TAKING CAMP TO THE NEXT LEVEL

Whiskey Mountain Conservation Camp needs a top-notch restoration. Game and Fish will invest $2 million, but needs the public's help with the rest

By Jeff Obrecht | Photography by Game and Fish staff

When it comes to trademarks, it can be argued the Wyoming Game and Fish Department's Whiskey Mountain Conservation Camp ranks right up there with green trucks and red shirts with the embroidered pronghorn on the left shoulder. • And, like the trucks, the camp requires repairs, too. However, the camp can't be traded in for new model when things start to break down — nor would you want to if you could. It's a classic 1927-ish vintage model deserving of a top-notch restoration and overhaul.

We'll be completely upfront: We're asking for the public's help to bring it back to its full glory. Hunters, anglers, subscribers, wildlife watchers, educators, those of you who think it important to invest in wildlife and conservation, and its education in a state that's known for both, we'd appreciate the help.

The Game and Fish Commission has pledged $2 million — nearly half the estimated cost — and is asking the public to help with the rest.

HISTORY

The 2,000-acre Trail Lake Ranch was purchased by the department in August 1958, with cabins and infrastructure already 30-plus years old. Since then it's been the site of education camps for both youth and adults, male and female. Stalwart education organizations have been involved from the start. The camp was leased to the University of Wyoming from 1960 to 1986. The National Audubon Society operated the camp for the next 13 years, including accommodating department functions. The camp was closed in 2001 to get buildings up to code and the Lucius Birch Center of Dubois, an outdoor-focused entity, leased the camp from 2002 to 2007. Game and Fish has operated the camp ever since.

ON THE HILLSIDE OVERLOOKING THE LAKE, SHOSHONE INDIANS ETCHED PETROGLYPHS INTO LARGE ROCKS IN A PREVIOUS ERA.

With the purchase from Charley and Sue Beck, the department acquired not just a dude ranch but also an education legacy. The Becks were not just teachers in Philadelphia and later California during the conventional school year, but also educators at their dude ranch in the summer. They even built a library. Horseback trips to the glacier expanse around Gannett Peak and other destinations were featured.

The ranch was a sought-after ticket. Guests included a member of the U.S. House of Representatives, faculty of Harvard Law School and University of Pennsylvania Medical School, and the New Jersey state treasurer.

Charley was also an engineer by training and used that aptitude and the building craftsmanship of his foreman Milton White in constructing the dude ranch. The lodge floor was reinforced every 18 inches to support a lot of people having a good time.

Lesser engineering and craftsmanship on Charlie and Milton's part would have placed the camp in disrepair — or even spelled the doom of the facility — many years ago.

There is so much more to the Becks' story. Charley and Sue would return to the ranch and contribute to the University of Wyoming classes.

NEEDS

Here's just one of many examples of what the facility is facing and something I experienced: After the first day of the last youth conservation camp in August 2013, many cabins woke up to no water. A quick check of the system revealed the water should be running — no ornery teenagers shut off any valves. Process of elimination: an underground waterline must have ruptured.

IT IS HARD TO IMAGINE A BETTER LOCATION FOR A CONSERVATION CAMP. ECOLOGY MELDS WITH NATIVE HISTORY IN THE UPPER TORREY CREEK VALLEY.

The idea of scrapping the camp after just a day and having guardians retrieve their kids was on the table. But first, Game and Fish Habitat and Access personnel, armed with a backhoe, scrambled into action. In the interim, campers bucketed water from the creek to afflicted cabins to flush toilets. Showers were taken in shifts in the handful of cabins that still had running water. Camp activities continued, including the red shirts and backhoe working into the night. Thankfully, the next day the repair crew was successful. The campers applauded — but the need for restoration was accentuated.

But things go deeper than just restoring the infrastructure of the library, lodge, bathhouse and the 18 cabins, while maintaining the rustic motif of the West. The cafeteria (not built by

How to invest

Donations are tax deductible. The National Bighorn Sheep Interpretive Association in Dubois, a 501 (c) (3) organization, has volunteered to collect the donations and assist with this effort. The Game and Fish helped establish the center in 1993 and the two have partnered on projects ever since. Send donations to National Bighorn Sheep Interpretive Association, P.O. Box 1435, Dubois, WY 82513. For more information, contact Sara Domek, the association's executive director, at (307) 455-3429 or visit the camp website at *wgfd.wyo.gov/whiskeymtn*.

