

The Charlie Blumenstein Water and Wildlife Conservation Internship

PERSONAL REFLECTIONS BY 2011 INTERN
COLLIN KNAUSS



I already miss the days loading up the truck with canoes and taking them to the launch area at Stalker Bridge. The other two Silver Creek Preserve interns, Samantha Engel (Sam) and Matthew Hough, and I loved this aspect of the Preserve because it either meant we were going paddling or a group of visitors would be about to experience my favorite part of The Nature Conservancy's Silver Creek Preserve in Picabo, Idaho. The canoe ride down Silver Creek follows a relatively simple trajectory. It starts at Stalker Bridge and continues downstream until merging with another tributary, Grove Creek. At this point the paddler should stay right and enter the beginning of Silver Creek. Soon the paddler will pass Sullivan Lake and the visitor center on an adjacent hill while approaching a series of S-turns. It is important to stay right and avoid paddling up Loving Creek and getting stuck, which I saw happen to a hapless paddling duo. The canoes hit deeper water in the S-turns, which eventually open into Kilpatrick Pond; at this point the paddler is able to close in on the landing zone. After about two hours on the water, we would put the canoes on the rack and walk back to the truck wishing we could do it all again. In fact, on some trips, I would purposely steer poorly to ram into the bank—something that did not fool Matt or Sam, since they referred to me as the canoe expert—to prolong the paddle.

Throughout the summer I found time to paddle Silver Creek many times. Sometimes I paddled alone, and other times I went with larger groups. The best paddle of the summer almost did not happen. On Saturday, June 18, Sam and I led a canoe float at 1:00 pm, which went well and another one at 5:00 pm, which turned into some of the best two hours of the summer. The 5:00 pm float included a trustee of the Utah Chapter of The Nature Conservancy, Linda Leckman, her son and a whole lot of bad weather. In the midst of downpours and high wind, Linda and her son convinced Sam and me to do the float with them. Amazingly, the treacherous conditions brought out the best sampling of Silver Creek wildlife I had seen. With owls, beavers, huge rainbow and brown trout and moose, I was in heaven. My hands were numb from the cold rain, and I was shivering from being soaked, but we paddled through the high winds at Kilpatrick Pond and dumped the accumulated gallons of water out of the canoes upon reaching the take-out

zone. We all smiled and high-fived, each knowing we had just experienced the most incredible Silver Creek canoe float of the summer.

I saw a bounty of wildlife while canoeing that the preserve never revealed to me when I walked or drove. On the water, it could be 95 degrees and sunny and other times it could be in the 50s with a downpour. I saw 30-inch brown trout waiting in the bank overhangs—both human and fish knowing I would never catch one, because these trout are way too smart. The sandhill cranes and great blue herons would call around the bends of Silver Creek, while the several owl species would wait in the large aspens covering the creek bank and decide to traverse the creek right as we passed them. We would race the beavers until they got scared of us and swam into the sinuous root systems of the large bankside trees. And if we were really lucky and careful, our canoe might turn the corner facing a moose with her young. Inevitably, my gaze would focus on the life of the creek, best embodied by the acrobatic rainbow trout and the massive brown trout. Seeing huge trout dart adroitly through the clear water, intent on choosing their next meal, signaled to me that this was the place for only the most skilled anglers.

After an enjoyable paddle, there was nothing better than seeing the smiling faces of the Preserve volunteers from inside the volunteer cabin, which sits close to the loading zone. Whether it was Jerry and Cheryl—a retired couple from southern California, who have volunteered at the Preserve for the past six years; Leroy and Ronile who live in Hailey, Idaho; Matt’s uncle Bob, who fell in love with the Preserve after seeing it for only fifteen minutes for the first time this summer; or John and Gwen who drove up from Florida to volunteer—each of them has a unique relationship to the Preserve and it was a pleasure interacting with them on a daily basis. The volunteers at Silver Creek Preserve are a vital liaison for enabling effective public outreaches and overseeing maintenance. Living on the Preserve and working at the visitor center allows the volunteers to interact with and watch over Preserve grounds and activities in ways that Matt, Sam and I could not. We would often depend on their knowledge and observations to enhance our understanding of day-to-day activity at the Preserve. Without them, I would have had difficulty knowing important Preserve details, such as wildlife sightings and fishing reports. The volunteers also introduced me and the other interns to “regular” Preserve visitors, whether they were established guides with an incredible knowledge of the creek’s ecosystem, locals who enjoyed taking on the challenge of fishing Silver Creek throughout the summer, or out-of-staters whose main objective was to fish at one of the world’s premier fly-fishing locations. Most importantly, volunteers became our great friends and we shared stories and experiences with them throughout the summer. Although volunteers come and go (as do interns), they leave an indelible imprint on the Preserve.

