



Citizen science a no-brainer for Brain, Thompson - Part 2 of 2 on UM's Wilderness Institute

[Print Page](#)

By *BILL SCHWANKE* of *Missoulian.com*

It's their personal version of the "Call of the Wild."

Deciding to go into Montana and Idaho wilderness areas to map ecological change didn't take much time for either Flora Brain or Mark Thompson, both of whom had hooked on to the University of Montana Wilderness Institute during their time as UM students.

Brain, from coastal British Columbia, has been in Missoula for six years and has completed her studies in natural resource conservation. Thompson came to UM from Texas to major in liberal studies with a minor in wilderness studies.

Both now lead groups under the institute's volunteer wilderness monitoring and restoration program. It's supported by the National Forest Foundation, the U.S. Forest Service and the Cinnabar Foundation.

Brain took one of the WI's field study courses in Yellowstone National Park as a student and was highly impressed with what she encountered in that setting.

"When I saw the advertisement for a field leader to work in Montana wilderness areas doing this type of citizen involvement project with noxious weeds and recreation impacts I jumped at the chance," Brain said.

Thompson also did a year-long WI program two years ago. He kept his ties with the institute and then did some work there last year in a different area.

"With my interest in ecology (and) natural history, this was a perfect opportunity to be able to educate some people as well as continue my own learning and also do something for our wildlands at the same time," Thompson said.

Working through the Forest Service a decision is made which wilderness area to work in. In late June both Thompson and Brain worked in the Gates of the Mountain wilderness on the Helena National Forest in some burned areas that are more susceptible to weed invasion. Once they get there they scout the territory, map where the weeds are, and do some pulling as well.

"We encountered quite a few noxious weeds," Brain said of the group that included eight volunteers. "It was just a great chance to have them spread out and use their eyes and their feet to hike off trail and look for these infestations of Common Tansy (a ragwort), Common Burdock (related to thistles), a lot of cheat grass."

Because the area burned there is a lot of “open canopy which is highly susceptible to cheat grass infestations,” Brain added. “We found pretty much every noxious weed you could hope to find in that particular area.”

Brain said areas with heavier canopies tend to have fewer weed invasions, but there are always exceptions.

“So we find Dalmatian toadflax way up high on hills far from trails where one would normally not expect to find (it),” Brain added. “So it’s exciting.”

Anyone can volunteer regardless of experience. Training is provided in terms of identifying weeds. Volunteers come from diverse backgrounds, some having botany experience and knowledge of what weeds are being sought. For those with little or no background it’s a great opportunity to learn.

Brain said the first day in the field is devoted largely to training. They find examples of noxious weeds volunteers will encounter and look at them in detail to help the identification process.

The groups also use global positioning satellite units to collect data on habitats where the weeds grow.

Pulling the weeds is another story. Some are much more difficult to pull than others.

“Some weeds you can’t even pull like the spurge and toadflax,” Thompson said. “Unless it’s a really small infestation you’re just kind of spinning your wheels. You could be doing more fruitful work mapping other things.”

Thompson said some species have a taproot while others spread by rhizomes underground, and that determines pulling difficulty.

Their tools are a pair of leather gloves and possibly a small metal digging tool.

Thompson said there is tremendous satisfaction in the restoration work, largely through the education aspect.

“Bringing people out that don’t have experience either in plant identification or even backpacking for that matter,” Thompson added. “Just getting people out there and helping them open their eyes and see what’s out there and teaching them a little bit about ecology and our wild places out here.”

Brain concurred with the satisfaction inherent in the work.

“Just being out in a Montana wilderness setting with citizens from all walks of life,” Brain said. “Getting them to really see the natural wonders but also increasing their understanding of the threats that our wilderness areas face. It’s really satisfying. I definitely feel that I’m giving back to the lands I love so much.”

Brain said graduate school is in her near future once she narrows the scope of her many interests. That’s her challenge because “there are so many inspiring and intriguing issues taking place on our landscape.”

For Thompson there’s the lure of writing the “great American novel.” He also talked about doing some farming later on and in the near term more field work in his beloved wilderness areas.

Copyright © 2006 Missoulian