

West Brownlee Creek Trail

#266

Closures and New Beginnings



The West Brownlee Creek project brings closure to the 2012 season of work projects for the SBBCHI and a sad farewell to a valuable partner, Mike Mullen, Payette National Forest West Zone Recreation contact. Mike has accepted a transfer to Lincoln Montana: "... Lincoln is very close to my wife's family and I love the area due to its proximity to the Bob Marshall wilderness complex so I couldn't resist applying when a position came open." We will miss Mike's enthusiasm and dedication to partnering with our Chapter's mission of keeping America's trails open. However, we are happy for Mike and his family and look forward to making contact with the new PNF liaison, Jascha Zeitlin.

It's time to hit the trail and leave the sad news behind! Mike made arrangements to send Ryan, one of his crew, to assist us with the trail work on Saturday, September 22nd. Ryan would meet us at the trailhead by

9:00 AM. It's a good thing too – otherwise, I would have gone the wrong direction at the creek and cleared the wrong trail! I really need to look into doing something about my navigational skills..or lack of.

My son and I checked out the area a couple of weeks prior in order to scope out the stock water availability and parking. Mike mentioned that water was a 1/3 of the way down the trail – I wanted to make sure I knew just which direction that would be. As it was, I got it backwards regardless; nothing new there.

Janine and I made plans to head up Friday afternoon and camp over the weekend. We would meet at the Coop, fuel up, and head out. While watching the diesel meter suck the life out of my bank account

like a reverse engineered slot machine from hell, a lady pulling a trailer full of horses stopped to talk. "Where are you guys heading?" Janine and I told her we were headed to West Brownlee Creek to cut wood and clear trail. "Oh," she said, "Are you bringing back a load of wood for the winter?" "No," we shook our heads. "Don't you have wood stoves," she asked. "Yes, I do," I answered. She seemed to ponder this for a moment, "Oh...well...have fun?"

The lady's reaction was not an uncommon one when people ask any member of the BCH what we do in our spare time. "We run around the woods cutting copious amounts of wood that would fill our woodshed for several winters...and then roll it off over a bank to decay." Most weekends I can find sawdust in places where sawdust shouldn't be, my clothes are covered in bar oil and I smell like saw gas and horse sweat. And I absolutely love every minute of it.

Janine and I pulled into the trailhead around 5:00 PM Friday evening. After setting up camp, we bridled Two Ton and Jack and went in search of water. The trail to the creek dives off a sage covered knoll littered with gopher holes. We followed the rock cairns leading to the creek. "Left or Right," Janine asked. "LEFT!" No doubt...it must be left. I was sure the trail Mike wanted us to clear would be left. It wasn't left. It didn't really matter – left or right – the creek was about as accessible as Fort Knox. Lined in Hawthorns, it looked like something Prince Charming would have to hack is way through to rescue Sleeping Beauty. It has been my experience that a girl best not wait around for Prince Charming to hack his way through the brambles. We reined the horses and headed back up the hill. There is a spring, called Deer Spring, with a stock tank across the road from the trailhead about a half mile up a steep trail. I had found it when my son and I checked out the area earlier. At the time, I thought our trail, #266, was that direction. It wasn't...imagine that. However, I am a firm believer in everything happens for a reason. Had I not been lost, I would not have found the spring and we would have had to wait around for Prince Charming to hack a path through the brambles to water our horses. Who knows how long that would have taken?



With the horses watered and back at camp, we built a campfire and waited for the rest of the crew to show up, whoever that might be. Rob has said you just never know who's going to make it to these things and he doesn't count them until he sees the whites of their eyes. Rob thought he would make it Friday afternoon and Phil was a strong possibility. The darker it got, the more we wondered if maybe we weren't going to be it for the weekend. We kept the fire going in hopes it would make it easier to spot the trailhead if anyone did show up. That someone would be Rob pulling into camp about 9:15PM.

Saturday morning, Rob had breakfast cooked by 7:30AM. By 9:00AM – Ryan pulled in ready to go to work. We saddle up, rode the horses to water and gathered around Ryan’s tailgate for a safety meeting. We each signed our lives away in recognition of the hazards we might encounter on the trail; bears, bees, heavy lifting and rock rolling where among the hazards listed. Rock rolling? Oh yes...we were about to become rock-n-roll champions of the Payette National Forest.

Ryan does not do horses. I offered: “If not horses, how about mules? You can ride Annie. If you can hang on for the initial 8 seconds...you should be good to go.” Ryan was having none of it. He would walk. Carrying a large backpack, a Stihl over one shoulder and a 12 foot pole saw, he followed us down the steep trail to the creek. At the creek, Ryan directed us to turn *right*. Figures...it had to be one way or the other and I will always choose the wrong way. If it feels right to me, it’s probably left – but never the other way around.

