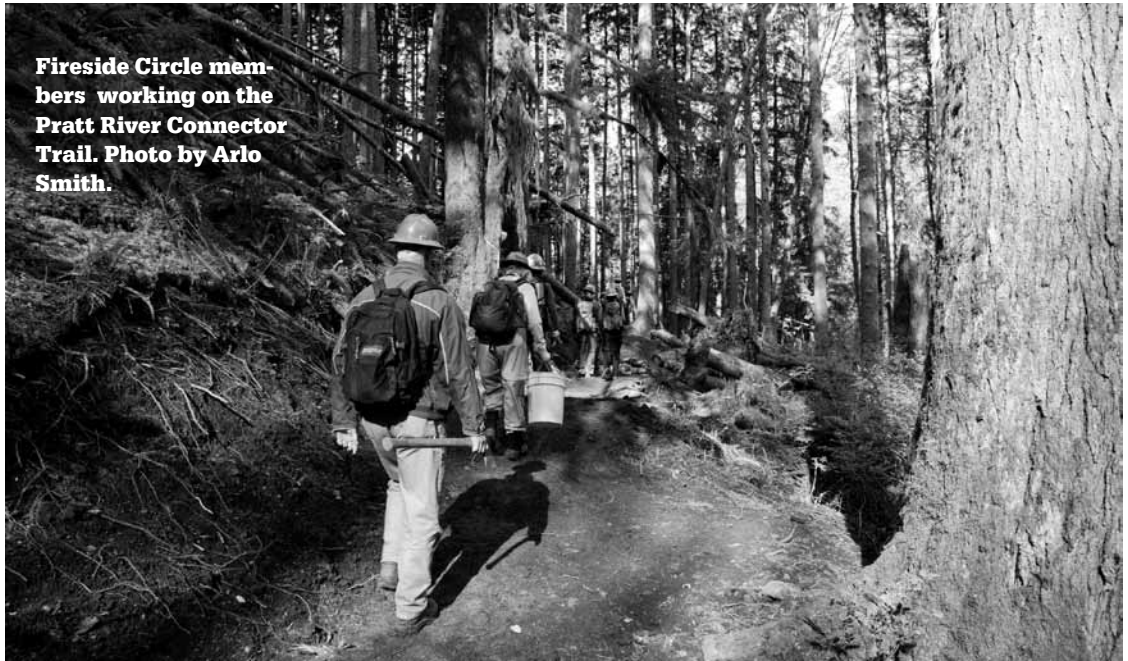


Trail Maintenance »

Getting the Highlights

The new guy gets the scoop on WTA's 2010 trail work projects

Fireside Circle members working on the Pratt River Connector Trail. Photo by Arlo Smith.



To see a map of each trail we worked on in 2010, visit www.wta.org/mapofwork.

This past fall, Washington Trails Association's trail maintenance program welcomed a new face when Mike Stenger joined us as our new trail programs director. Naturally, Mike had several questions for Diane Bedell, who'd held the position previously and now serves as our program development manager. Listen in as Diane takes Mike's questions and shares a few of the highlights of our program with him.

MS: What were the three most important projects for the trail maintenance program last year?

DB: Wow, Mike, that's like asking me to pick my favorite niece or nephew! Picking just the top three is going to leave a lot of great projects out, but if I have to choose, I'd say that the three signature projects that really stand out to me this year are the Pratt River Connector Trail, the Loowit Trail and the Robinson Creek Bridge project.

Our work on the Pratt River Connector Trail this year was simply amazing. We are working on restoring an old, old trail that essentially succumbed to the ravages of time and elements. We hosted nearly 50 work parties to carve out new trail along the Middle Fork Snoqualmie River, starting at the Middle Fork Bridge and heading south to the confluence at Rainy Creek. Our volunteers on this project

ranged in age from elementary school kids to eighty-year-old crew leaders. Being close to Seattle, the project drew many groups out. We saw folks from Boeing Alps and The Mountaineers. We had REI employees, students from Eastside Prep, a group of Korean mountaineers and many others. On this project, we also saw many first-time volunteers experience what it is like to come out and build a hiking trail. All told, our volunteers contributed more than 6,700 hours to this trail project alone.

And I have to pick the Loowit Trail, as 2010 was the thirtieth anniversary of Mount St. Helens' eruption and the Loowit—the "Round the Mountain" trail for Mount St. Helens—had suffered from years of benign neglect. It had been four years since WTA had worked on this trail, and it is very challenging terrain to work in: no shade, little water, lots of steep side slope and lots of access issues. Our southwest Washington program managed to work on several sections of trail through a series of Backcountry Response Teams (BCRTs). From my perspective this was a very successful project and meaningful to a number of WTA members. A trip report from a previous year described a section of the Loowit as "almost like an Indiana Jones movie where you have to run as the trail falls away behind you." WTA has done a lot to make sure this trail stays viable for hikers, and we're looking forward to continuing our good work there.



