



- Scott Condon / The Aspen Times

Fixing an Aspen fourteener

Trail crew lives and works above 10,000 feet to reroute trail on North Maroon Peak

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ASPEN — By the time the sun rolls over the eastern ridge high above the Maroon Creek Valley in these waning days of summer, the members of a trail crew already have worked up a sweat in the cool mountain air.

Half of the 12 workers have a large rock in a sling one recent morning. They cannot use motorized or mechanized tools because they are in the Maroon Bells-Snowmass Wilderness, roughly 11 miles southwest of Aspen. They coordinate lifting and moving the rock a few feet at a time over a hodgepodge talus slope with precarious footing. The rock is perfect for use as a step on a high mountain trail.

The seven women and five men of the crew are all between ages 21 and 25. They have been in Minnehaha Gulch for five weeks, living and working above 10,000 feet. They are rerouting about one mile of the trail up North Maroon Peak, one of the iconic Maroon Bells. The old trail, in use for decades, goes straight up the fragile tundra. Hikers must claw their way up two particularly tough sections: one steep section where the earth has been pounded by thousands of footsteps over the years, forming little steps framed by tree foots; the other being a scramble up a jagged granite ledge that requires careful selection of hand and foot holds to climb about 12 feet.

The U.S. Forest Service in partnership with Colorado Fourteeners Initiative has planned the reroute for years. Now two project managers from the Initiative and a 10-member crew from Rocky Mountain Youth Corps are turning the plans into reality with tough 10-hour days.

They haul rocks from an inconspicuous quarry site to build a 300-foot retaining wall along the new trail section. They use 6-foot-long pry bars to move massive rocks into place for a 67-step staircase. They use small sledge hammers to break up granite rocks into smaller pieces between the sections that require steps.

The crew has created a rough cut of the trail from the sweat of their brows. “For the most part, we’ve followed the blueprint to a T,” said Miriam Venman-Clay of Vermont, one of the two Colorado Fourteeners Initiative project managers.

“We’ve built this entire trail in five weeks,” she said with obvious pride in the crew’s performance. “We have to tie it up in four more weeks.”

They camp in a cluster of spruce and fir trees at about 10,200 feet. They are up at 4 a.m. or so, eat a hearty breakfast and hike a short distance up the mountainside to go about their work by 5 a.m. They work in some of the most spectacular terrain in the Maroon Bells-Snowmass Wilderness. The red rock of the Maroon Bells area surrounds them, jagged peaks in all directions. Minnehaha Gulch continues to climb to the north, to Willow Pass and, just out of view, Buckskin Pass. They work above 10,500 feet in elevation on North Maroon Peak.

“It can’t get better than this,” said Taylor Beeson, 24, a North Carolina native who graduated from college in May. Beeson and his work partner on this particular day, Lexi Evans, who turned 23 Wednesday, of Centennial, Colo., took a break from moving a heavy rock step into place to chat.

“We are in the most photographed peaks in the world,” Evans said. “It’s so overwhelmingly beautiful. I was de-sensitized at first.”

Now the setting is sinking in and she's absorbing the uniqueness of the experience after the pressure of college.

"I was really sick of studying and being stuck in a library for four years," said Evans, who also graduated in spring 2012. She was looking for a summer job where she could "kind of get away from society."

She likes camping and spending time outdoors but acknowledged it took her a week or so to adjust to camping while on the trail crew. "You think every sound you hear is a bear," she said.

But hard labor, day after day for weeks on end, helps a person sleep. The crew knocks off around 3 p.m. They prefer working earlier in the day on exposed slopes because of the frequent Rocky Mountain thunderstorms. The lightning hasn't materialized as much as usual this summer. The core of their camp is a large, canvas tent that is the kitchen. They have strung a huge tarp to create a shelter at the entrance.

They eat by 5 or 6 p.m., then hang out for a while in twilight and under the stars before diving into tents clustered around a large canvas cooking tent with a vast sheltered area covered with a tarp.

Beeson said he often crashes by 8 p.m. He estimated he's lost 10 to 15 pounds so far this summer, though they eat well. Typical dinners are veggie stir fry, burritos and enchiladas. Lunch is usually a couple of sandwiches, a couple pieces of fruit and granola bars. They haul in their food via backpack once per week.

Andy Smeby, Colorado Foutneers Initiative's other project manager, estimated they pack away 5,000 calories per day. "We eat a lot of bacon, a lot of butter," he said. It's not always the healthiest dining, but it allows them to handle the rigors of work and living outdoors at a high elevation, he said.

