

GRAY WOLF / BCH-PENINSULA TRAIL CREW NOTES

3/22 – 3/23/24

Location: Smokey Bottom Trail, ONP

Crew members:

Rebecca Wanagel
Martin Knowles
David Graves
Bernt Ericson
Eric Nagle
Josie Dean
Mel Melmed
Jonathan Hamlin
Neil Turnberg
Lisa Turnberg
Gwynne Carlson

Estimated On-Trail Volunteer Hours: 180 (includes getting tools and bodies too and from the job site which was nearly 4 miles from the cars)

Report written by Rebecca.

Objectives:

1. Clear entire 2.3 miles of downed trees numbering approximately 75 of all sizes.
2. Re-bench, hand brush, address drainage and rake as much of the trail as we had time and energy to do.

Metrics achieved:

1. We achieved the objective of clearing all the trees. They ranged from tiny and easy to 34" with detached rootballs on hillsides, and everything in between. This took care of the entire trail plus the path down to the camp area and two trees just as you're getting onto the lakebed trail.
2. We got about 1.3 miles of the trail – in fact the worse part of it – back to pleasant hiking status. The rest is already not as bad as this was.
 - a. Hand brushing done where the branches or brush were pushing people downward, causing the trail to slump and erode.
 - b. Raking to clear the trail of the thick layer of alder and maple leaves that cause it to stay wet and slippery, and to erode. This also included getting rid of all the small branches that sometimes cause people to slip and trip.
 - c. Drainage clearing to try to get the trail drier.
 - d. Re-benching in many places to get the tread cut back into the hillside. Some of it had gotten extremely narrow and was slumping away – hard to walk in places without feeling very off balance and tripping on the brush, branches and – the worst – thousands of trailing vines.

Could and should be done in the near future:

1. This trail could use one more good day of re-benching. There are several places where trees were down for so long that the trail moved down. We did address many of those, but with the time we had we couldn't get to them all – or we couldn't do it as thoroughly as we normally would.
2. Keep it clear of logs more frequently so this trail creep doesn't continue to happen.
3. One footlog and two very short puncheons badly need replacing.

We managed to dodge the raindrops that were in the forecast, right until the very end as we were packing up to head back to the cars. Unbelievable how lucky we were with the weather!

Smokey Bottom trail is formerly known as the West Lake Mills trail. It ran alongside the lake when there was one. Since then, the dam has undergone a historical removal, and the lake drained. This is a sweet trail that now has special significance in its history. Also, it connects with a new pathway that runs along what used to be a lake bottom.

Smokey Bottom is interesting. It has its serpentine moments, where it snakes around sharp corners and either the landscape does a sudden change, or you get a dramatic view of the Elwha river and / or the old dam site. Sometimes you are walking along a section that is fairly dry and full of just fir needles (which don't need to be raked, as they do not cause the trail to saturate for the most part). You go around the corner and there is a trail with madrone trees down and deciduous leaves piled thickly. Lots of ups and downs, dips through wet sections and plateaus through dry. Waterfalls and mossy turnpikes. It's strikingly pretty.

At 2.2 miles you come upon a path down to an old campsite situated high above the roaring Boulder Creek. The creek itself is in a huge, deep canyon and comes barreling down from above, originating off the backside of Appleton Pass and flowing past the bygone car campground (aptly named Boulder Creek Camp) and the odorous Olympic Hot Springs – the smell of dreams for some people and nightmares for others. 😊

There had been lots of reports of how unpleasant this trail was to hike. As far as I could tell (I could be wrong), it hadn't been tended since a crew led by me did it about 6 or 7 years ago. At that time, we could drive to the trailhead (3.7 miles from Madison Falls parking area) because the ONP had put in temporary "admin" bridges across the washout. Now you cannot drive there and must get yourselves and all your tools and supplies to the trailhead and then along the trail without the aid of a vehicle. I decided this would be a good early-season project. The story is below.



Getting bodies and tools to and from the trailhead was no small feat. And just getting this trip organized was herculean. From the Madison Falls parking lot, to and over the bypass trail, and then back along the Olympic Hot Springs Road to the dam and the trailhead is about 3.7 miles. We used this borrowed SAR litter to transport the heavy saws, fuel, etc. For the most part, people carried the dirt and hand tools themselves. The litter works great, but getting it over the bypass can be tricky and takes a team effort. There are a lot of roots, a notched log to lift it over, and footlog with short but extremely steep embankments on either side that had to be crossed because the mule path around the footlog has an upturned rootball. In addition, some folks opted to camp at the trailhead for this 2-day trip, others opted to commute back and forth, some walked, some rode bikes ... Those of us who rode bikes had to push / carry them over the bypass.



Some tread pictures and a picture of one problematic footlog-missing area. There are other logs to carefully pick your way across, but this footlog needs to be replaced.



Below: some random pictures of the saw team at work clearing all 75 projects. We finished the logs on the second morning and were able to help the tread / brushing crew for a few hours before heading out.







The walk to work on Saturday morning was enjoyable and peaceful as we used the trail along the bottom of the former lake. Crew members take care of each other by leaving arrows to make sure everyone can find their way.



We are proud that we helped Olympic National Park keep this sweet trail on the map. It makes a lovely loop with the relatively new lakebed trail, a place where you can see all the revegetation including the amazing sea of lupines! They bloom usually in mid-May so take a trip up there to enjoy the beauty and the amazing fragrance.