Charley and Milton) is simply inadequate in most ways and a new one needs built. Fortunately, even though the cafeteria is connected to the library by a quaint hallway, the library can live on into the new era. The extra-sturdy lodge has served stoically as the lecture hall and is long on character, but too short on space to be a functional classroom — it just isn't big enough to handle more than 50 chairs. So, a new classroom building, capable of hosting 100 campers with partitions for smaller groups, is part of the planned restoration.

LOCATION

It is hard to imagine a better location for a conservation camp. Ecology melds with native history in the upper Torrey Creek Valley.

The camp is almost at the end of the road. Ridges, buttes and mountains surround it on three sides. The camp not only borders the Shoshone National Forest, but from the forest edge it's not much more than a stone's throw to the Fitzpatrick Wilderness Area. Members of the famed Whiskey Mountain bighorn sheep herd not only winter on and around the camp, it's common for lambs and ewes to make an appearance for students and instructors in the summer. The camp is within the boundary of the Game and Fish's Whiskey Basin Wildlife Habitat Management Area, which provides crucial winter range for bighorn sheep, elk and mule deer. Torrey Creek is close enough to provide background music for some cabins and activities. The creek not only offers convenient fishing, it provides ample flow for canoeing all through the summer. Upstream, the creek barrels out of the forest just after a series of impressive falls easily reached by trail. During at least two camps I helped staff, a cow and calf moose in the backwater willows of Torrey Creek — easily viewed from the camp proper — enhanced the experience.

Trail Lake is less than a half-mile downstream and is welcomed by first-timers paddling down the creek. The lake serves as a great laboratory for campers to pull nets and be introduced to a variety of cold-water fish. Campers embark on foot for most aquatic and terrestrial investigations straight from camp.

"Attending the Whiskey Mountain Youth Conservation Camp for the 2005 summer season had a direct impact on my choice to pursue a career in the wildlife field," said Rebecca Zook, who graduated from Natrona County High School in Casper. "The passion exuded by the camp staff leading the activities was contagious. It was observing their endless enthusiasm to share their love for conserving wildlife and ethically enjoying outdoor recreation activities that inspired me to do the same."

Zook went on to earn four associate's degrees from Casper College and a bachelor's in fish and wildlife management from the University of Wyoming in 2011. She has served as a field biologist for Western EcoSystems Technologies, an environmental consulting company, since 2009.

UPSTREAM, THE CREEK BARRELS OUT OF THE FOREST JUST AFTER A SERIES OF IMPRESSIVE FALLS EASILY REACHED BY TRAIL.

On the hillside overlooking the lake, Shoshone Indians etched petroglyphs into large rocks in a previous era. Young and old minds are both challenged to "What is the message?" The awakening light of a pre-breakfast hike during the youth camps broadens the encounter. In a very early era a Shoshone band, known as the

Sheep-eaters, called the area home. Traces of one of their villages sits on the south face of Whiskey Mountain above camp.

A wide variety of camps have been featured at Whiskey Mountain over the years. After the Becks' emphasis on the Western experience, the university focused on teaching teachers. The Wyoming Association of Student Councils conducted leadership training in at least 1962 and '63. It was a science classroom for everything from ornithology to geology for the National Audubon Society. Beginning in 1989, the Game and Fish has offered camps for teachers, women, high school students and hunter education instructors most years. If the renovation can be accomplished, a similar line-up will certainly continue, along with camps tailored to the needs of conservation organizations. The potential is as vast as the Wyoming outdoors itself.

"The camp facilities created a comfortable, homelike atmosphere while being surrounded by the wild, rustic nature of Wyoming," Zook said. "There was an aura of natural history to the buildings which created an authentic feeling of being in a different world and helped enhance the focus from the distractions of our everyday lives."

If the subsidized subscription rate of *Wyoming Wildlife* or any other thing has ever prompted the thought: "What else can I do to help conservation in Wyoming?" This is it.

The goal is already $20,000 closer thanks to the Wyoming Wild Sheep Foundation.

I've had the privilege to both be on duty and relax at the camp. The Audubon Society employed my oldest son for three summers and middle son for one. The experiences have enabled me to judge the Whiskey Mountain Conservation Camp restoration and overhaul as an important investment.

—Jeff Obrecht is the acting editor of Wyoming Wildlife *as incoming editor Amy Bulger makes the transition to take over starting with the September issue.*