

## Getting the Job Done, Together: restoring habitat and reclaiming wildways in Trout and Eagle Creeks

by Tod Bacigalupi, Lee Patton and Jean Smith

I was glad to see the upper half of the former user-made trail so well-barricaded by logs, downed trees, and branches that it has kept out ORV traffic for almost six months. There are promising areas of revegetation...”, Lee said. But Tod said, “At first I was discouraged when I was counting grass shoots going up the trail. It seemed like there were lots of places where the grass didn’t grow, where there was new erosion, and where motorcycles had cut new trails. But as I was coming down, I saw much more new grass in the late day sun.”

Lee Patton and Tod Bacigalupi, both Wild Connections Board members, returned to Trout Creek in November for a late season monitoring of habitat restoration on the former ATV trail located north of Eagle Creek. (The rest of their story is on page 10.)

Many of you are familiar with this because you helped last summer. Over four work days, volunteers seeded and mulched 2¼ linear miles and nearly 5 acres of gullied trail. We will build on that experience to restore the Eagle Creek and the Trout Creek corridors next spring.



New growth. Photo by Michael Rogers.

### Spring 2010 in Eagle and Trout Creeks

Having gotten our hands dirty in one dry drainage, the next phase has even more potential because Eagle Creek is a perennial stream and more diverse. Trout Creek itself is a substantial stream that joins West Creek at Highway 67 a few miles north of Deckers where it flows into the South Platte River.

The work will be similar. Crew leaders will be trained by April, and four days of work for volunteer crews in May and June will take advantage of the best time for seed germination. A special camp-out event will bring young adults from the Youth Corps – they get to work on the steepest sections. Later in the year volunteers can return to monitor seed germination and check for illegal motorized use. Special events include a butterfly survey and a family outing in the fall to collect native seeds.



Looking up the rehab site from Trout Creek. Left - sparse ground cover in gravelly soil in April. Right - Vegetation is more substantial in November. Posts and cables are remnants from its days as a legal trail. They directed riders to the stream crossing and discouraged riding north or south along this bank of Trout Creek. Photos by Michael Rogers and Tod Bacigalupi.

### Why here?

Out of the thousands of places on the Pike-San Isabel that need restoration, why did Wild Connections select the Trout-Eagle Creeks area? It was a happy coincidence of habitat damage in a biologically important location with Forest Service and Wild Connections priorities.

### Fire and erosion

Trout Creek is at the east edge of the 2002 Hayman fire and erosion after the fire continues to this day, harming local and metro Denver water supplies. Roads and trails also add to erosion. The restoration areas were once legal OHV trails that connected to the Rampart Range Road. The Forest Service closed the trails because the habitat damage was unacceptable. However, the gullies got deeper from the weather and continued illegal motorized travel. Restoration was a high priority for the Forest Service.

### Biological diversity

The range of plant and animal species in the restoration area is quite amazing. Ponderosa pine, Douglas-fir, aspen, narrow-leaf cottonwoods, willows, alders and hundreds of kinds of shrubs, wildflowers and grasses fill their special niches.

Big animals such as deer, elk, mountain lion, and black bear live in balance with fox, squirrels and chipmunks. Birds take advantage of food and nesting sources in the forest and along the riparian areas. Beavers and trout swim in Trout Creek. Mexican spotted owls, Preble's meadow jumping mice and Pawnee montane skipper butterflies, all federally listed as threatened, have critical or occupied habitat in these drainages.

### *The big picture*

Wild Connections is interested in the big conservation picture across multiple watersheds. Trout and Eagle Creeks link this roadless landscape to other roadless areas to the west and northwest. Large animals in particular need big secure areas for their daily sustenance and seasonal movements. The restored watershed will offset heavy OHV use in the Rampart Range Recreation Area and the Rainbow Falls motorized area where increasing recreation tends to drive wildlife into smaller and more isolated parts of the forest.

### **What did we learn?**

The recent monitoring trip highlighted concerns for the project area: continuing erosion and continuing illegal motorized use.

Photos from the 2009 workdays are impressive: a wide swath of well contoured corridor is blanketed in straw. However, the November monitoring trip showed considerable differences in the amount and spacing of revegetation. In addition, a big mid-summer rain storm caused a lot of new erosion. In the spring we will check again and decide what additional work is needed.

Illegal use continues. In fact, at end of the first work day, we discovered two teens riding on the freshly seeded trail near Trout Creek! The monitoring trip showed motorcycle tracks here and up the trail for several hundred yards. These riders likely come from the Rainbow Falls motorized area along another illegal track. Monitors also discovered fresh tracks from the Trout Creek Trailhead on Rampart Range Road clawing up the terrain in the upper end. Trail blockage and enforcement of closure are essential since a single motorcycle uproots new plants and digs up the ground, leading to more erosion.

### **Leveraging success**

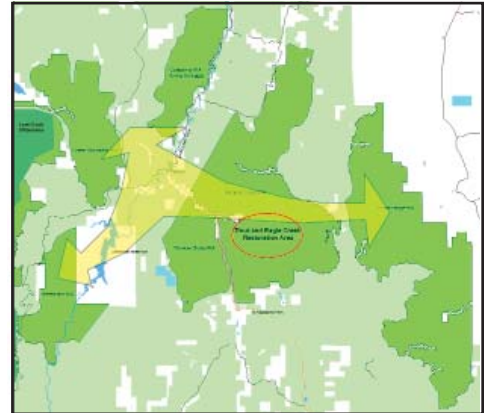
Additional resources are coming because of the successful completion of the first year of Reclaiming Wildways. The National Forest Foundation has awarded a grant of \$17,550 for the 2010 work, which they require be matched dollar for dollar by private, non-federal donations. The Forest Service, conservation organizations and businesses will provide an additional \$44,000 of in-kind donations. This grant was possible because of the demonstrated ability of all of us to work together and get the job done.

### **You can help**

A partnership among individuals, organizations and land agencies is a recipe for success for on-the-ground work. Sixty volunteers and staff drawn from Wildlands Restoration Volunteers, Coalition for Upper South Platte, Rocky Mountain Field Institute, Cheyenne Mountain Zoo, Wild Connections, the South Platte Ranger District, and the businesses that donated food and supplies all have a vested interest in seeing that the project succeeds. There is a sense of ownership-in spreading seed or straw by hand and supporting the volunteers.

Wild Connections wants to expand this partnership. Here's how you can help

- Sign up for a work day. 1 to 4 days, suitable for older youth and adults.
- Recruit your friends, neighbors and associates for a work day.



*Top - At some points heavy rains created gullies across the rehabilitated corridor. Bottom - The first work day was not yet over when two young men crossed Trout Creek from the south and rode onto the newly mulched corridor. Photos by Tod Bacigalupi and Jean C. Smith.*

- Be a crew leader. 1-4 work days plus the training.
- Help with project organization. If you would rather not do the physical work, we still have a job for you.
- Request a slide show for your conservation organization, civic or faith group, company staff or business association.
- Make a tax-exempt donation for the project to help match the National Forest Foundation challenge grant.
- Contact your employer for a matching contribution.

Much is said these days about giving back to your community, good stewardship of precious natural resources and the value of getting out into nature. We invite you to join with others in Reclaiming Wildways. 



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