

GRAY WOLF / BCH-PENINSULA TRAIL CREW NOTES

The Huckleberry Crew

The huckleberries were amazing this year, a bumper crop! We ate so many!!

8/23-8/30/2024

Location:

Upper Duckabush and Home Sweet Home trails, Olympic National Park

(Home Sweet Home to Upper Duckabush Camp and Upper Duckabush Camp to Lacrosse Pass junction are stock-rated trails)

Crew members:

Rebecca Wanagel
Martin Knowles
Paul Kamps
Bernt Ericson
Ted Spoon
David Graves

Packers:

Rachael Taylor-Tuller and Matthew Tuller

- Woody (leader, certified Search and Rescue Horse)
- Blue (co-leader horse)
- Possi (Haflinger)
- Biskit (Haflinger)
- Maizey (Haflinger Mule)
- Noomi (28-year-old miniature horse who makes everyone smile)

Harold Wiese

- Sugar (leader horse)
- Katy (horse)
- Archie (mule)
- Belle (mule)

Estimated On-Trail Volunteer Hours: 476

Report written by Rebecca.

Objectives met:

Maintained** the following 9.7 miles of trail:

1. Home Sweet Home Trail from Home Sweet Home Camp to Upper Duckabush Camp, 2.4 miles.
2. Duckabush River Trail from Upper Duckabush Camp east to Lacrosse Pass Trail junction (this section otherwise known as Upper Duckabush Trail) 1.8 miles. The stopping point of Lacrosse Pass Trail junction was because we cleared to there from the opposite direction last year.
3. Upper Duckabush Camp to O'Neil Pass and also from Marmot Lake to Hart Lake junction, 5 total miles.
4. Bottom half-mile of Lacrosse Pass Trail. This was hand brushing and retreading only, on a "just make it hikeable" basis. See narrative for more detail.

**** "Maintained" means we cleared all logs (to stock standards on trails rated as such), hand brushed, retreaded and tended to drainage in critical locations. It also means when logs were cleared, we took the extra step of clearing the remnant on the hill if there was a potential for it to slide with the next snow. Total number of logs cleared = 94. I am unable to give the total number of feet, yards or miles of hand brushing, treading and drainage because it was on an as-needed basis to make the entire 9.7 miles safer for people and / or stock as dictated by the trail type.**

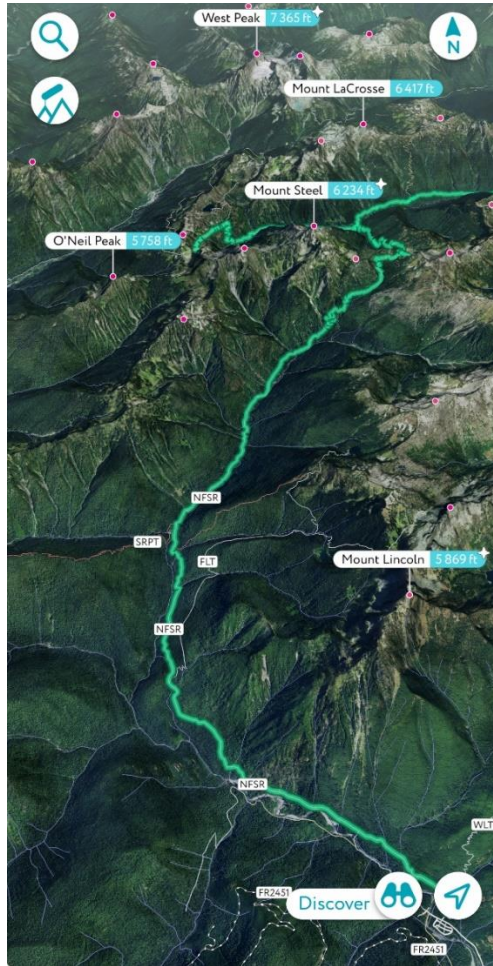
Mileage and elevations:

