

FENW Slate Lakes Work Trip

Our first overnight work trip turned out to be a rather fun and adventurous trek up some steep rocky trails, and included dodging garbanzo bean sized hail (twice), and trying to keep our hats on our heads (if not for the marmots then for the random storm) among other things! Powell and Dominguez, our trusty pack llamas, took good care to pack in our food, tools, and heavy camp items the six or so miles up to our campsite along Slate Creek. We were a group of volunteers, Forest Service staff, and Student Conservation interns intent on making our way to Slate Lakes to clean up campfire rings, pack out trash, and do what we could to leave the land a little better than when we found it.



Left to right: Abby Seymour, Dom the llama, Steve Alberico, John Taylor, Hannah Meyer, Todd Nice, Powell the llama, Lynette Nice, Maria Leech, Franz Hans (not pictured: Kirt Greenburg Tom Copper. Kate the human)

Friday

We had the good fortune of being able to hike in to our site from the upper trailhead of Boulder Creek Trail as a generous private property owner let our group park our cars at their property. Our hike in to our campsite was rather uneventful which in my mind was just fine. Dominguez (or Dom for short) and Powell, each burdened with 65 pounds of gear and food, made the slow hike in with me after the rest of the group set off. The boys as I also call them, were such seemingly good

sports about the work they performed for us and I was glad for their furry company. The llamas and I stopped after steep hikes to catch our breath and dallied at streams for drinks of water and every so often we stopped at the side of the trail for tasty plants to graze on. All in all it took roughly four hours for us to get to the upper reaches of the valley where we planned on setting up camp.

Our home-away-from-home was perched above the trail on a mostly level prominence looking across the valley at what appeared to be some rather large historical avalanche paths off the north flank of Bledsoe Mountain. We set up tarps to shelter our tools and gear, set up a bear hang for food, placed a picket line for the llamas, dug a trench toilet system with the best view in the valley, and set up our cooking gear so we could all socialize as we prepared our meals together. When all the camp chores were taken care of we really had no other choice than to marvel at our beautiful surroundings and watch the large waterfall that ran down to a series of trout pools below us at Slate Creek. Todd, one of our volunteers and a fishing guide in a former life, spotted some nice browns and rainbows and made quick work to set up his rod and make a few casts before bedtime. Abby, the lead wilderness ranger of the FS crew was surprised with 8 birthday cards and some lemon pound cake from her crew, while the rest of us helped her celebrate by munching on chocolate sandwich cookies packed in for the special occasion. The stout hike, setting sun, and looming storm clouds gave us all plenty of reason to tuck in early to acquaint ourselves with our backcountry beds and look forward to the next day's trek to the lakes.



Slate Lake, looking southwest towards the Atlas Basin

Saturday

The routine of camp can be a jarring adjustment if it's not something you do regularly. Lowering and re-hanging your food, gathering water, setting up your kitchen, leaving a clean camp, then packing up llamas, and in this case rolling straight into manual work for the entirety of the day. It can be exhausting even before it's time for a coffee break. As can be imagined, all of this is part of the process of performing routine work out in the backcountry and for many, is a ritual of the wilderness – a part of a job well worth the time and efforts needed to do good work.

The volunteers and wilderness crew began their hike early and made their way to Upper Slate Lake so they could get a good start on campfire clean-up and gather the materials necessary for installing a “no campfires within ¼ miles of lake” sign. What I mean by this is rather than pack in a heavy, milled post, the wilderness crew chose to source a small, downed naturally rot resistant spruce for their lumber. Also, in these parts, digging a decent hole for sign installation is always tough so the sooner you get to digging, the better. Once you start excavating, you're committed to the project, even if it means working after quitting time and/or it starts raining, or both.

Dom got a day off from packing while Powell drew the short straw to carry in the roughly 30 pounds of tools, assorted gear, and llama snacks the roughly 2.7 miles to Upper Slate Lake. Lynette and Todd and I lead the llamas to meet the rest of the group and joined in on the afternoon of clean-up, restoration, and sign installation. John Taylor, easily the most veteran of the group at 81 and a long-time member of FENW, stayed behind to work in the valley as a one-man musk thistle eradication effort.

Our day of work went by quickly as we worked, hunkered down against hail and rain, and dealt with the sad event of one of the volunteers hat's being partially eaten by a marmot. Our encounters with other wilderness users were met with surprise as not many people were accustomed to seeing llamas and large work groups out so remotely. Most everyone we encountered was behaving and happy to see good work being done. We continued into the afternoon with another sign installation and campfire clean-up effort at Slate Lake and continued on with corridor clearing in some of the more brushy sections of trail.

The second sign installation effort at Slate Lake was met with resistance on the part of large rocks that wouldn't cooperate. Thus, Saturday turned into a marathon work day with most everyone arriving back to camp after dinner time. However, we did good work and were proud of our efforts and I feel comfortable reporting that everyone was in good spirits - even the gentleman down a hat. We celebrated with some surprise refreshments, talked about our exciting day around our cooking circle and had another early evening as we were all pretty tuckered.

Sunday

The trip flew by. Come morning we shook out our tents and repacked the llamas, this time substituting full food canisters and Forest Service signs for bags of trash and weeds collected from the trip. A broken elk call, a pudgie pie maker, random clothing, candy wrappers, webbing, fishing poles, and lots and lots of burned aluminum foil... all of it abandoned in this wilderness. Even after ten years of work as a wilderness ranger, I'm still amazed and a bit saddened by the choices of other humans.

Kirk had to make an early departure in order to get to a play rehearsal on time and John decided to leave early too so as to leave himself plenty of time to make it to a meeting. The rest of us took off together, taking turns leading the llamas and making our way back to the trailhead. Save for a brief encounter with a resting bull moose, our hike out was pleasant and uneventful.

After all was said and done, I weighed our garbage haul in at around 15 pounds and our weed haul in at nearly 30. We cleaned up approximately 14 illegal campfire rings at the lakes and had what I felt was a really great time exploring the wilderness, unplugging for a day, and connecting ourselves to each other and the mountains and lakes we feel so akin to.