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# Six ways to volunteer in the White Mountains

By NICK REID  
Monitor staff

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To properly cover the nearly 800,000 acres of the White Mountain National Forest, the U.S. Forest Services relies on the help of more than a few volunteers.

Although many people have sought out their own fulfilling roles in the forest, at least one enterprising volunteer has taken it upon himself to better advertise the opportunities available.

Bill Tarkulich, a semi-retired volunteer with a background in marketing, said it's been harder than it should be to get "new blood."

"The root cause of the problem is the White Mountain National Forest people don't know how to ask for help, honestly," he said. "So I started out volunteering in one position, and then it became very obvious very quickly they were hurting all over and could use a lot of volunteer help."

Tarkulich pegged the need at about 100 volunteers forest-wide. He articulated six positions in which everyday people would be qualified to help – but he also added that anyone can bring his or her unique skills to a self-carved niche in the forest.

Here are six volunteer roles available in the White Mountains:

## **Trail adopter**

Trail adopters assume the responsibility for basic maintenance on a specified trail or segment of trail.

Their work includes digging waterbars – a drainage structure that redirects water off the lower edge of the trail – cutting brush and clearing blowdowns. They must file two trail maintenance reports annually in June and September.

Bruce Richards, who is a coordinator for the trail adopter program, said he used to point fingers when he saw deficiencies on the trail. But then he took over and started doing the work himself.

“Doing trailwork not only gives us a chance to give back, but it’s also a wonderful opportunity to make improvements to something with a wonderful sense of accomplishment at the end of the day,” he said. “You’ve done something, you’ve made the improvements, and it’s there for all.”

Richards said there are about 70 trail adopters already – who either care for a trail themselves or as part of a team – but there are still dozens of trails that need help.

Shelters and tent sites can also be adopted.

### **Visitor information services**

Volunteers are also needed to staff the desks at the various visitor centers throughout the White Mountains.

These visitor services volunteers meet-and-greet guests, answer telephones, assist with interpretive displays and provide information to customers.

They should have strong communications skills and be able to represent the forest service well.

John Marunowski, a wilderness manager for the forest service, said this role will rapidly expand a volunteer’s knowledge of the forest.

“Any sort of question you could ever get, you’ll hear behind a desk,” he said.

### **Frontcountry patrol**

Volunteers patrolling the frontcountry help to maintain recreation facilities, provide information to forest visitors and serve as the eyes and ears of the district staff.

These volunteers drive along district roads in forest service vehicles, stopping at recreation facilities to report on conditions and do maintenance.

They should be able to work with the district staff to focus on top priorities and make minor repairs to facilities.

### **Woodworker**

The thousands of wooden signs that mark distances between landmarks on trails deteriorate over time in the elements. Tarkulich said there's a backlog of signs that have been tapped to be replaced, but not yet created.

"We have 100 trail signs just waiting to be made," he said.

Woodworker volunteers use a high-end woodshop and computerized tools to build replacement signs.

Some background with woodworking skills and the capability to learn computerized router software are desired for these positions.

## **Trailhead steward**

Trailhead stewards station themselves at the bases of the most popular trails in the White Mountains to answer questions and make recommendations as hikers begin to head up into the mountains.

In these brief interactions, they seek to protect the hikers and the forest by passing on some of their knowledge to the inexperienced and share vital information about the weather.

"The biggest story I always tell is the flip-flop story," Tarkulich said, referring to cheaply-made sandals. "Every ranger has a story to tell you about flip-flops, and usually it has something to do with broken bones."

Visitors tend to underestimate the roughness of the White Mountain terrain, he said, noting that it's a national forest, not a national park. Tarkulich said he once saw a woman try to push a baby stroller up a mountain trail.

Trailhead steward positions are commonly filled by people who were avid hikers but have become physically limited. They make suggestions, such as to bring a flashlight, map, water or proper footwear.

"We're not going to tell them no," Tarkulich said, "but we're there to say, 'You know, you really need to have these things. How about if you do (a flatter trail) instead or just go for a walk along the river?' "

The mandatory training for this position – and backcountry patrol below – has passed, but volunteers can still help in an unofficial capacity.

## **Backcountry patrol**

These volunteers perform similar duties to frontcountry patrol, except they travel by foot on hiking trails.

Backcountry patrollers make contact with hikers and maintain facilities and trail signs. They can often be the first people to document issues such as trees fallen across trails or problems with signage.

Tarkulich noted that the forest service doesn't have enough staff to adequately spot all issues by themselves.

"Their staff keeps getting cut to the point that the rangers are almost never in the woods anymore," he said. "You'll never see them. They spend all their time doing paperwork, which is unfortunate, but true."

"They become the eyes and ears of the forest," Tarkulich said. "People walk along and say, 'I hope somebody knows this tree came down and damaged this outhouse.' Chances are we don't know."

Marunowski said there's a backlog of maintenance work in the national forest that needs to be done, which is why the forest service is reaching out for volunteer help.

"There's a lot of real-world stuff that the forest service is struggling with," he said. "We need folks to help us out revamping those areas. We have a high demand because our trails are known throughout the world."

Some of the volunteer positions require mandatory training or a commitment of certain hours, while others are more flexible. More information can be found at [volunteer.gov](http://volunteer.gov) or by calling one of the ranger districts. The Campton-based district is at 536-6100; Gorham is at 466-2713 and Conway is at 447-5448.

(Nick Reid can be reached at 369-3325, [nreid@cmonitor.com](mailto:nreid@cmonitor.com) or on Twitter at @NickBReid.)