- Staircase Ranger Station to drop-off and start point of Home Sweet Home Camp = 14.6 miles (Trailhead 800 feet, First Divide 4700, Home Sweet Home 4200).
 - It should be noted that from the trailhead to 9-Stream (10 miles) the trail averages 120 feet gain per mile. From 9 Stream to First Divide (4 miles) it does a steep grunt upward and averages 675 feet per mile, and very rocky for the last 1.5 miles.
 - First Divide down to Home Sweet Home averages about 1000 feet per mile and very rocky for 0.3 miles as you drop off of First Divide.
- Home Sweet Home to Upper Duck Camp = 2.4 miles (HSH 4200, UDC 2700)
- Upper Duck Camp to Lacrosse Pass Trail junction = 1.8 miles, relatively flat
- Upper Duck Camp to Duckabush River ford west, headed towards Marmot = 2.2 miles (UDC 2700, ford 3350 so it sounds like only 650 elevation gain BUT there are about 5 very steep down and up gullies as one hikes across the face of Mt. Steel).
- Upper Duck Camp to Marmot Lake = 1.1 miles (repeat UDC to ford, then Marmot 4400, for a total gain of 1700)
- Marmot Lake to Hart Lake trail junction = 0.5 miles (Marmot 4400, HLT junction 4900)
- Marmot Lake to O'Neil Pass = 1.2 miles (Marmot 4400, ONP 4950)
- Lacrosse Pass Trail, bottom ½ mile only, averaging about 1000 feet per mile

Before I start the story, I want to say that this is a trip that we could not have done ... WOULD not have done ... without stock support. It would be impossible. We are extremely grateful to BCH members Rachael, Matthew and Harold for doing this difficult trip so that we could maintain these deep backcountry trails.

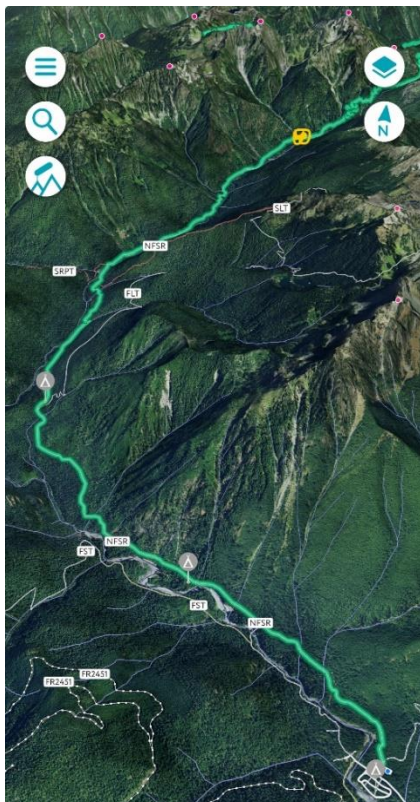
Here is our story (disclaimer, all the inserted maps are not oriented in the same compass direction but rather in a way that made them fit better. However, the compass needle shows on each picture, to help keep you oriented):

Overview map, trailhead at Staircase Ranger Station, Lake Cushman.

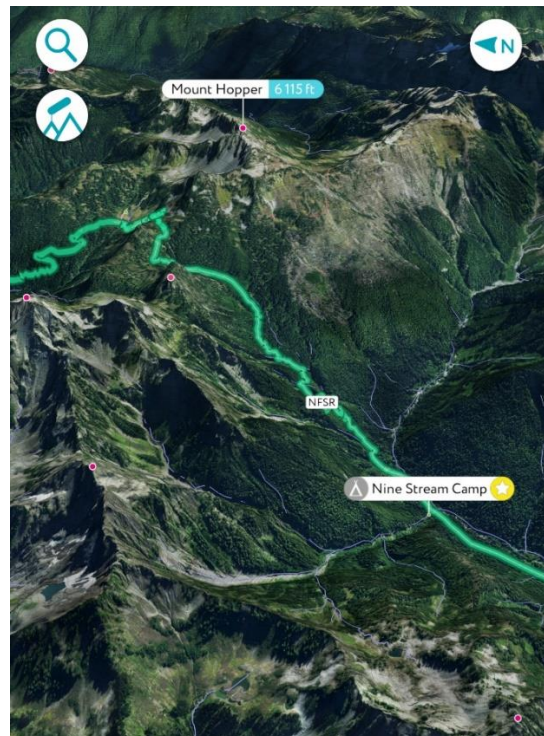


bottom right corner is showing the Staircase Campground loop

DAY ONE (Friday, 8/23) – Getting to the start of our work.



