



WILDERNESS

Protecting Big Prairie

Enthusiastic volunteers may not be enough to save Big Prairie Ranger Station, and the trails that link the remote workstation to the edges of the wilderness, without help from wilderness users.

Story and photography by **KATE BRADLEY BYARS**

THE WESTERN SKY BLAZES in shades of pink, purple and orange as the sun sinks behind Scarface Mountain, silhouetting the snowcapped peak and casting an alpine glow across the meadow that holds Big Prairie Ranger Station in the Bob Marshall Wilderness Complex. The workstation is one of the oldest still functioning in the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Forest Service, and if Trails Manager Guy Zoellner has any say in the matter, it will remain open for decades to come.

Zoellner administers the Forest Service programs from the workstation from May through October annually, sending out

trail-clearing crews, greeting visitors who stop at the workstation and coordinating volunteers that give their time to maintain the more than 80-year-old buildings at Big Prairie. It is an integral part of administering the Forest Service programs in the Spotted Bear District, which encompasses the Bob Marshall Wilderness, the Great Bear Wilderness and the South Fork of the Flathead River. Packers and rangers have been using the trails since the South Fork Primitive District was set aside as a wilderness area in 1941. The Bob Marshall Wilderness was created by Congress in 1964.

When Zoellner began working at Big Prairie eight years ago, there were 28

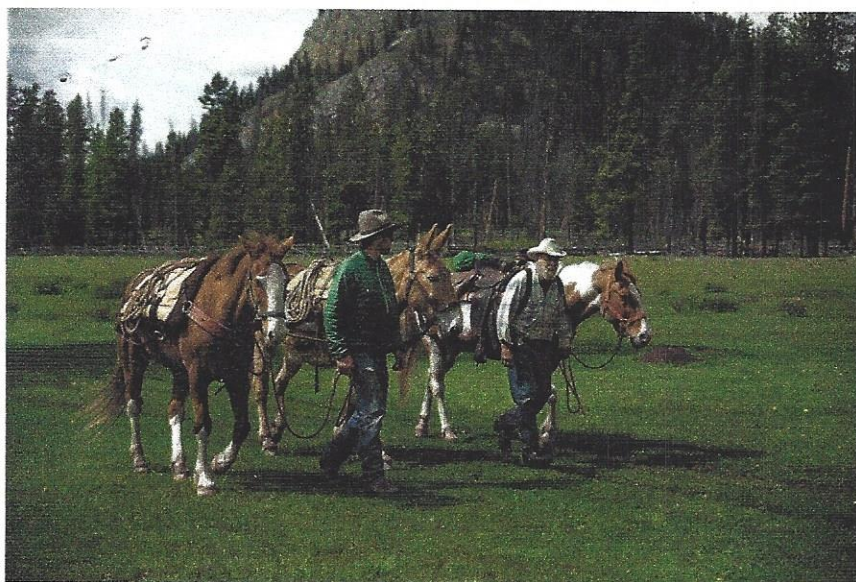
BENCHMARK VIA STADLER	27
BENCHMARK VIA WHITE RIVER	34.5
BIG SALMON LAKE	13.5
BLACK BEAR PACKBRIDGE	21
DANAHER MEADOWS	17
DRY FORK TRAILHEAD	37.5
GORDON PASS	19.5
HAHN CR.	11
HAYSTACK MTN	17
JENNY CR.	19
LARCH HILL PASS	29.5
MEADOW CR. TRAILHEAD	32
MONTURE TRAILHEAD	36
OWL CR. TRAILHEAD	30
PYRAMID PASS	25.5
SHAW CR.	15
SPOTTED BEAR RS	40
STADLER CR.	11
WHITE RIVER	7
WHITE RIVER PASS	18

ABOVE: The area's remoteness is shown by the distances to the trailheads listed on this plaque posted at Big Prairie Ranger Station.

TOP: A suspension bridge spans the South Fork of the Flathead River. Bridges like this allow the trail crews to reach both sides of the wilderness. Mules and horses are the only means of moving equipment in the area.

people working at the station. In 2017, there were 16. Only nine workers are at the station this year, and the projected budget cuts will allow for only four or five workers for the 2019 season, which runs from May through October.

The trails, though, have not dwindled in numbers like the workers. They are



Most packers are greeted by Trails Manager Guy Zoellner (left) when they cross the wooden fence into the heart of Big Prairie. Packer Fred Flint is a former district ranger at Spotted Bear and Hungry Horse districts, and he is the current president of the Bob Marshall Wilderness Foundation. He makes annual treks to the workstation to volunteer his time.

used as heavily as ever, and need regular maintenance.

