

INTO THE WOODS

By Mackenzie Reiss

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Fifty miles south of Big Timber lies the heart of the Absaroka-Beartooth Wilderness — an expanse of beautifully rugged country nearly 1 million acres strong.

This heavily forested land spans between Yellowstone National Park and northern Wyoming; dotted with mountain lakes and sweeping plateaus. The AB Wilderness, as it is colloquially known, is also home to more than 700 miles of trails. But one trail, in particular was the focus of a five-day work project earlier this month.

The East Fork Trail, No. 27, winds up a hillside from the Box Canyon Guard Station to Lake Plateau — a popular hiking destination. However, a rotting bridge and multiple water bars on the trail were in desperate need of repair. To expedite the job, the Absaroka Beartooth Wilderness Foundation (ABWF) stepped up to the plate, recruiting a band of volunteers to assist U.S. Forest Service trail crews from Aug. 13 to Aug. 17.

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The sun was approaching its peak in the sky by the time the last volunteer arrived at Box Canyon Guard Station. The small, one-room cabin sat just 20 yards from a nearby creek and would serve as the group's base camp for the coming days.

ABWF intern KJ Jenkins made her way down to the rocky shoreline, filter bag in hand. When the water was just a few inches from the brim, she pulled it from the flow, folded the lip of the bag over and lugged it back to the cabin. They would be getting their water from the creek each morning and afternoon, letting it drip through the filtration system into plastic jugs below.

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MACKENZIE REISS / Big Timber Pioneer
Walt Hajducki, of Woodberry, Connecticut, chops a groove into a fallen tree so it will lock up with another tree to form a small bridge known as a puncheon.

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Top: Terry Perkins (center) uses a crosscut saw to low-stump a tree with help from Jeremy Nicholson while Sue Maves waits to rotate in. Middle: U.S. Forest Service Trails and Wilderness Coordinator Kat Barker checks the levelness of logs during bridge construction. Bottom: Back row: David Kallenbach, Kat Barker, Terry Perkins, Walk Hajducki, Sue Maves, Jim Swartz. Front row: KJ Jenkins and Jeremy Nicholson.



The next five days would be about a simpler kind of life — one bereft of cell phones and modern niceties — dictated by the course of the sun and the intensity of the weather.

The seven volunteers, having finished setting up their tents in an adjacent meadow, assembled on the cabin porch.

They were a menagerie of characters from a variety of backgrounds; young and old, city-raised and country-proud. Among them was Jim Swartz, a former federal prosecutor; Sue Maves, a hardware store owner on the cusp of retirement, and Walt Hajducki, a Connecticut native who drove the 34 hours out to Montana. As varied as their pasts were, each one shared a love for the outdoors and the altruism to invest themselves in caring for it.

The volunteers, along with Kat Barker of the Forest Service and David Kallenbach Executive Director of ABWF, started up the East Fork Trail. Two and a half miles later, they reached their stopping point. Before them lay the shell of a puncheon — a log bridge typically constructed over a shallow waterway. Over the next few days, it would be their task to remove the remaining logs from the trail-side and replace them with new ones. They would strip bark from trees roughly 1-foot in diameter and more than a dozen feet long. They would fell lodge poles from the surrounding woods and carry them, three people to a tree, back to the work site. They would sweat and saw and chisel and ax. At the day's end they would pick up their tools and walk, sore muscles and all, back to camp where, at last, they could shed their pack and relish in the satisfaction of their accomplishments.

"It's physically rewarding in a beautiful place — it doesn't get better than that," volunteer Walt Hajducki said while hiking back to camp. "You get your exercise and the scenery is like this," he explained, gesturing to heavily wooded forest before him. Hajducki learned about the multi-day ABWF project online and has participated in multiple trips with the foundation.

First-time ABWF volunteer Sue Maves connected with the organization via social media. Maves said she enjoys working outside and, most especially, in the company of people who "are working hard to improve the world."

"It's completely different from my work situation, and it's away from the telephones ... and nature — it just brings you back to the earth and closer to the creator," Maves said. "I think with the aging population like me, if we don't contribute in our retirement, then there will be a lot of things that aren't done."

Kallenbach said volunteering in the wilderness is not only a rewarding experience for those involved, it also helps the Forest Service keep up with maintenance in light of budgetary shortfalls. In the past decade, funding for woodland and water maintenance in national forests has been slashed by 24 percent, according to a USFS report issued early August this year.

"When congress gets stingy, they pick on the agencies that manage our public lands because they sort of see it as a luxury that not everybody goes out and recreates on public lands," Kallenbach said. "With small budgets (the Forest Service is) forced to fill the ranks any way they can. I supplement that essentially (with volunteers) — it's a small thing at this point in time."

This is the fourth year the foundation conducted field projects with five multi-day and five single-day trips set for this year, he said. Kallenbach said making the trips affordable is very important to him. For the East Fork Trail project, ABWF requested a "fully refundable" \$50 deposit, which was returned to the volunteers after the completion of service.

"We provide food and all that kind of thing just to make it as easy as possible for people to say yes to coming out and volunteering on public lands," he said. "This is a great way for people to donate — not necessarily financially — but of themselves, and they get an experience to boot: they meet people, they get to see new places, and I think they go away feeling pretty satisfied. They also go away with the sense that, 'wow a lot of work goes into these trails.'"

Kat Barker, a trails and wilderness coordinator for the Yellowstone Ranger District, said the help provided by



ABWF volunteers helped improve wilderness access and trail conditions. Barker explained that with more than 700 miles of trails, her nine-person trail crew can barely keep up with clearing trees from the trails, let alone complete more complex ventures.

Barker said the region also suffered multiple, severe fires during her tenure, which elevate the workload for trail crews. In some instances, the Forest Service will receive supplementary federal dollars, but those monies are only applicable to fire-related work. While trail crews are diverted to post-fire clean-up, ordinary tasks get pushed to the back-burner, further crippling their ability to complete large-scale projects.

"We're just scrambling to keep up with clearing. We haven't, in the last 10 years, even had time to deal with these deferred maintenance projects, like dealing with a bridge that's falling apart or

reinstalling water bars that have been rotted out," Barker said. "Every time I hike this trail I think, 'Oh my gosh, this trail needs work.'"

Each winter, the ABWF consults with Forest Service employees from three different districts to identify prospective projects for the coming summer. Barker said partnering with the foundation made projects, like the East Fork Trail repairs, possible that would otherwise not have been.

"They do work behind the scenes so much that not many people know what the Forest Service does. That's one of the reasons why we try to engage people on their behalf to raise awareness," Kallenbach said. "There's not as many people sticking up for public lands or sticking up for wilderness so it's gotten defunded — that's what kind of forces organizations like ours into existence, to stick up for something that doesn't really have a voice."