At one point, 36 homes were to be built around an eight-acre ornamental pond just off Interstate 90 at Rock Creek.

But after Five Valleys Land Trust bought the property in 2012 and began partnering with the University of Montana, the water in the artificial pond has gone down, the land has been rebuilt and as of Sunday, around 300 native Montana bushes and trees have been planted, to transform the half-developed land into a wetland habitat.

“When the development didn't happen, having an artificial pond on the property wasn't really in line with Five Valleys’ goals,” stewardship manager Jenny Tollefson said. “We wanted to keep the water in Rock Creek.”
So they blocked off the manmade drainage, leaving a groundwater-only pond at the site.

To make the best of the situation, it was decided to replant native grass, forbs, shrubs and trees around the pond to restore it as a riparian wetland zone.

Around 25 volunteers showed up Sunday to help plant around 300 shrubs and tree saplings in a circle around the pond; the first of four revegetation events this spring at the site.

Mike Fazekas is a student in the ecosystem science and restoration program, a capstone course with the goal of restoring the Rock Creek parcel.

His class is one of many in an eight-year restoration process that began with a partnership with students in the Missoula College heavy equipment operations program, who recontoured the land, shifting dirt piles that were left after the pond was dug out.

His three-semester program is focusing on revegetation, with both grass and shrubs, to return the rock-and-dirt field to a natural habitat.

“This is the first and most heavily disrupted and degraded area,” Fazekas said. “We’re laying a groundwork for next year’s program.”

Sixteen different species of plants, including cottonwoods, willows, rocky mountain maple and red osier dogwood, sat in neat rows at the entrance to the site, toted down to the banks of the pond by volunteers along with shovels, pickaxes and digging bars to break up the rocky ground.

“This is crazy,” James Frakes laughed as his pickaxe struck rock after rock while he dug a hole for a cottonwood sapling.

“Is that good?” he finally asked his partner, Emily Hamant.

“No,” she replied. The 12-inch plastic container that held the sapling's roots wouldn't fit.

Frakes pointed out they would break up the roots a bit by hand before planting the tree.

“Okay,” Hamant gave in and the two scraped rocky soil in around the sapling, before piling mulch around the base and patting it down with their feet.

“One day a bird's going to make a nest in this tree,” Frakes said. “All thanks to us.”

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Frakes and Hamant are both wildlife biology majors at UM; Frakes said an email about the revegetation event caught his eye, as he often fishes on Rock Creek.

“I heard of a restoration project and I thought, ‘Why not, right?’” he said.

The two picked up their tools and another cottonwood sapling and moved closer to the shore, finding the soil much softer there, though no less rocky.
After a few hours' work, a line of yellow flags dotted the shoreline of the pond, marking each shrub and tree planted, their number steadily increasing as the two- or three-person teams moved along the shoreline, digging, planting and mulching. Up to 100 flags fluttered in the wind by about 11 a.m., alongside dozens of orange versions, marking prime spots for future planting.

Tollefson said this restoration is an odd one, since they're using the situation to improve the habitat around the man-made pond, not reverting the land back to what it was.

She called it “habitat improvement” – doing the best with what the developer left behind.

The restoration will take years, Tollefson said. Steady work has been done since 2012 at the site, but even the native grass seeds that have been planted have yet to poke their sprouts above the soil, and willow trees take over a decade to reach full growth.

“The process of restoration is slow and steady," she said. “It's a commitment."

The pond and vegetation nearby will attract birds and mammals, in time becoming a riparian habitat, like so many that Five Valleys routinely seeks for conservation.

“Wetland habitats are really valuable in Montana,” Tollefson said. “Over time this will be really lush.”
Panel named on future of Bitterroot, West Fork fishing

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