

# A Tough Job

Mount Baker-Snoqualmie trails coordinator faces many challenges



BY CHRIS BELL

I finally caught up with Gary Paull at a Vietnamese restaurant in Mountlake Terrace. His face wore the expression of a person who is carrying a very heavy burden. I kept him at the table long enough to find out about the state of trails on the Mount Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest (MBSNF). He had a lot on his mind, so it required him to do a lot of talking during our meal.

As Wilderness and Trails Coordinator for MBSNF, Gary is responsible for ensuring that the trails on the west side of the Cascades—from the Canadian border to the northern edge of Mount Rainier National Park—are not only kept passable but are continually improved. There are at least three forces conspiring against him. Not necessarily in order of importance, they are: (1) the elements, (2) the federal budget, and (3) the slow pace of government process.

None of these forces is within his control, and after listening sympathetically to him over a bowl of noodles, I concluded that Gary and every other Forest Service employee who is dedicated to overseeing our system of trails faces a daunting task.

Two years ago this October, floods rushed through many of the major drainages on the west side of the North Cascades. Bridges disappeared, some of which have only recently been replaced. Big chunks of roads and trails



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Mount Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest's Wilderness and Trails Coordinator Gary Paull on a 2003 work party at Dishpan Gap. Dwindling budgets and ever-present trail damage are just a few of the challenges Gary deals with every day.

were swept away. The Pacific Crest Trail still remains closed on the west side of Glacier Peak due to catastrophic damage. Even though the floods of 2003 were an extraordinary event, each

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year always brings a new round of trail damage. Nature has an unpredictable way of rearranging the Forest Service trail maintenance schedule. This makes planning a risky activity, especially if you're trying to determine priorities for the upcoming year. For example, funds

that were appropriated to improve the Downey Creek Trail in the Darrington District cannot be spent, because the 2003 floods wiped out the access bridge. This is not an anomaly; many projects are delayed due to unscheduled natural calamities. Planning trail maintenance projects might better be left to fortune tellers who communicate with the weather gods.

If the vagaries of nature were the only problem faced by the Forest Service, then the task of caring for trails wouldn't be too nerve wracking. But slim budgets are a major concern for Forest Service personnel trying to keep our trails in good shape. During the heyday of logging, there was always money available to pay Forest Service trail

## TRAIL MAINTENANCE

maintenance crews. This is not true today. Federal funds for trails within the Forest Service's Region 6 (which covers the Pacific Northwest) have been significantly reduced over the past 10 years. According to Gary, without money collected from the Northwest Forest Pass, there would be almost no ability to provide maintenance services. Funds generated by the Northwest Forest Pass remain within Region 6, and are also used to leverage additional grants from sources outside the Forest Service, such as Non-Highway Off-Road Vehicle Activities (NOVA) funds, a portion of Washington state gas revenues dedicated to recreation projects.

Declining Forest Service budgets have also affected permanent staffing for trail maintenance operations. Experienced people are leaving the Forest Service, and are not being replaced. If this trend continues, the Forest Service will lose its most experienced and talented trail people. Organizations such as WTA have developed considerable skill in trail work, and are able to pick up some of the slack. But a volunteer trail crew is no substitute for full-time land management experts whose job is to represent and serve the public in the stewardship of our parks and forests.

In the meantime, the population of the state grows while the number of trail miles within the forest stagnates. Within the MBSNF, only a few new trails were added to the system during the 1990s, such as the Iron Goat and Baker Lake trails. Today less than a half mile of trail is added each year, and what is added generally involves the relocation of trails, such as the Mason Lake trail. Trying to reclaim trails, like the Pratt River Trail, is a difficult and lengthy process. This trail fell into disuse after a bridge across the Middle Fork of the Snoqualmie River left it without access. The reopening of the trail will depend, in part, upon the completion of a thorough environmental analysis, already several years in the making. If you are interested in seeing an example of just how many trail miles

have been lost in the last 50 years, find a copy of *Routes and Rocks, a Hiker's Guide to the North Cascades* by D. F. Crowder, and compare the book's trail descriptions with the fraction of those trails that exist on the ground today.

Finally, Gary is also frustrated by what he sees as apathy among hikers. Specifically, he's observed an unwillingness among hikers to take a stand on issues that directly affect their ability to get into the backcountry. One example: the Suiattle River Trail is an important access route into the Glacier Peak Wilderness. The October 2003 flood so damaged a portion of the trail that it is now impassable. The Forest Service has been engaged in a lengthy process to restore the trail, and part of this process involved an opportunity for public comment on the restoration plan. Public support for any proposed action by the Forest Service is important to the success of what they do, yet only six people filed comments on the Suiattle River Trail restoration plan. If, for example, only one negative comment was received out of the six, then it would carry a much greater weight than one out of dozens in support. Hikers and advocates for trails do have a voice in the decisions that the Forest Service makes, and Gary made it clear that all voices are heard when his office makes decisions about trail projects.

Our lunch was over. Gary was headed back to the Supervisor's Office, struggling with these and other problems. I left the restaurant thankful our region has someone like Gary tackling these issues. And thankful that WTA is there to assist him, through volunteer trail maintenance and advocacy for trails. Hikers really do make a difference in the quality of trails in this state, and those people who volunteer on work parties or who speak up for the interests of hikers and volunteers make an important contribution toward solving the many problems facing our trails.

Contact Chris Bell at [chris@wta.org](mailto:chris@wta.org).

## MEET OUR VOLUNTEERS!

### Loretta Knoke



As a crew leader there's nothing more pleasing than seeing Loretta Knoke's name attached to the roster for a Volunteer Vacation. You know you won't have to do any of the cooking or worry about how you're going to have to get back to camp dirty and tired and still come up with dinner for these volunteers. This is where Loretta shines. It is not uncommon to head up trail after a good breakfast and soon after see Loretta come up to lend a hand. A little after lunch she heads back to camp to start preparing the meal for the evening. Sometimes you'll have her homemade chili, and for dessert some nights it could be rhubarb crisp, brownies or another wonderful concoction.

Loretta has been working on trails and been the unofficial cook for WTA since Greg Ball told her husband Jim (a WTA long timer in his own right) that he could still come out and work as long as he brought his wife's baked goods. That took place sometime in 1998, and since then Loretta cooks on 3 to 4 weeklong trips a year, not including the annual Crew Leader Training held for our seasonal staff.

Because of her work on trails, her cooking and all the help with the shopping for the weeklongs, Loretta is certainly a valued part of WTA.

Thanks Loretta, for all you do... especially for the rhubarb crisp!