The N. Fork Skok has a gentle grade until Nine Stream Camp (yellow dot)



After Nine Stream it's a difficult and rocky climb to First Divide (saddle to the side of Mt. Hopper)
You can see Home Sweet Home basin / camp in this picture (look for the green dot on the backside of First Divide)

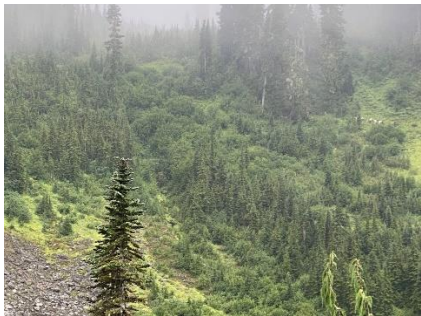
North Fork Skokomish (Staircase Ranger Station) trailhead to First Divide and down to Home Sweet Home Camp.

Rain. Seriously ... after a typical summer's long, dry spell ... we got dumped on. And not just for an hour or two but All Day And All Night Long. Cold hard rain. Ok, that's cool. We're tough, the packers are tougher and the horses / mules are beyond description tough.

The packers still had to finish loading when we left the trailhead, plus they had to drop off their camp and horse feed at a camp below First Divide, and then they encountered ground hornets which dispersed their herd, and the trail from 9 Stream to First Divide and then down to Home Sweet Home is difficult, to put it mildly. Steep and rocky and now, also wet. Therefore, the packers and their animals were working EXTREMELY HARD and the trail crew, who had arrived hours before, was waiting, very cold and wet, bouncing around trying to stay just this side of hypothermia. It served to make us all stronger (what doesn't kill you ...).

Lesson learned – expect delays with horses and mules, bring a tarp no matter what. With two lightweight tarps, that we did have but left in the stock transport pile, we could have all wrapped ourselves up and stayed plenty warm and dry.

Home Sweet Home is an iconic and lusciously beautiful camp, perhaps even more so in the misty fog. You can see the entire basin from First Divide. The camp is the site of an old shelter, long since gone, nestled at the back side of a gigantic meadow overshadowed by Mt. Steel and Mt. Hopper, and filled with sub-alpine firs worthy of a Dr. Suess starring role. They are curvy because they are squished under snow for the majority of the year and don't tend to straighten out until they get older and taller, which takes an abnormally long amount of time.



We could see the pack strings coming down off of First Divide (squint at the right side of the picture).



Harold and company emerging out of the rainy mist



The Tullers arriving with their animals, all safe and sound after their ground hornet attack



Soaked little Noomi, just enjoying the adventure. Shelter remnants are still there.



We've discovered it's impossible for Packer Rachael to arrive without a smile! With Woody, a trusted leader.



Packers leaving, tents and tarps set up.



Dr. Suess firs, in June when we scouted for this trip.



Home Sweet Home shelter, 1980. Distinctively different meadow – no small fir trees everywhere, the trees by the shelter were much smaller. Thanks to Ted for these pictures.



Ted said there was even an Adirondack chair!

DAY TWO (Saturday 8/24) – the work starts, Home Sweet Home towards Upper Duckabush Camp.



Packers were all headed home while the trail crew got a later-than-usual start due to the aforementioned rain. We had to organize the tools, put the bars and chains on the saws, etc. We knew the weather would be trending better, at least that's what the InReach forecast told us, so we figured stalling a bit would help. Once we started, we cleared logs and did trail maintenance from Home Sweet Home junction down to about 0.4 miles above Upper Duckabush Camp (so about 2 miles of work). There we cached the tools behind a tree and hiked back up to HSH.



