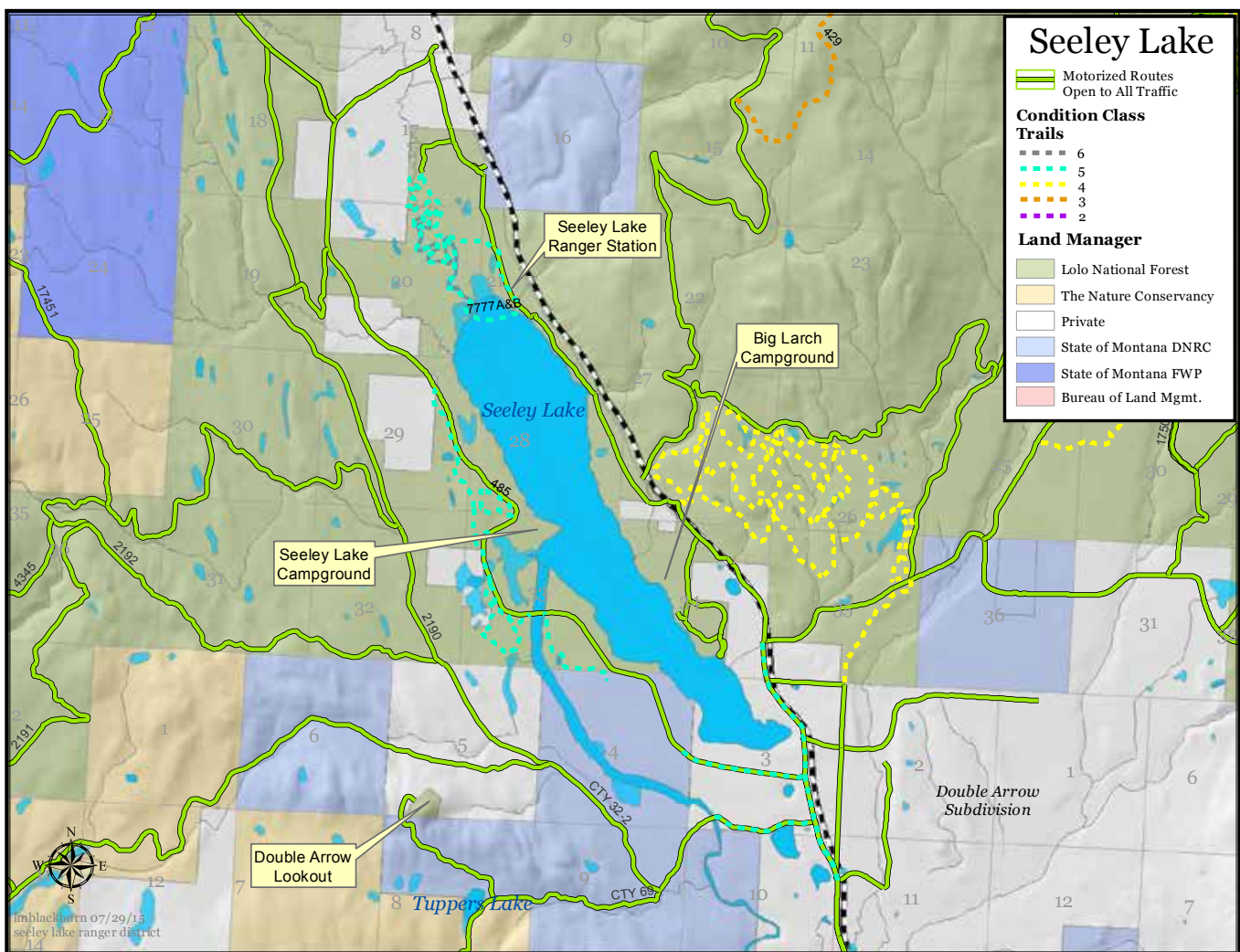


Figure 1 Seeley Lake Trails. For the purposes of this map, Trail Condition Classes³⁴ indicate: 6 (Not Surveyed), 5 (Excellent Condition, well-maintained to standard); 4 (Good Condition, brush- or treadwork needed); 3 (Fair Condition: significant brush- and treadwork needed, windfall along length, difficult to travel); 2 (Poor Condition: route-finding difficult, significant brush- and treadwork needed along length).

³³ American Forests, National Register of Big Trees, <https://www.americanforests.org/bigtree/western-larch-larix-occidentalis-3/> (12/30/15).

³⁴ For this and future maps in this report, the trail condition classes (and later the road classes) were developed by The Trust For Public Land as a means to characterize the trails and the condition we found them in during the 2015 survey.

community trails network developed over the past 15-plus years. The community is working to complete a continuous pathway around Seeley Lake with legal access. The trail has yet to be completed on the north end of the lake and is intermittent along Highway 83 between the Big Larch Campground and the Seeley Lake Ranger District Office.

Horseshoe Hills

Located on the southeast edge of town, the Horseshoe Hills were transferred to public ownership between 2006 and 2007 as part of the Blackfoot Community Project (Figure 2). The Forest Service manages the majority of the area, although Montana DNRC manages Section 16 in the center as well as portions on the southern and eastern edges of the area. Originally managed primarily for timber production by its previous owner, Plum Creek Timber Company, an extensive network of roads crosses this landscape of second-growth forests and open meadows. In many places, visitors to the Horseshoe

Hills can gain spectacular views of the Clearwater River, Seeley and Salmon Lakes, and the Swan and Mission mountain ranges. The views, the network of old roads, the proximity to town, and multiple access points are among the many reasons why local residents highlighted this as an area important for future recreation development opportunities.

The existing road infrastructure is extensive and ranges in condition from well-maintained gravel roads to decommissioned, grassed-over road prisms. Currently nearly all of the roads in this area are gated and closed to summer motorized travel. While the roads in the Horseshoe Hills are managed “in storage” (and therefore unavailable for public motorized use) by the Forest Service, they are open to dispersed, non-motorized activities including horseback riding, mountain biking, hiking, sightseeing, and dog walking. In the winter, several of the roads are groomed and marked as designated snowmobile routes.

Rice Ridge/Morrell Creek

The Rice Ridge/Morrell Creek area sits along the foothills of the Swan Range and is made up of Richmond Peak, Rice Ridge, and the deep drainage of Morrell Creek (Figure 3). It is most frequently accessed from town by driving north on the Rice Ridge Road (FS 720) or on West Morrell Road (FS 4353). The area contains the highest density of existing trails surveyed in the Seeley Lake area. The condition of these trails range from well-used and maintained such as the Morrell Falls Trail (TR 30), to trails that are faint, difficult to find, or unmaintained such as Rice Ridge (TR 429) and Florence Lake (TR 451) trails.

