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Monsoon! Partnerships Assist Trail Recovery

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Exposed gabions (metal mesh rock-filled cages used to support trails) on Bell Rock Pathway



Friends of the Forest volunteers Jerry Checchia, Ernie DiMillo and Melissa Pontikes cleaning blacked culvert drains on Bell Rock Pathway.



Tree and flash flood debris across Templeton Trail



Culvert drains clogged with mud and debris on Bell Rock Pathway

Monsoon! Partnerships Assist Trail Recovery

Everyone in our community was happy to see the monsoons bring much needed rain after two years of minimal precipitation. But this year, monsoon rains also brought severe erosion and damage to our Red Rock Trails.

Our recent monsoons, although welcome to alleviate drought conditions, have left scars on many of the trails. Newly formed ruts and washouts are now found scattered throughout the area of Red Rock Country in and around the Sedona/VOC communities.

As always, partnerships serve a critical role in maintaining and enhancing the Red Rock Trail System. The Forest Service anticipated post-monsoon trail damage and reached out to a trusted partner, Friends of the Forest Sedona, for assistance in identifying, assessing, and repairing damaged trails.

Friends of the Forest volunteers across the organization hit the trails. Almost immediately reports started coming in highlighting trails that had enormous trail erosion, due to the storms. Particular problems included flash flood debris and clogged, non-functioning drains. Drains are purposefully excavated parts of the trail that allow water to run-off the trail tread and into nearby vegetation. When drains are non-functioning, more problems arise.

Friends of the Forest volunteers are committed to be ready to tackle emergency maintenance issues. One immediate monsoon-related emergency was a culvert-drainage issue on Bell Rock Pathway. At first glance, everything looked okay. However, upon closer inspection it became apparent that one side of the culvert's drains were completely blocked and what looked like flat land was actually a back-up of mud and debris. If the drains weren't cleared right away, the next rain would swamp the trail with more mud, water, and debris and damage its tread, in addition to making it dangerous for hikers and bikers.

At 6:30am on a hot July day, a small group of Friends of the Forest Trail Maintenance & Construction volunteers met at the Bell Rock Vista to tackle the culvert and were later joined by their Forest Service contact, Kyle Robb. Jumping right in, or more like sinking in, were Ernie DiMillo, Jerry Checchia, Tim Fogarty, Friends of the Forest President Annie Glickstein and Trail Maintenance & Construction Committee Co-Chairs Mike Boyd and Melissa Pontikes. The group took turns shoveling the wet, heavy, fetid mud and debris searching for the two metal drains. One of the trickier aspects of the work was the fact that no one could take a step without sinking several inches or outright falling in the ever-shifting slippery mud. After almost 2 ½ sweaty hours, the group was able to clear the area of debris and create a new drainage channel. After several new monsoon rains, the culvert was reassessed to find the drains remain clear!

Other monsoon-related trail repair that has been completed includes the removal of flash flood debris and filling-in of trenches on trails in the VOC, West Sedona and Dry Creek area. Additional damage is still being assessed and prioritized by the Forest Service. As the Forest Service establishes their priorities, Trail Maintenance & Construction volunteers will once again don their hardhats, grab their tools, and hit the trails.

Friends of the Forest Sedona is a twenty-seven-year-old nonprofit volunteer organization dedicated to assisting the Forest Service. Annually, Friends of the Forest provides the Red Rock Ranger District with more than 30,000 volunteer service hours. Volunteers help maintain trails and cultural resources, remove graffiti, provide information to visitors at the Visitor Center, and strive to enhance the overall forest experience for visitors and residents.

Year-round, Friends of the Forest volunteers (Trail Patrol) hike local trails and in addition to recording the number of hikers, mountain bikers, and equestrians they encounter, they report trail damage and graffiti that needs to be remediated. All reports are stored and monitored in a custom database that is then used by Friends of the Forest's volunteer leadership to determine volunteer opportunities for various committees, including Graffiti Removal and Trail Maintenance & Construction.

Friends of the Forest Trail Maintenance & Construction provides on average 3,765 volunteer hours to the Forest Service, during non-pandemic years. The crew works every Friday morning throughout non-summer months, performing maintenance and trail construction around the Red Rock District under the supervision of and in partnership with the Forest Service.

Trail Maintenance & Construction Committee does not have regularly scheduled work-days in the heat of summer, but they remain available for emergencies, such as the monsoon damage this season.

Sedona Red Rock Trail Fund, another partner helping with trail maintenance, has generously supported the Forest Service's Red Rock Ranger District over the past two field seasons in the amount of \$609,513.00.

These funds enabled the Forest Service to employ two full-year trail staff and 10 seasonal trail workers from October to May. In addition to providing significant funding for the District's staffing, Sedona Red Rock Trail Fund has twice contracted with the American Conservation Experience in Flagstaff to augment the District's trail crew with youth conservation corps members, purchased nine two-panel steel kiosks to replace wooden ones that have reached their useful life, replaced the District's hand tools, helped fund new trail and trailhead concept designs, purchased new trail signs for the Western Gateway, created a trail crew best practices pamphlet, started the process to replace all the District's worn and outdated signage, and provided refreshments at volunteer workdays.

Supporting partners of the Red Rock Ranger District include the Sedona Red Rock Trail Fund, the Friends of the Forest Sedona and the Sedona Westerners Hiking Club. Working in concert with each other, the Red Rock Trails are kept safe and well maintained.

If you are interested in learning more about these groups, please see their websites:

Sedona Red Rock Trail fund: redrocktrailfund.org/

Sedona Westerners: sedonawesterners.org/

Friends of the Forest Sedona: friendsoftheforestsedona.org/