



**Western Native Trout Initiative
Final Report**

**Blackfoot River Recreation Stewardship Program (WNTI No: 2024 SG 8)
December 2025**

Project Summary

In the wake of the 2020 pandemic, Blackfoot watershed landowners, resource managers and fishing guides began to see concerning trends. In some stretches of the Blackfoot, recreation use jumped by as much as 80%, leading to visible impacts to the river corridor, aquatic habitats and native fisheries. The Blackfoot River is home to two native trout species – westslope cutthroat trout and threatened bull trout. Over the last few decades, bull trout numbers have declined and few spawning strongholds remain as a result of climate change, annual drought, and wildfire impacts. Increased angling pressure and habitat degradation through recreation are now putting these native species at greater risk of decline. In a landscape known for decades of landowner-led stewardship, the Blackfoot Challenge responded to community concerns by formally establishing a Recreation Stewardship Program, setting up a partnership-based advisory committee and hiring a program coordinator. Together with state, federal, university and NGO partners, we launched a recreation initiative, aiming to prevent potential irreversible impacts of recreation on the water, habitat, and fish and wildlife resources that local communities have spent decades protecting.

Project Goals & Outcomes

Over the course of two years, community members and partners met every few weeks to collaboratively outline a strategy for addressing recreation impacts on the Blackfoot watershed. The collaborative group includes landowners, fishing outfitters, representatives from all relevant state and federal agencies (Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks, Bureau of Land Management, U.S. Forest Service), University of Montana Recreation Studies staff, county planners, and NGO partners (Trout Unlimited, The Nature Conservancy). Their shared vision identified multiple goals and strategies, beginning with an easy area of agreement amongst the work group: more needed to be done to connect with and educate recreationists to improve their outdoor ethics, especially on the river.

Following the late 2024 hiring of a Recreation Program coordinator, the Blackfoot Challenge team and partners accomplished the following project outcomes:

1. **Launch of a new website:** The Blackfoot Challenge invested in a complete redesign of our flagship website aiming to attract more website traffic, streamline navigation and make information more accessible to all audiences. As part of this redesign, we developed a new section focused on recreation. Several priority recreation topics have been integrated into the new website, with pages dedicated to background on the Blackfoot Recreation Program, recreation ethics, recreation visitor planning resources, and ways to get involved with the program. The content includes information about leave no trace, low-stress trout angling, and volunteering with the Blackfoot Challenge. Website visitors can see a real-time river conditions map that shows current river flows and potential fishing restrictions due to drought. The website showcases information from our pilot year of recreation use and impact data collection across the watershed. It also shares broadly for the first time the full “Community Perspectives on Recreation in the Blackfoot Watershed 2025 Report,” resulting from a series of community meetings facilitated by the University of Montana’s Parks, Tourism and Recreation Management Program. Now that the website has gone live, our team will continue to regularly add resources, reports, and guidance to encourage good stewardship behavior among recreationists. The landing page for the Blackfoot Recreation Program can be found here: <https://www.blackfootchallenge.org/what-we-do/recreation-stewardship/>
2. **Development of outreach materials:** In addition to the website, the Recreation Committee had a goal to create other forms of outreach to connect with current and future visitors to the watershed. The program coordinator developed a Recreation Program fact sheet to help raise awareness about the impacts of recreation and how individuals could play a role in mitigating those impacts. The Challenge Communications staff also began regularly sharing recreation program updates and visitor guidance through social media and electronic newsletters. This messaging was particularly critical this summer as the Blackfoot watershed experienced its worst drought conditions in recorded history, putting extreme pressure on fish due to the low water levels.
3. **Direct visitor connections:** This summer marked the start of a long-term effort to fill data gaps and bridge information across multiple agencies. The Challenge hired a summer intern to collect visitor use data at popular river access sites and recruited several local volunteers to help out. This staff and volunteer presence at popular recreation sites provided opportunities for in-person visitor interactions, while laying the groundwork for growing a recreation ambassador program in the coming years. The Blackfoot Challenge Recreation Program coordinator and summer intern interviewed recreating visitors and provided information about natural resource stewardship. They also tabled at popular visitor sites and at

community events throughout the summer, speaking with hundreds of outdoors enthusiasts and sharing hand-out materials.

Looking Ahead

Looking forward to 2026, the Blackfoot Challenge Recreation Program will continue expanding visitor outreach. Our plans include regularly adding and refreshing website content and continuing to post recreation stewardship content to social media. With a subcommittee of recreation managers from state, federal and NGO partners, we will also identify additional opportunities to reach visitors before they come to the Blackfoot and once they reach popular recreation sites. With in-person interactions offering the best opportunity to influence behavior, the program will increase the use of volunteer recreation ambassadors stationed at popular river access sites.