"We are in charge of 500 miles of trail in the South Fork area of the Spotted Bear Ranger District, which has about 1,100 miles of trail in total," Zoellner says. "Our nine workers should cover that 500 miles of trail, clearing it, maintaining it and improving areas that could be dangerous for crossing. Of that, there are 250 miles of essential trails that include pathways along river bottom and around mountains that are the main thoroughfare for pack strings.

"The numbers [of workers] don't pan out for what we can physically do to clear the 250 or 500 miles of trail."

Every item at Big Prairie is brought in on a horse or mule. In fact, two full pack strings—each including nine mules—run weekly to keep the station supplied during the summer months. These strings use the same trails that bring visitors, hikers, backpackers and stock animal users to the workstation.

The solitude draws visitors, but it also hampers signing up volunteers to aid the Forest Service. In order to maintain safe trails that are cleared to Forest Service standards—no vegetation for an 8-foot-wide by 10-foot-high area—the service relies on volunteers to fill positions once held by trained, paid employees. The first challenge is to find individuals willing to leave their creature comforts behind for somewhat back-breaking work at the remote station.

"It takes two days to get into Big Prairie. To clear just the trails at Big Prairie, then you need two or three more days, and then another two to get out," Zoellner says. "People don't generally have more than a week off to volunteer.

"Volunteers are great and I like to share the experience with them. But relying solely on volunteers in the Bob Marshall Wilderness, it will be nearly impossible for us to clear trail to the level people have received and expected in the past. It will not happen."

And not clearing the trails also will have a negative effect on the stock using those pathways, which will impact the packers, hunters and wilderness guides making a living traversing the trails with out-of-state visitors, he says. In other words, it will have a domino effect.

For Zoellner and his supervisor, Spotted Bear District Ranger Scott Snelson, the experience a visitor has in the Bob Marshall Wilderness is priceless.

"One of the high values to wilderness is knowing that it is there and your children and children's children will be able to have an experience at Big Prairie," says Snelson, who first joined a trail crew 30 years ago. Now, with more than 20 years with the Forest Service, he is tackling the challenges brought on by budget cuts.

"Big Prairie is central to effective administration of the trail system. If we don't have the funding to maintain the trails, that is going to diminish the experience for folks coming in," he says.

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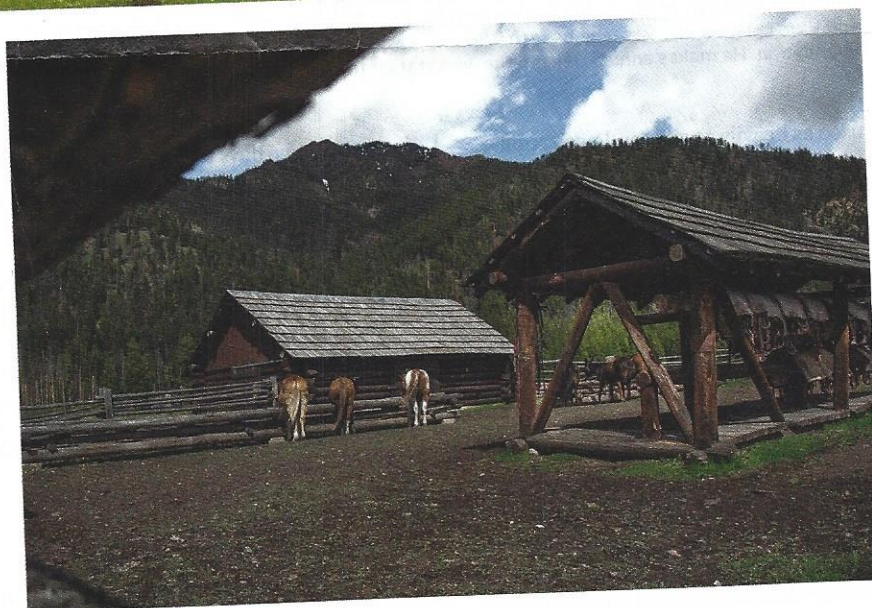
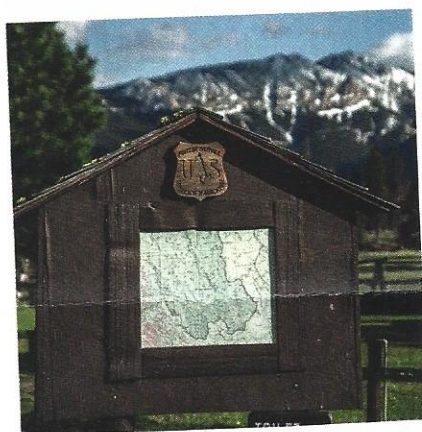
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CLOCKWISE FROM TOP:

At 30 miles in from the nearest trailhead, Big Prairie is most often accessed via horse or mule. The animals mingle, graze the ample grass around the historic buildings and receive a break before hitting the trails.