Summer recreational opportunities in this area include mountain biking, hiking, horseback riding, and OHV use. Equine use is primarily concentrated on the trails that access the Bob Marshall Wilderness Complex such as the Pyramid Pass (TR 416) and Crescent Mountain (TR 390) trails. Mountain biking is largely concentrated on the Morrell Creek Trail (TR 30.1) and the Swan Divide Trail (TR 382). According to local


hikers, most people enjoy both on- and off-trail experiences, using most of the trails in the area to access backcountry trekking opportunities. Some of the more popular hikes referred to were the Clearwater Lake (TR 18), Pyramid Pass (TR 416), and Morrell Falls (TR 30) trails. As is the case throughout the Seeley Lake Ranger District, summer motorized use is permitted only on roads designated as open to motorized vehicles.

On-the-ground surveys found inadequate signage on nearly all trails. Even in the few places where trailheads have signs, directional indicators at trail junctions and route markers are largely absent along the length of trails. Further, maintenance needs exist on nearly all trails, including a need for brushing and vegetation management, tread work, reroutes to improve sustainability or reduce erosion, cleaning and/or installation of modern drainage features, and bridge repairs and/or new bridge installation. The Rice Ridge (TR 429), Florence Lake (TR 451), and Upper Morrell Creek (TR 383) trails are in the most need of maintenance work in this area.

Figure 3 Trail inventory results from Rice Ridge – Morrell Creek. For the purposes of this map, Trail Condition Classes indicate: 6 (Not Surveyed), 5 (Excellent Condition, well-maintained to standard); 4 (Good Condition, brush- or treadwork needed); 3 (Fair Condition: significant brush- or treadwork needed, windfall along length, difficult to travel); 2 (Poor Condition: route-finding difficult, significant brush- and treadwork needed along length). For the purpose of this map, Non-Motorized Road Condition Classes indicate: 6 (not surveyed); 5 (well-maintained gravel road, gated); 4 (grassed-over or lightly brushed-in double track, gated); 3 (brushed-over double track, passable, gated); 2 (brushed-over double track, impassable, gated); 1 (fully decommissioned road, impassable, gated).

Rice Ridge - Morrell Creek





Bob Marshall
Wilderness
(Flathead
National Forest)

 Motorized Routes
Open to All Traffic







Condition Class Trails

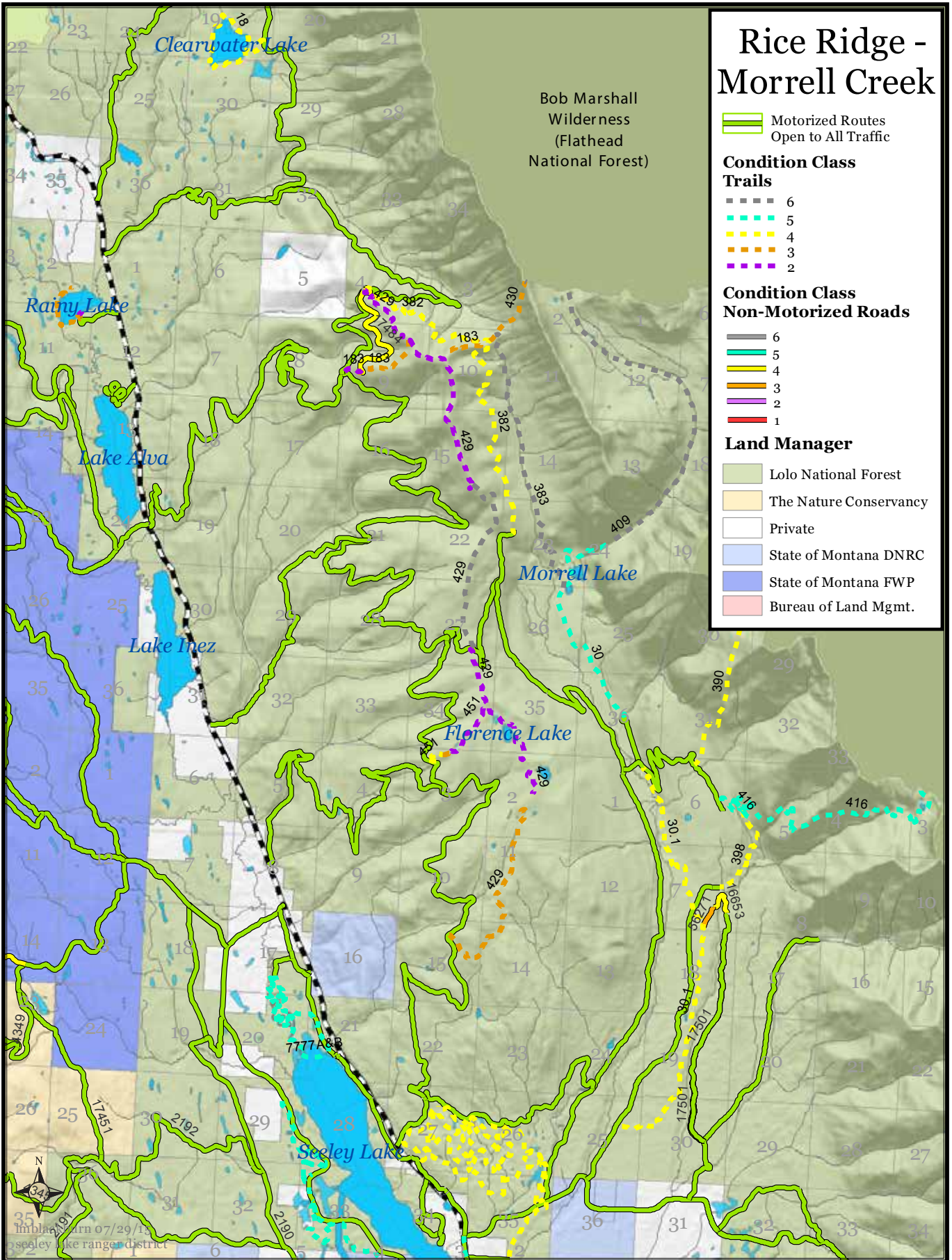
-  6
-  5
-  4
-  3
-  2

Condition Class Non-Motorized Roads

-  6
-  5
-  4
-  3
-  2
-  1

Land Manager

-  Lolo National Forest
-  The Nature Conservancy
-  Private
-  State of Montana DNRC
-  State of Montana FWP
-  Bureau of Land Mgmt.



Marshall Creek Wildlife Management Area

Located on the west side of Highway 83 and north of Seeley Lake, the Marshall Creek Wildlife Management Area was acquired by Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks in 2011 from The Nature Conservancy as part of the Montana Legacy Project (Figure 4). As a wildlife management area, its primary management goal is to protect and improve habitat for native fish, game, and non-game species alike. Simultaneously, a secondary goal of the area is to provide year-round recreational opportunities and public access. From a recreation perspective, the area provides gorgeous views of the Swan Mountains to the east and is a summer destination for fishing, camping, and hiking and a winter destination for snowmobiling.

