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Get Wild: What've those llamas been up to?

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Get Wild



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backcountry preservation work. Well, our llama friends have been busy this summer, helping to maintain our wilderness trails and preserve our beautiful Alpine lakes.

Each year, the [Eagle-Summit Wilderness Alliance](#) hires two hearty llamas from a llama ranch in southwestern Colorado. The llamas help carry trail maintenance tools and other essential gear on the multiday backpack trips necessary to conduct preservation work deep into our four spectacular local wilderness areas: Eagles Nest, Flat Tops, Holy Cross and Ptarmigan Peak.

The alliance obtains funding for hiring the llamas from a generous grant provided by the [National Forest Foundation Ski Conservation Fund](#).

Dom and Monty (short for Domingo and Montague) have been the Eagle-Summit Wilderness Alliance's amazing llamas for several years. Each able to carry 70 pounds or more, these four-footed fellows are well suited for navigating rocky high-Alpine terrain. Their soft, padded, two-toed feet make them not only nimble, but much lower in impact on the trails than hooves. Llamas also need less food than other pack animals, and they graze gently on the native vegetation.

A couple of fun llama facts: Llamas are members of the Camelidae family – along with camels. Llamas enjoy being petted on their necks but not their faces.

Already this year, Dom and Monty have carried essential supplies on multiple work trips with the U.S. Forest Service, Eagle-Summit Wilderness Alliance and the Rocky Mountain Youth Corps.

Ever wonder what kind of work is performed on these trips? Lots! For instance, although signs and regulations remind backpackers that campfires aren't allowed above 11,000 feet or within a 1/4 mile of lakes – and that campsites must be at least 100 feet from lakes, streams, and trails – people don't always pay attention. Once someone camps or builds a campfire along a shore, others come along and do the same. Camping or building campfires near lakes and streams contaminates water, damages high-Alpine vegetation and frightens wildlife that need to approach to drink.

Also, every year, trails become blocked by trees and branches, and the trail tread becomes worn and eroded.

In July, the llamas helped support a work trip with Eagle-Summit Wilderness Alliance volunteers and Forest Service rangers to the popular Wheeler Lakes and Lost Lake in the Eagles Nest Wilderness. Using heavy tools and equipment that the llamas helped carry, the team was able to remove 38 illegal fire rings, lop hundreds of branches blocking the trail and clear drainages to allow proper runoff.

In August, Dom and Monty headed even deeper into the Eagles Nest Wilderness to spectacular Gore Lake. Increasingly popular with hikers and overnight users, Gore Lake gets a lot of use. But the lake's location at treeline makes it especially vulnerable to the impacts of overuse. This time, in addition to removing almost 50 fire rings, we cleared an equal number of trees that had fallen across the trail to Gore Lake, as well as the trail over Red Buffalo Pass. When trees block the trail, hikers are tempted to go around the blockage, which causes trail expansion and erosion.

Later this month, for their first time, Dom and Monty will venture into the rugged Flat Tops Wilderness with Eagle-Summit Wilderness Alliance and the Forest Service. We hope they are looking forward to experiencing this new terrain as much as their human co-workers are.

Dom and Monty work hard all summer to keep our Wilderness Areas pristine and accessible. Please help support them by remembering to limit your impact when enjoying time in our fragile high-Alpine environment.



Frances Hartogh
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“Get Wild” publishes on Fridays in the Summit Daily News. Frances Hartogh is a Volunteer Wilderness Ranger for the [Eagle-Summit Wilderness Alliance](#).

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