

Adventures with Benefits

Bozeman-based Adventurers and Scientists for Conservation offers outdoor enthusiasts a chance to give something important to the places where they venture

BY TED BREWER

PHOTOGRAPHY BY THOMAS LEE

From left, Alex Guest, Leah Mabee and Teri Ness gather data on American Prairie Reserve land south of Malta, Montana.



Driving on Highway 191 north of the Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge, Leah Mabee pulls off at mile marker 109 onto Dry Fork Road. She parks her car and looks out across nothing but prairie and sky as a June storm barrels in from the northwest and a frigid rain begins to pelt her Hyundai sedan. The excitement and nervousness she's felt since leaving her home in South Dakota the day before builds as she waits for a group of people she's never met but will spend every day with for the next month. They'll be living and working together in the distance she ponders through her windshield, in a landscape of prickly pear, rattlesnakes, bison herds, tempestuous weather, and two-tracks that turn to grease when it rains.

A Suburban pulls off the highway and parks behind her. Out jumps Mike Kautz, program director for Adventurers and Scientists for Conservation (ASC), a Bozeman-based nonprofit that specializes in recruiting intrepid people like Mabee to spend time in the outdoors, usually in wild places, to collect data for scientists, land managers, wildlife managers and others involved in conservation work. With Kautz are five other ASC volunteers who have ridden up with him from Bozeman. All are women

between the ages of 19 and 26, most of them just out of college. They come from all parts of the country, and none of them has set foot in Montana's prairie before. Neither have they done the sort of work they'll be doing here.

After everyone has been introduced, the two vehicles set off down the gravel Dry Fork Road for the hour-and-a-half drive to American Prairie Reserve—some 274,000 acres of grasslands that a nonprofit of the same name has bought up (or leased from the Bureau of Land Management) and set aside for native prairie species, including reintroduced bison. This is the sixth crew of volunteers Kautz has taken out to the reserve. APR has contracted ASC to conduct wildlife surveys, count bison calves, ascertain how native species are interacting with fences, discover archeological sites and gather other information that can help APR determine how best to manage its land. Called the Landmark Project, it started in January 2014 and will last for three years.

“One of things we're trying to show with this project is that you can do good science with nonprofessional scientists, that you can collect robust, rigorous scientific data with people who are not necessarily professionals,” Kautz says.

Each month a new crew arrives, with members coming from as far as Germany and Australia. They spend the first few days in training with Kautz, learning how to collect data with tablets, GPS devices, cameras, range finders, and compasses and then spend the next four weeks doing the work, walking 75 to 100 miles along nine different transects in various sections of the APR.

“Every month we do these trainings and every month I’m really amazed by the fact that [the volunteers] actually show up,” Kautz says. “You really have to have a sense of adventure to, say, meet us at milepost 109 on this road in the middle of nowhere in Montana.”

More than the adventure

THOUGH MABEE IS FROM AN ADJOINING GREAT PLAINS STATE, she finds Montana’s prairie a lot more exciting than the one she left in South Dakota.

“I think it’s an amazing opportunity to spend a full month living right in the midst of this vast amount of wild-life and in a part of the country I’ve never been to before,” she says. “I feel really blessed to be here and be able to do this.”

Mabee is the kind of person Gregg Treinish knew was out there waiting to be recruited when he founded ASC, the kind of person who wants to have an outdoor adventure that does more than indulge the self—that benefits the place where the experience occurs. Treinish hatched the idea for the organization after recognizing a bothersome selfishness that sometimes attended his own adventures.

“When I started talking about that with my friends, I very quickly realized that [these selfish feelings] were a widespread phenomenon and there was a big need to give outdoor enthusiasts a way to contribute their time,” he says.

If ever there was a poster child for such a group, 32-year-old Treinish is certainly it. After hiking the entire Appalachian Trail in his early twenties, he co-pioneered a route along the length of the 7,800-mile-long Andes Mountains, for which he and his partner were named the National Geographic Adventurers of the Year in 2008. Treinish came back from South America to earn a degree in wildlife biology from Montana State University, which led to fieldwork focusing on sturgeon, wolverines, lynx, and spotted owls. The fieldwork mostly revealed to him how little was known about these species.

“There’s just a shocking lack of information [about these species], and we’re making decisions about their futures,” he says. “And it occurred to me, at the same time we need a ton



The learning goes on into the night as program director Mike Kautz shows the group more ways to gather data at the American Prairie Reserve.

more of information, there was a motivated group of people willing to go out and get it. It was kind of a no-brainer.” As he learned from his own fieldwork, collecting data was not something you needed an advance degree to do.

When the notion for ASC struck, in November 2010, Treinish was working as a supervisor at a Belgrade-based wilderness therapy center for kids with drug and alcohol problems. By January 2011, he had the organization up and running and was keeping it and himself financially afloat by selling bumper stickers (the ones that say “BZN,” short for Bozeman). The organization began by pairing adventurers with researchers who needed samples and other data from far-flung locales.

Since then, ASC volunteers have brought back moss from Mt. Everest (thought to be the highest altitude plant ever recorded), rowed across the Arctic Ocean and collected plankton for a study of marine life, and trekked Mt. Rainier and the Wind River Range to discover a new species of diatoms—a kind of algae that reflects its environmental conditions.

In 2013, a crew of five ASC volunteers that included Treinish skied 230 miles across northern Mongolia and brought back samples of wolverine hair and scat, that country’s first DNA samples from a living wolverine.

