

Divide Camp, Memories boost access for disabled

By Rocky Wilson

Wallowa County Chieftain

Two relatively new Wallowa County-based nonprofit groups, one dedicated to disabled veterans and the second to disabled children and adults, already are expanding the services they have to offer. Qualifying for nonprofit status greatly expands access to potential grant opportunities, and the driving forces between Divide Camp and Creating Memories are reaping rewards from grant applications already submitted and approved, and not bashful about seeking more.

For Divide Camp, a quiet, secluded haven 20 miles east of Joseph where disabled veterans can attempt to regroup from the many negative consequences of war, the latest grant-secured acquisition is a \$15,000 Action TrackChair designed to allow veterans with limited or no mobility to travel unescorted through the woods.

The newest grant-propelled effort underway with Creating Memories – which short weeks back signed a long-term lease of 90 acres at Wallowa Lake from the Boy Scouts of America – would place a wheelchair accessible trail around Marr Pond. The pond, in Enterprise, is a popular, frequently fish-stocked Wildlife Refuge owned by the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife.

Julie Wheeler, who launched Divide Camp less than two years ago after being bequeathed an abandoned family-owned elk camp with cabins, expresses excitement about that organization's latest acquisition, realized courtesy of a grant from the National Rifle Society Foundation.

Equipped with a wide track, like footwear for a tiny dozer, the Action Track-Chair that arrived last week at Divide Camp has some limitations but will equate to freedom for future disabled veterans who visit that remote Wallowa County site.

Quadriplegics and other disabled veterans can be positioned and strapped into the device, then turned loose to roam, hunt, and/or fish near the camp utilizing specially designed attachments for guns, sights, and even fishing gear.

Testimonials in support of the slow, steady overland vehicle designed after 2008 by an entrepreneur from Marshall, Mont. – who designed and built the prototype for his wheelchair-bound son – have been overwhelmingly positive. Says one quadriplegic from Alaska, “This freedom is something I have been dreaming about since my injury. I need help getting in, but then I’m free to choose my own path. This Action TrackChair has greatly improved my attitude for life.”

Wheeler says the device is fueled by two AGM-sealed wheelchair batteries that periodically will be re-powered by a marine battery charger. The Action TrackChair can run for about seven miles on one charge and operates at speeds less than 4 mph.

In the future, once grantsought funding is secured to construct an accessible vault toilet and possibly a yurt is erected to meet disabled-accessible lodging needs, quadriplegics will be welcome at Divide Camp and, along with more mobile vets with disabilities, have access the new track chair as well.

A \$5,000 grant from the Oregon Wildlife Heritage Foundation is expected to fund half of the 1,600-foot wheelchair trail around Marr Pond. That trail will be placed on top of the existing trail, says the author of Creating Memories, Ken Coerson. He says a fabric that allows water to pass through will provide an underlay for fine, compacted gravel over which wheelchairs easily can navigate.

To be launched in September, the first half of that project that eventually will boast a path four feet wide around the entire pond plus two stability platforms allowing handicapped fishers safely to fish from water's edge, is targeted for completion prior to Free Fishing Day in 2015. Designing the project and doing the work is Eastern Oregon Landscaping LLC. Coerson is optimistic that the Oregon Wildlife Heritage Foundation or other groups that have expressed interest in the Marr Pond effort will deliver the extra \$5,000 needed to complete the second half of the trail. Coerson also is exploring the possibility of making privately owned Kinney Lake southeast of Joseph, and an ODFWstocked pond or two near Wallowa, handicap-accessible as well.