FINAL BUDGET

CATEGORY	WNTI ACTUAL*	WNTI PROPOSED	MATCH**	TOTAL
Personnel			\$15,000.00	\$15,000.00
Travel			\$1,000.00	\$1,000.00
Equipment				
Supplies			\$3,000.00	\$3,000.00
Contractual	\$4,500.00	\$4,000.00	\$4,500.00	\$9,000.00
Construction	\$500.00	\$1,000.00	\$1,500.00	\$2,000.00
Other			\$5,000.00	\$5,000.00
TOTAL	\$5,000.00	\$5,000.00	\$30,000.00	\$35,000.00

*Print and display materials were produced in-house with Blackfoot Challenge resources for less than originally budgeted, while the website contract expenses increased – so a small portion of the grant was reprogrammed to help pay web developers.

**Final match dollars secured included \$15,000 from a private donor to support our staff and summer intern salaries and travel; \$10,000 from the Bureau of Land Management to support the Recreation Program; and an additional \$5,000 from a private foundation to support overall website development and communications, a portion of which included the recreation-related outreach materials.

New Recreation Landing Page on the Blackfoot Challenge Website:

The screenshot shows the Blackfoot Challenge website's Recreation Stewardship landing page. The header includes the Blackfoot Challenge logo, contact information (info@blackfootchallenge.org, 406.793.3900), and a navigation menu with links for Who We Are, What We Do, Get Involved, Resources, and a prominent Donate button. The main banner features a scenic river landscape with the title "Recreation Stewardship" and the subtitle "Balancing quality outdoor recreation opportunities with natural resource conservation & protection".

Recreation Stewardship
Balancing quality outdoor recreation opportunities with natural resource conservation & protection

Learn more about our Recreation Program

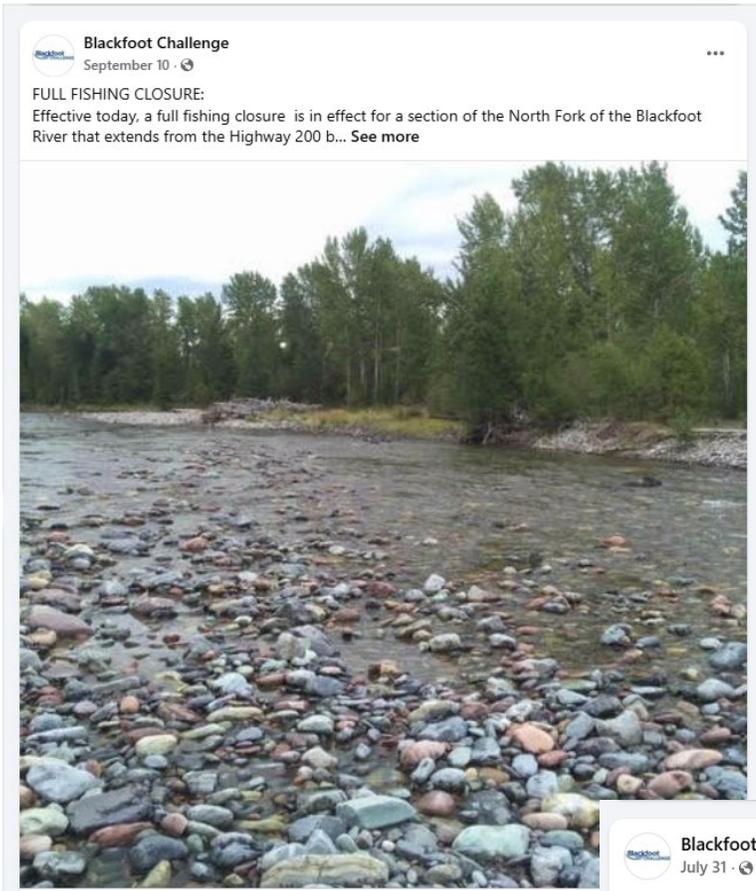
Click on the topics at right to find out more about how partners are responding to recreation pressures in the Blackfoot watershed.

Recreation Ethics
Ensuring that the Blackfoot watershed continues to support resilient wild landscapes and outdoor experience starts with a commitment to stewardship among recreationists.
[HOW TO RECREATE RESPONSIBLY →](#)

