

# Get Wild: Sawyers in the forest

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Zach Kauk  
Get Wild



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*Eagle Summit Wilderness Alliance/Courtesy photo*

Did you ever wonder how trees are cleared from our Summit County trails on Forest Service land?

Thanks to [the mountain pine beetle devastation that spread through Colorado](#) from the 1990s to 2012, Summit County forests are filled with stands of dead lodgepole pine trees. It's estimated that at least 70% of Summit County's mature lodgepole pines have succumbed to the beetle.

Most trees consist of rings of plant vascular material that elevate nutrients from the root system to the tree canopy. In temperate climates, like here in Colorado, a new ring of vascular material is created each year. As new rings form around the older rings, the older rings stop conducting nutrients while the new rings begin delivering nutrients to the top of the tree. Because of this, any damage to the outer rings of a tree will reduce nutrient flow significantly.

The mountain pine beetle indirectly kills trees by damaging the outer rings and stopping nutrient flow in two ways. The first is that they burrow under the bark of a tree to lay their eggs. This action and the further burrowing of their larvae damage the outer rings of the tree. The second is that they carry a blue fungus that spreads in the outer rings of the tree. This fungus stops the capillary action that elevates water into the tree canopy.

You can identify a tree that has succumbed to the beetle. Pull away the tree's bark, and beneath the bark you will see many burrowed trails in the tree's outer surface. You can also look at a freshly cut cross section of the tree. If you see blue or inky shaded sections in the rings, that's the blue fungus spread by the beetle.

Unlike spruce trees, lodgepole pines have a very shallow root system. Once trees are weakened, the effects of snow and wind cause them to fall across our trails in the Eagles Nest and Ptarmigan Peak Wilderness Areas.

Lodgepoles aren't the only trees that, at some point in their lifecycles and under the right conditions, will topple. Although nobody has counted all the trees that fall, it's likely that thousands of trees fall in Summit County during storms.



**Volunteer groups like the Eagle Summit Wilderness Alliance work with the U.S. Forest Service to help keep local trails clear.**

*Eagle Summit Wilderness Alliance/Courtesy photo*

In many other damaged forests around the country, the number of fallen trees has permanently closed their trail systems. Thanks to the work of the U.S. Forest Service's Dillon Ranger District and volunteer groups like the Eagle Summit Wilderness Alliance, almost 100% of the extensive Summit County trail system remains open.

The Dillon Ranger District employs a few highly capable Sawyers who clear trails during the summer, but lacks the funding to clear everything. That's where volunteer groups, like the Eagle Summit Wilderness Alliance, step in. The alliance volunteers with the Forest Service to clear trees from six trails in Eagle County and eight in Summit County.

Keeping trails cleared also helps avoid widening and erosion caused by people and stock wandering off trail to avoid obstacles.

Much of the Summit County trail system is in Wilderness Areas. [The Wilderness Act of 1964](#) effectively prohibits motorized tools or mechanized travel of any kind in a designated Wilderness Area. Consequently, the Eagle Summit Wilderness Alliance volunteers hike into the wilderness and clear trails using only hand saws. Many trees can be cleared with small one-person saws, but larger trees are removed using the traditional two-person crosscut saw.

Keeping our trails clear for future generations is a team effort and we'd love to have you as part of our team. If interested in volunteering, please send an email to [info@eaglesummitwilderness.org](mailto:info@eaglesummitwilderness.org) and we'll send you more information about how to volunteer – including the potential to become a certified sawyer.



Zach Kauk

“Get Wild” publishes on Fridays in the Summit Daily News. Zach Kauk is a member of Eagle Summit Wilderness Alliance, an all-volunteer nonprofit that helps the U.S. Forest Service protect and preserve the wilderness areas in Eagle and Summit counties. For more information, visit [EagleSummitWilderness.org](https://EagleSummitWilderness.org).

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