

Covering ground: Volunteer wilderness ranger program seeking volunteers

Eagle Summit Wilderness Alliance program supplements Forest Service needs

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Eagle Summit Wilderness Alliance volunteer wilderness rangers will have the opportunity to learn the cross-cut sawing technique used in wilderness areas where mechanized equipment is not allowed.
ESWA/Eagle Courtesy image

In seeking the ample staff to cover the large amount of wilderness in Eagle County, volunteer rangers go a long way, literally, in helping the Forest Service each summer.

The Forest Service will employ two wilderness rangers and one intern in 2022. Oftentimes, though, the Forest Service's full-time wilderness rangers will be assigned to higher-level project work – work that's deeper in the backcountry – so they won't have as much capacity to be on all of the higher use trails, making contact with trail users on a daily basis.

With education being one of the best tools wilderness rangers have in preserving the wilderness character, those everyday contacts make a big difference, and the Forest Service has found assistance to that end from the non-profit Eagle-Summit Wilderness Alliance.

The alliance is the only wilderness advocacy group targeting Eagle County and Summit County specifically, and with the Eagles Nest, Holy Cross and Flat Tops wilderness areas comprising a total of nearly 200,000 acres, the group's work in providing volunteer rangers is helping to keep wilderness values intact in these areas.



ESWA volunteer rangers at a trailhead. The volunteer alliance answers questions and informs trail users of rules and regulations.

ESWA/Eagle Courtesy image

Eagle Summit Wilderness Alliance Chair Mike Browning says most contacts involve basic education on some of the wilderness rules like telling people about current fire restrictions or rules like no cutting switchbacks and no letting dogs off leash.

“We tell people it’s a pretty special land use status, and why there are special rules associated with it,” Browning says. “Most questions we get are ‘How far is it to the lake?’ or ‘what do you think about the weather?’”

Eagle Summit Wilderness Alliance volunteers wear the official Forest Service branding on their patrols.

“We ask volunteers to do at least four patrols per summer,” Browning said. “Each of which should be at least four hours long.”

The alliance has a sign-up system online, where volunteers can pick the trails, hours and which days they want to volunteer.



Volunteer wilderness rangers say their most common question is ‘how far is it to the lake?’ The group will have a training in May for any who want to get involved.

“We usually start around Memorial Day weekend and run until hunting season,” Browning said.

Following a shift, volunteers submit a report about what they encountered that day.

Last year, 76 volunteer wilderness rangers completed more than 400 patrols, covering more than 2,700 miles. They contacted more than 11,000 day users and 340 overnight users and answered thousands of questions.

For those who want to get involved, a volunteer wilderness ranger and training will be held on May 21 at the Eagles Nest HOA Pavillon just north of Silverthorne.

Two identical half-day sessions will be offered – one from 9 a.m. to noon and a second from 1 to 4 p.m.

A training for new sawyers will be held on June 10-12, where sawyers learn the cross-cut technique of hand sawing which is used in wilderness areas when a tree falls and covers a trail.

“Last year our sawyers cleared over 900 trees from trails,” Browning said.

For more information, or to attend a wilderness ranger and trailhead host training, visit the volunteer wilderness ranger page on EagleSummitWilderness.org.

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