

The Big Blackfoot Chapter of Trout Unlimited Partnering in Restoration Solutions Across Boundaries Within the Southwestern Crown of the Continent!

The Big Blackfoot Chapter of Trout Unlimited (BBCTU <http://bbctu.org/>) has a long history of working with partners, sharing ideas, identifying common needs, and ultimately working toward the common goal of a healthy ecosystem across a large landscape. When most people think about Trout Unlimited they recognize the tenured and important role the organization has had in protecting important fisheries habitat and helping restore native fish populations across the country. But the conservation/recreation organization has also been a key player in working with partners in western Montana. When the Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration (CFLR) program came along in 2010, the stars were aligned for the Forest Service, BBCTU, private landowners, national and local conservation groups and other key partners to capitalize on the program's broad goals of restoring ecosystems across boundaries within the Southwestern Crown of the Continent. BBCTU and the Forest Service had already established a productive partnership through formal agreements starting in 2005.

Since the Southwestern Crown Collaborative (SWCC) was selected in 2010 as one of the first CFLR projects nationally, BBCTU has undertaken 12 priority projects with the Forest Service to restore fish habitat on the Seeley Lake and Lincoln Ranger Districts in the Blackfoot River watershed. Fish cross ownership boundaries readily – and the benefits of BBCTU's restoration efforts will match that dynamic habitat feature. The projects include removing undersized culverts that are barriers to aquatic species, removing unnecessary or resource-impacting roads, restoring stream channels and restoring vegetation along stream banks to provide shade and cover which are critical to the survival of native aquatic species. Some projects have been even broader in scope – necessary to restore areas where roads or past activities more heavily impacted the landscape.

The **Cottonwood Stream Restoration** project on the Seeley Lake Ranger District of the Lolo National Forest is one such project. Cottonwood Creek is a bull trout core area stream. The stream is critical bull trout habitat and supports a population of genetically pure westslope cutthroat trout. The project will restore a section of stream channel that currently is out of sync with its natural, historic state. One look at stream banks in the project area reveals to even the untrained eye the area is in need of help: steep stream banks with no vegetation where sediment erodes into the creek, and a channel that has become deeply incised because the raw stream banks are unable to protect themselves from the dynamic forces of moving water.



Figure 1: Example of Cottonwood Creek's existing condition.

There are also sections where sediment has accumulated in the streambed downstream so extensively that the stream itself no longer looks like a stream – but rather a pancake-like feature where a natural creek used to run. The project will take approximately two years to complete and will be supported with \$137,000 in funding from CFLR and an additional \$43,000 in matching funds.



Figure 2: Undersized culvert will be replaced to accommodate fish passage and stream channel function.

Another BBCTU project directly aiding the recovery of important native trout populations, restoring aquatic habitat and providing a long-term benefit for public recreation is the **South Fork Poorman Creek** project on the Lincoln Ranger District of the Helena National Forest. The project includes relocating 2,400 feet of road out of the floodplain of the South Fork of Poorman Creek and eliminating five stream crossings – four fords and one undersized culvert that is a barrier to fish passage. The five

crossings will be replaced by a single bridge capable of handling a 100 year flood event. The existing stream crossings and road location in the floodplain currently contribute to excessive sediment delivery into Poorman Creek, impacting genetically pure westslope cutthroat and bull trout populations. The bridge is scheduled to be installed in 2013, while the new road itself has already been built. The historic road will be decommissioned and the four ford locations will be restored in 2014. When completed the project will eliminate the current road drainage problems, eliminate excessive sediment delivery and restore the natural channel morphology at each of the impaired stream crossings.

Both projects represent important collaborative and partnership efforts that will bring countless recreational opportunities, and are another critical step in fostering a healthy ecosystem across a large and valued landscape –all while furthering BBCTU’s mission to restore and conserve the cold water fishery of the Blackfoot River and its tributaries.

For fish biologists like Shane Hendrickson of the Lolo National Forest, BBCTU brings both expertise and capacity to important work.

“They are unique in that they are not only an important partner and help finance many of these projects, but they have the ability to take the lead in implementing them as well,” Hendrickson said. “BBCTU has trained and utilized many local (Blackfoot Valley) contractors for in-stream/channel type projects. That not only helps the resource but also the local economy.”



Figure 3: Example of existing ford on South Fork Poorman Creek