

Get Wild: One crew's impact on trail clearing

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Emily Elder
Get Wild



A crew of sawyers in training with the Eagle Summit Wilderness Alliance clear a trail near Lily Pad Lake on June 13. Pictured from left are Emily Elder, Frances Hartogh, instructor Anne Dal Vera, Ellie Finlay and Katy Sinclair.

Photo by Steve Elder

When hiking in the wilderness, you'll occasionally come across a tree that has fallen across the trail. What you might not know is that since 1964, when Congress passed the Wilderness Act, all of those trees have been cleared using hand-held, crosscut saws. The act created the legal definition of wilderness in the U.S. and protected 9.1 million acres of federal land. It also barred the use of motorized or mechanical tools or transport, including things like mountain bikes and chain saws. These regulations serve not just to protect wildlife but also to preserve a pristine wilderness experience.

This has created a demand today for skilled crosscut saw users, so the Eagle Summit Wilderness Alliance and Friends of the Dillon Ranger District recently partnered to train a fresh batch of "buckers," or sawyers certified to clear fallen logs. Through the training, I learned firsthand what a four-person crew, armed only

with hand tools, can do in less than a day to improve a trail (and how physically and mentally challenging the work can be).

On the northeast side of Lily Pad Lake, our group of sawyer trainees found the path so buried that the main trail was impassable and nearly invisible. Day hikers were having to route around the blockage on a steep, rocky hill overhung with dead trees. It was not only inconvenient but potentially dangerous.

The problem of clearing the trail was assigned to myself and three other women. Before commencing work on the project, all crews run through a process of site assessment called OHLEC, which stands for objective, hazards, leans, escape paths and cutting plan. The process was then evaluated by Anne Dal Vera, our instructor, before we could begin work on the site.

I must admit, we were initially daunted by the size of the task at hand, but our crew got welcome help limbing the downed trees from some of the men. Removing all of the branches revealed what we call a jackstraw pile, or five large tree trunks stacked on top of one another. Eventually, the guys were shoed off to work on their own problem logs while we traded in our small, folding saws and axes (the best tools for limbing) for the longer two-person crosscut saw.

Our approach, which applies to most jackstraw piles, was to start by bucking the log at the top and working our way down. With every cut, we had to reassess the order based on the new information and hazards that were revealed. Heavy logs, when cut, can release intense energy based on the physical forces acting on them.

Each time we made a new cut, we asked ourselves, “Is there a clear escape path if this log starts to move? Are the hikers around us safe?”

Often, we would remove one handle of the saw and finish the cut with a single buckler from the uphill side, in case the log were to roll.

Finally, after five hours, we had worked our way through the mess to reveal a surprisingly wide, beautiful path. A few minutes later, some children who had been wading in the lake traipsed through barefoot – a lovely reward for our efforts. And despite our hesitation at the start that four women might not be strong enough, we never had to call in backup. At the end of the multiday training, the crew all became certified buckers and the entirety of Lily Pad Lake Trail was cleared (for now)!



Emily Elder

“Get Wild” publishes on Fridays in the Summit Daily News. Emily Elder is a volunteer with the 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.

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