



TRAIL BLAZERS

Volunteers from all walks of life donate their time (and muscle) to maintain the longest hiking trail in North America.

STORY BY **SCOTT SCHILLER**, ART DIRECTOR

Mount Jefferson rises above Russell Lake in Oregon's Cascade Range.

FIELD SURVEY	<i>Aug 28 - Sep 2, 2014</i>	TERRAIN: <i>SUBALPINE MEADOW</i>
TRIP DATE:	<i>Aug 28 - Sep 2, 2014</i>	MILES TO BASECAMP: <i>6.5</i>
DESTINATION:	<i>MT. JEFFERSON WILDERNESS</i>	HIGHEST PEAK: <i>10,435 FT.</i>
COORDINATES:	<i>44.6793°N 121.7996°W</i>	TOTAL MILES OF TRAIL: <i>40</i>
ELEVATION:	<i>6,085 FT.</i>	



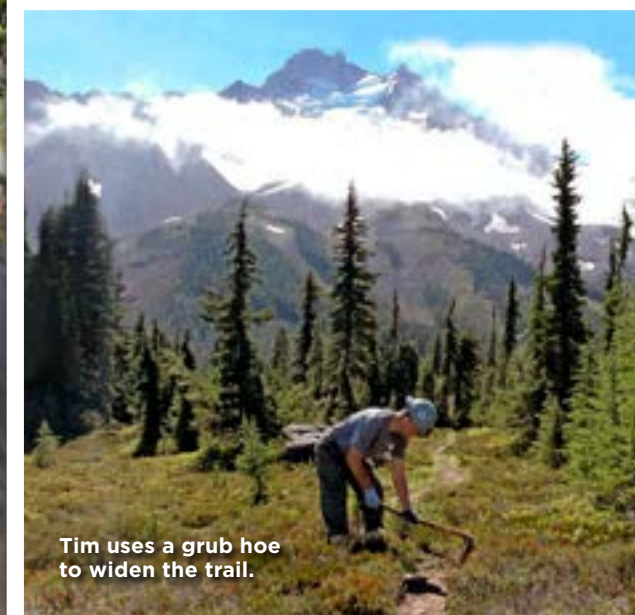
Andrew gives a safety talk before we hit the trail.



A mule train delivers provisions for the week.



Removing boulders requires a pry bar, muscle and teamwork.



Tim uses a grub hoe to widen the trail.

Last summer I was hiking a section of the Ice Age Trail in my home state of Wisconsin when I came upon a ragtag group of folks laughing, swinging shovels and carrying rocks. When I stopped to greet them, they told me they were spending the day creating a new spur, or secondary branch, of the trail.

As I went on my way, I thought about their project. It occurred to me that such efforts are largely unseen and unappreciated by everyday hikers like me. After all, when I'm on a hike I'm usually looking at birds or appreciating the view. I don't think about how the trail was created or how many people it took to do so. I began to wonder: *Who are these heroes of the trail? Who is responsible for the very path I'm treading?* The reality—as I would soon learn for

myself—is that trails need people as much as people need the trails.

I wanted to learn more, so I did some online research and came across the Pacific Crest Trail Association, a nonprofit group of dedicated trail lovers who work to protect, preserve and promote the Pacific Crest National Scenic Trail (PCT). At 2,650 miles, the PCT is the longest contiguous hiking trail in North America. It winds along the West Coast from Mexico to Canada and passes through 25 national forests, six national parks and nine mountain ranges. Last year about 1,500 volunteers from all walks of life and all corners of the country donated more than 85,000 hours to maintain the PCT. Without these volunteers, the trail would cease to exist.

Suddenly I was eager to be a part of such a monumental effort. The PCTA is one of the few organizations to provide volunteer opportunities on the trails free of charge. After I filled out an online application, I spoke to the trail operations manager, who helped

me determine which trip would be best for me. I was soon assigned to a crew that would be working in the Cascade range around the base of Mount Jefferson, the second-highest peak in Oregon.

The PCTA sent me a project overview and a guidebook for volunteers that explained in great detail what I could expect on the trip. It covered the trail crew's role and structure, daily schedule, meals, what to pack, trail etiquette, safety precautions and much more. I'm an experienced backpacker, so I was already pretty well equipped. All I had to do was get myself to the trailhead in late August. The PCTA would take care of the rest.

My team of nine was assigned to a popular section of the trail at the base of the mountain in the Mount Jefferson Wilderness. We would work eight-hour days (with one day off in the middle of the week to rest or hike for pleasure), rehabilitating and decommissioning a network of side trails that were damaging fragile sub-

alpine meadows, which are especially vulnerable to impact from overuse.

At the trailhead I met the team leading us: Andrew, the technical trail crew leader; and his assistants, Andy and Andrea, who are trail crew leaders from Deschutes National Forest. The other volunteers on this trip were Leif, Dale, Tim, Vanessa and Rebecca. Though we came from different states and backgrounds and had varying levels of experience, we all shared a love and respect for the wilderness.