Opportunities frequently presented themselves during work to meet fascinating people. One of my favorite mornings began by welcoming local Hemingway Elementary schoolteacher, Char Roth, and her first-graders on June 3. Sam started out by telling them about the Preserve and showing them some aquatic critters. They were incredibly well behaved until I showed them a sample from the creek with lots of leeches, at which point the mayhem began, and the students became overly-excited and then enthralled by their erratic movements. It was hard work managing 40 first graders but great to see such

enthusiasm from area youth about the Silver Creek Preserve and its inhabitants. The next day, June 4, Dayna Gross, the Preserve Manager and talented artist, led a watercolor and wildflower hike south of the Preserve into the Picabo Hills, during which I met interesting folks from the Idaho Conservation League and the Craters of the Moon National Monument—an otherworldly area in Idaho reminiscent of lunar terrain but home to abundant and diverse animal and plant life. With Dayna’s help during the hike, I learned about several of the more persistent invasive plant species afflicting the preserve. Spray control has become an integral intern duty throughout the summer for controlling weeds such as Canadian Thistle, Hound’s Tongue and White Top that are outcompeting native plant species. Loading up the four-gallon backpack sprayers with the herbicide, milestone, blue dye indicator and wearing our all-white protective “Ghostbuster” suits, we felt unstoppable until we hit seemingly endless patches of Canadian Thistle. On the Preserve’s spray day, we were relieved to have had a battalion of invasive species sprayers arrive from local groups, including the Blaine County CWMA, The Nature Conservancy, Chaney Creek Ranch, the Forest Service, and the Wood River Land Trust, armed with ATVs to help us manage the invasive species.

Towards the end of July, Dayna gave all of the interns the opportunity to spend several days in the Lemhi River Valley near Leadore, Idaho assisting Ron Troy, a field representative with The Nature Conservancy. We helped Ron with fencing work, weed spraying and driveway repair. During the first day, Ron gave us a tour of the valley and a summary of the pertinent water rights issues, including current legal battles. He also showed us stream restoration points critical to the health and preservation of Chinook salmon spawning. The next day, Ron introduced us to the art of building fences. We were responsible for bracing and creating wildlife crossings at various sections along a several-mile stretch of fencing. The bracing required sledging nails, six to seven inches long, at difficult angles, to create an X in the bracing section for support. For wildlife crossings, we lowered the height of the fence in a 10-foot section to enable deer, antelope and moose to cross but prohibiting cattle from crossing. After eight hours in the heat using sledgehammers, power drills and chainsaws, while getting feasted on by mosquitos, we completed our project. I feel honored to be among the first Silver Creek Preserve interns helping Ron in the Lemhi Valley and hope future interns enjoy it just as much.

This summer, Matt, Sam and I worked on several new projects for Silver Creek Preserve. Dayna, along with other TNC staff worked on improving GPS software use and with the help of Nathan Welch, a Nature Conservancy geographic information system (GIS) analyst, we gained a better understanding of the software and began using it for projects. We recorded specific points at the Preserve and also tracked our movement during surveys. The GPS data could easily be saved to the computer and put into the Dropbox application, allowing our recorded data to be accessible to all Nature Conservancy staff. We used the GPS for a wide range of projects on the Preserve, including recording birdhouse locations, recording temperature logger locations and recording photomonitoring points, as well as on the neighboring Stevenson family’s property. Sam and I also finished a nature trail sign project started by the interns last year, in which we edited plant, bird and animal descriptions of species on the Preserve and obtained illustrations and photographs to send to a design company for production. Towards the

end of summer, the Preserve hired professionals to finish installing a durable deck on the visitor center, begun the previous summer. I helped the builders, Scott and Tad, clean out the debris under the deck, which I happily found out afterwards consisted largely of mouse excrement.



Sullivan Lake in mid-August

Dayna requires interns at Silver Creek Preserve to complete a personal project during the course of the summer. I focused on the geology of several of Idaho's well-known mountain ranges and wrote a 16-page local hiking guidebook entitled, "Hiking the Mountains of Central Idaho." It features detailed descriptions of my hikes, personal observations and brief overviews of the mountain ranges, including photographs. I also helped Sam with part of her project, in which she compiled information about the different restoration projects occurring on or near the Preserve and analyzed the different restoration techniques, detailing their pros and cons. In particular, I helped her monitor a section of Silver Creek below the Preserve that was restored by John and Elaine French, who own the Silver Creek Preserve intern house where we three interns stayed.

Dayna has been working more closely with property owned by the Stevenson family this summer, which lies to the west and northwest of the Preserve and heavily influences several of the major tributaries feeding into Silver Creek. Stream monitoring along Patton Creek, a tributary running southeast through the Stevenson's property from Highway 20, included assessments at three different transects of 100 meters of stream section laid out by members of the United States Geological Survey (USGS) in early summer. Stream width, bank descriptions, sediment compositions and riparian vegetation samples were recorded every 10 meters for each transect, in addition to flow, pH, water temperature, conductivity and dissolved oxygen level measurements, which were taken mid-transect. These assessments were recorded in early summer and again in late summer. This process of stream monitoring varied from the monitoring on Silver Creek, which was done bi-monthly at five separate transects on the Preserve, with only one measurement point in each. For the Preserve, we collected monthly water samples to send to a water chemistry lab in Boise. Walking to the five transect points often took longer than the actual measuring, so Sam and I created a quicker way to access these locations by loading up all our gear in a canoe and paddling to the transects. It saved time and allowed us to paddle during a workday, which was a win-win.

