



## Spotlight on a Forest Steward/Tree Farmer

Mike and Jody Christianson

Thanks to Mike Christianson for this submission

Mike and Jody Christianson reside on 75 acres of forest in the foothills of the Bridger Mountains outside Bozeman. They have been there since the '90s. They were particularly attracted to the forest land because it was abundant with nature, and offered the ability to walk out the back door and hike to the National Forest in complete solitude.

Their serious forest work started when Mike's mind continually turned to forest fires when he drove up the private road to the residence, past the hazardous fuels. At first their sole goal was to remove all hazardous fuels to prevent forest fires and free Mike's mind. The hazardous fuel removal

Bozeman Forest Stewardship Workshop inventory training at the Christianson's family Forest.



resulted in an astounding transformation of the forest floor due to sun and moisture reaching the floor. The shrubs, natural grasses, and seedlings flourished (plus the weeds, but not to worry).

This led Mike to ask for advice from a number of professional foresters, including Curt Tesmer who is a Service Forester retired from the DNRC. In 2007, one forester said “You need to attend an MSU Forest Stewardship workshop.” Without further research or question, Mike and Jody enrolled in the next MSU Extension Forestry Forest Stewardship workshop. The only difficulty was that the workshop was in Heron, a seven hour drive for Mike and Jody. They attended the workshop anyway, and were overjoyed with the knowledge they received, so much so that they attended a second workshop in 2008 (only a ten mile drive to Bozeman).

Dennis Davaz, RY Timber Forester, consulting with Mike about logging.



They have a certified Forest Stewardship and Tree Farm plan which includes, in this order:

1. Removal of hazardous fuels from the floor;
2. Felling all dead trees and trimming shrubs and lower branches with pole saws (to a height of 20' or so);
3. Selective thinning;
4. Weed management, including seeding bare spots with a native grass seed mix;
5. Pocket gopher management (not a part of the certification);
6. Aerial spraying for spruce budworm until the forest is sufficiently thinned to survive without outside assistance.

They have completed about 45 acres. The result is breathtaking. Although the cleaned and thinned areas first appeared Spartan, the forest regained so much growth (because of sunlight on the floor and precious precipitation getting in to the soil rather than into the dead wood) that the wildlife increased within a year or two. They have advanced over the years to the point of using a Bobcat skid steer with several grapples, a winch imported from Finland, a wood chipper, and half a dozen chain saws. With all these tools, Mike reminds himself he is not yet in heaven.

Mike and Jody are members of the Montana Forest Stewardship Steering Committee (MFSSC), Tree Farm, and Montana Forest Owners Association (MFOA).

Each Christmas they hike from their back door to the National Forest to cut a Christmas tree, secure it in a tarp, and drag it (both up and down hills) to the house. Mike is in front towing, and Jody is in the rear to prevent the tree from running amok (that means running into Mike). One year just after Mike cut the tree and it was on the tarp, a strong gust of wind blew the tree over pushing Jody to the ground and completely covering her to the point that Mike was wondering where Jody went. In retribution for Micheal's laughter after find-ing her, Mike had to fetch the tree alone the next year. -

Mike sorts pine beetle killed logs with advice from Dennis Davaz.



Mike and Jody believe that the only means for a fir or pine forest to resist a multitude of predators is to be healthy. A forest cannot be healthy without management, which includes thinning. One can lose a home and replace it in short order. One cannot lose a forest and replace it in one, two, or three lifetimes!

Note from MSU Extension Forestry: Five Forest Stewardship workshops are offered annually, see the calendar at [www.msuextension.org/forestry](http://www.msuextension.org/forestry) All family forest owners are encouraged to attend as well as Tree Farmers and second/third generation Forest Stewards and repeat attendees.

Mike uses the Bobcat with attached Farmi winch to move a very large, naturally fallen, Douglas fir tree.

