

Backcountry work trips aim to preserve and restore local wilderness

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Volunteers work during the Eagle Summit Wilderness Alliance trip to Slate Lakes in July 2018.

Photo from Dave Brewster / Eagle Summit Wilderness Alliance

The nonprofit Eagle Summit Wilderness Alliance aims to do whatever it can to preserve the Eagles Nest, Ptarmigan Peak and Holy Cross wilderness areas in Eagle and Summit counties, including yearly backcountry work trips for trail and campground improvements.

Dave Brewster, who leads wilderness alliance volunteer trips within Summit County, is taking charge of the Slate Lakes trip this month in the more than 200-square mile Eagle's Nest Wilderness Area.

"It's nice just to get up there and see all that countryside. It's gorgeous," Brewster said about the trips.

Brewster said a big part of the wilderness alliance's mission is education, including teaching folks about Leave no Trace principles by which they should abide when recreating in the wilderness. He said the group frequently works hand in hand with the U.S. Forest Service.

For the annual work trips, Brewster said the alliance partners with the Forest Service to get llamas to transport tools over the summer. He said they use llamas as opposed to other animals because their soft, non-hooved feet have very little environmental impact. He added that llamas are self-sufficient and can carry up 70 or 80 pounds of gear.

Volunteers on the trip typically work to scatter fire rings that people illegally build within a quarter-mile around the lake, which Brewster said is common despite not being allowed. During Stage 1 fire restrictions, which are in effect in Summit County, no campfires are permitted in wilderness areas.

"Those mountain lakes get heavy use, so it's (the volunteers') chance to get up and ... make it look like there was never a fire there," Brewster said. "We'll go up and scatter fire rings and restore it as best we can."

How to help

The Eagle Summit Wilderness Alliance typically hosts four trips a year, but this summer it has three, each with a few volunteer spots available and no experience required.

- July 16-18 at Slate Lakes
- July 30 to Aug. 1 at Lake Constantine
- Aug. 27-29 at Sopris Lake

Groups as large as 15 people are allowed while working in the wilderness, which means volunteer spots fill up quickly.

Brewster also said volunteers work to trim back willows that overgrow trails in the area. Since no volunteer work trips occurred last year due to the pandemic, he said the willows might need more work than usual as they've had more time to grow. He added that trail maintenance is always a possibility as needed along the way.

When working in the wilderness, power tools aren't permitted, meaning volunteers will all use hand saws and other human-operated tools.

Brewster said a large motivator for clearing trails and trail maintenance is simply to keep folks on the trails during their hikes.

"Otherwise, they do this walk around ,and pretty soon we have trails all over the wilderness," Brewster said.

Anyone interested in participating in the work trips can go to EagleSummitWilderness.org.

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