Typical log on this trail.



Work commences.



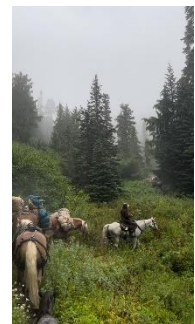
Cleared to stock standards.



What a mess!



Cleared, even all the stuff that would have slid down from the hillside.



Meanwhile the packers were headed back to the trailhead.



There was one extremely bad slide alder patch that had to be mowed down and cleaned up (for reference in the next picture, note the rock on the "trail" that you can barely see).



Once the alders were cut back, a new tread needed to be put back in for the safety of hikers and, mostly, packers. This was a team effort: Martin and I did the sawing and clearing, Ted did the backbreaking tread work.



Martin and I cleared one messy tree about where I'm standing to take this picture, then Paul and Bernt came along and took over for the next one. We tag teamed a lot because we had two different saw sizes.

DAY THREE (Sunday 8/25), Home Sweet Home to Upper Duck Camp.

We packed up camp and moved it all down to Upper Duckabush Camp, set up and then headed back up to the cache. We finished clearing the last 0.4 miles down to UDC, had lunch and called it for the day in the early afternoon. Our next project was to clear from UDC to Lacrosse Pass junction, which we knew we could do in one day. That, combined with the fact that we were all exhausted from the long hike and hard work to stay warm on Friday – we decided that for safety's sake we would call it a relatively early day.



We woke up to no rain and a lovely sunrise on Mt. Steel. Packed up our camps and moved down to Upper Duck.



I'm putting that sharp cambered angle in the log because there was a pretty good chance the rootball would want to stand back up, which is always fun!



The rootball had different plans, so I pouted that I didn't get the fun of a standing rootball. 😞

DAY FOUR (Monday 8/26), Upper Duckabush Camp to Lacrosse Pass Trail Junction.



Yellow dot is Lacrosse Pass Trail junction

Today was super fun. It wasn't raining, the trail was flat, some of the projects were extra enjoyable, and we were excited because our stopping point would be the same place we stopped last year when we cleared the trail from the opposite direction. Last year's was an epic trip too, clearing 11 miles of the Duckabush trail through two old burn zones in 95-degree temps ... the Gray Wolf Trail Crew really knows how to have a good time.



Sometimes what we "saw" is just punky, rotten stuff.



But it's still heavy!



Ted has recently joined our pack, and we are super lucky to have him.



This 40" log was a real trail blocker.



And, of course, sometimes after you release it it's close to the ground (chain dulling risk).



However, we've worked a lot on the skill of lightly feathering the saw when we get close to the bottom, stopping the second we see the sawdust indicating we've arrived at the bark. This allows us to remove the billet but not drive the chain into the dirt because we don't go all the way through the bark.

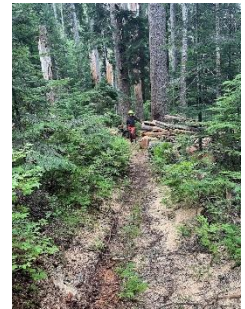
(we strongly dislike digging under the log 😊). Ted and Martin are re-filling the saw with gas and oil, ten feet or more away from the project as required. We adhere to that even though everything was wet from rain.



Meanwhile, Bernt and Paul had this big mess to deal with. We thought it might be a project for the entire team to work on together ...



... but they started on it while we finished the 40-incher ...



... and had it done in no time, at least 36 cuts later!

