

BRIDGE Is BACK

■ Wallowa-Whitman National Forest and the volunteer Wallowa Mountains Hells Canyon Trail Association built a bridge on a trail near Wallowa Lake where hikers have had to make a dangerous creek crossing since a storm destroyed the previous bridge in 2002

By Jayson Jacoby
Baker City Herald

There was a big problem on the trail at BC Creek, on the edge of the Eagle Cap Wilderness near Wallowa Lake.

Fortunately the solution was standing right beside the fast-flowing mountain stream.

And it was big, too. Fixing the problem required toppling several tons of Douglas-fir in dangerously steep terrain and then wrestling the obstinate mass into place.

All this in a spot where winter is the longest season.

Little wonder that constructing a new bridge across BC Creek, along the Chief Joseph Mountain trail, spanned parts of two years.

The single-log bridge, with hefty rails on each side, was finished Saturday, May 22.

Its completion gives hikers an easier, and safer, route to one of the grandest vistas in the Wallowas, from the

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— Russ West, chairman, Wallowa Mountains Hells Canyon Trails Association

shoulder of Chief Joseph Mountain.

John Hollenbeak, trails coordinator on the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest, was involved from the start, wielding the chain saw that brought down that massive Douglas-fir in August 2020, among other tasks.

He said the job, despite its difficulties, “worked out as good or better than I’d hoped.”

The project also epitomized the sort of public-private partnership that has become increasingly important in maintaining trails and bridges in Northeast Oregon’s vast backcountry, including



Russ West/Contributed Photo

Volunteers from the Wallowa Mountains Hells Canyon Trails Association had a work day on May 22 to finish a bridge across BC Creek on the west side of Wallowa Lake. The previous bridge over the creek, along the Chief Joseph Mountain trail, washed away in 2002, creating a potentially dangerous trail crossing.

the Eagle Cap Wilderness, Oregon’s largest at 365,000 acres.

“It was a huge collaborative effort between the Forest Service and the Trails Association,” Hollenbeak said.

The Association in this case is the Wallowa Mountains Hells Canyon Trails Association.

The Association’s executive director, Rick Bombaci, applied for the grant through Travel Oregon that paid for the lumber, metal hardware and other material needed to transform a log into a bridge.

And about 15 members of the volunteer group hauled materials up a mile and a half of trail or did other tasks during the project, said Russ West, the Association’s chairman.

“It was a great project,

something that will benefit the community,” West said. “It’s a high-use area, and a very scenic trail.”

The washout

The Chief Joseph Mountain trail has long been a popular hiking route, in part because of that aforementioned view, but also because the trail is easy to get to.

The route starts at the Forest Service trailhead just south of Wallowa Lake. Hikers follow the West Fork Wallowa River trail, which leads to the Lake Basin, Ice Lake and other popular wilderness destinations, for about a third of a mile before branching off onto the Chief Joseph Mountain trail.

That trail contours along a steep slope that rises above Wallowa Lake.

About a mile and a half from the trailhead, the trail crosses BC Creek, the biggest stream draining the east side of Chief Joseph Mountain.

Just upstream from the trail, the creek plunges down a series of rocky steps, a waterfall long popular with sightseers and photographers.

The best view of the falls happens to be just about the middle of the stream. This was an easy place to reach.

Until July 18, 2002.

On that day a cloudburst transformed BC Creek into a torrent of mud, rocks and debris that swept away the bridge spanning the stream.

The same storm spawned a mudslide that destroyed the dining hall of the Boy Scout camp near Wallowa Lake.



Russ West/Contributed Photo

Randi Jandt of the Wallowa Mountains Hells Canyon Trails Association attaches a rail to the new bridge spanning BC Creek on the Chief Joseph Mountain Trail near Wallowa Lake on May 22, 2021.

The destroyed bridge was no flimsy structure, Hollenbeak said.

The 56-foot-long bridge was a traditional design, with parallel stringers and planks about seven feet long. The bridge was designed to accommodate horses as well

as hikers, he said.

The flotsam that plucked the bridge loose also damaged the roots of an old Douglas-fir on the north bank of the creek — the tree destined to bridge the stream.

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Interested in volunteering?

You can find out more about the Wallowa Mountains Hells Canyon Trails Association at its website, www.wmhcta.org. The Association also has a Facebook page and Instagram feed that has photos of recent projects.



Russ West/Contributed Photo

From left to right, Mary West, John Hollenbeak, Jon Larsen, Shawn Gorham, Joey Van Leuven, Russ West and Randi Jandt stand on the new bridge they helped to build across BC Creek, on the Chief Joseph Mountain trail near Wallowa Lake.

ODFW reminder: baby animals best left in the wild

■ Biologists say that in most cases deer fawns, elk calves and other newborn animals are safe, their mother nearby foraging for food

SALEM — The Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife (ODFW) reminds people that deer fawns, elk calves and other baby animals that might appear to be abandoned almost always are not, and that it’s best to leave young wildlife alone.

Memorial Day weekend marks the start of the birthing season for Oregon’s elk and deer herds. Elk calves and deer fawns are born from late May through mid-June.

Fawns and calves are most vulnerable to predation in their first few weeks of life when they can’t run with the herd. Their mothers will hide them in brush and go off to forage for food some distance away, sometimes for long periods so as

to not call attention to their young, according to a press release from ODFW.

A fawn or calf’s spotted coat helps camouflage them as they stay motionless except when nursing. They also have very little odor as another protection against attracting predators.

But each year, well-intentioned people mistake a young fawn or calf hidden by its mother as permanently abandoned or orphaned and remove it from the wild to “save” it. Instead, this action drastically reduces its chance to survive in the wild. When removed from the wild, the animal misses the chance to learn where to seek cover, what to

eat and how to escape from predators and other dangers, according to ODFW.

“Sadly, we see dozens of fawns and calves that have their lifespan drastically shortened each year because people don’t understand they aren’t actually orphaned,” said Brian Wolfer, ODFW wildlife program manager. “Please never assume a calf, fawn or other young animal is orphaned. Don’t remove it from the forest, or your backyard.

When wildlife biologists get the call that someone has picked one up, the advice is always the same: put it back.



Greg Yamada/Contributed Photo

See **Babies**/Page 3B Twin mule deer fawns in Sunriver.