



Gray Wolf Trail Crew - in partnership with - BCHW, Peninsula Chapter



Duckabush Trail, ONF

Stock access mitigation

Report by Rebecca Wanagel

Crew members

1/31/26 – 18 hours
Martin Knowles
Rick King
Rebecca Wanagel

2/12/26 – 9 hours
Martin

2/13/26 – 27 hours
Martin
Rick
Rebecca

2/15/26 – 16 hours
Martin
Rebecca

2/24/26 – 24 hours
Martin
Paul Kamps
Randy Kraxberger

3/22/26 – 27 hours
Martin
Rebecca
Rodney Lemay

3/30/26 – 21 hours
Martin
Rebecca
Eric Nagle

Quick Stats

On-trail volunteer hours: 142
Hours including travel time: 204
Miles worked: 6
Trail rating: hiker / stock

Backstory

This was a big push to, once and for all, mitigate some serious stock access issues on the Olympic National Forest portion of the Duckabush (it becomes Olympic National Park at 6.5 miles). This section was the victim of a human-caused fire, called Big Hump Fire, in 2011. It was a ground, rather than a crown fire, so the soil was burned away leaving a very rocky trail with little to no soil in the burn zone. Dozens of trees continue to fall every year.

Stock access past Five-Mile camp (specifically past "Claire's Rock" which is at 5.5 miles) has been non-existent for many years - maybe since the fire? Stock safety even getting that far has been sketchy. We have had our tools packed in many times by BCHW volunteers, but all tools and supplies were dropped at Five-Mile camp. Everything then had to be schlepped nearly two miles to the start of the work and first camp. Worse, at the end of the trip, everything had to be hefted back to the pickup location, but by that point the tools are well beyond Ten-Mile Camp. Olympic National Park crews have not worked up the Duckabush for many years due to stock access problems. Packers who have transported our gear mentioned many times the multiple safety issues.

I showed these problem areas to Brent Freeman, Olympic National Forest Recreation Shed Manager, and he was able to get permission to have the rock blasted on a couple of the worst trouble spots. That was scheduled for October 2025, but then the government shutdown happened. Meanwhile, in the fall of 2024 the ONP packers took a hike to give it a pro's eye as to what the stock access issues were. Heidi Brill, lead packer, wrote up a detailed report with pictures. I shared that report with Al Mashburn, volunteer WTA crew leader who leads at least two multi-day crews on the ONF Duckabush every year. His crews fixed many of the issues - done excellently! There were several left. Some of them were slippery rock problems, others were encroaching trees.

ONP is planning on sending up several crews this year to do some backlog maintenance on this trail - even more critical now that the N. Fork Skokomish trail is burned and the access to the East Fork Quinault / Graves Creek trailhead is closed. The GWTC is also going to work a week clearing logs from the ONP boundary west. It had become past time to fix the stock access issues.

Here is what we did (again, this was in addition to the expert work done by WTA in earlier seasons):

1. Removed maples from the upside of the tight switchbacks that were pack bumpers (they were growing curved into the trail). These were bumping packs hard enough that mules were in danger of slipping off the soft shoulder of the steep and unstable switchbacks.
2. Made a short slick rock section right below Snack Rock safer. A fall in this spot would likely be catastrophic. Packers mentioned this area many times.
3. Did major improvement to the slippery bedrock just above Snack Rock. This was an area that had smooth, outsloped, perpetually wet and slippery bedrock. There was no way to gain any purchase; hooves were scrabbling all over. At least one horse fell with its rider here in the past. It was nerve wracking watching a pack string go over this.
4. Shortly before Five-Mile camp there was a large rotten fir that ran parallel to the trail at about shoulder height. Packs had bumped it so many times the bark was worn off. We removed that.
5. Made it possible and safe for pack stock to get around the corner at Claire's Rock without the animals getting bumped off into the river below (**NOTE: THIS SPOT IS THE REASON NO PACKERS WOULD GO BEYOND - A FALL HERE WOULD BE CATASTROPHIC AND THE LIKELIHOOD WAS EXTREMELY HIGH**). The rock on a sharp corner, which was on a cliff above the river, was jutting way into the too-narrow trail. It was impossible for the pack boxes to not hit the rock and the river is about 30 feet below at this point.
6. Just past that corner, improved footing for the animals on a short but slippery rock hill that didn't have good hoof placement.
7. On the traverse above Claire's Rock, for 30 feet we knocked the rock wall back to make more room for packs so the animals don't get bumped off.



I asked Harold Wiese, one of our amazing volunteer packers, to walk over to look at Claire's rock for his opinion. He agreed that this was not a spot safe to pack through. This is looking downriver. Two "before" pictures, one has a hiking pole for reference.