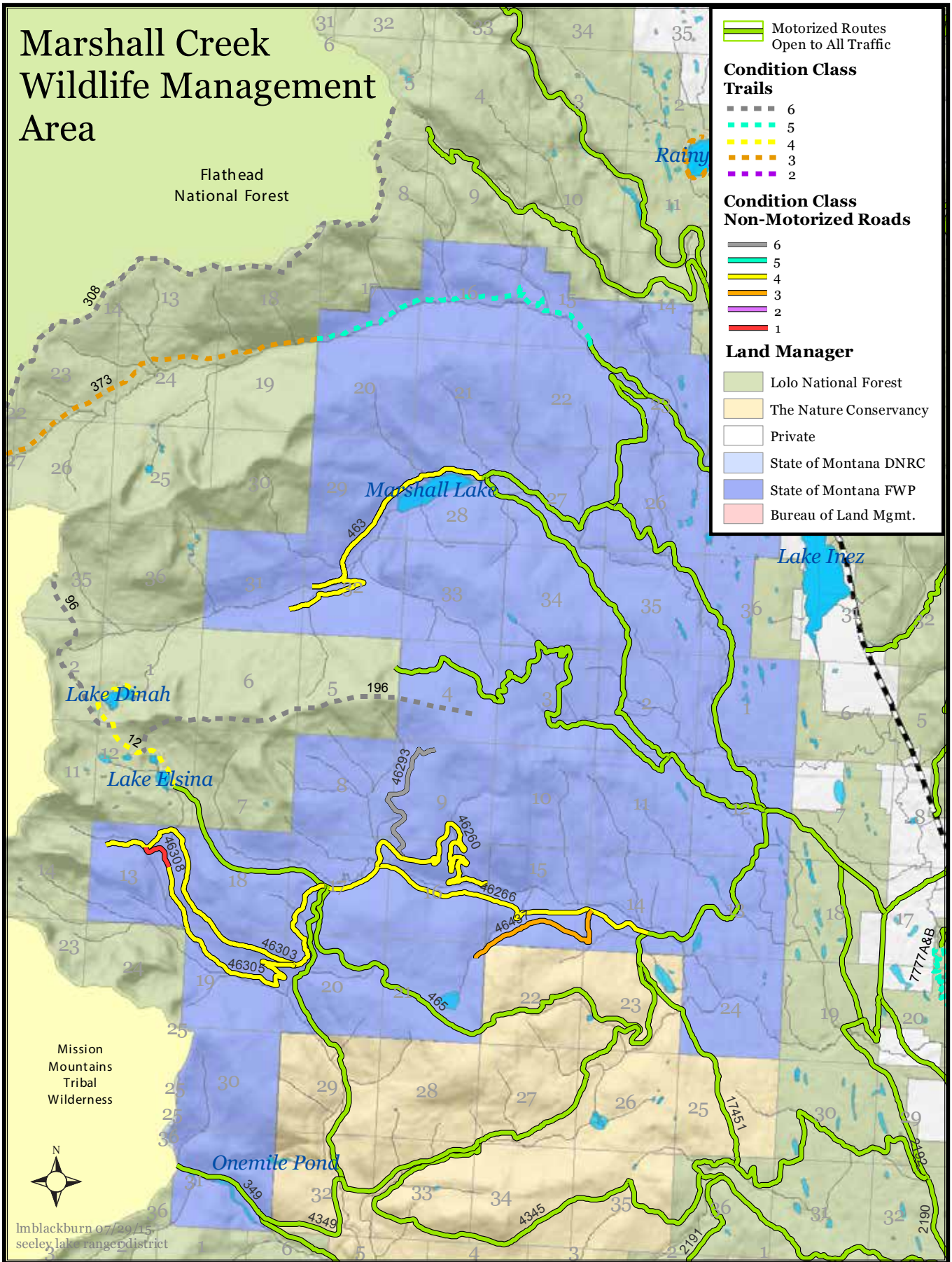
While no trails exist exclusively within the Marshall Creek Wildlife Management Area, several trails connect the area and the surrounding National Forest lands. The West Fork of the Clearwater River trail (TR 373) begins within the area and follows the creek for about 2.5 miles before ending on the Lolo National Forest. The

historic Mount Henry Trail (TR 196) begins on the National Forest near Lake Dinah and terminates within the Wildlife Management Area, however several attempts to locate this trail were unsuccessful. Additionally, the Lake Dinah (TR 12) and Jocko Ridge (TR 96) trails are found on the Lolo National Forest just west of the Wildlife Management Area and are accessed by traveling the roads through the Wildlife Management Area. Of the trails in the west side of the valley, the Lake Dinah Trail (TR 12) and the West Fork of the Clearwater River Trail (TR 373) are some of most frequently used.

In addition, Marshall Creek Wildlife Management Area contains 36 miles of roads and loops that are open to motorized wheeled vehicles from spring through late fall (whenever conditions allow). In winter, a large part of the Seeley Lake area's groomed and ungroomed snowmobile trail network traverses the Wildlife Management Area. Hiking and non-motorized opportunities also abound on the more than 300 miles of gated roads located on the property.

Figure 4 Trail inventory results from Marshall Creek Wildlife Management Area and surrounding lands. For the purposes of this map, Trail Condition Classes indicate: 6 (Not Surveyed), 5 (Excellent Condition, well-maintained to standard); 4 (Good Condition, brush- or treadwork needed); 3 (Fair Condition: significant brush- or treadwork needed, windfall along length, difficult to travel); 2 (Poor Condition: route-finding difficult, significant brush- and treadwork needed along length). For the purpose of this map, Non-Motorized Road Condition Classes indicate: 6 (not surveyed); 5 (well-maintained gravel road, gated); 4 (grassed-over or lightly brushed-in double track, gated); 3 (brushed-over double track, passable, gated); 2 (brushed-over double track, impassable, gated); 1 (fully decommissioned road, impassable, gated).

