# Virtual tracking

Armchair hunters will find it easier than ever to track critters in Montana with a new state Web site.

The Montana Natural Heritage Program's new "Tracker" site allows people to search for reports of bird, mammal, reptile and amphibian sightings throughout the state, plus record their own observations. A link to the Montana Field Guides provides detailed descriptions including color photos, breeding dates and recordings of many of the wild creatures.

"This is the first time people have direct access to our Heritage database," noted Sue Crispin, director of the Natural Heritage Program, a partnership between the Montana State Library and the University of Montana. "In the past, we've had quite a lot of data, but to get access to it folks had to send us a data request. They couldn't browse through it like they can today from their home or office."

In a conference room in the basement of Helena's State Library building, Crispin and Allan Cox, the systems and services manager, are excited to explain how the new interactive site works.

Crispin scrolls down the mammal category to gray wolves, and clicks on the link. A map pops up, with cross-hatched areas showing where wolves have been observed in Montana.

These maps draw on the Natural Heritage Program databases, which contain nearly one million records of species observations, as well as aerial photos and special land designations for the entire state.

Crispin clicks on a green bar at the bottom of the screen, which brings up a chart showing 529 instances that canis lupus was sighted, including when and where, plus a section for comments. Some of the data goes back to the 1860.

"You can learn that the Spotted Dog Pack was recorded here in 2006 and the Halfway Pack was found here in 2005, and so on," Crispin said, pointing to a few of the more recent reports. "This can be helpful for wildlife management, and land resource management, among other things."

Cox adds that you can set numerous filters to narrow the information.

"If you only want to see gray wolves recorded since 2000, you can do that too," Cox said. "It takes a little patience to work your way around, but we've built in a multitude of paths and hope

everyone will find their way through it.

"The trick is how do you build a tool powerful enough to allow people to ask detailed questions but still be easy to use?"

He's hoping that question will be answered through the feedback they've received since launching the site earlier this year. Already, Cox said they've got some great comments and are working on implementing some of those ideas.

Some of the user feedback is a little more complicated, though. The programs have to be viewed through Microsoft Internet Explorer, because that's the state's program. Some of the programs need special software to be downloaded, and some of the links are broken.

"We heard from a lot of people who want to access this on their (MacIntosh) or on Firefox," Cox said. "The programmer who wrote this -- Dave Ratz -- has done a heck of a job to bring it where it is. Our challenge, now that it's out there and working, is to listen to the comments and keep it moving so it meets people's needs."

Crispin said she hopes this will be a place where people go not just to learn where critters are located, but also to record their own sightings. She envisions school teachers taking a day or a week every year to have students look for birds, or other creatures, then being able to compare from year to year what they've observed.

"I think it has tremendous value as a teaching tool, and want to work with folks at OPI (the Office of Public Instruction) to develop a curriculum," Crispin said. "This could be a great project for students."

http://mtnhp.org" target=_"blank">Click here to visit the Natural Heritage Tracker and Field Guides.

Reporter Eve Byron: 447-4076 or eve.byron@helenair.com