



MONTANA

Montana Department of Natural Resources & Conservation

The Natural Areas Conservancy (NAC) is a non-profit organization with a mission to promote and ensure healthy forested natural areas in U.S. cities by advancing science, management, partnerships, and communications within and across cities. Centered in New York City, the NAC extended their reach nationally by conducting a survey of natural area management and associated issues.¹ Working with 12 cities selected from this group, they encouraged focus on natural areas management and provided a process to write case studies of lessons learned. These were presented at an in-person meeting in October 2019 and published in the journal *Cities and the Environment*.² Billings, MT was selected as one of the participating cities as a result of their work on effectively restoring and managing Riverfront Park and increased collaboration with area educational institutions on account of this program.

One of the premises upon which the Forests in Cities initiative rests is having easy access to nature while living in an urban setting in order to ease stressors that derive from urban living. Accessible natural areas provide a place to unwind, reflect, and experience the restorative benefits nature has been shown to provide.³ While not asking for “proof” that natural areas improve the human psyche in stressful situations, the COVID-19 pandemic provided exactly that. An informal poll of urban foresters across Montana’s cities all reported significantly increased natural area use, especially throughout the period of the pandemic during which Montanans, except for essential workers, were directed to stay at home. It was also noted that this increase in use of natural areas resulted in more people exploring spaces in their

immediate outdoors, which resulted in greater awareness of urban and community forestry systems.

Billings has a long history of having publicly owned natural areas within city limits but a relatively short history of actively managing them. The recently expanded management creates more opportunities for recreation and multiple-use efforts. Several of Billings’ natural areas are well-known as birding hot spots that attract birders from across the nation. Some are ideal for mountain biking, running, hiking, dog walking, and one was even set up as an artist’s promontory. The emerging natural areas management program has limited funding and relies primarily on volunteer help to sustain and restore natural area conditions. COVID-19 has temporarily put a damper on both,

even while proving that accessible nature is important. The natural areas program will come back with a new and improved normal, when recovery comes.

¹Pregitzer et al. 2019. Untapped common ground: The care of forested natural areas in American cities. Natural Areas Conservancy. NY, NY. 46 p.

²<https://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/cate/vol13/iss1/>

³ U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service. 2018. Urban nature for human health and well-being: A research summary for communicating the health benefits of urban trees and green space. FS-1096. Washington, DC. 24 p.



1. View of west Billings from Phipps Park Natural Area, Billings, MT. Photo Credit: Steve McConnell. **2.** Pond and wetland area, Riverfront Park, Billings, MT. Photo Credit: Steve McConnell. **3.** Phipps Park Natural Area trail at sunset, Billings, MT. Photo Credit: Steve McConnell. **4.** Billings team at Forests and Cities event in New York City (Pictured from L to R: Steve McConnell, Billings City Forester; Megan Poulette, Rocky Mountain College; Heather Bilden, Montana Audubon Center.) Photo Credit: Sophie Plitt.

