

Hikers at Maroon Bells, photo by
Nicolette Toussaint

THE VOLUNTEER RANGERS OF THE FOREST CONSERVANCY

Serving as the "Eyes and Ears" of the White River National Forest

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PHOTOGRAPHY PROVIDED

As a vacationing family of three approaches Maroon Lake, they spy a table covered with a bearskin, claws, photos and even some scat. The child squeals and runs forward, eager to touch the rough brown fur.

“Is it from a *real* bear?” he asks, round-eyed with wonder.

“Oh yes! And there *are* real bears around here. It’s good to know what to do if you meet one,” answers the woman behind the table. She’s dressed in a khaki cap and shirt adorned with a familiar pine tree logo flanked by the letters U.S. As she poses with the boy and dad snaps a photo, the sun glints off of her name badge: Ruth Frey.

It takes a sharp eye to note the word “volunteer” engraved beneath her name.

Ruth Frey is one of 130 volunteers who make up the Forest Conservancy, a local nonprofit that strives to be the “face of the White River National Forest.” These volunteers provide information at visitor centers, answer questions about nature, care for trails and hikers and create hands-on learning experiences like Frey’s display on “close encounters of the ursine kind.”

Odds are that the thousands of visitors who will flock to the Maroon Bells this summer are far more likely to encounter a bear than a federally-employed forest ranger.

Although the White River National Forest covers 2.3 million acres (including the Roaring Fork Valley), and although it’s the nation’s most-visited national forest, budget cuts have forced the Forest Service to decimate the number of rangers. In the past 15 years, they have had to slash visitor services, eliminate conservation education programs and contend with a backlog of trail maintenance. The numbers are grizzly: Between 2010 and 2015, while recreational visits doubled, reaching more than 13 million, the White River Forest’s funding dropped more than 65 percent! On top of that, federal funds are unremittingly redistributed to fight forest fires nationwide. That has put face-to-face forestry on the endangered list.

“We are one of the only forests that has folks out on the trails in official uniform interacting with people,” says Forest Conservancy executive director Marcia Johnson.

Judy Schramm, who co-founded the organization with Joanne Lyon in 2001, adds, “The Aspen-Sopris Ranger District has just one full-time wilderness recreation manager now. In 2001, there were 20-plus rangers.”

“The need for volunteers is unquestionable,” Johnson remarks.

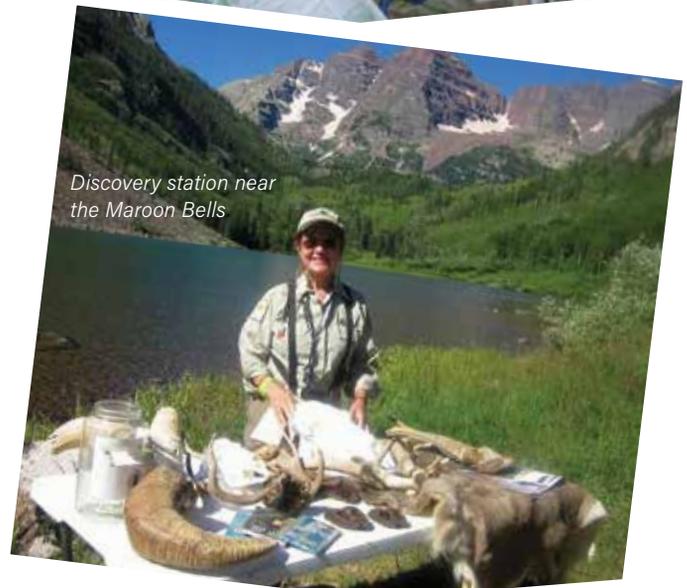
Schramm and Johnson recently gathered at *Roaring Fork Lifestyle’s* editorial office along with volunteers Ruth Frey and Patti Stranahan. All arrived neatly uniformed, kitted out in khaki shirts and olive green pants, complete with forest ranger insignia. Frey even wore Smokey Bear earrings.