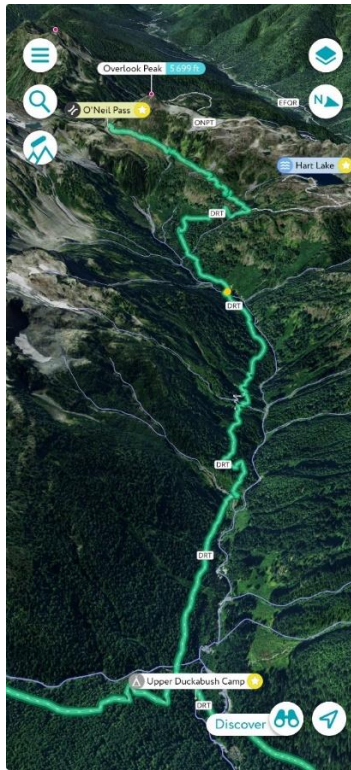


This year's picture at Lacrosse Pass Trail junction.



Last year's picture at the same place, from the opposite direction.

DAY FIVE (Tuesday 8/27), Upper Duckabush Camp headed west to the Duckabush ford.



Duckabush ford noted with a yellow dot

Today we started working towards Marmot Lake, but made it goal to stop at the ford. That would set us up for success for tomorrow, allowing us to work to our final end goals of Hart Lake and O'Neil Pass. This is a trail that a crew under Rebecca's leadership worked 5 years ago. Not having been touched since then, there were plenty of logs down and some nightmare slide alder patches had grown back in the wet drainages coming off of Mt. Steel. Combine that with tread issues and trail erosion problems, there was plenty of work. The trail is difficult to hike because, as you can see in the map above, the trail cuts across the face of Mt. Steel. It's common, when a trail goes across the face of a mountain, to have lots of deep, steep gullies from the frequent streams running down the mountain. Each one of those is a careful foot placement going down and a grunt going back up.



Sawing



and teamwork



until we arrived at our goal for the day, the Duckabush River ford. Most of the year this is a raging, very dangerous ford. But now it was quite easy.



Some of the relentless beauty was also the source of relentless grazing.



Some seemed better to graze only with eyes.

DAY SIX (Wednesday 8/28), Upper Duck Camp back to the tools at the ford and continue on to Marmot Lake. From there to O'Neil Pass and also up to Hart Lake junction above Marmot. (refer to map from day 5, above the ford – you can see Marmot Lake too, it's the smaller one below Hart Lake)

This was the day when we were in the heart of some of the most jaw-dropping scenery the Olympics have to offer. Our goal, which we met, was to finish clearing logs not only to Marmot but beyond to the junction with the Hart Lake trail. Also, we wanted to work the trail from Marmot to O'Neil pass. This didn't involve any logs, but did involve an extensive amount of hand brushing, drainage work and retreading to put the trail back where it was supposed to be. It's wide open to the sun, so the brush and small encroaching trees had gotten bad enough to cause parts of this trail to be creeping way down from its original lay. You can tell from the map that this is the headwaters of the mighty Duckabush River. Little trickles of water in a huge open meadow suffice as the "river." Like all rivers in the Olympics though, it takes a very short distance for this to become a raging, deep and cascading body of water, unsafe to ford for much of the year.



Constant waterfalls and creeks on the way up.



This was a messy 30+ inch Alaskan Yellow Cedar about a ½ mile below Marmot Lake. Once you hit about 4000 feet, this type of tree becomes very common up here. They are fun to cut because they are quite soft and they are AROMATIC!



Despite being finished with this project, it's hard to leave due to the amazing aroma.

David, Bernt and Ted were working on the trail from Marmot Lake to O'Neil Pass. They worked extremely hard, but from the following pictures one might think they were interested in the view ... 😊



Marmot Lake



Mt. Steel



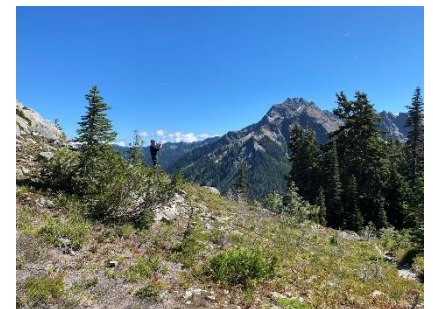
Mt. Duckabush



Paul and I were finishing up some trees above Marmot Lake. Rough life, sawing with these views, eh?