Before we hiked to base camp, Andrew talked to us about trail safety and hazards, such as overheating or tripping along the trail. The hike to base camp would be steep and sometimes rocky, with an elevation gain of about 1,200 feet. With my pack weighing in at a hefty 55 pounds and the sun already beating down, I took Andrew's words to heart: I was the last to get to camp.

Once we had set up our tents, Andrew introduced me to trail maintenance. He explained that our primary objectives in this section of the PCT were to rehabilitate and shut down unauthorized trail spurs, dig or widen new trails, move large rocks and boulders, install new signs and trail markers (blazes), and transplant native plants and trees to naturalize the

trails we were closing.

This work can be strenuous and difficult even for the accomplished trail builder. It requires prolonged periods of bending, stooping, lifting and sawing. Each PCTA project has a specific fitness level, so volunteers can be sure their physical abilities are well matched to that particular trip.

I donned a hard hat and gloves and grabbed one of the many specialized tools provided for us. There were tools for cutting, sawing and brushing; tools for prying and wedging, lifting and hauling, chopping and grubbing, pruning and lopping, digging and scooping. They had names I'd never heard before, like Pulaskis, McLeods and mattocks. The rest of the crew was much more experienced than me, but Andrew patiently and thoroughly explained what we were doing and the reasons that we were doing it.

A typical day started around 7 a.m. with a breakfast of oatmeal, yogurt and fresh fruit. Then we made our lunches, which we carried with us and ate on the trail at noon. Every day's work was a slightly differ-



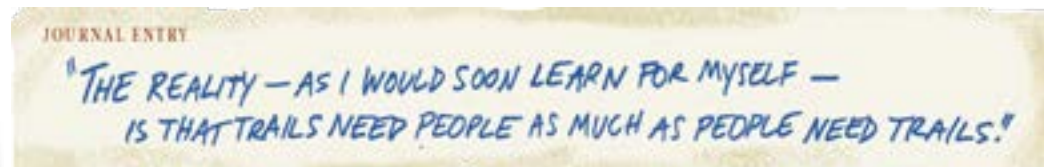
The circle shows our work area.

ent experience. One day I helped decommission braided trails, those undesirable multiple parallel paths created when hikers walk around muddy spots or obstacles in the main trail. This involved strategically placing rocks and branches on the path to make it look natural. I was taught how to properly transplant native hemlock, heather and alpine fir in the middle of the trail to help revegetate trampled soil. Another day I helped widen a section of the trail that had become overgrown.

At the end of the workday we hiked back to base camp, cleaned ourselves up and prepared for dinner. Because of a fire ban, there was no campfire to



That's me, excited to work!



PREVIOUS SPREAD: STEVE TERRILL; SAFETY: SCOTT SCHILLER

MULES AND TRAIL: DALE PROHASKA; BOULDERS AND MAP: SCOTT SCHILLER

SOMETHING FOR EVERYONE

The PCTA encourages volunteers from all walks of life and matches them with projects suited to their fitness level. To learn more about volunteering on a trail crew, visit pcta.org.

Our team included (from left) Andrea, Dale, Tim, Leif and Andy.



Andrew (right) and Tim prepare to transplant a sapling.

enjoy during dinner but we all made the best of it. The day's work and fresh air had me so tired I fell asleep within minutes of zipping into my sleeping bag.

As we worked alongside each other or stopped for a bite to eat, I chatted with my crewmates and got to know them better. Tim, a 67-year-old former truck driver from Kent City, Michigan, entertained us with stories about his adventures in the wild. Leif, who is from Minneapolis, had volunteered on the Mount Hood trail for the past five years.

One important thing I needed to know before we parted was the answer to the question that had pulled me 6,000 feet into the Oregon Cascades: Why do this? Why hike half a day into the mountains to work for hours at a time, breathing in trail dust as you saw wood and carry boulders, enduring sun, wind, rain, heat and cold?

Andy told me that working in the field served as a "restart" for him, a stress release from everyday life. Leif told me simply, "I've found the best things in life rarely come easily. I love trail work. It's very rewarding for me." Vanessa said, "It needs to be done, so why not me?"

As I hiked down the mountain back to the trailhead, I thought of my own answer: I did it because I love the wilderness, and to enjoy it means to be responsible for my place in it. It is our duty to ensure that it remains pure and undamaged for us, for our neighbors, for our children, and for future generations. That is why I did it.

The experience really opened my eyes to how much can be accomplished when like-minded people band together. 🌄



View more of my trip photos at country-magazine.com/pct.

Get Closer to Nature

You don't have to travel far to be a part of something big. Here are three easy ways you can help make a difference in your own backyard:

- 1. Step outside.** It doesn't matter where you live or what the season brings. Greet the rivers and meadows and breathe in the fragrant air. Feel the peace and solace as nature revives your spirit.
- 2. Enlist a loved one.** Introduce a friend, a neighbor or a child to the simple pleasure of exploring the natural world around you.
- 3. Share your skills.** Seek out local opportunities to connect with others who want to protect and preserve wild places.