

Red Lodge Hiking Club attracts retirees with passion for outdoors

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Wanda Kennicott is enjoying the chance at a new life now that she's retired.

"I'm young enough to where there's another life out there," said Kennicott, 62, a former embassy officer who worked in nine countries. "Before I'd look at a paper and see what did I miss this week. Now I read it to see what can I do this week."

Part of how Kennicott fills her summer days is by taking weekly hiking outings with the Red Lodge Hiking Club. She's in good company. Most of the club's members are female retirees. And they all list pretty much the same reasons for being a part of the club: meeting people with like interests, staying fit, enjoying the outdoors and social time with friends.

Members repeatedly told the same story as an example of the club's attitude towards aging and its limitations - or lack of them.

In celebration of her 80th birthday six years ago, the club's oldest member, Ruth Scholler, did a five-day, 36-mile hike with members of the club.

She returned home on the fifth night and threw herself a barn party with a live band and "jitterbugged the night away."

Sue Glidden, 58, said she felt a great loss when she and her husband sold their general store in Cooke City and moved to Red Lodge, but that retirement has given her freedom from what was always a hectic workweek.

"I'm lucky to have the chance to enjoy a new and different life," she said, adding the club gave her a chance to pursue interests in flowers, plants and outdoor recreation - things she didn't have as much time for before.

Lucille Olds, 72, has been in the club the longest, with 42 years of hiking with the group under her boots. She said she thinks the club began just a few years before she joined.

"My friend kept pestering me to join, but they hiked on Wednesdays and that was press day," said Olds, who with her husband ran the Carbon County News, Red Lodge's weekly newspaper.

When the group changed its hiking days to Thursdays, Olds was able to join.

The club, which has about 50 active members, still hikes every Thursday, often with two hiking options of varying difficulty, usually in the Red Lodge area.

Several members dubbed Marlene Tetrault, 70, the "most fit" of the club. Tetrault laughed at their boasts that she ran 5 miles before hikes and would often play tennis after, but the former health and gym teacher often led the way and pushed the pace - tanned and taut arms pumping - on a recent hike along Commissary Ridge in the Pryor Mountains.

Tetrault said she enjoyed the variety of experiences each member brought to the group, with prior careers including such things as airplane engineer, real estate agent, general store owner and teacher.

Marge Strum, 72, said each member of the group also brings knowledge of different plants, animals and trails, which broadens the group's hiking area and learning.

Conversations on the Commissary Ridge hike reflected the varied interests and backgrounds, focusing on plant identification but also varying to include recipes for sangria - a mixture of red wine, brandy and fruit.

Strum said the club also tries to take its active attitudes into the community by doing cleanup on area trails, picking up trash along a section of highway and helping with community volunteer efforts such as the recent playground construction in Red Lodge.

Sixteen women took part in the Commissary Ridge hike, but they said there were a few "brave men" who are also part of the main group.

Members participate in anywhere from one hike a year to a hike every week, Strum said. During the more popular summer months, Strum said there are two hikes each week that usually fill. A group leader is assigned to each week's scheduled hike and takes calls to reserve spots on the hike and arrange travel.

Hikes are categorized as easy, moderate, strenuous or very strenuous and range from less than 10 miles with less than 500 feet of elevation gain to more than 14 miles or 3,000 feet of elevation change.

During the winter, year-long residents of the area continue to snowshoe, cross-country ski and hike, depending on the weather.

People interested in participating can contact Marge Strum at 446-2514 or estrum@vcn.com.

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