



Jan Keil of Imbler works one end of the crosscut saw and Miles McFall of Joseph guides the other, while Brent Lewis of La Grande drives a wedge into the cut so the saw won't bind.

KEEPING TRAILS OPEN

Volunteers from Wallowa and Union Counties maintain the trails on public lands

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The La Grande Observer

The next time you go for a walk in the woods—specifically on a U.S. Forest Service Trail in the Eagle Cap Wilderness or Hells Canyon—you might consider pausing at one of those big, fallen trees that used to block the trail and silently thank the hard-working volunteers from Wallowa and Union Counties who keep the trails open. Without their efforts, and a supporting cast of horses, mules, volunteer pilots and other team members, those trails would likely be cluttered with prickly brush, big logs and ankle-rolling rocks. But thanks to the Wallowa Moun-

tains Hells Canyon Trails Association (WMHCTA) and their partners, your horseback ride will be hazard-free, and you won't have to vault over logs, trip over displaced stones, or squeeze thru brambles on your next iPhone-powered, music-infused trail run.

Wallowa Mountains Hells Canyon Trails Association's members are dedicated to keeping mountain and canyon trails open and historic sites accessible to hikers and horsemen. Last year their 73 members cleared a total of 89 miles of trails, including most of the 40-mile long Minam River Trail, removing 398 trees and brush to make the trip—all or part—easy for people and stock. They also cleared the historic blackberry-choked, poison ivy-infested and shrub-tangled ancient trail from Dug Bar to the Chinese Massacre Site on Deep Creek. USFS Trail 1726 between two of Wallowa County's most historic locations had in many places become impassible. It took three days for nine vol-



Photos by Ellen M Bishop

Jim Akenson of Enterprise and Hanley Jenkins of Union pack into Red's Horse Ranch to start a few days of work clearing the Minam Trail and Little Minam Trail with other volunteers.

unteers and two Forest Service employees to hack their way about two miles through what seemed an infinity of brambles. But now you can ride or walk from Dug Bar to Deep Creek—a journey that for years has been possible only via boat.

And as if re-establishing two historic trails was not enough, WMHCTA also began projects to renovate the Lick Creek Guard Station and the bridge over BC Creek on the Chief Joseph Trail, both of which are slated for completion in 2019.

This summer, WMHCTA set its summer priorities on clearing trails that lead from the Minam River Trail into the high Wallows and also connect the Minam and Little Minam Rivers with the trails at Moss Springs Trailhead, east of Cove. With USFS approval, they are basing their work out of historic Red's Horse Ranch on the Minam, as well as camps near Splash Dam Meadow and the confluence of the Minam and North Minam, clearing another 30 miles of trails 1673 (Minam River Trail), 1675 (North

Minam Trail) and 1901, (Little Minam River Trail) and 1928 (Rock Springs Trail).

Why devote all this time to clearing up trails in the forest? Russ and Mary West of Imbler packed into Red's Horse Ranch as part of the multi-county Minam team. "The main purpose is to try to get the trails on Minam safe," Mary West said. "They probably needed to be done 10 or 15 years ago. And anyone who has been up there would agree."

Former Union County planner Hanley Jenkins has been involved with the WMHCTA, and like everyone else on the team worked hard to clear the trails. "If you don't maintain them (the trails) they get worse and worse," he said. "They become impassible, which has happened. When it does, people will go around, which causes more resource damage."

And as WMHCTA board member and treasurer Holly Akenson of Enterprise pointed out, "Many of those involved with the association are active users of these trails and saw nothing will

change unless we do something to change it. We all agree we want to see it in usable shape."

She noted that easy-to-use trails are important for emergencies and having access in case someone is hurt or lost. Plus trails are a big part of our tourism. "People assume the trails are cleared, but those who are local know that isn't true."

Veteran pilots Bill Ables and Doug Fremont flew in supplies and some volunteers to Red's. Packer Steve Morris, of Wallowa Mountain Packers, volunteered his time and stock to scout the trail to the North Minam, and then bring in supplies and volunteers for this rougher portion of the project. And a number of volunteers, including WMHCTA Board Chair Jim Akenson of Enterprise, Russ and Mary West of Imbler, and Brent Lewis of La Grande, hitched up their own pack strings, saddled their mules, and rode into their assigned trail to help.

These trails are all within the Eagle Cap Wilderness, where non-motorized equipment is required. "We're using all hand tools," Jim Akenson said. "Crosscut saws, hand saws, pulaskis, axes, shovels, in compliance with the wilderness policy." For many, the chance to use

hand tools takes them back to a more traditional slower time, when hard work was the essence of being in the woods.

Access is by foot—two feet or four feet. Trails must be cleared to U.S.F.S. standards: four feet on both sides of the trail centerline. Overhanging branches that might interfere with a rider must be removed. Smaller trees that lean into the trail are cut. Especially where forest health problems have created many dead trees, meeting this requirement is labor intensive.

But the volunteers based at Red's and on the North Fork were up to the task. On Saturday, they cleared 62 trees from the Minam River Trail 1673. And for the remainder of this week, teams brandishing crosscut saws, axes, Slick saws, and pruning tools are working to clear the trails to specs. "We expect to have more than 24 volunteers on the projects this week," Akenson said.

Support for this effort comes from a slim U.S.F.S. cost-share budget that provides per diem for food and mileage for the distance from the nearest Forest Service station or office to the trailhead. Other funds—the Wallowa County Hotel Motel tax provides some equipment, and a Cycle Oregon grant supports volunteers' food and travel. But those funds don't stretch very far. "Our organization provides the Forest Service with about four times the value of the funds they give us," said WMHCTA Treasurer Holly Akenson. "We keep track of the time, travel, materials—of everything we do." Akenson estimated that the total value of services of volunteers probably exceeds \$100,000 each year.

But for many back-country hikers, riders, and hunters, the work done by these volunteers from Union and Wallowa Counties is truly invaluable. "It's truly a unique place," said volunteer Jan Keil. "Just being here is inspiring. But keeping these historic trails open is really special."

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ATHLETE OF THE WEEK

Jim Akenson

This week's athlete of the week honor goes to Jim Akenson, board president, head coach and trainer of the Wallowa Mountains Hells Canyon Trails Association. Akenson led a crew of WMHCTA on a weekend excursion to clear a number of trails adjacent to the Minam River. Besides packing and riding mules, Akenson trains club members in tool use and sets the example by his hard work.

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