



We spend our summers clearing paths in the Rocky Mountains of Idaho.



Tom, Jay, and Betsy on top of Stanley Butte in the Rocky Mountains.

Jay's cousin Max (front) spent a week on the trail with Jay (center) and the author.



The author and her son saw a tree trunk.



Jay takes a break from work to draw while his parents clear a tree that has collapsed across their path.

Clearing Trails in the Wilderness

By Betsy Kepes Photos by Tom Van de Water

We look like a family of turtles when we travel to work. Our backpacks bulge with camping gear and enough dried food to feed us for a week. Our equipment is strapped to the outside of our backpacks. I carry a two-person crosscut saw. My husband, Tom, carries an ax strapped onto his heavy load. Jay, our 10-year-old son, walks with a pruning saw tucked into an outside pocket of his pack. We all carry shovels in our hands, using them like

walking sticks as we hike along the trails.

“When we have to hike a long way, we make up stories,” says Jay. “It makes the hike go faster.”

My family works as a wilderness-trail crew in the Rocky Mountains of Idaho. In the summer, the United States Forest Service hires us to clear more than 100 miles of trails in the Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness. We cut up trees that have fallen across the trails and clear debris

from drainage ditches. No motors are allowed in this wilderness, so we cannot use a chain saw or ride on an all-terrain vehicle. We like the quiet and the challenge of using only hand tools.

Huckleberries and Slushes

Some days, we walk for miles without finding many trees to cut. Other times, we work for hours cutting branches and sawing chunks of large fir and spruce trees that have collapsed across a

trail. Sometimes while Tom and I work, Jay will pick huckleberries and share them with us when we’ve finished clearing the trail.

All of us work together when we reach a trail with lots of drainage ditches. We use our shovels to scoop dirt and leaves out of each ditch. At the top of the ridge, we look for patches of snow left over from winter. We mix clean snow with powdered lemonade mix to make slushes. After working hard in the hot

summer sun, a snow slush is the most delicious treat in the world.

Alone in the Mountains

When our trail crosses a stream or river that has no bridge, we take off our hiking boots, roll up our pant legs, and wade across the cold water. On the other side, we put our packs down and then wade back into the stream. It is our job to take loose rocks out of the fords (shallow river crossings) to make it easier

for horses to walk across. Many people who travel the wilderness trails use horses and mules to carry their food and equipment.

When we finish work for the day, we set up our tent by a stream or lake. Mountains surround us and no one else is around. When it’s time for dinner, I ask Jay what he wants.

“Macaroni and cheese,” he responds. It’s his favorite.

We like it best when our home is on our backs.

We cook dinner over a campfire and look at maps to see where we will work the next day. Before it gets dark, we crawl into our tent and wiggle into our sleeping bags. “Chess?” Tom asks Jay. Jay nods. They like to play chess on the pocket-sized magnetic chess set that Jay carries in his pack. Sometimes Jay gets out his drawing pad and pencils. Often we read aloud an exciting book or write in our journals. Our bodies are tired from a long day of working, but our minds need exercise, too.

After almost a week in the wilderness, we hike back out to the road. We look forward to getting clean clothes from our van, fresh food from a store, and more books to read. Sometimes we visit friends, but we take only one or two days off before we head back into the woods. In the summer, we like it best when our home is on our backs and we are in the wilderness, working together as a trail-crew family.