

CLEARING THE WAY

Volunteers roll up their sleeves to repair, unclog, and construct trails across Montana.

BY PAUL QUENEAU

Well before dawn on September 2 this year, an army of bowhunters will hit the trails in search of deer and elk for opening day of archery season. That surge will ebb and flow until the general rifle season ends 30 minutes after sundown the Sunday after Thanksgiving.

Few hunters following those thousands of miles of trails through Montana's national forests and other public lands will have any idea who keeps the routes clear—the people who hump chainsaws or two-person cross-cuts deep into the backcountry to take apart felled trees; wield Pulaskis to carve new routes where old ones have washed away; haul boulders to shore up sloughing corners; or clean out erosion chutes so rain and snow runoff doesn't turn trails into canyons.

They might be surprised to learn that it's mostly done by volunteers—snowmobilers, dirt bike riders, trail runners, backcountry horseback riders, and others. I sure was. ►►

HEAVY DUTY A volunteer with the Madison-Gallatin Chapter of Wild Montana helps reshape Cliff Creek Trail in the Gallatin Range. Volunteers are key to keeping Montana's trails clear and functional.

PHOTO BY CHRIS SAWICKI

One thing I learned is that volunteers donate their time to trail clearing so they and others can enjoy Montana's outdoors. Another is that their labor of love has grown exponentially more challenging over the past two decades, as wildfires and mountain pine beetles have left millions of dead trees strewn across Montana forests and many more just waiting to fall.

"Anytime I hear about a windstorm, I'm like, *Oh no*," says Jody Loomis, a lead volunteer for the Helena-based Capital Trail Vehicle Association (CTVA). He's sawed thousands of trees off public trails, mostly single-track routes where he motorcycles each summer, a 12-pound Stihl attached to the front of his bike with a custom mount.

"Nobody on motorcycles used to carry chainsaws," says Loomis, a member of the Montana State Parks and Recreation Board. "Now it's pretty much mandatory in many areas. I've seen spots with so many blow-downs that we'd run out of gas for the 'saws before we could make it all the way through. Then you feel defeated when you have to head back and try again another day."

The CTVA helps clear hundreds of miles of trails every year, many of them single-tracks also popular with mountain bikers, horseback riders, trail runners, backpackers, hunters, and berry pickers. That includes sections of the Continental Divide Trail (CDT) open to motorbikes east of Butte, part of a motorized trail running from Elk Park to Pipestone. "With all that deadfall, hikers especially are appreciative when they run into

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us clearing that section,” says Loomis.

Another of the dozens of volunteer groups keeping forest routes open is MTB Missoula. What started as a small band of mountain bikers in the early '90s has grown into a labor powerhouse of more than 175 trail-work volunteers. In 2010, MTB Missoula signed a cost-share agreement with the Lolo National Forest's Missoula Ranger District to help maintain more than 100 miles of local and backcountry single-track trails.

"The Sheep Mountain Trail was the one we really first cut our teeth on," says Brian Williams, the group's trails director. "Backcountry trails like that get a huge amount of trees blown down every winter, and the public agencies don't have the capacity to hit every path every year. By having this pas-

sionate group of individuals that want to use the resources and are willing to chip in, we can make sure trails get cut out every single summer as soon as the snow melts."

MASSIVE BACKLOG

Why isn't the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) clearing trails? It is. The federal agency hires professional contractors to build and maintain trails throughout the seven national forests across Montana totaling 20 million acres. But the USFS is responsible for a staggering 160,000 miles of trails nationwide. Budget cuts and the massive financial drain of fighting increasingly numerous wildfires each summer have combined to create a road, trail, and bridge maintenance backlog of more than \$5.2 billion, according to the agency's 2019 report to Congress.

That's where volunteers come in.

This past April, I witnessed their work at an MTB Missoula workday to prepare the popular MoZ trail, which climbs Mount Sentinel outside Missoula for the area's perennial heavy late-spring rains and intense summer use. Most volunteers that day were dedicated mountain bikers, but distance runner Jerome Steen was there, too. "I train for 100-milers, so I'm running trails all the time," Steen says. "I figure I should be here taking care of them."