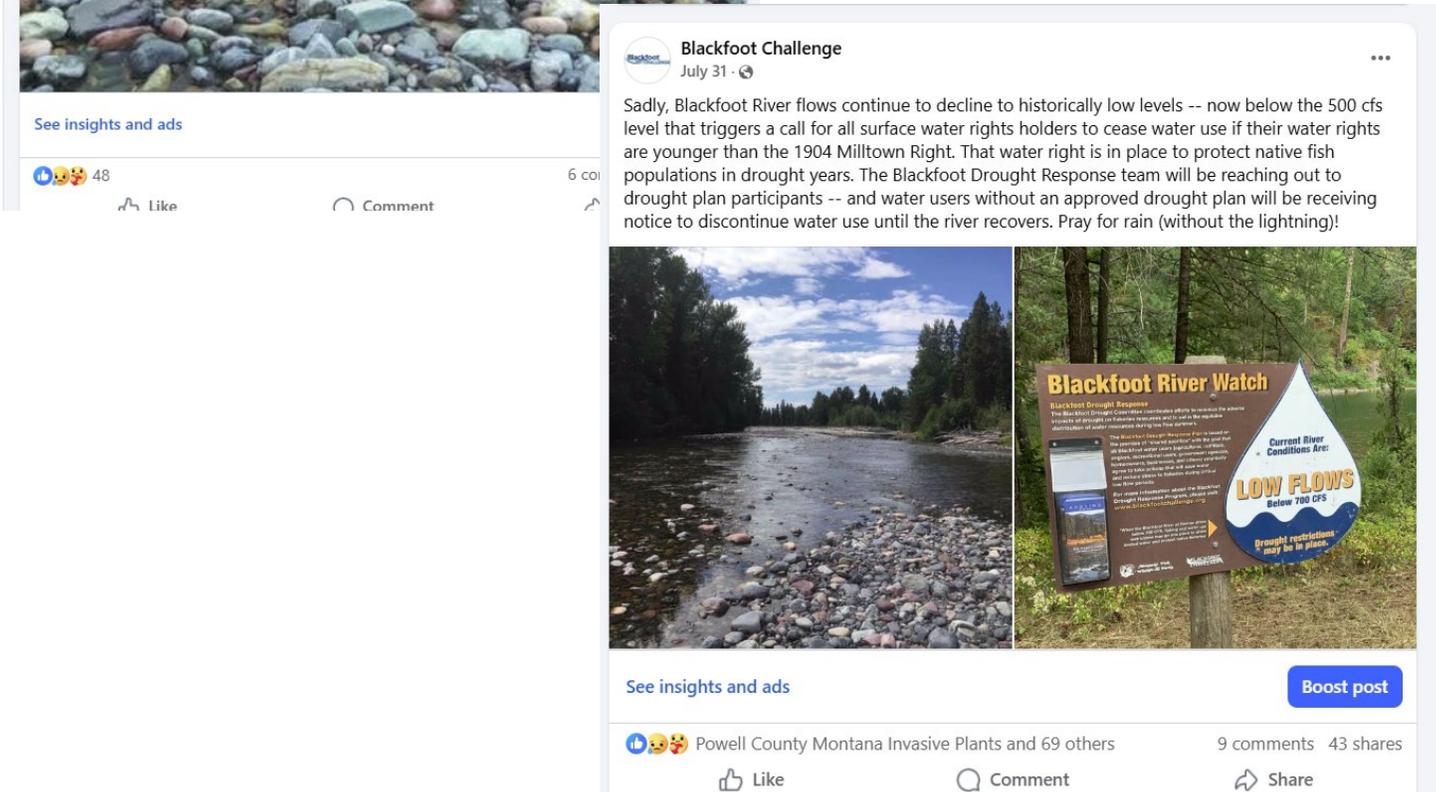
Plan Your Blackfoot Visit
Learn more about the resources we and our partners offer to help you plan safe and low-impact visits to the lands and waters of the Blackfoot watershed.
[ACCESS VISITOR RESOURCES →](#)

Recreation Research & Data
The Challenge and partners are building long-term understanding of trends by tracking visitor use and impact data to support future recreation management and resiliency projects.
[TRACK RECREATION TRENDS →](#)

Blackfoot Recreation Committee / Get Involved
The Recreation Committee facilitates knowledge sharing and bringing together resources to respond to recreation concerns. Volunteers support data collection and visitor outreach.
[GET INVOLVED IN OUR RECREATION PROGRAM →](#)



SAMPLE SUMMER SOCIAL MEDIA POSTS



2025 PILOT SEASON

Recreation Use & Impact Data

NUMBER OF ASSESSMENTS COLLECTED BY TYPE



TOTAL: 598 Assessments Completed

8 VOLUNTEERS + 2 EMPLOYEES



23

Fishing Access Sites Monitored



15

Land Access Sites Monitored

Preliminary Findings:

Average Vehicle Counts per Visit at Low- and High-Use FAS (5-Minute Observations)



■ 6 Lower Use FAS

■ 6 Higher Use FAS

- 1. Cedar Meadow
- 2. River Junction
- 3. Six Stall
- 4. Three Stall
- 5. Roundup
- 6. Daigle's Eddy

- 1. Harry Morgan
- 2. Scotty Brown
- 3. Russell Gates
- 4. Corricks Riverbend
- 5. Whitaker Bridge
- 6. Johnsrud

Infographic summarizing year 1 of recreation impact monitoring, created to help inform visitors about current challenges and areas at risk due to overuse.

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INVOICE # 15267
DATE 10/31/2025
TERMS Net 15
DUE DATE 11/15/2025

PAYMENT METHOD
Check

DATE		DESCRIPTION	QTY	RATE	AMOUNT
10/31/2025	Website development, features, functionality	Phase 3 Custom WordPress Website Development	0.50	9,900.00	4,950.00
10/31/2025	Content Styling	Content Styling	0.50	3,600.00	1,800.00
10/31/2025	Services	Phase 5 Staging Site, Testing, Revisions, Launch	0.50	900.00	450.00
10/31/2025	Project Management services	Project Management	0.50	3,240.00	1,620.00

50% deposit required to initiate project.

SUBTOTAL	8,820.00
TAX	0.00
TOTAL	8,820.00
BALANCE DUE	\$8,820.00