Last cut project of the entire trip. A bit of a fun jackstraw puzzle (piled on top of each other, loose rootball, snag in the way, and a steep hillside gave it just enough challenge to be fun).



After our last cut, I took Paul up higher so he could see the view explode. Once up on the plateau of the Lacrosse Basin, you can see from beyond O'Neil Pass (west) to the Hood Canal (east) and so much north & south. (Mts Duckabush, Steel, Elk Lick, Lacrosse, White, the list goes on ...)



Someone wasn't at all interested in us with the billions of delicious huckleberries covering every square inch.



The mighty Duckabush River being born as meadow trickles. Looking east from just below the pass.



O'Neil Pass sign with Mt. Anderson's twin peaks in the background.



O'Neil Pass as seen from Lacrosse Basin above Marmot Lake.

DAY SEVEN (Thursday 8/29), bonus work on Lacrosse Pass Trail.

Intended to be a rest and organize day before the exit, we decided to go back to Lacrosse Pass Trail to give it a little TLC, for something productive to do with our morning. Backstory behind this: last year we cleared to the junction, yes, but we actually kept going for ½ mile up this trail. We knew there was a nearly impossible large log to get past at the ½ mile point, and the trail was getting destroyed with people trying. Therefore, we wanted to at least clear to that log even though we were at the end of our trip and our energy. We discovered how badly the bottom ½ mile of LPT is overgrown! Some of it was so thick that hikers literally pushed their way through the intertwined tree branches and shied away from the salmonberry and wild rose prickles, eroding the trail downhill to where the "tread" was just trying to stay on the hillside. It was miserable to hike. The drainage is horrible too, with some patches so bad that your boots nearly get sucked off your feet. We figured on this morning we could make it at least hikeable, but we weren't going for perfection. We hand brushed the worst areas and put some tread back in. This trail could use a crew in and of itself, but we made it much better for now. Sorry, no pictures of this project.

Back at camp we organized for departure and at 5:30 the Tullers with all their animals arrived at Upper Duck Camp for the night. They had encountered the ground hornets again but, fortunately, the herd stayed together this time.

DAY EIGHT (Friday 8/30), Exit day.

We all exited and hiked the 17 miles at our own pace, arriving at the trailhead at various times throughout the afternoon. After many hours, the packers arrived and we learned that there had been an incident. Thankfully all heartbeats were fine (cute line stolen from Rachael's InReach message). What happened is that Possi had slipped off the trail on some switchbacks out of camp, which sent him first sliding on his belly and then tumbling. He tumbled down a couple of switchbacks, with the manties still attached to him. One flew open, which the Tullers had to re-collect and re-pack once they had gotten Possi back on the trail and made sure he was okay (He was! Remarkably! Phew!). Rachael and Matthew, as always, remained calm and dealt with the situation as if it were a minor issue. They were all smiles when they showed up at the trailhead.



Someone caught a picture of the elusive superhuman, David. He hiked out the 17 miles on Thursday while doing a lot of tread work and brushing on the way!



Packing up the manties into equally weighted packages.



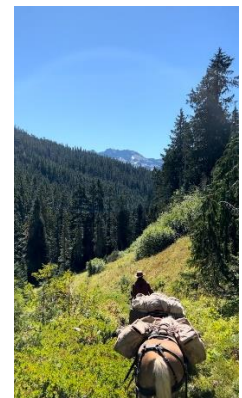
First Divide.



Packer Rachael on Blue.



Packer Matthew on Woody.



Much better weather on the way out!



Arriving at the trailhead after a long day.



This one didn't give the long day a second thought.



Packer Rachael with Possi in the rear, thankfully unharmed from his spill on the trail earlier in the day.

Tens of ground hornet stings and maybe a million huckleberries under our belt, this season's multi-day backcountry trips are a wrap.



Belle and Archie, looking forward to doing this again!