

PITCHING IN

Local volunteer groups help maintain cross country ski trails



COURTESY OF BET GENDRON The New Mexico Cross Country Ski Club does trail maintenance in the Jemez Mountains.



Volunteers with the Friends of the Sandias work to remove tree stumps during the warmer months.



COURTESY OF SCOTT DIETRICH Members of Sandia Nordic Ski Club move snow from the high to low side of a trail in the Sandia Mountains to help level the trail.

BY TANIA SOUSSAN FOR THE JOURNAL

Keeping the trails of the Sandia Mountains in good shape for cross country skiing is truly a team effort. Sam Beard has been volunteering his time since the early 1970s to help create and maintain the ski trails in the Sandia Mountains as part of the New Mexico Cross Country Ski Club. Beard might be the guy who got it all started, but today the Friends of the Sandia Mountains, the Sandia Nordic Ski Club and others also pitch in to do everything from leveling trails to removing fallen trees.

The U. S. Forest Service, which manages the Sandias, doesn't have the resources to get all that work done on its own.

" They're unfortunately very, very low-staffed. so it's virtually impossible for them to keep up," says Bob Lowder, president of the Friends of the Sandia Mountains, known as FOSM.

FOSM spends most of its time taking fallen trees off trails but also rebuilds and maintains trails year-round in cooperation with the Forest Service.

Miles of trails

Cross country skiers use two types of trails: backcountry trails and groomed trails. The backcountry trails don't require as much work, while the groomed trails need attention once or twice a week to stay

in top shape, says Chris Norton of the Sandia Nordic Ski Club.

Norton, a skier who raced for six years in biathlon events for the U. S. military in Europe, is one of a few people qualified to run a grooming machine in the Sandias, packing down the snow and setting grooves on the side of the track for classic skiers. The middle section is intended for freestyle or skate skiing, which is similar to ice skating on skis.

The wide, groomed trails are good for racers and families, Norton says.

The Sandia Nordic Ski Club has been working to expand the groomed trails with an area of switchback trail near the Ellis and 10 K trails' parking areas near Sandia Crest.

" It's a beautiful area," Norton says." When you ski, you can see all the way to Santa Fe, Taos."

There are almost three miles of trail in a fairly open half-mile by half-mile area, making it great for family skiing because parents can look up or down and see their kids skiing on a different switchback, he says.

The switchbacks also are easier to ski than trails that go more directly up or down.

" We really think the groomed trails are going to be a nice addition," Norton says.

The Sandia Nordic Ski club is a new group that aims to promote. cross country skiing and work with the Forest Service and other volunteer organizations to construct, maintain and provide public access to groomed trails in the Sandias.

The group hopes to raise money for the trails and to expand the system, says President Scott Dietrich." Already the club has raised enough money to buy a Yamaha Grizzly ATV with snow tracks to pull its grooming equipment and a Ginzu Groomer. In addition, as part of its commitment to donate 5 percent of annual funds raised to the UNM Nordic Ski Team, the club will be giving the team more than \$750 at the end of the year."

Dietrich adds, " We'd like to actually construct some additional trails in that same (Ellis-10 K) area."

Freestyle or classic cross country skiing - the style seen in the winter Olympics - - and the skate style are growing in popularity, Dietrich adds.

Lots of trees

Another longtime player in grooming trails in the Sandias is the University of New Mexico Ski Team, which has been doing the volunteer work under a Forest Service permit since the early 1980 s, says Head Coach Fredrik Landstedt.

Team members do maintenance and trail work while Landstedt and his assistant run a snowmobile to groom trails.

" It's a big job," Landstedt says, adding that it requires about four or five hours to groom the roughly 10 kilometers of trails that the ski team takes care of on the service road between Sandia Peak and the tram and in the 10 K Trail area.

This winter, the ski team and the Nordic Club hope to put on a competition and ski clinic, something that hasn't been done for years, Landstedt says.

In addition to grooming trails with a snowmobile, trail work involves shoveling to level trails and bank corners as well as removing downed trees.

Groups of six to 12 volunteers from the New Mexico Cross Country Ski Club often tackle a day of work, pruning branches, cutting brush and replacing blue plastic diamonds that have fallen from the trees.

When it comes to removing trees, volunteers trained by the Forest Service can use chain saws in some areas. But only non-motorized tools are allowed in wilderness areas. Once they have cut up a fallen tree, they use a tool called a cant hook, a giant hook attached to a lever, to roll the pieces of log to a safe spot off the trail.

With Beard as trails chairman for the New Mexico club and projects chairman for FOSM, the two groups work closely together to keep the Buried Cable, Survey, Switchback, Rocky Point, Gravel Pit and Challenge trails in good shape.

Around the state

Volunteers also work on other trails around the state. For example, the Los Alamos-based Southwest Nordic Ski Club maintains the Pajarito Nordic Ski Trail in the Española Ranger District of the Santa Fe National Forest.

The New Mexico Cross Country Ski Club also maintains trails on unplowed Forest Service roads in the Jemez Mountains, including ones near Redondo Campground and in the East Fork, Los Griegos and Peralta areas as well as trails in the Coyote Call,

South Mountain and Valle Grande areas of the Valles Caldera National Preserve, Beard says.