Diane Bedell

Program Development Manager
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I'll pick the Robinson Creek Bridge project as my third "most important" project, but like I said, it's hard to choose among so many worthy projects. The Robinson Creek project took one of our Volunteer Vacation crews into the Methow Valley to work on a primary access trail into the Pasayten Wilderness. This trail bridge emerged as a significant safety issue at the end of last winter. We sent a crew in to help the U.S. Forest Service move several 1,600-pound bridge stringers into place. This project was a special request from the Methow Valley Ranger District land manager, so we were happy to be able to help.

MS: I can imagine it's tough to choose just three. How about new locations? Did WTA work in any new places in 2010?

DB: You bet we did. Our first BCRT of the year was on the South Coast Wilderness Trail in Olympic National Park. We had a crew doing early season log-out, and we discovered lots more work for WTA in the process. Another crew took on work at Liberty Lake County Park in Spokane County this year. We've done some work with Spokane County before, but this was the first time we worked at Liberty Lake. And I'd be completely remiss if I left out the work we are doing on Guemes Mountain. This was the first time WTA has had any type of trail maintenance presence in the San Juan Islands. We are working with the Skagit Land Trust to build a new trail to the top of Guemes Island, and it's an ongoing project this winter.

MS: You've mentioned BCRTs a couple of times now. I know that stands for Backcountry Response Teams, but what are they and why are they so popular with our partners?

DB: Great question, Mike. Backcountry Response Teams are kind of a hybrid work party for us. They aren't full-blown Volunteer Vacations, but they are longer than a one-day work party. I think our partners like them so much because they operate a lot like a traditional trail crew that carries all its own gear and tools and can travel relatively quickly. They are well-suited for early-season log-outs or for places that it would be difficult to get gear into to support a Volunteer Vacation. We had some stellar BCRTs this year. One that comes to mind is the Devils Dome log-out, where a crew of six sawyers backpacked into the North Cascades, traveling

30 miles and cutting out over 60 trees. There is still plenty of work to do in this area, especially tread work. A couple more BCRTs will probably be the best way to handle the work here.

MS: Well, this all sounds like great work. Who leads all these work parties?

DB: WTA coordinates more than 670 work parties in a year, and who leads them can depend on where the work party is and what kind of trip it is.

We have two chief crew leaders on staff who sport their blue hard hats year-round. Mike Owens generally covers work parties within two hours of Seattle, while Arlen Bogaards handles work in the Bellingham region. In south-western Washington, Ryan Ojerio wears a blue hat and does a whole lot more.



Across the state, we are lucky to have a number of volunteer blue hats who can lead anything from one-day work parties to weeklong Volunteer Vacations. Our volunteer blue hat leadership is particularly helpful in Eastern Washington, on the Olympic Peninsula and in southwest Washington. Volunteers also lead the bulk of our BCRTs.

WTA hires a half dozen chief crew leaders each summer to help us make the most of that all-too-short season. These seasonal crew leaders rely heavily on our volunteer assistant crew leaders, our amazing "orange hats." Last year, more than 105 active assistant crew leaders helped us to effectively manage more than 2,300 volunteers. At our heart, we're a volunteer-driven organization, and we couldn't do quality trail work without the help of volunteers who lead crews. ♦

Take a Volunteer Vacation! Registration Opens February 7

Would you like camp out in the wilderness, cozy up with a crosscut saw and help fix a hiking trail? On a WTA Volunteer Vacation, you can do all that in one great week.

Starting on January 31, you can peruse the list of project locations online at www.wta.org. Registration will open on Monday, February 7. The wilderness awaits!



Welcome, Mike!

Mike Stenger joined WTA as trail programs director in October 2010.

Mike has spent the past two decades working with nonprofit organizations, land managers and volunteers on trail and environmental restoration projects. Prior to coming on board with WTA, Mike served as the trails program manager for the Mountains to Sound Greenway Trust for seven years, where he worked with WTA on many trail projects. In addition to his work at the Greenway, Mike has also worked on trail and volunteer projects for EarthCorps and the Student Conservation Association.

Mike knows the challenges that our trails face—wear and tear from escalating use, long-term financial uncertainties, the weather and more—and he is excited to join the WTA team. On his first day on the job, he said, "I can't think of a better response to these and other challenges than the trail maintenance programs found at WTA, and I'm delighted to have this opportunity to participate in guiding these efforts." ♦