Marshall Creek Wildlife Management Area



Closed and Decommissioned Roads

An extensive network of closed and decommissioned roads exists on both sides of the Clearwater Valley. Decisions to close and decommission roads are made for a variety of reasons, including watershed or wildlife resource values and agency budgets, which are unable to maintain the vast amount of historical infrastructure on the landscape. Most of these roads were created to access timber sales or facilitate forestry work and have long since been gated and either put into storage or actively decommissioned. Storage roads are roads that are still on the Forest Service system but are not actively maintained. Decommissioned roads have been completely removed from the Forest Service inventory and treated in some way to prevent further public and administrative use. Some of these roads were converted to trails and are managed as such; other decommissioned roads were not adopted as system trails. Most of the roads travel a short distance, are often dead-ends, and have seen little use since their closure. However, some are longer in length, connect to other roads or trails, and provide dispersed, non-motorized recreational opportunities for locals. Many of these closed roads, particularly in the Horseshoe Hills, the Marshall Creek Wildlife Management Area, and the Fawn Peak/Jocko Canyon area, can be linked together to create loops for recreational activities including mountain biking, hiking, and horseback riding. Many of these roads are groomed in the winter to create the extensive network of snowmobile trails.

Although the focus of this survey was on the existing trail infrastructure, a rough road classification system was developed in an attempt to classify the various conditions of the closed roads. The system was based entirely on the visual appearance of the road and its ease of travel and does not reflect the official database used by land management agencies, which incorporates engineering specifications and design. Roads

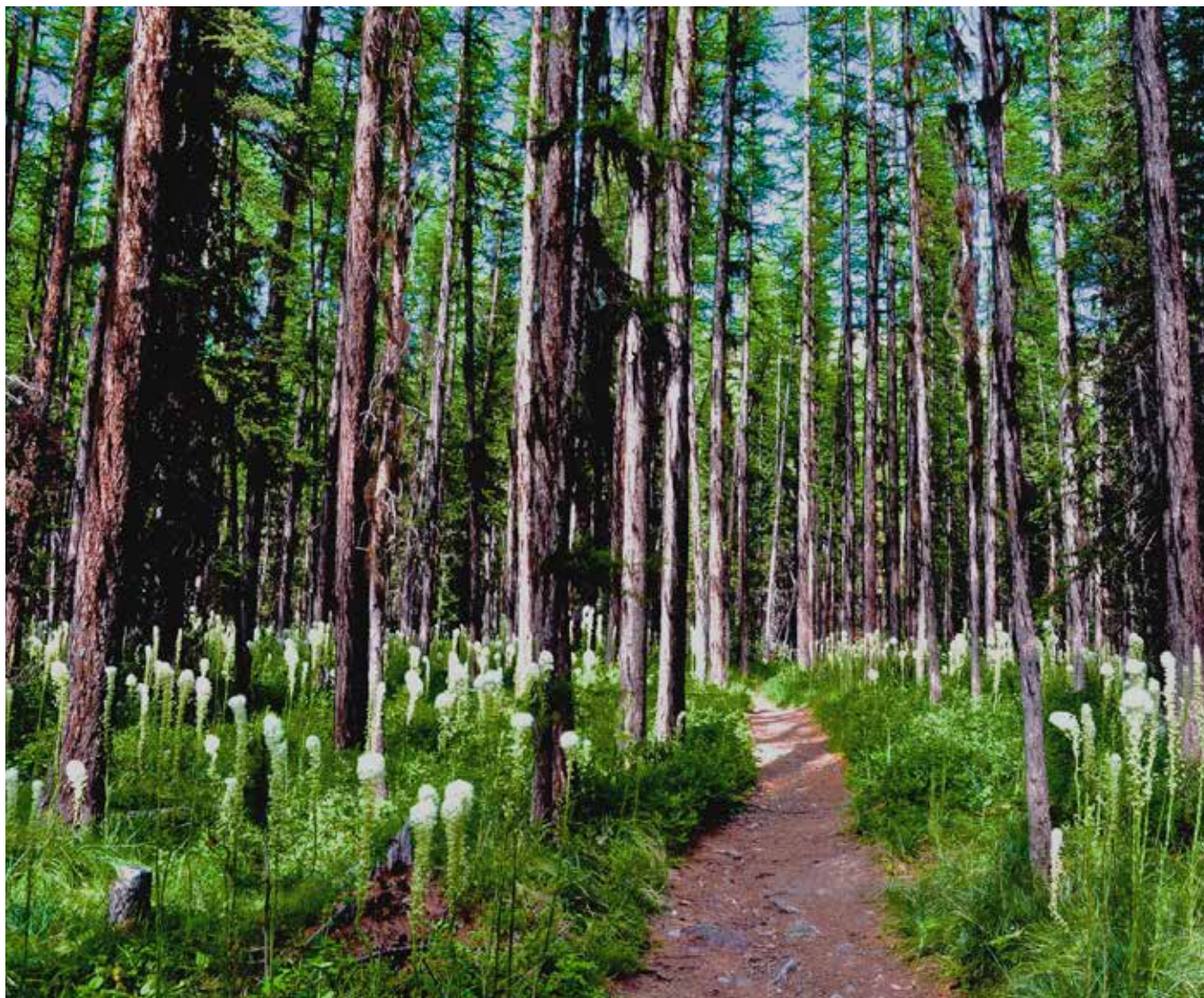
were ranked on a scale of 1-7, with the following condition classifications designated as follows: Roads open to all motorized vehicles were classified as a 7. Roads with unknown conditions, due to not being surveyed, were assigned a value of 6. Category 5 roads are well-maintained gravel roads that appeared to be passable by passenger car but are gated and closed to motorized use. Category 4 consisted of double-tracks that appeared to still be easily passable by a car or 4-wheel drive vehicle but are gated and closed to motorized use. Gated, double-track roads that had significant vegetation encroachment but are still passable by bicycle or foot were assigned to Category 3. Gated road prisms that had significant vegetation growth in the corridor and were very difficult to pass along were assigned to Category 2. Category 1 was reserved for actively decommissioned road prisms that were gated. Although applied across the valley to any roads that were surveyed, this system was most heavily used in the Horseshoe Hills area (Figure 2).

Open Roads/Motorized Routes

While it was not the goal of this survey to assess the condition of the roads in the Clearwater Valley, an extensive network of roads is open to all motorized vehicles, including numerous “loop” driving opportunities. Most of these roads are in good condition and frequently traveled by a broad spectrum of motorized vehicles both for transportation and recreation purposes. As mentioned above, for mapping purposes, all roads open to motorized vehicles received a roads condition class value of 7. All designated motorized routes in the Seeley Lake Ranger District are open to the broad spectrum of motorized vehicles including passenger cars, 4-wheel drive vehicles, motorcycles, and properly licensed OHVs. *Note: some roads were surveyed for recreational purposes on July 27; unfortunately this data was lost in the data transfer that was mentioned in the Methods section.*

Appendix II: Detailed Trail Descriptions³⁵

THE DESCRIPTIONS BELOW characterize each of the trails surveyed. Each trail is characterized by six factors: 1) round-trip route distance; 2) characteristics of the area; 3) amenities such as trailhead parking, outhouses, and campsites available; 4) the user experience; 5) the Forest Service's stated Trail Management Objectives (TMO); and 6) the maintenance needs that were cataloged in 2015. Trails are presented in ascending order based on Forest Service route number. Some of these trails do not appear on the Forest Service Visitor Use map, as they are no longer managed as system trails; this is reflected in the findings.



