

CLEARING A PATH

— for summer exploration —



MONICA GOKEY / Big Timber Pioneer

U.S. Forest Service trail crew members Wes Dudley and Kat Hickman work alongside Absaroka-Beartooth Wilderness Foundation volunteers Karen Holcomb and David Callenbach on a trail maintenance project up the Passage Creek trail in the Yellowstone Ranger District. The event was organized for National Trails Day on June 1.

Trail crews, hikers prepare for spike in outdoor traffic

By Monica Gokey
Pioneer Staff Writer

As the days get warmer and the snow starts to melt, hikers are venturing out of their winter stupor, drawn to the three local mountain ranges that offer countless trails to explore in south-central Montana.

The Yellowstone Ranger District trail crew maintains about 800 miles of trails in the Gallatin National Forest — from the Crazies to the Absaroka-Beartooths.

It's a lot of terrain for the six person trail crew and their chief. There used to be two trail crews in the area, one in Livingston and one in Big Timber, but the two crews merged in 2009, leaving the whole trail network to one team.

National Trails Day

At the Passage Creek trailhead south of Livingston, 10 volunteers split into two groups, each assigned to work under two U.S. Forest Service trail crew members.

The first Saturday in June is National Trails Day, and the local manifestation of the event was a trail maintenance day organized jointly by the Absaroka-Beartooth Wilderness Foundation and the Forest Service's Yellowstone Ranger District.

Avid hikers rendered themselves into able-bodied volunteers, ready to pitch in time and sweat — a labor of love — for the trails they enjoy in their free time.

Volunteers and Forest Service crew members alike were dressed in work boots, leather work gloves and hard hats. The hard hats are a Forest Service policy

for crews working in burn areas like Passage Creek; and they're also probably a small comfort to the seasoned trail crew members who handed out pick-axes one by one to each volunteer. Only about half of the volunteers had ever done any trail maintenance before.

Kat Hickman was in charge of one team. She's the leader of the Yellowstone Ranger District's trail crew, a group numbering six in total. Of Hickman's team, five of the six are Forest Service employees; and one is a summer intern provided by the ABWF.

At five-foot-three, Hickman was the smallest person in her group. But she loaded herself with a crosscut saw about as tall as she is, an axe and a heavy-looking pack full of essentials: a radio, bear mace, snacks and water.

Her volunteers followed her into the woods single-file, minding the ends of their pick-axes for those marching close behind.

Hickman was initially reticent to share that she first learned about summer trail crews through the Nickelodeon channel. When she got the chance to work on a trail crew the summer out of high school, she jumped at the chance. Sixteen years later, she said she's still loving it.

"You're all working super-hard, but it's also a lot of fun," Hickman said.

The lifestyle of a seasonal trail crew worker has a gypsy ring to it — many trail crew members have worked out of several different ranger stations, and they have a unique opportunity to intimately know the forest from the inside out.

Her crew generally heads out for eight

day stretches at a time. And what do they do? They clear trail, day in, day out — often in the middle of nowhere. When daylight wanes, they camp out under the stars. Then they get up and do it all over again.

Once trail maintenance season kicks up they'll be servicing high-traffic trails as well as burn areas, which tend to have no shortage of fallen trees across trails. The season usually runs from mid-June through mid-September.

Hickman guessed they're out on Passage Creek three to four times a season. Other highly serviced trails in their territory are the Big Timber trail in the Crazies and the Green Mountain Trail up the Boulder River.

Because much of the terrain they service is wilderness — where the use of motorized and mechanized equipment is forbidden — the trail crews generally don't use chain-saws or other fuel-powered equipment, which means a lot of the grunt work comes down to old-fashioned human power.

And Hickman is right about the work being hard.

Volunteers chipping in

David Callenbach manned one end of a crosscut saw. He and a partner sawed back and forth, back and forth — slowly running their blade further into the center of a young lodgepole pine just over a foot in diameter.

The tree was needed elsewhere on the trail; it'll be used to stabilize an eroding switchback on a footpath leading to Passage Creek Falls.

"This is the part of my job I love the most, being out here and working on these projects," Callenbach said.

Callenbach is the executive director of the Absaroka-Beartooth Wilderness Foundation, a group based out of Red Lodge aimed at providing stewardship in the Absaroka-Beartooth Wilderness.

They work closely with the Forest Service, but this is the group's first time participating in National Trails Day, an annual event sponsored by the American Hiking Society.

"I think we'll definitely make this a yearly event," Callenbach said. "It's such a great excuse to get people out on the trails."

For many of the volunteers, it's their first hike of the season.