“We are unique in that our volunteer rangers officially represent the Forest Service,” Johnson explained. “When we’re out on the trail, we look just like rangers.”

Stranahan added, “The Forest Service trusts us to wear the uniform because of the rigorous training we get.”



Volunteer Ranger Donna Grauer assisting hiker.



Discovery station near the Maroon Bells



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Volunteers trekking out trash near Avalanche Creek.

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Indeed, the Forest Conservancy selects and prepares volunteers with a rigor atypical of most nonprofits: First, there's a job interview. Then references are checked. New volunteers take a day of classroom training followed by a day of field training. They complete CPR and first aid certifications; many also complete an advanced wilderness first aid course. Then they work with a mentor to gain hands-on experience.

None of us would be here without Judy," comments Stranahan. "She had the foresight and vision to see the need."

Stranahan is one of the organization's newer volunteers, and because she pitches in on public relations and fundraising as well as on the trails, the others warmly refer to her as "our Swiss Army knife." But even an adept multi-tasker like Stranahan has a lot to learn; Stranahan says that she has taken the orientation twice and is still learning.

After an initial 40 hours of training, the organization begins teaching its volunteers environmental science, free of charge. They learn about wildflowers, birds, butterflies, weather patterns and orienteering. They study botany and geology, and they continue learning as the organization adds new classes.

In addition, volunteers can follow a curriculum leading to a national certification. Frey is certified as a master naturalist; she must complete a new research and outreach project every two years to maintain that certification. Frey has completed two ursine projects, one on black bear safety in the wild and one on bear safety at home.

Although the Forest Conservancy works in partnership with both the Forest Service and other nonprofits, notably the Roaring Fork Outdoor Volunteers, which builds and repairs trails, its unique niche is face-to-face outreach. "I really enjoy interacting with people on the trails," says Schramm. "You're doing something good by educating people, and that protects nature, so it's a win/win for me."

"I have had my photo taken so many times I can't count them!" laughs Frey, noting that hikers are surprised to actually meet a ranger on the trail.

Schramm adds, "I give them candy, sunscreen lotion, water, whatever they may need in a pinch."

At this, Frey demonstrates how well prepared these volunteer rangers are by unloading her daypack: She has maps of the Maroon Bells, Conundrum Valley, Marble and Hanging Lake. There's a headlamp for dark-hours map reading and a filter bottle that enables her to safely get water from the rivers. For rescues large and small, she carries a space blanket, band-aids, antibiotic spray, insect repellent, an after-bite stick, ibuprofen, Gatorade, sunscreen, an extra hat, gloves, socks, a poncho and a towel, plus a pen and paper so that she can write out hiking directions or first aid instructions. She has a dog leash and a poop bag. She carries a camera, a tape recorder and extra batteries.

That kit pretty well communicates what services the volunteers provide, but not how well informed they are. Each day, Forest Conservancy rangers tape-record trail reports, take photos and file bulletins online, so that the next volunteer going out knows if there's snow, downfall on the trail or any other problems. This makes them, in Johnson's words, "the eyes and ears of the White River National Forest."

"The budget keeps getting slashed and the visitor numbers keep growing. I can't imagine how Hanging Lake and the Bells would get by without volunteers," comments volunteer Patti Stranahan.

This month, the Forest Conservancy will celebrate its 2015 accomplishments with a potluck and awards ceremony. Volunteers completed nearly 11,000 hours of service to the White River National Forest last year and aspire to break that record this summer.

"What's important is that we all share this commitment to protect the forest and to connect other people to it," says Johnson. "We love each other, love the forest, and we love the visitors."

Stranahan, who notes that Forest Conservancy is always looking for funding and new volunteers, says, "I have volunteered for lots of organizations over the last 40 years, but I have to say that this one is extraordinary. Every day I give so much, but I get so much. It really feeds my soul."

To learn more, visit ForestConservancy.com.