³⁵ The trail descriptions detailed within this report were written with several goals in mind. One, a basic articulation of the existing trails could be useful should the community decide to develop a comprehensive recreation map and/or guide in the future. Two, in terms of community-based stewardship of trails, a snapshot of current maintenance needs on each trail was detailed to help the Forest Service and community collectively identify and set priorities.

Depending on the year, bear grass can be abundant on area trails. Photo: Lee Boman

Lake Dinah/Lake Elsina (TR 12)

Distance (miles): 4.6 (out and back)

Area Description: Located just west of the Marshall Creek Wildlife Management Area at Lake Elsina, this trail has relatively little elevation gain as it follows several forested hillsides, wildflower meadows, and rocky benches before ultimately winding down to the picturesque Lake Dinah.

Access and Amenities: The trailhead starts at Lake Elsina, about 14 miles from the Westside Bypass parking lot. The parking area accommodates five to seven cars and is situated on the southern shore of the lake. Lake access is an easy 100ft walk with two small, primitive campsites located along the lake.

User Experience: This trail is designed and maintained by the Forest Service as a hiking and equine trail. It is generally easy to follow. Users should make sure to take the unsigned eastern split at the top of the ridge and look for the route to the north as they reach flat rock outcrops above the lake, then follow the well-defined tread as it

wraps around the north end of Lake Dinah. The trail ends at the north end of Lake Dinah. There are several (3-4) user-generated backcountry campsites at the lake.

TMO:

Designed Use - Hiker/Pedestrian, Pack & Saddle
Trail Class - Developed/Improved

Tread Width - 12-18in

Clearing Width - 8ft

Clearing Height - 10ft

Max. Sustained Grade - 15%

Max. Pitch Grade - 30%

Inventory Notes: This trail has a well-defined tread but has several maintenance needs. Two degraded log bridges span portions of a marshy area about a half mile from the trailhead. Additionally, two very eroded and channelized sections of trail, where grades exceed 30%, are in need of restoration and rerouting. Route-finding proved difficult at several points where the trail crosses a series of rocky ledges overlooking Lake Dinah. Vegetation was encroaching at several points along the length of the trail.



The trail to Lake Dinah (TR 12) is a popular hike in the Mission Mountains that starts at one remote, beautiful lake (Lake Elsina) and ends at another. Wildflowers typically decorate the trail late in the summer and other surprises, like this Columbia spotted frog, can be found at Lake Dinah. Photo: Ben Donatelle

Clearwater Lake (TR 18)

Distance (miles): 2.56 (loop)

Area Description: A slight descent to reach the lake is followed by a flat loop trail that provides postcard views of the lake and the Swan Range. This lake has historically supported one of the best cutthroat trout fisheries in the state and is a prime location to watch loons and other waterfowl.

Access and Amenities: Reach the trailhead by taking Highway 83 north from Seeley Lake, turning onto Clearwater Lake Road (FS 4353) and taking a left at the top of the ridge onto FS 4370. The trailhead is roughly a quarter mile from the lake and provides parking for approximately six cars. Multiple campsites and fishing access points can be found along the length of the trail.

User Experience: This relatively flat and easy to follow trail encircles beautiful Clearwater Lake. It is designated by the Forest Service as a hiking trail, although all non-motorized use is allowed.

TMO:

Designed Use – Hiker/Pedestrian
Trail Class – Developed/Improved
Tread Width – 18-24in
Clearing Width – 8ft
Clearing Height – 10ft
Max. Sustained Grade – 15%
Max. Pitch Grade – 30%

Inventory Notes: Brush is encroaching upon the trail tread along the length of the route. Significant numbers of trees have fallen across the trail at several points, mostly on the west side of the lake. On the north side of the lake, a small creek has eroded its bank causing the bridge to slump and become unstable.

Morrell Falls (TR 30)

Distance (miles): 6.06 (out and back)

Area Description: This popular trail is primarily flat, traveling through a dense forest at the base of the Swan Range. The trail crosses two small

streams and passes by two quaint mountain lakes. Stunning views of the Swan Range can be enjoyed along the edge of both lakes.

Access and Amenities: Access the trailhead by turning north off of Morrell Creek Road on West Morrell Road (FS 4353), travel about six miles and take a right onto Pyramid Pass Road (4381). Stay left at the split. The trailhead has outhouses and ample parking.

User Experience: This is a wide and well-maintained hiking trail that can be easily navigated by families with small children. A stunning waterfall and refreshing creek culminate the experience and make this hike a tourist favorite. Although designed and maintained as a hiking trail, it is open to all non-motorized use.

TMO:

Designed Use – Hiker/Pedestrian
Trail Class – Developed/Improved
Tread Width – 18in
Clearing Width – 8ft
Clearing Height – 10ft
Max. Sustained Grade – 15%
Max. Pitch Grade – 25%

Inventory Notes: In several spots near the trailhead, user-created trails fan out through the forest to access Morrell Creek. Most of the trail past the first half mile is well-maintained and up to standard. A trail junction at the first lake is unsigned and the route is confusing.

Morrell Creek (TR 30.1)

Distance (miles): 11.12 (out and back)

Area Description: This trail follows Morrell Creek drainage over several forested hills and open meadows. The clearings provide sweeping views of the Swan Range.

Access and Amenities: Individuals typically access the trail from East Morrell Road (FS 467). Heading north on East Morrell Road there an old road on the left identified by a metal guardrail

preventing motorized travel. There is no parking here, so individuals typically ride from town or park at the ski trail parking lot.

User Experience: While designed for hiking, this trail is primarily used by local mountain bikers from the Seeley Lake area. Morrell Creek offers a fast and fun cross-country route between the Pyramid Peak road and Seeley Lake. The section above East Morrell Road is technical with multiple rock gardens and short steep climbs. The lower section is a fast ride on relatively level ground. The trail is poorly signed at both ends and where it crosses many of the logging roads traversing the drainage.

TMO:

Designed Use – Hiker/Pedestrian
Trail Class – Developed/Improved
Tread Width – 18in
Clearing Width – 8ft
Clearing Height – 10ft
Max. Sustained Grade – 15%
Max. Pitch Grade – 25%

Inventory Notes: Up to standard on clearing width and height. The 10-12in tread is narrow compared to the TMO and very uneven. Two points just north of the stream crossing are very steep and the trail is eroding and channelized in both places. The bridge over the stream crossing is rotting and dangerous. At the south end of the trail, the route follows an old roadbed that crosses in front of the down-range end of the community shooting range (on Cottonwood Lakes Road); a reroute is needed to improve safety and user experience. No signs mark the route or warn of potential hazards.