An unusual experience occurred on August 4 when members of Idaho Fish and Game (IDFG) arrived at the preserve prepared to do their annual fish shocking on Silver Creek. Fish shocking involves temporarily stunning fish for counting and tagging to generate an age distribution for the general health of an aquatic ecosystem. The shocking on the Preserve is done at night, usually 9:00 pm to 3:00 am, to avoid disturbing anglers during the day. On this particular night, the shocking did not start until after 10:30 pm due to a treacherous band of severe thunderstorms that approached the Preserve. Sam and I sat in our truck with seven other IDFG members in their respective trucks waiting for Doug Megargle, the regional fisheries manager of IDFG, to make the call to start or postpone the shocking. Even with a blackened sky and a lightning show northward, Doug gave us the green light and we set up to start the process. Each of the experienced shockers had an assigned role, so Sam and I did whatever else was needed, which usually involved fish weighing, measuring and revival. The “assembly line” would include someone cutting the adipose fin and then injecting the fish with antibiotics measured to the weight of the fish. The next person would inject fluorescent markers under the fish’s jaw and above an eye. There would be an IDFG member measuring antibiotic dosages and someone else recording the species name, length and weight. The final IDFG member was responsible for trout revival, in which the larger trout were held softly but securely in the Creek until able to swim away under their own power. None of this would have been possible without the shock boat that traveled ahead with a rower and two netters collecting the fish. The process became quite efficient after participant roles were established. It was amazing being part of such a unique experience, in addition to handling dozens of 25 inch-plus trout under a frightening sky. We collected approximately 300 fish that night and returned to our intern house at 5:30 am. Let’s just say that Dayna was really nice to give us the next day off!



A storm north of preserve with a lightning strike

I must describe the 35th anniversary party for the Preserve, because it was a unique event, as anniversaries always are. On June 30, I was part of an incredible evening during which The Nature Conservancy staff of Idaho put together a celebration of Silver Creek Preserve’s 35th Anniversary. On my first day at Silver Creek on May 24, I had met Dayna Gross, the Preserve Manager, and the rest of The Nature Conservancy staff at their

headquarters in Hailey. After greetings and smiles, I sat in on a staff meeting where preparations for the anniversary event were discussed. It was only a month away. Even on my first day, I could sense the passion and excitement for this celebration event in all those associated with Silver Creek Preserve. This only heightened my enthusiasm for working at the Preserve. One month later, we were standing in the midst of a crowd of over 300 people, sharing stories and meeting new people who have a great fondness for the Preserve. During the course of the party I had the good fortune to meet Jack and Sarah Blumenstein for the first time. Not knowing they were present, my nerves shook slightly when Dayna touched my shoulder and whispered excitedly, “the Blumensteins are here!” Meeting Jack and Sarah became the best part of a very special night for me. Full of encouragement and funny stories, as well as being extremely kind, Jack and Sarah left me in a state of eager anticipation for the rest of the summer.

What makes Silver Creek Preserve an incredible place is not only its unique ecosystem and biological diversity, but also the many individuals who have in some way contributed to its use and preservation. These include the visitors who find time to enjoy the innumerable activities available at Silver Creek; the anglers who respect the challenge of fishing there; the Idaho Nature Conservancy staff that works tirelessly to protect Silver Creek Preserve and the other Conservancy habitats in Idaho; the volunteers who dedicate vast amounts of time as resources for the Preserve; and of course those who support the Preserve by making monetary contributions. I would like to thank my fellow interns, Matt Hough and Sam Engel, for their great friendship throughout all our adventures this summer and for being such enthusiastic, hardworking and creative co-workers. I offer my profound thanks and appreciation to Dayna Gross for her friendship and her inspirational leadership at Silver Creek Preserve. She articulated and implemented short and long-term goals for the Preserve and for her interns clearly and purposefully, and I count her as an important role model.



The three interns: (from left) Sam, Matt, Collin.



My last picture of the summer!

Finally, I would like to thank Jack and Sarah Blumenstein for establishing this wonderful internship in the memory of their son, Charlie Blumenstein. Not only did my experience as an intern exceed my expectations, it made me even more interested in studying the environment and it enhanced my appreciation of the importance of environmental stewardship. As I drove out of the Preserve, nearing Highway 20 for the last time this summer, I thought about the unique opportunity Jack and Sarah have given Blumenstein interns from Colorado College to become a part of Silver Creek Preserve's extraordinary history and community. After my summer at the Preserve, I feel more capable than ever of following in Charlie Blumenstein's footsteps as I make my way toward a professional career that channels my tremendous passion for the environment and conservation. I will always remember Silver Creek Preserve and the community that makes it so special.