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Eye on the Environment

## Opening Swan Front Trails

By Mike Childs, Backcountry Ranger

As any hiker or backcountry horseperson knows, it is a big fat pain in the neck to encounter a bunch of blown down trees or slide rocks littering the trail. One expects the occasional hazard. However turning around, spending the day sawing out, or crawling over and around trail obstructions can spoil a person's weekend. After all, a trail is supposed to be an efficient way to access a distant stream, lake, or secluded retreat—not be an ordeal!

Every May and June when the snow sufficiently recedes, trail opening begins in earnest. Forest Service trail crews, outfitters, and back country rangers like myself strive to make travel into the wilderness possible, safe, and as enjoyable as we can. Each group has the same tasks and goals, but we tackle the issues differently.

For starters, I contract with the Swan Ecosystem Center and, aside from occasional volunteer assistance, work alone. My dogs Cooper and Roxy tag along this time of year, but they only divert the attention of thousands of blood-hungry mosquitoes and ward off ferocious mother grouse who “attack” to protect their chicks!

The job description seems uncomplicated: remove all trees, debris, and rocks over one inch in diameter to a distance of three feet in each direction from the center of the trail. Also I'm to cut away dangerous overhead “deadfalls” which wind might easily dislodge. Luckily my territory encompasses the Swan Front from the Gordon trail number thirty-five to Lion Creek trail number twenty-five. I maintain these and all the trails in between from their trailheads to the Bob Marshall Wilderness

boundary and so I can use mechanical means to do my job, namely a chain saw! The problem of course is how to transport the saw and other equipment from one blow down to the next.

Trial and error led me to adapt my old Camp Trails Freighter pack that I use in the fall to haul elk quarters. It has a ledge which accepts the bulk of the saw and I use a Bungee chord to keep the tool snugly in place. I toss the straps of my Kelty back pack over the top two posts of the Freighter and I'm off.

Completely loaded, the packs, saw, and accessories weigh thirty-two pounds—not all that much compared with a fully loaded backpack. What wears on a person is the continual taking off and putting on the gear which might occur thirty or forty times during a ten hour day. With all that stop and go I'm like a car that gets less gas mileage in the city than on the highway!

As you might expect, not all trees fall the same way nor are all days similar. To accommodate the expected and unexpected, I throw these items in my back pack: a raincoat, sunscreen, mosquito repellent, a flashlight, water, toilet paper, a plastic wedge, a chainsaw wrench/screwdriver, a lunch, ear protectors, matches, a first aid kit, a digital camera, a cell phone, and bear spray.

Additionally I rely on a light axe, Asolo hiking boots, Superfeet inserts for the boots, and Smartwool hiking socks. On cool days, a wool shirt, Tilly wide-brimmed hat, blue jeans, and work gloves complete my outfit.

For me, opening a trail is often like renewing a friendship. Although I've forgotten a few parts of the pathway, the green leaves, fresh aromas of wildflowers, and the ubiquitous peace and quiet welcome me back. Forced to be outside, I take solace in the sight of newborn whitetail fawns scuttling along with their ears drooping like little beagles, the changing shades of grey in the rain clouds as the sun fades from sight and then reappears.

Alteration is everywhere—more beargrass here, higher water there, and an uprooted tree forces a slight alteration of trail tread. Later with shovel and Pulaski I'll make a second pass over the trail and dress up the mess. Although more light this time of year gives me plenty of energy to accomplish the job, not all is

perpetually hunky dory. The aforementioned mosquitoes annoy, wood ticks pester, even if it's not raining wet brush soaks my pant legs making each step heavier. Some days trail opening seems like doing the dishes. Didn't I just clean up this section last year?

Then the stick I'm using to sweep small branches from the trail breaks or I find a limb-filled fir stretched the length of the path instead of across it. Shucks! Oh well, despite the physical and mental aches and pains, Roxy and Cooper buoy me with their enthusiasm.

At the end of the work day we usually hike out satisfied with the effort. Just last week, for example, some volunteers and I finished sawing out Smith Creek in time to see four riders head up the trail. Their joyful chatter and the sound of the horse's hooves reminded me of the value of my work. It's a good feeling.

Also if I start to feel sorry for myself I have only to think of the wilderness crews who must remove blow down with a cross cut saw. Then there was last year when wet ground, a June snowfall, and wind resulted in more than two hundred trees falling over trails I had already cleared! Ouch. At least that hasn't happened in 2009.

However, the biggest problem to face trail area crews this year is avalanche damage. On January tenth the Missoulian newspaper issued avalanche warnings saying, "Some wind-packed slopes in the Rattlesnake Wilderness are particularly primed for trouble as they rest on larger-than-usual ice crystals near the ground that could act like ball bearings."

Heavy worm snow and high winds added to the problem and such conditions were apparently prevalent along the Swan Front too. At least three big snow slides hit the Lion Creek trail, cluttering it with scores of trees and scouring away many yards of trail. Four or five avalanches covered hundreds of yards of the Gordon trail with dirt, trees, and debris. And the Foothills trail 192 recorded two massive slides as well.

So, as you contemplate your hike or trail ride in the Swan Valley area, please consider the pleasures and pains of opening our trails here and call ahead to be advised as to which trails are open and clear. The telephone number at the Swan Ecosystem Center is 754-3137. We who

open the trails are working hard to please our visitors, but this year Nature requires both diligence on our part and extra patience from you all. Thank you in advance and as always, Happy Trails!