That's the goal of these events—to attract as many helping hands as possible, regardless of how they use the trails. That common goal has helped MTB Missoula build partnerships with other organizations like Five Valleys Land Trust. "We're really proud that our work benefits not just mountain bikers



TOO MANY TO COUNT Ken Salo (left), Jody Loomis (right), and other members of the Trail Vehicle Riders Association cut lodgepole pine blocking single-track trails in the Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest near Basin in August 2022. "We lost track of the number of trees we cut that day, but with six of us running three 'saws, it was a lot," says Loomis, who is also a member of the Montana State Parks and Recreation Board.

but also trail runners and horsepackers and hunters," Williams says. "It's a contribution to the entire outdoor rec community as much as it is to mountain bikers themselves."

Trail stewardship partnerships are also fostered by Wild Montana, where Matt Bowser is stewardship director. Every summer the wildlands conservation group recruits hundreds of volunteers for dozens of multi-day trail projects on public lands across the state. "We post them on our website for registration on March 1 each year, and they fill up in a matter of days and sometimes hours," Bowser says.

Bowser attributes the growth in volunteer stewardship in large part to increased trail use during the COVID pandemic. As more people used trails, more felt inspired to give back and help in places they could see needed clearing or repair, he says. Bowser lives in Columbia Falls, and one of his "backyard" projects has been teaming up with the Bob Marshall Wilderness Foundation on a trail up Tunnel Creek, which spills north out of the Great Bear Wilderness into the Middle

Fork of the Flathead River.

"It hadn't seen any real maintenance for seven to ten years, and it was absolutely choked with blowdowns," Bowser says. "Inside the wilderness boundary, we can only use crosscut saws because chainsaws aren't allowed, but with a good crew we still manage to cut 100 trees some days. It should be finished this summer, and I'd bet we'll have cut more than 1,000 trees out of there over three years."

"TOTAL GAME CHANGER"

Bowser moved west after graduating from college and spent a season leading a Montana Conservation Corps (MCC) crew. That launched his career in trails management working for multiple agencies throughout Montana. Bowser says he's never seen more support for trail work than he has over the past few years, which he attributes mainly to the 2019 Montana Legislature creating Montana's Trail Stewardship Program (TSP).

Funded with a portion of Montana's \$9 light-vehicle registration fee and marijuana

tax revenue, the program has so far awarded more than \$3.6 million to 106 projects that develop, renovate, or maintain trails. "It's been a total game changer and a huge boost to trail work statewide," Bowser says. He represents Wild Montana as a board member of the Montana Trail Coalition, which includes both motorized and nonmotorized groups. He says that a combination of interests was instrumental in helping get the bill passed.

The Capital Trail Vehicle Association that Jody Loomis belongs to has landed grants every year since TSP's inception. This year the group received \$57,000 to relocate a section of trail in the Big Belt Mountains where a new landowner had blocked access to a motorized trail and a separate nonmotorized trail.

Loomis, the group's vice president, says he approached the USFS about building a new half-mile route that skirted the private land to reopen the motorized trail. When he learned that the agency lacked funding to reroute the nonmotorized trail, "I offered to add that reroute to the motorized grant application," he says.

APPLY NOW FOR TSP AND RTP GRANTS

Tom Lang, FWP recreation and trails coordinator, says nonprofit groups, municipalities, tribal governments, and public agencies looking for trail construction and maintenance funding should prepare now to apply for 2024 Montana Trail Stewardship Program (TSP) grants, as well as long-standing Recreation Trails Program (RTP) grants. "The next application cycle is just around the corner," Lang says. "Go online now and learn about the application process and figure out which of the two grant programs is best for you."

Eligible TSP grant projects include:

- ▶ constructing new trails and shared-use paths;
- ▶ rehabilitating and maintaining trails and shared-use paths, including winter grooming;
- ▶ and building and maintaining trailside and trailhead facilities.