It's hard to capture tread and rock problems in pictures. You just don't get the depth and perspective. Suffice to say, this was the corner that was a no-go for anyone who packed us in for work crews. The fall to the river below is a good 30 feet and the rock jutted out so far it would be impossible for pack boxes not to hit and push the animal to the edge. The drop after the corner was just as bad, leaving no way to get down to the river level safely.

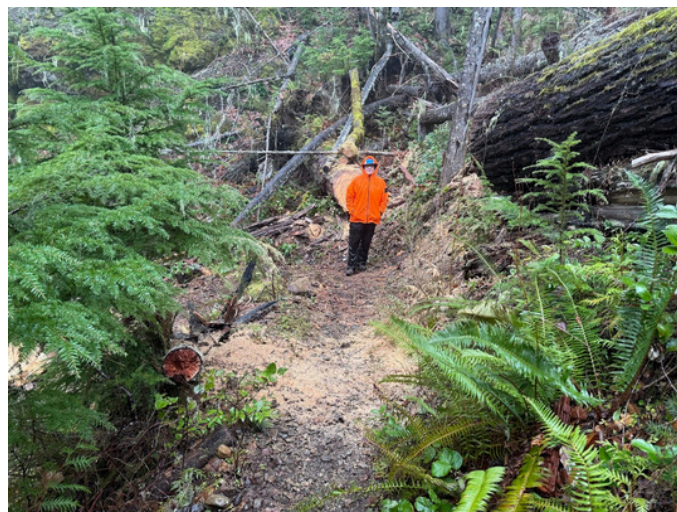


We are holding our arms out with a tool extending our reach to show how much clearance there is now. We feel like there is enough clearance for the stock to pass through safely.

This section, known as "Claire's Rock" (sadly named after a horse who took a fall here) is 5.5 miles from the trailhead. Working on this required an 11 mile round trip hike. Up and over Big Hump each way. We put more time into hiking to the jobsites than actually working!



There were several maples on the uphill side of the trail on the tight switchbacks heading up to "Snack Rock." They were growing tilted outwards, which bumps pack boxes. The switchbacks are on unstable soil with soft shoulders. An easy place for an animal to take a fall.



This was the large doug fir that was parallel to the trail at about shoulder / head height. The trail does a switchback right behind Martin in the orange coat. You can see where the bark has been knocked off by pack bags / boxes as packers came around the corner. The logs you see laid perpendicular were ones we placed there as skid logs. The target log was going to roll right into the trail, which is troughed. We decided to help the log help itself get off the trail down below the switchback.



It's hard to see what's going on here but this is a section just above "Snack Rock" that is about 40-ish feet long. It is smooth bedrock that is always wet (it seeps off the hill) and is outsloped. This spot was difficult for me to watch the pack string going over, sure that someone could fall. A fall in this section was less consequential than the other areas, but highly likely. After a pack string goes over, I can see dozens of scrapes on the rocks where the animals were trying to gain purchase with their hooves. We flattened it out, made it wider and easier to ramp on or off, depending on the direction of travel.





Section just below Snack Rock. Before and after, looking downriver. A fall here would be extremely high consequence. Some packers / riders have refused to come back to the Duckabush based on this spot alone.



Before and after, looking upriver. On the rock projects, we finish by delineating the downhill edge of the trail with piles of rocks. This is to encourage the horses / mules to stay to the uphill side. It makes the direction of desired travel more obvious.



This is the traverse up above Claire's Rock. A long ways above the river, with an extremely steep hillside. This is the after picture. For 30 feet we knocked the rock back anywhere from a few inches to a foot or more. I walked this section afterwards with an outstretched arm and a tool and did not hit the rock anywhere. Before, it was much tighter and more conducive to pack bumping with a high consequence fall waiting below.

So what's next?

On May 23, Martin and Rebecca will go back up the Duckabush. This time with Harold Wiese, Rachael Taylor-Tuller and Matthew Tuller. Harold and the Tullers, our masterful volunteer BCHW packers, will bring their animals and ride the trail, checking each and every area that we worked to see if it's up to safety specs or if it needs a little more work. If more work is deemed necessary, we will do it right then until it meets the standards of the people who know best ... the packers.

After that, work can get done on the Duckabush by the GWTC and ONP crews ... getting supplies packed far beyond the traditional stopping point of Five-Mile Camp.



For your viewing pleasure. This is a delightful place to camp or just take a break, about 14 miles up the Duckabush Trail. It's where Crazy Creek dumps into the Duckabush from the south side of the river. The eddying of the water over eons carved out the rocks and caused this enchanting scene.