



Photo by Greg Lemon

Matt Kangas (left) and Easton Holder practice their shot at the archery range at the Jack Creek Preserve Foundation's annual summer youth camp. The pair of young archers were having a little friendly competition to see who could get the most arrows in the yellow circle.

Local summer camp looks to inspire another generation of conservationists

By Greg Lemon, The Madisonian

The narrow two-track road wound through regenerated high-elevation Douglas fir and pine stands.

In one clearing a handful of kids are target practicing with compound bows. Further along three young girls are listening intently to a man carrying a compound bow who is standing near a 3D elk target, explaining to them how elk pick up human scent. Further down the road is an open sided pole barn with picnic tables. At one end about six kids are learning to tie flies. At the other end a group is learning how to score deer antlers.

On a nearby knoll is a group of tents.

This is the setting for the fifth annual Jack Creek Preserve Youth Camp, which was held two weeks ago in the mountains east of Ennis.

"If you can touch one kid and make a difference in their life, you've done a lot," said camp director, LaDonna Maxwell.

That sentiment pervades through the leaders at the camp. John Fossel started the Jack Creek Preserve Foundation more than five years ago. The preserve consists of about 4,600 acres at the head of Jack Creek and nearly spans the gap of private land between the north and south part of the Lee Metcalf Wilderness.

The vast majority of the preserve is under a conservation easement, Fossel said. It is an important migratory bridge between the two parts of the wilderness.

With the land preserved, Fossel and his ex-wife Dottie, wanted to pursue a dream — holding a camp for kids that teaches them an appreciation for conservation, outdoors skills and the importance of wild lands and wild places.

"When you get a passion for something you'll find a way to make it work," Fossel said as he took a break

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from helping teach kids about tree stand safety. "This camp is the center piece of what we do."

The camp is run by volunteers, several from organizations like the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation and Pope and Young Club. The two organizations do quite a bit to support the camp, said Fossel, who once served as RMEF president.

"They, in both cases, help us raise money," Fossel said.

The camp started out as a three-day event, but this year expanded to four days and 50 kids, he said.

Most of the campers are from Montana, but every year they get kids from elsewhere in the country.

Fossel remembers two inner-city kids from Ohio who came out with their guidance counselor and assistant principal. Both kids were labeled problem teens and at risk, but three days in the Montana mountains changed things.

Fossel remembers one of the teens saying: "Until I came to Montana I never knew how many stars there were."

The camp and the friends the two teens made there turned their lives around, he said. The reports Fossel got back from Ohio were all

positive.

"You have no idea the impact camp had on those kids," Fossel said relating a letter he received from the assistant principal.

Fossel is an ambitious guy with a passion for expanding what the Jack Creek Preserve Foundation provides. Talks are underway to provide sessions for teachers to come and learn more about conservation at the preserve.

"If I can educate a teacher about some of these issues, they'll educate a thousand kids," he said.

The preserve also has seven water monitoring sites in Jack Creek to see if development in the drainage is impacting water quality. So far it isn't, Fossel said. But the project gives local youth another chance to learn about

conservation and science. This particular project has been done in partnership with the Madison River Foundation, Moonlight Basin and the Madison Valley Ranchlands Group.

In the fall, the preserve also awards two disabled veterans hunts, which are unguided hunts on the preserve's 4,600 acres. They also raise money by auctioning off hunts on the preserve.

The long-range vision is to expand the youth camp and build a conservation center, Fossel said.

"Who says we can't do five week-long camps," he said. "In a perfect world we'd reach a lot more of them (kids)."

He again points to the

volunteers who help pull off camp every year. The camp is run completely by volunteer help. At this year's camp they had 30 volunteer counselors.

Besides the camp, Jack Creek Preserve Foundation provides two scholarships for local students studying conservation, science or wildlife management. They also allow Madison Valley residents to use the 3-D archery range on a limited basis and also have two cabins for rent on the preserve.

For more information on the Jack Creek Preserve Foundation, look on their Web site at www.jackcreekpreserve.org.