Richmond Peak (TR 183)

Distance (miles): 3.28 (out and back)

Area Description: A steep climb through thick forest to the top of Richmond Peak.

Access and Amenities: Accessed from the intersection of Forest Service roads 720 and 667, park-

ing is limited to a small roadside pullout. The trailhead is not signed and hard to find. Several small rock cairns on the inside of the sharp turn at FS 720 marks the point where the trail heads up the steep ridge.

User Experience: A very steep climb that frequently exceeds 30%, this trails moves through thick brush and occasional downed trees. Once past the trailhead the tread is well defined.

TMO: Unable to obtain from the Forest Service.

Inventory Notes: This trail is severely overgrown by brush along its entire length. An 8-12in tread exists but is difficult to find. Multiple sections with grades steeper than 30% exist near the trailhead. No signs identify this trail.

West Fork Clearwater River Trail (TR 373)

Distance (miles): 14.48 (out and back)

Area Description: This trail parallels the West Fork of the Clearwater River and rises gradually through a series of meadows and sparse forests. At the Montana FWP and Forest Service boundary, the trail enters a thick forest and ascends a steep hill. Lush underbrush and occasional marshy areas are found along the trail's length. The trail ends at a small subalpine lake on the western boundary of the Lolo National Forest.

Access and Amenities: Access this trail from Seeley Lake by taking a left onto the West Fork Clearwater Road (FS 552), between lakes Alva and Inez. Follow this road to its end. The trailhead provides parking for six to eight cars and a hitching post for stock.

User Experience: The first 3.5 miles of the trail were recently constructed on Montana FWP land and follows decommissioned roads. This section of trail provides a prime example of how old roads can be converted to single-track trails. While the entire trail is designed and maintained for hiking and equine use, this first 3.5-mile section is a nice mountain bike ride for novice riders.

The portion of the trail beyond the Forest Service boundary is much narrower, eroded and channeled in several places, and in a condition that is currently suited only for hiking and horseback riding.

TMO:

Designed Use – Hiker/Pedestrian, Pack & Saddle

Tread Width – 18in

Clearing Width – 8ft

Clearing Height – 10ft

Max. Sustained Grade – 15%

Max. Pitch Grade – 30%

Inventory Notes: The portion of this trail on Montana FWP land is primarily decommissioned road that has been converted to a single-track trail within the past five years. It is well-maintained and up to specifications. Weeds (oxeye daisy, knapweed, and Canadian thistle) are prevalent along its length. The section of this trail on Forest Service property, while easy to follow and cleared of most brush, is eroding extensively and channeled where it ascends several steep hills.

Swan Divide (TR 382)

Distance (miles): 6.28 (out and back)

Area Description: This trail traverses the forested ridge between the Swan Range and the Clearwater River and offers stunning views of the Swan Mountains to the east.

Access and Amenities: The primary access for this trail is from the trailhead at the junction of Rice Ridge Road (FS 720) and the Clearwater Lake Road (FS 4353). Take Highway 83 north from Seeley Lake, turn right on the Clearwater Lake Road for about two miles. Veer to the right at the “Y” to stay on FS 4353 and head up the hill.

The trailhead, at the intersection of FS 720 and FS 4353, has parking for three to four vehicles but no water or other amenities.

User Experience: Part of the Great Divide Mountain Bike route, this trail is one of the few existing trails frequented by mountain bikers in the Seeley Lake Ranger District. Hikers primarily use the trail to access Sunday Mountain or simply enjoy the views on both the Swan and Clearwater sides of the divide. The trail climbs gradually from the upper trailhead along an old roadbed and has ample room for parties to pass each other. Once reaching the Sunday Mountain saddle, the trail descends south toward Seeley Lake and the lower trailhead at the end of the West Morrell Road.

TMO: Unable to obtain from the Forest Service.

Inventory Notes: An old converted road, this single-track has thick tree regeneration encroaching along its length. An avalanche path, roughly a mile from the trailhead, is beginning to erode the trail. Otherwise, the trail is well-maintained.



Many Forest Service trail junctions are designated only by a plain wooden pole like the one seen here at the Swan Divide Trail (TR 382). Photo: Ben Donatelle



The Chaffin Trail (TR 388) was designed for equestrian use. Today the trail is also used by hikers and mountain bikers. Mountain bikers use the Chaffin Trail to connect several other trails to create a lollipop loop. Photo: Ben Donatelle

Chaffin Trail (TR 388)

Distance (miles): 2.68 (out and back)

Area Description: A moderately steep ascent up to the Pyramid Pass Trail or a descent into the Trail Creek drainage, the Chaffin Trail passes through a dense forest. The trail descent emerges onto FS 16651, an extension of East Morrell Road (FS 467).

Access and Amenities: The Chaffin Trail can be accessed from the lower trailhead at the end of FS 16651. Or, the trail is accessed roughly a half mile up the Pyramid Pass Trail, which is typically how mountain bikers access the trail.

User Experience: This is a moderately steep trail that is primarily used by hikers and horseback riders to access the Pyramid Pass Trail. This trail also creates a lollipop route that is popular with local mountain bikers when combined with Trail 30.1.

TMO:

Designed Use - Pack & Saddle

Trail Class - Developed/Improved

Tread Width - 12in

Clearing Width - 8ft

Clearing Height - 10ft

Max. Sustained Grade - 15%

Max. Pitch Grade - 30%

Inventory Notes: Some erosion and trail channelization is occurring at the upper end of the trail where it descends the head of the drainage from the Pyramid Pass Trail. It is extensively eroded and sloughing off the hillside in several places, especially around switchbacks, due to the steep terrain and heavy use. In several places along the lower section, below the initial descent, it often reaches four feet wide, greatly exceeding the TMO.

Crescent Lake (TR 390) [not on Visitor Use Map]

Distance (miles): 5.18 (out and back)

Area Description: A very steep ridge-climb, this trail passes through beautiful, wildflower meadows and huckleberry patches as it switchbacks over 30 times up the western face of Marshall

Mountain. Gaps in the trees provide amazing views of the Seeley Lake valley below and Mission Mountains. At the top of the ridge, nestled along the saddle between Marshall and Crescent mountains are a number of picturesque alpine and subalpine lakes.

Access and Amenities: The Crescent Lake trailhead is easy to miss. It is a roadside pullout on FS 4381 that can accommodate two cars just before reaching the Pyramid Pass trailhead. A signpost marks the trailhead.

User Experience: Primarily used as an access trail for equestrians and backpackers headed into the Bob Marshall Wilderness, this is very strenuous. At times the grade hits nearly 30%, and it often exceeds 15%.