TSP grants range up to \$75,000 and require a match of 10% of total project costs from the applying organization. The next grant application cycle for these and RTP grants begins November 1, 2023, and runs through January 15, 2024.

For more information, visit fwp.mt.gov/aboutfwp/grant-programs/trail-stewardship.



“Apparently I’m a glutton for punishment,” Loomis continues, grinning. “That nonmotorized reroute is far more of a challenge. It’s really rocky and way longer—4 miles of new trail. But it only made sense to put them together into one effort. To my knowledge, this is the first time a club of motorized users in Montana has put in for a grant to build a nonmotorized trail.”

Dedication like that is music to Tom Lang’s ears. As recreation and trails coordinator for Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks, Lang oversees the TSP grant program that helps fuel Montana’s vast volunteer army of trail workers. “Without them, most TSP-funded projects wouldn’t have existed, because it usually takes a volunteer to kickstart things and get the spark going,” he says. Lang adds that many older volunteers help outline projects, draft and submit grant applications, and submit status reports. “These administrative tasks are unseen, but they are essential contributions to the program,” he says.

Though heartened by the increase in volunteers over the past few years, Lang worries



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1. The Pulaski tool is widely used for trail clearing and reshaping. 2. Volunteers with the Helena Snowdrifters snowmobile club clear a trail in the Beaverhead Deerlodge National Forest. 3. Clearing a trail in the Swan Valley. 4. Detail of a sharpened crosscut saw. 5. Reshaping the Cliff Creek Trail in the Gallatin Range. 6. Safely burning slash piles on the Mount Helena trail system in winter. 7. Volunteers with the Absaroka-Beartooth Wilderness Foundation clear fallen timber on the Vernon Lake Trail near Cooke City. 8. Students with the Little Big Horn College Worker Program repair a trail at Chief Plenty Coups State Park. 9. Volunteers with MTB Missoula perform trail work at the MoZ Mountain Bike Trail on the Garden City’s Mount Sentinel. 10. A volunteer attaches trail markers on the Continental Divide National Scenic Trail.



that so many are age 50 and older. “We need to build a better runway to bring younger people into the mix,” he says. “This work can be hard and time-consuming to begin with, and if the average age of volunteers keeps going up, pretty soon we won’t have anyone out there working on trails or helping us with administrative work.”

Loomis takes a more hopeful view, believing the next generation will step up once they reach an age that provides more free time. Most volunteers he works with are retirees who have extra hours to devote to clearing trails. “Once the younger users hit that age, they’ll be out here like we are,” he predicts.

In addition to being an avid motorbike rider, Loomis loves to ride snowmobiles and is a proud member of the Helena Snowdrifters, which receives FWP funding to groom almost 200 miles of trails near MacDonald Pass. The group is one of 25 snowmobile clubs across Montana helping maintain trails. On a Saturday this past March, I joined Loomis, his 19-year-old son Ashton, and several other members on a 12-mile snowmobile adventure

above Elliston, about 20 miles west of Helena.

Most of the group carried chainsaws on the back of their sleds to clear fallen trees. Though it turned out no logs blocked our path that day, a large, dead tree leaned precariously over the trail on one narrow section, just waiting for a good gust to bring it down. Another dead tree leaned against that one, meaning both would block the trail after the first one toppled.

From a safe distance I watched as the crew went to work on a task they’ve performed too many times to count. Within minutes, they had taken down both trees and cut up the logs and moved them off the trail. I thought of future cross-country skiers gliding silently through this forest, unaware that a crew of mostly retired motorized sledders had cleared the way.

Loomis says he doesn’t really care if other people know that he and his buddies are out clearing trails. As with so many trail-clearing volunteers, the good deed itself is what motivates him. “It’s tough work,” he says, “but dang if it isn’t rewarding.” 🐾

MCC trail crews

Helena motorbike enthusiast Jody Loomis can’t recall ever riding the Red Rocks trail system in the Deerlodge National Forest without packing a chainsaw. “It’s been hit hard by the pine beetle,” Loomis says. “With every windstorm, more standing dead trees fall, and after the high winds we experienced early in 2022, we knew re-opening it would be a huge and possibly multi-year challenge.”

