

Get Wild: Llamas in the wilderness

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Get Wild



Each summer the U.S. Forest Service rents several llamas to help with trail maintenance projects, including this project in summer 2021.

Eagle Summit Wilderness Alliance/Courtesy photo

When was the last time you used a trail in Summit County? Many of us live in this area for the access to beautiful forests and wilderness that our trails provide. With increasing usage of our trail system, by locals and visitors alike, it is more important than ever to ensure that our trails and the wilderness areas they connect us to are being maintained and improved for future generations.

When one thinks about the different four-legged animals one may run into on these trails, llamas are probably not the first that comes to mind. It may come as a surprise, but each summer the U.S. Forest Service rents several llamas to help with trail maintenance projects. This summer, the Eagle Summit Wilderness Alliance and the Forest Service are hosting four overnight llama trail-work trips (two in Summit County and two in Eagle County). These trips allow volunteers to assist the Forest Service over a long weekend with all sorts of projects to keep our trails and wilderness in great condition. Some of the

more commonly performed tasks involve scattering illegal fire rings, restoring illegal campsites, repairing or adding signage, removing noxious weeds, and trail maintenance such as trimming vegetation or erosion control.



A llama carries gear and equipment during a Eagle Summit Wilderness Alliance trail-work trip in summer 2021.
Eagle Summit Wilderness Alliance/Courtesy photo

Llamas help make these trips possible, and have many unique characteristics that make them a great pack animal. To start, llamas can carry up to 100 pounds, which allows the wilderness alliance and Forest Service to bring in tools, protective equipment and additional gear to help with the work. Llamas require less feed and do not need to stop and graze like other pack animals. One of their unique characteristics relative to other pack animals is their feet. They have soft, padded feet with two toes that do much less damage to the ground than hooves do. These feet make them more sure-footed, which is a desirable quality in the steep, rocky terrain of our local national forests and wilderness areas. As a result, llamas can go places that are inaccessible to other pack animals.

Without the help of llamas, it would be far more difficult to carry tools and equipment to harder-to-reach sites, particularly in wilderness areas that may be far away from a trailhead. Mechanized or wheeled equipment is not permitted in wilderness areas, and even items that would be helpful for a trail work trip, like chainsaws or wheelbarrows, are not allowed.



A llama is tied up to a tree during a Eagle Summit Wilderness Alliance trail-work trip in summer 2021. Llamas have many unique characteristics that make them a great pack animal for helping in wilderness areas.

Eagle Summit Wilderness Alliance/Courtesy photo

Next time you find yourself on a trail, take notice of the work that may have been done by both the Forest Service and volunteers through organizations such as the Eagle Summit Wilderness Alliance to make your experience better. Have the willows that were starting to take over the trail been clipped back? Have the logs you were having to climb over or under been sawed back? Have illegal campsites within 100 feet of the lake been removed and the land restored to its natural condition, providing a more pristine nature experience?

Familiarize yourself with Leave No Trace principles to ensure you are providing the next person on that trail with the same positive experience you had. And finally, consider ways you can give back to our trails and wilderness areas. Whether it's simply picking up a few pieces of trash at your next trailhead or volunteering for an overnight llama trail-work trip, we all can contribute in our own way to keeping our trails and forests in excellent condition. If you are interested in joining an Eagle Summit Wilderness Alliance llama overnight work trip this summer, please email info@eaglesummitwilderness.org.



Krista Hughes is a volunteer wilderness ranger and advocacy committee member for Eagle Summit Wilderness Alliance.
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