While trail maintenance is ABWF's foremost activity, Callenbach said, the group also organizes projects in weed management, scientific monitoring and wilderness education.

The non-profit was set-up in 2007 and many of ABWF's board members are retired Forest Service and National Parks personnel.

"They foresaw a day when the Forest Service would need outside work and resources to get things done," Callenbach said.

Hickman said volunteers have played an increasingly important role in how well her crew can service all 800 miles of their trail network.

"Eight hundred miles of trail isn't feasible with six people," she said.

And while the Forest Service is still fairly new to this model of tapping into community groups to share its workload, Hickman expects it's a growing trend.

Job well done

Once Callenbach's tree is safely felled and further cut into two 10-12 foot pieces, teams of two skinned the bark off the tree trunk.

Hickman said trees without their bark tend to resist rot longer, which is what they're aiming for.

The smaller logs were portaged down to an eroded switchback with the muscle power of four to five volunteers apiece.

At one particularly eroded switchback, volunteers dug a saddle for each log along the edge of where the trail was succumbing to gravity. The footpath was extremely narrow in some places due to erosion. Hickman also suspected some trail users may have

ignored the 'no stock' signs.

Each log was padded with rocks to help prevent soil from slipping downhill.

And the finishing touch? While everyone was setting the logs and rocks into place, Hickman's colleague was shaping a number of wooden stakes, which were hammered perpendicular into the ground on the downhill side of the logs to prevent the new trail stabilizers from creeping downhill over time.

What was once a scree-like trail became a three-foot wide pathway for foot traffic.

Sweaty volunteers leaned on their pick-axes and quietly admired their handiwork.

It was easily the magnum opus of the day, and passing hikers uttered comments of gratitude and admiration at the improved switchback.

Barring severe weather events, Hickman guessed the newly supported switchback could last as long as 20 years.

After the two mile hike back to the trailhead, the two volunteer groups reunited over a cooler of blue Gatorade that materialized from Callenbach's Subaru. The teams swapped tales of thick logs they hewed through, experiences with the crosscut saw and a bull moose sighting.

Hickman gave everyone a run-down of the day's totals: about 70 fallen trees cleared, serviced water tracts to prevent puddle accumulation on the trails and two new switchbacks.

She extended a thank you to everyone who pitched in, telling them they accomplished today what it would take a trail crew a couple of days to do; their work was very much appreciated.

"Unless you've done it before, it's hard to wrap your head around what goes into maintaining a trail - getting folks involved is one way we'll keep trying to make an impact," Callenbach said.

Sweet Grass hikers

The trails serviced by the Yellowstone crew are arteries that connect people to the wild spaces they cherish. Big Timber resident Eunice Kirkpatrick is one of those who fell in love with the area's trail network. She organizes a group called the Sweet Grass Hikers, which she helped start in 2009 as a way to meet more hikers in the community.

"I guess I'd always just looked up at the mountains and I knew there were trails there, but I didn't have anybody to hike with," Kirkpatrick explained. She started

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— David Callenbach, AB Wilderness Foundation Director

talking with some of the Forest Service trail crews to learn about what trails were nearby and began organizing trips from there.

On the Sweet Grass Hikers' summer agenda are several hikes that see regular maintenance by the Yellowstone Ranger District's trail crew: West Boulder Meadows trail, Elephanthead Mountain trail and Big Timber Creek from Half Moon Campground to Twin Lakes - a favorite of Kirkpatrick's.



Yellowstone trail crew leader Kat Hickman shows volunteers a map of where the group would hike approximately two miles into the forest to service the footpath leading down to Passage Creek Falls, where an eroded switchback needed maintenance.

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The Sweet Grass Hikers meet every other Friday at the Grand Hotel to carpool and hike together at one of the regions many day hikes.

"We meet at 8 a.m. and try to get to most of our trailheads by 9 or a little after," Kirkpatrick said. "Most of the hikes we try to keep fairly short, so we can walk two to three hours and have lunch, and then make it back by mid-afternoon."

Turnout varies week to week, but Kirkpatrick said they usually have a core group of four to five hikers who participate regularly, with some drifters in and out of their group.

Some highlights for Kirkpatrick are getting to see all the famous flora and fauna of the Rockies: alpine wildflowers and wildlife like bighorn sheep and bears. It's also a family affair for Kirkpatrick,

who remembers hiking with her father at a young age. What started with a father-daughter activity has evolved into a life-long passion.

Kirkpatrick said hiking is about more than the wildlife and spectacular mountain scenery. For her, it's the exercise, the love of nature and the camaraderie that keep her coming back to Sweet Grass County's bountiful hiking trails.