Stock corrals at Big Prairie are repaired annually. During the peak season in July, it is not uncommon for 50 to 100 pack animals to leave trailheads, and many end up stopping at the workstation.

The Big Prairie Ranger Station in the Bob Marshall Wilderness is remote, beautiful and used by a variety of visitors.

Every item needed at Big Prairie is brought in by a pack string, from a can of tomato sauce to a box of cereal to a new couch or roof shingles. The food pantry is one of the largest rooms at the workstation.

Without trails cleared of downed trees or shored up with logs to stabilize water crossings, it becomes more dangerous for the stock horses and mules essential for carrying visitors and equipment in and out of the wilderness.

"It is relatively inexpensive to maintain those trails if you go in year-in and year-out to keep them going," Snelson says. "It is like a highway or building; if you let it go too long, costs become significant."

Snelson and Zoellner know that public support and volunteer efforts are the solution to the challenges facing the Forest Service at Big Prairie. There is abundant use of the Bob Marshall Wilderness Complex, from backpackers to avid sportsmen to those seeking some of the best trout fly fishing. The repeated use of the trails helps support their calls for more funding.

But it is not enough.

"We are a taxpayer-based organization. It is going to be very difficult to continue to support this program without strong advocacy from the users," explains Snelson. "First, come to the wilderness. The next thing to look at is visiting with your representative, because Congress decides what funding we get for trail work. Third, join a group like the Bob Marshall Wilderness Foundation or the Back Country

Horsemen [of America], who are vital partners to our situation.”

Zoellner says that a summer spent at Big Prairie can be life-changing. Those interested in volunteering should be able to offer skills needed in the wilderness, like stock handling.

“Bring something to the table here. Talk to the districts to see what project fits your skills,” he says. “We couldn’t do anything without stock. They are our machinery; they haul our freight, plow our trails and carry us. Lack of stockmanship is an issue I see in volunteers. A lot of our users are horse people—recreational and packers. If our trail crew isn’t on horses and doesn’t understand what it takes for a horse to go down the trail to camp, then we can’t provide the product to the public.”

As Zoellner says, the wilderness isn’t just his; it belongs to everyone. The trail quality is suffering from the lack of attention, and the historic designation for the buildings at Big Prairie isn’t enough to ensure paid workers to maintain their care, he says.

“Everything is just barely hanging on because we don’t have the manpower to do it,” he says. “There has to be a public shift. The American people have to say they want access to their wilderness, and they have to pay for it. In the grand scheme of things it is not expensive.”

Visitors have a once-in-a-lifetime experience on the trails in the Spotted Bear Ranger District, and, as Snelson says, it touches your soul.

In spite of the hardship and the uphill battle the volunteers and paid Forest Service employees face, they continue to return to Big Prairie. And they want the visitors to come back, too.

“It is the people we see back there and the families, guided tours, backpackers, all of the people enjoying the wilderness that get us to continue to do the work,” Zoellner says. “There is still a need because people enjoy it. Visitors don’t know we have to fight, scratch and claw for every dollar. For them, it is the trip of a lifetime. We just want them to continue to have the chance to take such a trip.”

For more information on the Bob Marshall Wilderness Complex, visit fs.usa.gov/attmain/flathead/.

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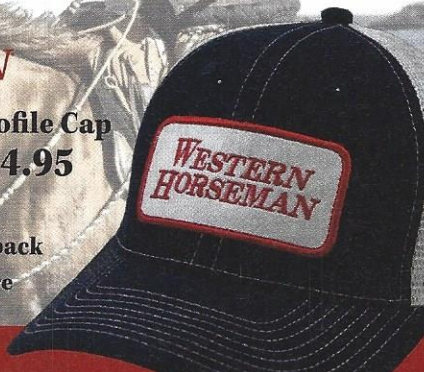
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