



Willows for Wildlife: Volunteers in Action

By Jen Bruns, Volunteer Coordinator, Clearwater Region



Smoke from the Rattlesnake fires filled the meadow, but that didn't keep Idaho Department of Fish and Game (IDFG) staff and University of Idaho Wildlife Society volunteers from getting their hands in the dirt for a good cause at Red River Wildlife Management area (RRWMA) near Elk

City, Idaho. Volunteers broke ground along the banks of Red River and planted over 1100 willows, alders, & hawthorne for streambank stabilization and wildlife habitat.

In the 1930's, Red River was drastically altered from dredging equipment used for mining and continues to be affected today. Restoration efforts are needed to strengthen the stream banks and restore the historic meandering stream. Even though there are several hundred elk, deer and other species of wildlife that annually take advantage of the open meadow habitat that RRWMA has to offer, IDFG is working to provide more vegetative cover along the stream corridor to provide protection and shade for creatures of the water as well as the dwellers of the land. Chinook Salmon have historically used Red River for spawning and even though salmon are still present in the system, the numbers have decreased significantly from historic numbers.

Bonneville Power Association funds have made it possible over the past three years of this project to purchase plants, and other materials for Red River restoration work. Without volunteer contributions, the restoration process would not be where it is today. Volunteers have worked diligently to make the process go smoother with immediate results. "When you get large groups of people together to work toward a similar goal, the results are limitless" says habitat manager Miles Benker.

Volunteers unanimously agreed that there is a sense of accomplishment to be able to look over the meadow and see an instant forest after only a day and a half of planting. "A thousand plants seemed to be overwhelming at the beginning of the weekend, but before we knew it, they were in the ground" said volunteer coordinator Jen Bruns. "Volunteers took their time making sure each plant was planted firmly in the ground and ready to conquer the meadow's harsh winter winds & snow pack. Each person carefully planted one at a time. The next thing we knew there was only a stack of empty potting buckets left. It went faster than most of us were expecting. Planting can be hard work, but very rewarding, especially when we worked as a team."

“It is fun too!” says volunteer & wildlife society member Christina Tewes, “it is much better than doing homework.” “It is not only fun, but an essential part of their education at the U of I. When students get outside and get the chance to explore they have a better appreciation of Idaho’s natural resources” says Bruns. Being in the field on a weekend volunteer project allows students to practice what they learn in their classes. The theoretical overview is taught at the college level, but what cannot be taught in the classroom is application of practical real world skills. Idaho Fish and Game Volunteer Program provides this opportunity to apply knowledge and skills to hands-on projects.”

The weekend’s volunteers not only used their hands to plant trees, but they used their minds to learn about the Red River area. On Saturday evening, Miles Benker, Red River manager and habitat biologist gave volunteers a tour of the area and talked about historic and present day uses of the land. Stops on the tour included Red River hatchery and salmon weir and Red River hot springs. Overall, students came away with a better understanding of the Red River area and hopefully a willingness to return.

There are a number of projects similar to the Red River planting project that can involve group involvement and provide a sense of satisfaction. Every person young and old is welcome to come out and get their hands dirty for wildlife. It is part of living and appreciating the natural world around us.

Stop on by the Regional Idaho Fish and Game office or call for a Volunteer application (208) 799-5010. We would like to meet you and learn about your interests!

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