We dismounted and lopped our way through Hawthorns that ripped at your sleeves and pants. The trail crossed the creek before switching back up the canyon to the left. Ah ha! I knew we would eventually go left! A feeling of pride in a less than adequate internal compass wafted through me as I sat once more upon a mighty steed and motioned with exuberance, “This way, gang!”

Rock rolling 101 was about to commence. Rocks ranging in size from a fist to cannon balls littered the once motorized vehicle trail. There was no sense in riding this section of trail. We walked in front of the horses kicking rocks and taking turns operating the saws, limbers and pole saw. If you weren’t operating one of the three saws – you spent the next six hours either rolling rocks or removing higher limbs with the pole saw – probably both.



Ryan proved to be an effective and conscientious trail hand. Concerned for our wellbeing, he checked on each of us often, “Are you drinking enough water? Is everyone familiar with their PPE?” He wasn’t being patronizing or condescending in any form – he was genuinely compelled to see to it that everyone remain safe and healthy and did so with an honest, contagious smile that radiated with enthusiasm and wonder. I think Ryan is the type of kid who’s just happy to be there. If he thought a group of middle aged people running around the woods on horseback cutting trees and clearing trail for fun looked a bit crazy, he didn’t mention it. If he wondered if we had all entered our second childhood and came out here to relax, enjoy life and let go of reality for a short time, he would have been right.

Rob decided we should work until three O’clock before calling it a day. Ryan didn’t argue as he leaned toward me and spoke softly, “You guys are kicking my butt.” If it

were not for his sweat soaked strawberry blonde locks, I might have thought he was just trying to go easy on us. As it was, I think we really did kick his butt. In all fairness – he had walked in carrying heavy tools while the rest of us rode. He would be walking back out a very steep section of trail.

We packed Ryan's Stihl on Rob's mare, Misty. I offered to take his backpack but he again refused. I offered to let him ride double on Jack. Come to think of it, Jack never has been ridden double. Ryan may have made a wise decision by refusing that particular offer. Regardless, our four person crew made our way out of the canyon and up the steep hillside toward camp.

We said our goodbyes to Ryan back at the trailers. He thanked us for our volunteer work and we thanked him for being such a good sport and putting up with our geriatric shenanigans. I promised that if we were fortunate enough to work with him again, I would make sure we had accommodations for his gear so he didn't have to carry anything. Better yet, I'd bring Annie's saddle along and he wouldn't have to walk at all! Ah...there's that endearing smile I was hoping for.

Pork loin, baby red's and bell peppers to die for. Rob cooked dinner in his Dutch oven, Janine brought a Green Goddess Jell-O salad and I tried a "not really made for DO apple crisp" that wasn't worth writing home about, in my large, #12. The smallest DO I have is big enough to feed a family of 12. From the look on Rob and Janine's faces, I won't be surprised if Santa brings me a single serving DO for Christmas.

The Sunday day ride is my favorite part of a project weekend. The work tools are left at the trailers, the pack horses are allowed to roam free and we leave our hot, heavy saw chaps behind. We try to explore new trails we haven't been on and scope them out for accessibility and possible future projects. There aren't too many trails in Idaho that Rob hasn't already been on and E. Brownlee creek was no exception. Janine and I would get to traverse unfamiliar terrain.

We hauled out of the W. Brownlee Creek trailhead and drove the several miles to E. Brownlee Creek trailhead, sitting a short distance from the Brownlee Campground. We made note of a minor downfall ½ mile from the trailhead. Since we left our saws behind, Rob would email Mike and let him know that the obstacle would need to be removed at a later time. It was the only part of the trail that needed work. The remainder of the trail wound unencumbered up the mountain and crested out at Cuddy Saddle.

The view from Cuddy offers a 360° panoramic view of the surrounding valleys and rolling hills. With



smoke from the many wildfires in Idaho, Oregon and Washington hanging in the atmosphere, it was an added relief to breath clean air and be above the blanket of stifling smoke for a day. We settled on a gnarled log and ate a lunch of Buffalo beef stick and cheese. I set the self timer on my camera and snapped a group picture as we discussed the possibility of making a pack trip into this area next season.

Our horses (and mule) made quick work of the ride back to the trailhead. We unsaddled our animals in silence and made preparations for the haul home. It was another successful project with its poignant moments. This would be our last project for the season, a fact that made us all a little sad. Still, the day would end with a sense of accomplishment and pride knowing that both humans and horses would arrive safely back into the realm of civilization and a sometimes bitter-sweet reality.



The End

