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TRAILHEAD STEWARDS HELP REDUCE SEARCH AND RESCUES IN WHITE MOUNTAIN NATIONAL FOREST

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- By Edith Tucker
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RANDOLPH — Volunteer trailhead stewards are now greeting and providing information to hikers, backpackers and climbers starting up trails — Valley Way, Airline, Amphibrach and The Link, and Fallsway — to the northern peaks of the Mount Washington Range from the busy state Department of Transportation-owned Appalachia parking lot on Route 2.

It's part of a growing program that was started four years ago by a White Mountain National Forest employee.

"These trailhead stewards have been in action for several years with steady growth in volunteer numbers each year," said White Mountain National Forest public services staff officer Tiffany Benna. "This was a grassroots effort and brainchild of John Marunowski, U.S. Forest Service backcountry-wilderness manager in the Pemigewasset Ranger District, based in Campton.

"These volunteers have not only made tens of thousands of contacts with visitors but have influenced many hikers to change plans, add more gear and be more prepared. N.H. Fish and Game credits this program with reducing the number of search and rescues and having a positive influence on hiker safety culture."

Col. Kevin Jordan of Groveton, chief of law enforcement at Fish and Game, recently told the Legislative Sportsmen's and Sportswomen's Coalition that the program is making a difference, not only keeping hikers from hurting themselves but also helping keep search and rescue costs in check.

U.S. Forest Service volunteers staff four other key trailheads on weekends: Old Bridle Path-Falling Waters off I-93 in Franconia Notch State Park, Welch Dickey in Thornton, Champney Brook off the Kancamagus Highway in Albany and Ammonoosuc Ravine on Base Station Road.

"The Trailhead Steward program got its start in 2014 with just over 10 volunteers, and now we are in our fourth year with about 100 volunteers, staffing five trailheads," Marunowski said.

He oversees the program but has delegated much of the volunteer recruitment and assignment tasks to Bill Tarkulich of Lexington, Mass., an enthusiastic and committed volunteer who makes frequent day trips to the White Mountain National Forest.

The need to make information more readily available to novice hikers at trailheads has been clear for some time. What Marunowski and Tarkulich did that was new was to interpret the data that the U.S. Forest Service has collected, gaining an understanding of the nature of today's hikers.

"There are several types of hikers and different times of year that they're drawn to the mountains," Tarkulich said. "There are tourists who come up to northern New Hampshire with no plans at all to hike, but then decide to hit the trail after they drive by a sign for a waterfall.

"Then there are those who only come up once a year to hike and just can't bear not to go forward, even if faced with very bad weather, high stream levels or deep snow at higher elevations. For others, a hike is one of a number of events planned with family members or college friends, and they're just not aware of the different levels of physical fitness, experience and preparedness within the group."

He and Marunowski rely heavily on Fish and Game to guide them in deciding which trailheads they should locate helpful volunteers at tables under pop-up canopies. Fish and Game keeps meticulous records of all the locations and details of the lost, injured, medically compromised and deceased hikers as well as at what time ill-prepared hikers head out. Conservation officers share their expertise and experiences when attending a four-hour, once-a-year training session for volunteers held in April at White Mountain National Forest headquarters in Campton, Marunowski said.

"When the program began, volunteers were only on duty in the morning in the summer," Tarkulich recalled. "But then Fish and Game pointed out that those that leave early in the day are usually the best prepared, including having the equipment needed to handle the unexpected," he said. "So we've extended our hours until later in the day and also both earlier and later in the year, including during the September-October foliage season. Two 4- to 5-hour shifts are now typical.

“Visitors often confuse National Forests with National Parks and assume there’ll be (Americans with Disabilities Act) trails, with grades and ramps designed for wheelchairs, walkers and strollers,” Tarkulich added. “They also expect restrooms, restaurants and adequate parking.

“Eighty-five percent of those starting up a trail are prepared, not only with equipment but also — very important — with a plan,” he continued. “There’s no point in talking about the 10 essential things to take, if the hiker hasn’t enough information to develop a realistic plan.

“Trailhead stewards can usually tell within a few seconds whether a hiker needs help in developing a plan and the information that goes into it. Half of them — 7.5 percent — are willing to talk with a volunteer, leading to a good outcome.”

Hikers can also get information at White Mountain National Forest ranger stations in Gorham on Route 16 and Conway on the Kancamagus Highway or at the information center in Lincoln, right off I-93.

Unexpected benefits have also developed. Chuck Henderson of Conway, Sen. Jeanne Shaheen’s, North Country representative, came up with a “cheat sheet” of common French hiking terms and phrases to help stewards communicate with the many visitors from Quebec.

They’ve also become more aware of Canadian holidays: Victoria Day (last Monday before May 25) and Canada Day, July 1 (previously Dominion Day).

Other White Mountain National Forest volunteer opportunities are also growing, including a new trail patrol program in which volunteer “rangers” in uniform answer questions and provide guidance to those on the trail.

Those interested in becoming White Mountain National Forest Trail Stewards should email John Marunowski at jmarunowski@fs.fed.us or go to www.volunteer.gov, click on NH, and then Trailhead Steward.

Trailhead Stewards help reduce search and rescues in White Mountain National Forest



Hikers talk to a national forest volunteer trailhead steward. (COURTESY PHOTO)By Edith Tucker

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