TMO:

Designed Use – Pack & Saddle

Trail Class – Developed/Improved

Tread Width – 18in

Clearing Width – 8ft

Clearing Height – 10ft

Max. Sustained Grade – 15%

Max. Pitch Grade – 30%

Inventory Notes: This trail is clear of brush and windfall and is up to standard in its clearing width and height. The back slope is slumping at many places along this trail and has forced traffic to the outer edge of the tread, eroding the downslope. Additionally, the trail crosses a marsh less than a quarter mile from the trailhead and has created a significant mud bog. A reroute or substantial armoring is needed.

Rainy Lake (TR 396A & B)

Distance (miles): 2.00 (out and back)

Area Description: Rainy Lake provides great views of the Swan Range, fishing access, opportunities for watching waterfowl, and two walk-in campsites on the west side of the lake.

Access and Amenities: Rainy Lake is easily accessed by driving north from the town of Seeley Lake on Highway 83. Turn left just after Lake



The 18-kilometers at Seeley Creek Ski Trails are groomed throughout the winter for classic and skate skiing. Photo: Lee Boman

Alva. Outhouses, lakeside camping, a picnic area, and ample parking are provided.

User Experience: These flat trails wrap nearly all the way around Rainy Lake. They are narrow and intermittently covered or blocked by downed trees but are generally easy to follow. Access to the west side of the lake and TR 369A requires wading across Clearwater River as it exits Rainy Lake.

TMO:

Designed Use - Hiker/Pedestrian
Trail Class - Developed/Improved
Tread Width - 18in
Clearing Width - 6ft
Clearing Height - 8ft
Max. Sustained Grade - 15%
Max. Pitch Grade - 30%

Inventory Notes: A partially brushed-over trail with a 10-12in tread. Tread is generally in good condition. Windfall is prevalent along its length and needs clearing. At the river crossings, the tread has eroded down the hillside and is in need of moderate maintenance to re-establish and armor.

Rice Ridge (TR 429)

Distance (miles): 19 (out and back)

Area Description: Rice Ridge separates the Morrell Creek drainage from the Clearwater Valley by a series of low-elevation foothills connected by forested ridgeline. It is one of the few places where visitors can simultaneously experience stunning views of both the Mission Mountains and the Swan Range.

Access and Amenities: This trail has two trailheads. The upper trailhead, located at the intersection of Rice Ridge Road (FS 720) and the Clearwater Lake Road (FS 4353), is the easiest to find and provides the most parking. The lower trailhead, also along Rice Ridge Road, is at the gate for FS 4369 and has a pullout with room for one or two vehicles but no other designated parking area. No signs exist to indicate the trailhead or mark the route.

User Experience: The trail generally follows the ridgeline from north to south but at either end is difficult to locate. The northern end of the trail shares a parking area with the Swan Divide trailhead and begins by ascending a very steep hillside where it is substantially hidden by overgrown brush. After several very rough switchbacks leading to the top of the ridge, the trail smooths out and levels off. Significantly brushed-over in places and with lots of windfall along its length, it requires advanced route-finding skills and should only be traveled by the experienced off-trail hiker.

TMO:

Designed Use - Hiker/Pedestrian
Trail Class - Developed/Improved
Tread Width - 18in
Clearing Width - 6ft
Clearing Height - 8ft
Max. Sustained Grade - 15%
Max. Pitch Grade - 30%

Inventory Notes: The route is obstructed by very thick brush and second-growth forest along the length of Rice Ridge and has no discernable tread after the first half mile. The southern section of the trail (south of where it crosses FS 4343) is, with a few exceptions near Florence Lake, in much better condition. It is brushed-in and covered by sporadic windfall but has a well-defined, and easy to follow, 8-12in tread. Just south of Florence Lake, the tread disappears under substantial downed trees before reemerging on a hillside about a half mile further south. While there is sporadic flagging, the route again disappears before it intersects and follows FS 4369. Near the Camp Creek drainage, the field staff lost the flagged route and was unable to reacquire it.

Florence Lake (TR 451)

Distance (miles): 2.6 (out and back)

Area Description: This trail travels through forested hills, eventually ascending to meet the Rice Ridge (TR 429) trail near the top of Richmond Peak. Meadows and openings in the forest canopy provide views of the Swan Range to the east.

Access and Amenities: Relatively close to town, the Florence Lake trailhead is found along Rice Ridge Road (FS 720). With only a roadside pull-out for a parking area and no trailhead signage, it is easy to miss. To find the trailhead look for a 5ft tall wooden post and several large boulders blocking an old road on the east side of FS 720. The trail follows this old road briefly before diverging and becoming a single-track.

User Experience: A nice day hike from its trailhead along Rice Ridge Road (FS 720), this trail offers easy access to the rarely visited Florence Lake. There is only minor elevation change along its length. In its current state, the trail – while easy to follow – has significant windfall along its length and is therefore difficult to travel.

TMO:

Designed Use – Hiker/Pedestrian
Trail Class – Developed/Minimally Improved
Tread Width – undefined
Clearing Width – undefined
Clearing Height – undefined
Max. Sustained Grade – undefined
Max. Pitch Grade – undefined

Inventory Notes: A brushed-over trail with significant downed trees along its length. The tread is in good condition and varies from a double-track at the beginning to a 10in single track in places. There is no sign at the trailhead.

The following trails could only be partially surveyed or were not surveyed at all. We include the rationale in the “Inventory Notes” section of the trail descriptions that follow.

Jocko Ridge (TR 96) [not on Visitor Use Map]

Distance (miles): 3.82 (out and back)

Area Description: A forested ridge that is interrupted by several dramatic rock outcroppings and wildflower meadows offering unrivaled views of the Swan Range.

Access and Amenities: Follow the Lake Dinah/Lake Elsinia trail (TR 12) for about two miles to a rocky clearing where this faint trail diverges to the west. No sign marks this route.

User Experience: The Jocko Ridge Trail follows along the rocky, forested ridges just west of Lake Dinah. While a recognizable tread exists where this trail joins the Lake Dinah trail, it is primitive and requires hikers to navigate carefully.

TMO:

Designed Use – Hiker/Pedestrian
Trail Class – Primitive/Undeveloped
Tread Width – 12in
Clearing Width – 6ft
Clearing Height – 8ft
Max. Sustained Grade – 20%
Max. Pitch Grade – 30%

Inventory Notes: The trail is brushed-in but the tread is easy to identify at the junction. The trail is generally faint and begins to fade quickly beyond the junction with the Lake Dinah Trail. Only the first quarter mile of the trail was surveyed. Further surveying of the trail could not be completed because the tread was not visible on the ground after the first quarter mile.