The crew's longest, consecutive hitch has been 10 days without a break. The shortest was five days.

Evans said she thought when she signed up with Rocky Mountain Youth Corps for trail crew duty that the work would mostly consist of cleaning up and maintaining trails. "It's been a lot more physically and mentally demanding than I thought," she said, adding that she's been told she's added muscle over the five weeks.

"My boyfriend can tell — so I guess that's good," she said with a laugh.

To a person, the crew looks lean and strong, with little body fat. A couple of the guys have burly beards. The pants, shirts and gloves of all the workers is torn and frayed from working with the rough granite.

Colorado Foutneers Initiative is a nonprofit organization dedicated to educating people about the ecological damage caused by heavy recreational use of the state's 54 peaks above 14,000 feet in elevation. The organization also repairs some of that damage by typically undertaking two to three trail projects per year.

North Maroon Peak suffers from "social trails" braiding through some ecologically sensitive areas. About 90 percent of the new route takes the trail through indestructible talus, Smeby said. It departs from and connects to the old trail by creating switchbacks where the old trail climbs straight up slope. He used various tools to scratch a path through a short section of dirt between patches of talus on a recent work day.

The 1-mile stretch of trail where the damage occurred will be closed during the week of Aug. 27 and it will be revegetated.

Although the difficulty of climbing the Maroon Bells peaks eases the amount of use, a Colorado Foutneers Initiative report still rated the trail reroute as a top priority among remaining projects on the big peaks. The report cited "the significant natural resource impacts it is experiencing, as well as the increasing rate of change."

The estimated budget for the North Maroon Peak Trail reroute was \$286,000. Future work is planned on adjacent Maroon Peak.

The Forest Service designs the projects with Colorado Foutneers Initiative's input. Agency officials have said partnerships with groups such as Colorado Foutneers Initiative are essential to taking care of the land in these cash-strapped days.

Colorado Foutneers Initiative's project managers are paid. The organization draws on volunteers and experienced trail crews from Rocky Mountain Youth Corps to get some of its jobs done.

Rocky Mountain Youth Corps hired 100 youth and young adults this summer to work primarily in northwest Colorado, according to associate director Mark Wertheimer. It filled 14 crews this year — five chainsaw crews that undertook fuels reduction projects to reduce wildfire risk and nine trails crews.

The crew members are between ages 16 and 25. Summer work starts in mid-June and extends to mid-August. Some crews, such as the one at North Maroon Peak, stay on duty into fall. Older participants are assigned to work on Colorado Foutneers Initiative projects because it usually requires more technical skills.

Returning or experienced Youth Corps workers are paid \$310 per week, Wertheimer said. Crew leaders earn \$500 per week. They are also eligible for an AmeriCorps Education Award, which provides varying amounts that can be applied to student loans or further educational endeavors. Working nine weeks with Rocky Mountain Youth Corps makes a person eligible for \$2,000 from AmeriCorps, Wertheimer said.

The true value of the service, he said, is development of leadership and life skills, Wertheimer said. Participants learn to be a team player, improve their communication skills and hone their work ethic, he said. Those interested in conservation-oriented jobs can “get a foot in the door” with nonprofits and public land management agencies because of their experience.

Lida Wise, 23, of Virginia, worked the prior two summers on chainsaw and trails crews and was hired this year by Rocky Mountain Youth Corps as a crew leader. “Being outside, being active and getting paid for it is perfect for me,” she said.

She eyes some type of career in conservation. This summer has expanded her technical skills and develop leadership.

“I’ve never really been in a leadership position before this summer,” she said. In addition to the obvious duties of helping coordinate specific jobs, a big part of the job has been boosting morale and mediating differences, Wise said.

By the time they finish their hitch, they will have spent nine weeks together, 24/7. Getting on one another's nerves occasionally is inevitable, though several crew members volunteer that this group gets along well. Rocky Mountain Youth Corps members sign a pledge not to partake of alcohol, tobacco or other drugs during their entire tenure, regardless of whether it is a work day or day off. They learn how to communicate “without social lubricants,” as Evans phrased it.

Only Evans and Josie Pacana of Steamboat Springs are from Colorado.

Rebecca Elderkin, 22, of Pittsburgh, Penn., is in Colorado for the first time. Assistant crew leader Amy Freund is from Wisconsin; John Wallace is from North Carolina; Adam Sillup is from Massachusetts; Jon Adams is from Pennsylvania; and Cassie Love is from Oregon.

The mornings are getting colder and the crew has the end of their hitch in sight. They will also have peace of mind of knowing they helped heal a scar on one of Colorado's 14ers.

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