Vice president of the Capital Trail Vehicle Association, Loomis helps clear trees from hundreds of miles of trails every summer in the Helena area. In 2022, he and his group received unexpected assistance on one particular route.

Before their trip to clear the Red Rocks trail, Loomis spoke with a rancher who uses the trail system to move cattle to high-mountain meadows to graze. The rancher said a Montana Conservation Corps (MCC) crew had visited earlier that summer to re-open the single-tracks, but he wasn’t sure how much trail they’d managed to unlock from the mess of fallen timber.

“As we headed up the North Fork, we found it was cleared all the way to the Middle Fork junction,” says Loomis. “And then, heading up the Middle Fork—the most challenging of the three forks—we found that MCC had removed all of the downfall there, too, including many huge logs. That was awesome. It

was obvious how hard they’d worked, and I can’t tell you how much pain they saved us.”

Turns out those were just a fraction of the more than 27,000 trail-blocking trees statewide that MCC crews took out in 2022.

Modeled after President Franklin Roosevelt’s Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), which helped thousands of unemployed Americans during the Great Depression, MCC launched as a private nonprofit organization in 1991 with support from Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks and the Human Resource Development councils in Billings, Bozeman, and Kalispell. Within two years, it became one of the nation’s first AmeriCorps

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environmental programs. Now, 30 years later, MCC deploys hundreds of young people every spring, summer, and fall in six-person crews into Montana’s forests and prairies to fix bridges, clear trails, repair state park facilities, and do other conservation work as they earn money for education and basic living expenses.

From its home bases in Missoula, Kalispell, Helena, and Bozeman, this small army of workers constructed or repaired more than 1,700 miles of trails, planted more than 5,800 trees, and fought noxious weeds across more than 3,500 acres of wildlife habitat in 2022 alone. But perhaps the most important thing they are building is future conservation leaders.

“The Montana Conservation Corps has always been about developing young people into becoming stewards of our lands and, even more importantly, into

FUTURE FACING An MCC crew clears a trail near Wade Lake in the Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest. MCC work builds skills and contacts that often lead to jobs with conservation agencies.

engaged members of their communities,” says Jono McKinney, MCC president and CEO.

Matt Bowser, who leads volunteer trail work projects for Wild Montana, says the training he got while working for MCC during two summers in college launched his career. That led to a job with the U.S. Forest Service, MCC’s largest partner, and eventually Yellowstone National Park, where Bowser worked for six years before moving to the nonprofit sector.

“I owe so much to MCC. It brings six strangers together in the woods who you learn to live and work with. It’s a pretty cool experience,” Bowser says, adding that he also met his wife while working for the MCC. He now partners with the organization on trail-clearing projects across Montana.

MCC crews have also helped the biking and running group MTB Missoula build several new House of Sky and Wallman trails near the Garden City.

“MCC makes these large projects possible on a much more manageable budget,” says Brian Williams, MTB Missoula trails director. “We have great volunteers, but they can only do so much. MCC brings a substantial amount of horsepower to any project combined with a level of know-how and expertise that has taken what we’re able to accomplish to a whole new level.” ■

—Paul Queneau



DIGGING THEIR WORK Using Pulaskis and shovels, an MCC crew carves out a trail in the Bob Marshall Wilderness. Each year, hundreds of young people working in six-person crews build and clear trails, fix bridges, and repair state park facilities.



GOOD-DOERS Members of the Helena Snowdrifters take a break from cutting down a dead tree threatening to topple onto a popular snowsledding and hiking trail in the Helena-Lewis and Clark National Forest.

LEFT TO RIGHT: PAUL N. QUENEAU; PRESTON KERES/USDA; MICHAEL REAVIS

