

Get wild: Llamas help maintain our trails

Krista Hughes



Llamas help pack in gear during a trail maintenance trip organized by the Eagle-Summit Wilderness Alliance.

Courtesy photo

After what felt like a rather snowy and cold winter, it finally feels like spring has sprung in Summit County. Much of the snow has melted, and we are starting to see more green everywhere we look; from the grass in our yards to the leaves regrowing on trees. As part of this transition, we see lakes thawing and trails starting to dry out. It's natural to start thinking about summer activities, which for many of us include hiking and backpacking in our local wilderness areas.

As I start venturing onto our local trails, I notice some of them need work. With such a short summer season in Summit County, the U.S. Forest Service has its work cut out to maintain and improve the hundreds of miles of trail we have in the county in just a few months. This fact reminds me that volunteers are necessary to help with this work. There are many local organizations that provide ways to give back to our trails, and I believe anyone who uses our trails should consider volunteering.

There's one type of trail work trip that always stands out to me as being a little different than the rest: the overnight llama trips hosted by the Eagle-Summit Wilderness Alliance in conjunction with the Forest Service. Did you know that every summer the Forest Service rents two llamas to help with trail maintenance projects? This summer, the Eagle-Summit Wilderness Alliance is hosting four overnight llama trail work trips — three in the Eagles Nest Wilderness and one in the Flat Tops Wilderness — to help maintain the trails and lakes that are a little more difficult to access and are better serviced by multi-day trips.

You might be wondering why llamas are the animal of choice over horses. Llamas have several characteristics that make them better suited for these trips. One of the most interesting ones is their feet. Their feet are soft and padded and have two toes that make them much more nimble than many other stock animals. This allows llamas to more easily navigate our rocky terrain while also having much less impact than hooves do on the trails. Llamas also don't need to stop and graze as much as other pack animals do. They require less feed and are highly self-sufficient in grazing once at camp. Additionally, a llama can carry up to 100 pounds each, which is a considerable amount of equipment when you have two

llamas on a trip.

Going on one of these llama trips isn't just a great way to help maintain our local trails and wilderness areas, it's also a great way to get introduced to backpacking and meet like-minded individuals who could make great future hiking partners. By going on a trip like this with the Forest Service, it also alleviates some of the pressure you'd have from going backpacking alone. The Forest Service helps dictate navigation and campsite selection. They may also know where the best and most convenient water sources are. The llamas can even carry a few pieces of your gear, helping to lighten your load.

If you are a trail user and have the ability to give back to our local trails, it's something we should all consider doing each summer. Perhaps you only have the time or capability to do so through a day work trip, or perhaps this summer you might try something new and sign up for an overnight llama work trip with Eagle-Summit Wilderness Alliance. Whichever you choose, your community and local trails will thank you.

If you are interested in joining a llama overnight work trip this summer, please email info@eaglesummitwilderness.org



Krista Hughes is a Volunteer Wilderness Ranger, Llama trip organizer and Advocacy Committee Member for the Eagle-Summit Wilderness Alliance.