

Shuttle Columbia Recovery

Marvin Carpenter, Assistant Fire Mgt. Officer

On a cold winter day last February the space shuttle Columbia tumbled to earth. As we watched this event unfold we did not anticipate how it would affect Helena National Forest employees.

The Columbia was the nation's first shuttle to orbit earth and return safely. It had made 27 successful trips before its 28th launch on January 16, 2003. It was the 113th shuttle flight overall. This was the second to end tragically in the loss of a shuttle and its crew. The tragic ending to Columbia began on January 16 during launch. It was later determined that 81.7 seconds into launch a piece of insulation foam came loose from a fuel tank. As it fell it struck the leading edge of the left wing. This strike caused a breach to the wing. This breach was of a size that allowed

superheated air to penetrate into the wing upon re-entry to earth's atmosphere. As Columbia raced through the skies over California pieces of the shuttle were seen coming off. The shuttle began to tumble and break apart over Texas. Then 16 minutes from touch down at Kennedy Space Center the shuttle Columbia experienced total breakup and the deaths of the seven crew members.

Shortly after the accident the Helena National Forest was asked to assist with the recovery efforts underway in Texas. First to respond were two 20-person crews. From that point until late April the Forest continued to support the recovery effort with additional supervisory personnel. The Helena National Forest ended up sending a total of 86 people to help with the recovery. Many



Helena Forest employees "on the grid" in Texas.

expressed a deep sense of honor and privilege to be able to assist in the effort.

The primary search area covered 2.3 million acres of Texas and Louisiana. Ultimately, 84,000 pieces of the Columbia were recovered, about 38% of the shuttle. Over 25,000 people from 270 organizations took part in the recovery, expending 1.5 million person hours during the search.

As a result of the recovery effort, NASA was able to determine the cause of the accident. After correcting the problems, the shuttle fleet is planned to return to space March 2005. To those who participated in the actual recovery effort and to those who stayed behind and took care of business, we very much appreciate another job done well!

School Is Out—Outside, That Is

Samsara Chapman, Helena Forest Foundation

The Helena Snowschool is an unforgettable winter field trip that combines real science with hands-on learning. Bundled up and fitted with snowshoes, kids and adults ventured out into the winter wildlands to discover all the living creatures under and on top of the snow.

The Helena Forest Foundation (HFF) received a grant from the Montana Wilderness Association (MWA) for 50 pairs of snowshoes to fit all ages and sizes. This partnership has brought together two local non-profit organizations to share a common goal: a desire to expose all ages to the fun and wonder of their winter environment. Helena Snow School sites will include the Helena National Forest, regional parks, and local open spaces.

HFF is working with after-school programs, home schoolers, boy scouts and girl scouts, and any group interested in offering field trips focused on winter ecology. Foundation and MWA employees and volunteers are providing support and logistics to the Helena Snowschool, getting it up and running and developing an approved science curriculum for use out on the snow.

While participants are out on snowshoes they will be identifying wildlife tracks, measuring snow depth, examining snow-flakes and -crystals, and discovering how animals can make it through harsh Montana winters. Guided by Snowschool leaders, students will experience real-life ecology lessons. As the program develops, we will continue to work with

students to review what they have learned and to allow for participation in follow-up projects.

If you would like more information about the Helena Snowschool or if you would like to find out about volunteering opportunities, please contact the Helena Forest Foundation at 406-449-5201 ext. 270 or ext. 267.



A young winter recreationist gets a little help with her bindings.