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

West Elwha Trail, ONP
Puncheon removal project
September 12, 2026
Report by Rebecca Wanagel

Crew members

Jack Bochsler
Kellie Creamer
Mike Forsyth
Martin Knowles
Grey Mercer
Eric Nagle
Bear Pearcy
Cricket Pomeroy
Gwen Scott
Mark Subbotin
Rebecca Wanagel

Quick Stats
On-trail volunteer hours: 55
(includes getting to the job site from the trailhead)
Hours including travel time: 83
Length of puncheon dismantled: 84 ft
Trail rating: hiker / stock

Objectives:

1. Dismantle and properly dispose of extremely old, rotten puncheon - 84 feet.
2. Touch up the tread on the reroute we built in May, if necessary.

Achieved:

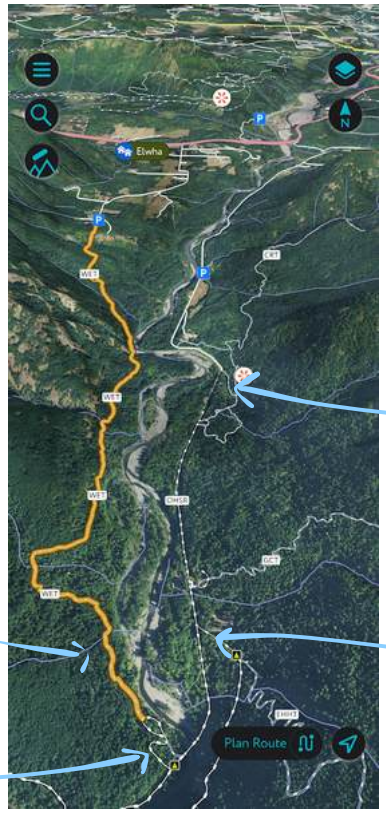
1. Puncheon was successfully torn apart, fasteners all removed, wood tossed randomly into the surroundings (out of view).
2. Tread touchup not needed! We examined the tread we built in May and it had hardened up over the summer very nicely. It was in great shape!

You've read about us working on the West Elwha Trail many times before. This project was just under a half mile uptrail from the old Altaire campground.

Some of us used our bikes on the old Olympic Hotsprings road, pushing them over the rough bypass trail, and then parked them at Altaire to hike to the site. Some walked the whole way.

Approximate site location.

Old Altaire Campground.



Madison Falls parking.

Olympic Hotsprings Road





We start by putting aside the brush we had thrown over it back in May so people would start using the new reroute. Then remove the bullrails and start the process of carrying everything with fasteners still attached over to the fastener removal department.




Why remove the fasteners? Because we would be tossing all the old wood to disperse it back to nature in the surrounding fern and salmonberry forest. There is no way we would leave these dangerous spikes sticking out for some poor unsuspecting chipmunk or other critter to injure themselves. None of the old wood was pressure treated - it will all decompose.



We were joking about what we might find under those planks that have been there for many decades. Money? Treasure? All we found was two old beer bottles, which we packed out.



Some of the wood was more awkward to carry.





Our West Elwha Trail Angel, Bobbie Stoneman, treated us again to a huge pan of homemade sweet rolls, coffee, tea and even milk or cocoa for our coffee! Bobbie hiked these treats in from the upper trailhead, 3 miles each way, and the rolls were still hot. This is such a treat for a hard working crew.





Bobbie took the time to teach Gwen how to set the axe at the edge in line with the spike, then turn the wood over, lift the plank and bring it down on the axe - it drives up and splits the old cedar to release the spike. That helped speed up the process!





We utilized many methods of getting the spikes out - depending on the size of the wood it was buried in. Axe. Sawzall. Splitting. Punching through ...





Our crew does not realize its own strength. We managed to break the head off the demo bar! So that made us switch to Plan B - made up on the spot. We would now cut one side of the planks with the battery chainsaw we had brought, and then wrench the plank off the other stringer. We could only do that because they were so rotten. Turns out this method was faster! Who knew?





That left blocks on top of the stringers on one side, which we were able to knock off with an axe and then pull out the spikes.













Once the puncheon was gone, we “decommissioned” the pathway it left behind. Meaning we threw a whole bunch of natural debris into the pathway. Ideally what it needs is for a few dozen ferns to be transplanted into the path. This was not the day for that, maybe over the winter.



What to do with these old spikes? Well, there was probably 50-60 pounds of them, so we didn’t want to carry them out. I got a hold of the ONP packer, Heidi Brill, and she readily agreed to come in with a mule later this week to get them. I’m sure they will be recycled. For now we hid them behind a tree.

This crew was absolutely amazing. When we first started, I was thinking we might not even finish today and need to come back another day. I mean, really, 84 feet of old rotten puncheon? But no ... even with our sweet roll / coffee break AND the fact that we had to get to the jobsite from 3 miles away ... we were packing up to leave by 12:15!

A final note on puncheon

Puncheon (otherwise known as boardwalk by some) is supposed to be used only as a last resort when the terrain is simply too wet for anything else to work. Puncheon, or any wooden structure on a trail, requires maintenance and eventually it rots or gets broken by a falling tree (which happened to this one, multiple times). This puncheon had been rotten for so long that it was a hazard even to hikers, never mind the horses that simply could not use it. The reroute we did, which allowed us to get rid of this puncheon, turns this trail back into a stock trail. There are two more projects we will do, probably this winter, to mitigate semi-hazardous spots. But otherwise, the entire trail is open again to horse riders.

And what a lovely trail it is.