

Get Wild: What is happening with Summit County's forests?

Thekla Schultz



Volunteers John Taylor and Gail Culp conduct operations to monitor the forest on Ophir Mountain on July 13, 2023.

Thekla Schultz/Get Wild

The Volunteer Forest Monitoring Program is hands-on citizen science. The program has run seasonally for more than a decade. Originally started by the Summit County Forest Health Task Force, it has transformed into an important local source of forest ecology data for the U.S. Forest Service. Friends of the Dillon Ranger District, actively participates with recruitment, training and event planning for the task force, and we are actively looking for additional volunteers.

Our Summit County forests have experienced a major beetle epidemic in a rapidly changing climate. Wildfire is a present hazard, putting people, recreation, our economy and our unique mountain setting at risk. We have seen catastrophic wildfires such as the East Troublesome Fire in neighboring Grand County. Our forests are recovering from the mountain pine beetle epidemic, but we need to think about how they function in a hotter and drier climate. These forests have changed in a relatively short time and require us to think about how to manage them for the future. Critical water supplies and valuable recreational assets are also threatened.

In this dynamic and complex forested environment, we have embraced the Volunteer Forest Monitoring Program to help us better understand the conditions of our local forests and work with the U.S. Forest Service to inform future management. We want to know and understand what is happening in our local forests. We also learn and share our findings with the public. This is our way of getting directly involved with forest health and sustainability.

The Volunteer Forest Monitoring Program is a place-based Summit County activity created and managed by local nonprofits with the support of the Forest Service's Dillon Ranger District. The purpose is to increase our understanding of current and future forest conditions, and more specifically to assist the Forest Service. Volunteers of all ages and backgrounds come together to document forest densities, growth rates, tree types, other species, disease, mortality and other indicators of forest health. They generate important scientific data needed for future forest land management, and educate themselves. Residents and visitors participate. More are needed. It's a big job. I encourage you to participate.

Last year Forest Health Task Force and Friends of the Dillon Ranger District volunteers monitored over 200 separate plots, providing information on regeneration rates, species and forest health directly to the Forest Service. This information is used by the Forest Service to plan future management activities.

Volunteers of all ages and physical ability levels can participate. There are one or more half-day volunteer events scheduled each week. You may volunteer for only a single session or several as your time allows. All help is greatly appreciated.

This year we are assigned two locations: Ophir Mountain located behind the hospital and Lakeview in the Spring Creek area north of Green Mountain Reservoir. The Ophir plots are regeneration studies of an area that was logged three years ago. As a "citizen scientist", you have an opportunity to learn about our local forests. The Ophir plots are close to a road, but there is some wood debris to cross and volunteers may wish to bring poles. Always wear boots, sunscreen and bring water. We meet at the Gold Hill trailhead at 8:30 a.m. and usually finish by 1 p.m.

The Forest Service is working on defining the requirements for the Lakeview/Spring Creek section and monitoring is expected to begin in August.

For more information, contact Thekla Schultz at theklamoose@comcast.net

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If you are looking to get outdoors, like science and want to gain a better understanding of our current and future Summit County forests, this is the volunteer activity for you.



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Thekla Schultz enjoyed 30 years living in Alaska before moving to Colorado. Since then she has volunteered with Friends of the Dillon Ranger District on ranger patrol and monitored for six years with the Forest Health Task Force.