Sunset Ridge (TR 308) [not on Visitor Use Map]

Distance (miles): 13.82 (out and back)

Area Description: Follows a forested ridge along the boundary between the Seeley Lake Ranger District and the Flathead National Forest.

Access and Amenities: Access from town by heading north on Highway 83, take a left onto FS 552, a right onto FS 646, and then a left onto FS 4354. Follow this road along Uler Creek until it ends at a small turnaround. The trailhead is the same as the Beaver Lakes trailhead and sits at the end of the road. No signs mark the trailhead or the trail route.

User Experience: This trail is said to traverse Sunset Ridge on the northwestern boundary of the Seeley Lake Ranger District.

TMO:

Designed Use – Hiker/Pedestrian
Trail Class – Simple/Minor Development
Tread Width – 18in
Clearing Width – 6ft
Clearing Height – 8ft
Max. Sustained Grade – 15%
Max. Pitch Grade – 30%

Inventory Notes: Not surveyed. According to the Forest Service, despite being displayed on the current visitor map, the Sunset Ridge Trail has not been maintained and no longer exists on the ground.

Beaver Lake (TR 380)

Distance (miles): 1.8 (out and back)

Area Description This narrow double-track winds gradually up a forested ridge, then descends to Beaver Lake. Breaks in the trees provide views of the lakes below and Swan Range to the east.

Access and Amenities Access the trailhead by driving to the end of FS 4354. This road is narrow and steep and provides few if any turnaround spots until its end. The trailhead has pullout space for two to three cars maximum.

User Experience A well-shaded, narrow double-track, this trail provides a nice hiking, biking, or equestrian route to Beaver Lake. Several user-generated campsites can be found along its length. The tread is smooth and the grade gentle.

TMO:

Designed Use – Hiker/Pedestrian
Trail Class – Developed/Improved
Tread Width – 18in
Clearing Width – 8ft
Clearing Height – 8ft
Max. Sustained Grade – 15%
Max. Pitch Grade – 30%

Inventory Notes: No signs or other route markings exist at the trailhead. This trail was not extensively surveyed because the trail described in the trail management objectives was not found. Instead, a visit to the area found a well-used double-track. The double-track heads west for approximately one mile to a small, user-generated campsite. From there an overgrown two-track leads across the forested ridge to the west. This overgrown two-track was not surveyed.

Upper Morrell Creek (TR 383)

Distance (miles): 6.90 (out and back)

Area Description: A gradual climb through dense forest and along Morrell Creek ends in a steep ascent to the Sunday Mountain saddle where it joins the Swan Divide.

Access and Amenities: Access this trail from a junction on the Morrell Falls Trail (TR 30). The intersection is marked by a small wooden sign and a narrow trail diverges to the north as the wider, more well-defined Morrell Falls Trail curves slightly to the east towards the Morrell Lakes.

User Experience: This trail connects users from the north end of the Morrell Creek Valley to the Morrell Falls Trail.

TMO:

Designed Use – Hiker/Pedestrian, Pack & Saddle
Tread Width – 18in
Clearing Width – 8ft
Clearing Height – 10ft
Max. Sustained Grade – 15%
Max. Pitch Grade – 30%

Inventory Notes: There is a trail sign for the Upper Morrell Creek Trail at its junction with the Morrell Falls Trail; however one cannot currently travel the trail from this junction as it does not appear to exist. As such it could not be surveyed. The Forest Service trails staff indicated they have flagged a potential reroute of this trail to bring it out of the creek bottom and up onto the hillside.

Pyramid Pass (TR 416)

Distance (miles): 9.82 (out and back)

Area Description: Poised at the edge of the Bob Marshall Wilderness, Pyramid Peak provides a stunning, 360-degree view of the surrounding valleys. The trail switchbacks up the steep west face of the mountain.

Access and Amenities: From town take a right onto Seeley Creek Road. Immediately after the Seeley Creek Nordic Trails, take a left onto West Morrell Road (FS 4353). Drive about six miles before taking a right onto Pyramid Pass Road (FS 4381). At the “Y,” stay right and follow the road to its end. The trailhead is a very large, pull-through parking area that can accommodate large horse trailers. Hitching posts are available.

User Experience: This is a very popular trail, and

is primarily used by equestrians, outfitters, and backpackers to access Pyramid Peak and the Bob Marshall Wilderness. It provides an opportunity for day hikers to climb Pyramid Peak. The trail is steep and sees heavy use, especially on the weekends, but is well-maintained and easy to follow.

TMO:

Designed Use – Pack & Saddle
Trail Class – Developed/Improved
Tread Width – 18in
Clearing Width – 8ft
Clearing Height – 10ft
Max. Sustained Grade – 15%
Max. Pitch Grade – 30%

Inventory Notes: This trail was not surveyed. The Forest Service trails staff stated they were well aware of its condition and had recently cleared it of downed trees.



The Horseshoe Hills are a popular area for many close-to-town activities, including horse-back riding.
Photo: Rich Ranch

Appendix III: List of Those Interviewed for the Project

COMMUNITY MEMBERS

Anne Beach	Seeley Lake Community Foundation
Mike Biggins	Equestrian Interests
Jim Blackburn	U.S. Forest Service (retired)
Lisa Blackburn	U.S. Forest Service (retired)
Lee Boman	Seeley Lake ROCKS
Ron Cox	U.S. Forest Service (retired)
Curt Friede	Kurt's Polaris, Seeley Lake Driftriders
Cathy Kahnle	Clearwater Resource Council
Ken Kronsperger	Seeley-Swan ATV Club
Mike Lindemer	Lindley's Steak House (owner)
Chris Lorentz	Seeley Lake ROCKS
Dave Plante	Seeley Lake ROCKS
Jack Rich	Outfitter, Rich Ranch
Dave Sharbono	Seeley-Swan ATV Club
Chris Stout	Seeley Lake School District
Mark Williams	Seeley Lake Community Foundation

AGENCY STAFF

Lisa Moisey	Missoula County, Parks, Trails & Open Lands Program Manager
Kristen Baker-Dickinson	Montana DNRC, Clearwater Unit Manager
Scott Eggeman	Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks, Blackfoot-Clearwater Wildlife Biologist
Ryan Sokoloski	Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks, Placid Lake and Salmon Lake Park Manager
Rachel Feigley	U.S. Forest Service, Seeley Lake District Ranger
Jake Long	U.S. Forest Service, Seeley Lake Trails Specialist
Christine Plourde	U.S. Forest Service, Seeley Lake Recreation Program Manager (detail)

OTHERS

Chris Bryant	The Nature Conservancy
Vickie Edwards	Five Valleys Land Trust
Jordan Reeves	The Wilderness Society

Notes



Northern Rockies Office

1007 E Main St., Suite 300

Bozeman, MT 59715

406.522.7450

tpl.org/montana