



Classified	B8-9	Marketplace	B6
Comics	B7	Obituaries	A2
Community	A5-6	Opinion	A4
Lotteries	A2	Sports	B1-4

TIMES OBSERVER

Warren, Pa.

www.timesobserver.com

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Volunteers clear the way on Hickory Creek trail

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Over the past 14 years, dozens of volunteers have helped the Friends of Allegheny Wilderness keep the Hickory Creek Wilderness Trail clear and open.

On Aug. 15 and 16, four volunteers made the 13-mile hike, and used only rudimentary hand tools. No power tools are permitted on wilderness trails.

The four were Kirk Johnson, FAW executive director; Luke and Alex Bobnar of Ridgway, and Chris Garback of Pittsburgh.

"The FAW trail stewardship crew has primarily worked to help keep the Hickory Creek Wilderness Trail clear and open," Johnson said. "However, we have on occasions worked on the Minister Valley Trail, the Tanbark Trail, portions of the North Country Trail, portions of the Tracy Ridge trail system, and others."

The 13-mile Hickory Creek Wilderness loop trail was first opened by the U.S. Forest Service in 1978, which actually predates the area's designation as wilderness by about six years. The northern half of the loop runs along the plateau between the valleys of East Hickory and Middle Hickory Creeks. The southern half climbs in and out of several small stream valleys feeding East and Middle Hickory Creeks, such as Cook Run and Jack's Run, he said.

Thousands of people hike the Hickory Creek Wilderness loop trail every year. Johnson said it is difficult to know exactly how many because not everyone who hikes the trail necessarily signs in at the trailhead sign-in sheet before heading out. Also, many people enter the Hickory Creek Wilderness from various points around its perimeter and simply hike off-trail, cross-country.

"The work last month involved clearing downed trees and brush that were blocking the trail," said Luke Bobnar, Watershed Technician, Upper Allegheny & Lake Erie, with the Western Pennsylvania Conservancy Watershed Conservation Program. "Axes and hand pruners were used, as motorized items are prohibited in wilderness. Not all trees were removed, only ones that made it extremely difficult to navigate over/through/around. In the case of large (20-inch or more diameter) trees, often a notch would be cut with axes so that hikers could pass over it. Leaving some of the step-overable trees on the ground helps preserve that untrammelled nature of the HCWA, as well as discourage prohibited uses and serve as natural water bars.

"The event was not a Western Pennsylvania Conservancy sponsored event," he said. "However, we do have a strong working rela-

tionship with Friends of Allegheny Wilderness and supported their efforts with volunteer time on this weekend. That being said, the event and the approach do dovetail with WPC's watershed work. Overall, we have a view towards managing watersheds at the landscape scale. This starts from the moment a raindrop hits the ground, even if it's at the top of a hill. WPC's Watershed Conservation Program mainly focuses our restoration efforts in the riparian zone, the crucial 300-foot corridor on either side of a body of water that is the "last line of defense" of a stream, as far as water quality is concerned. In the up-slope forested landscapes, leaving some of those downed trees that you can step over creates natural water bars on the trail. This slows the water down early and begins the process of infiltration, helping prevent erosion that leads to sedimentation and lower water

quality downstream. Personally, I like the trails management in HCWA. Instead of constructing water bars that have to be maintained and removing every piece of woody debris that falls on the trail, leaving it in place reduces maintenance costs, improves water quality, and makes the trail more sinuous, ultimately helping to preserve the wilderness character of HCWA. I've worked in several other wilderness/backcountry managed areas including Montana's Bob Marshall Wilderness and TN/NC's Great Smoky Mountains National Park, and nowhere is it done quite like it is here in our own HCWA.

"This work occurred all along the 13-mile long loop trail that runs through the wilderness, and didn't address any of the storm damage on Minister Creek," said Bobnar. "There were more than enough downed trees on the HCW trail though, enough to slow down our

hiking pace to near one mile/hour (normal is around 3-to-4 miles per hour).

"All in all, it was a great excuse to get out for the weekend and see an incredible part of the ANF," he said. "Even though it was 'work,' my wife and I really appreciated the opportunity to experience the peace that comes when one enters wilderness. Stress from everyday life and the hustle and bustle of the modern world seem to melt away when you're in one of these special places, and you simply exist as you in the world. Additionally, there's a peace and satisfaction that comes when you only use a hand tool (ax) that's existed for centuries, and see, smell, and hear the fruits of your labor before you. It humbles you, connecting you to history, nature, and your place in the universe. I'd like to express my thanks again to FAW for having us out, and we look forward to the next adventure."



Photo submitted to the Times Observer

A portion of the Hickory Creek Wilderness Trail was blocked with downed timber. No power equipment or vehicles are permitted on the wilderness, so work must be accomplished with hand-operated tools and elbow grease.



Photo submitted to the Times Observer

From left, Alex and Luke Bobnar, Ridgeway; Chris Garback, Pittsburgh; and Kirk Johnson, Warren stand at the trailhead of the Hickory Creek Wilderness Trail before spending two days hiking and clearing the trail. The four made a 13-mile trek to help keep the trail clear and open for hikers.