The same year, 20 or so ASC volunteers spent three months setting up and managing camera sites throughout the southeast corner of Washington’s Olympic National Forest hoping to capture photos of pine martens, a species biologists think may be extinct in the area (unfortunately, no images of martens were captured).

“I consider us a SWAT team of able-bodied people who can go in with very specific questions and can bring a ton of resources to a conservation problem,” Treinish says.

Treinish is more interested now in taking on fewer, but bigger projects that require longer engagements, such as the Landmark Project at APR. The partnership with APR came about when Treinish happened to meet APR President Sean Gerrity at National Geographic’s 2013 Explorers Symposium.

Bison graze on about 30,000 acres at the American Prairie Reserve. ASC volunteers monitor the herd and other native species on the prairie.



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Night falls on the volunteers as they gather around a campfire. The group's field work holds the possibility of close encounters with wildlife.



"When it comes to collecting data on such a vast landscape, the idea of using adventure athletes was a perfect fit for American Prairie Reserve," Gerrity says. "No one else could do it this way, covering the ground on foot every day and in all seasons."

Treinish and Gerrity hatched a plan for the project in October 2013. The project was underway by the following January.

Kautz led the first crew of volunteers.

"We started that first month in 20-below weather," he says. "And I thought, 'Oh my God, what if somebody gets lost or gets frostbite? What if they get the car stuck in the ditch?'" Because of the snow, some of the nine transects the volunteers had to hike were inaccessible by vehicle, forcing them to go on foot and adding three or four extra miles to the transect's eight miles. The crew still walked each of the nine transects twice and set up several cameras along them to record how wildlife are negotiating fences—all without incident.

Rattlesnakes, lightning, gumbo

SIX MONTHS LATER, the roads to APR aren't covered with ice, but they may as well be. It's just rained, creating "gumbo"—a prairie clay that turns greasy in the rain and makes the roads as slick as ice.

Setting up their tents, the volunteers quickly find out

just how immersed they'll be in the field—they find bison hair stuck in the cleats of their tent platforms. The hairy beasts have been scratching themselves against the platforms and leaving pies throughout the campsite. With the prairie grass and cottonwoods shimmering in the gilding sunset and the birdsong climbing to an ecstatic pitch, the crew contemplates the distinct possibility of waking up in the middle of the night surrounded by bison. "Wow, this is going to be up close and personal," Mabee says. But tonight it won't.

The next morning begins with a safety/pep talk from Kautz, who will be leaving the crew on its own in two days.

"There's been a lot of scrutiny on this project because you have never been to this place," he tells the crew. "You're really on your own up here. You have to be resourceful and responsible for yourselves. There aren't many people to call if you get yourselves into trouble. I give it as a challenge to every crew to take care of yourself and take care of each other."

The challenge begins that day. After a brief lesson on how to use the data-collection equipment, the volunteers set off on a transect not far from the border of the Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge, all of them wearing gaiters to protect themselves from prickly pear needles and, in theory, to blunt a rattlesnake strike.

The crew comes across two young bison bulls, which quickly demonstrate just how fast they can run. Later,

they see the heads of three or four pronghorn that appear to be nursing young in the long grass. One of the volunteers spots a greater short-horned lizard scuttling in the dirt. Another, curiously enough, finds a dead fish.

As they near the end of the transect, they see three different storms approaching from the northwest—a repeat of yesterday. Kautz figures they will get hit by at least one of them and recommends heading back to the vehicle, a speck in the distance at this point in the transect. Halfway back, the storm does hit.

As the rain begins to fall in dollops, volunteer Rachael Herring from Nashville, Tennessee passes a rattlesnake looped in the grass, either frozen by the sudden plunge in temperature or dead. Moments later, lightning strikes in the near distance. Kautz motions the crew back to the bottom of the coulee from which they just emerged. He tells the volunteers to spread out and crouch down. A few moments later another bolt of lightning shatters the air above them.

Once the storm passes, the drenched crew shambles to the car with a thick layer of gumbo stuck to the bottom of their boots. On the drive back to camp, Kautz fishtails down the two-track, hyper-aware of the huge rocks to the side of the road. A collision could strand the crew dozens of miles away from camp.

Safely back at camp after uploading the day's data onto ASC's file network, he jokes that the crew may have had too much of an adventure for their first day. "If you know there's a point to what you're doing, a purpose, it's easier to endure," he says. But none of the volunteers seems in need of the reassurance. They're all too blissed savoring the sunset, the crescendo of birdsong, and everything else that makes their job of helping conserve all this understated beauty worth the risk. 🐾

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| Date EPA Registered | May 12, 1998 (The First) | Dec 22, 1998 | March 18, 1999 | July 17, 2000 | | | | |
| Manufactured by | Counter Assault | Contract Filler | Contract Filler | Security Equipment | | | | |
| Recommendations Suggested by bear biologists and wildlife specialists of the IGBC* | Counter Assault | Guard Alaska | Pepper Power | Frontiersman | | | | |
| Minimum Net Weight | 7.9 oz 225 gr | 8.1 oz 230 gram | 10.2oz 290 gram | 9 oz 255 gr | 7.9 oz 225 gr | 9.2 oz 260 gr | 7.9 oz 225 gr | 9.2 oz 260 gr |
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*IGBC: The Interagency Grizzly Bear Committee consists of representatives from the U.S. Forest Service, the National Park Service, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Bureau of Land Management, the U.S. Geological Survey and representatives of the state wildlife agencies of Idaho, Montana, Washington and Wyoming. In the interest of international coordination and cooperation, the Canadian Wildlife Service is also represented.

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