

Keeping Trails in Shape

By Deborah Geigis Berry

A Connecticut troop's commitment to regular trail maintenance means safer hiking for the public and a rewarding outdoor service experience for the Scouts.

- [Scouts for Volunteer Trail Maintenance Service Projects](#)

Deer, geese, raccoons, and rabbits roam the woods of northwest Connecticut, but on a crisp October morning, there's a sound wafting through the trees from a different kind of animal. "Aargh! Mmmph! Ooooof!" Antagonized doe? Nah. Lost Maine bull moose? Try again. It's the Scouts from Torrington's Troop 23, [Connecticut Rivers Council](#), who resemble a giant caterpillar as they crush together trying to extract a stubborn rock from its hold beside a popular hiking path.

The 1.3-mile Alain and May White Trail features a variety of plants and wildlife that create a woodsy wonderland. But the nine Scouts focus on the task at hand as they use pry bars and shovels to loosen the rock's glue-like grip.

"Our job is to make these trails more navigable," says Scoutmaster Michael Brophy, who coaches the Scouts during their trail maintenance outing. "All of these boys live in the area, so they're getting a chance to work on something they use."

"Don't lose it in the water!" a Scout shouts, as the team maneuvers the rock past a soggy area toward a pit in the trail where a hiker could easily sprain an ankle.

"That's good, right there," says Samuel Langley, a trail manager for the Connecticut Forest and Park Association (CFPA). "Now, let's fill the area in with dirt and tamp it

down."

Commitment to better trails

Troop 23's commitment to better area trails began three years ago, when Langley called Scoutmaster Brophy to ask if the Scouts would help maintain part of Connecticut's 700-mile Blue Blazed Hiking Trail System. Identified by blue marks on tree trunks, the volunteer-managed network relies on the good will—and sheer strength—of volunteers to keep the paths safe and beautiful for the public.

The troop heeded Langley's call, realizing it offered a great opportunity for a community service project. The Scouts now donate several Saturdays a year to their commitment. The CFPA provides the materials; the boys provide muscle to get the job done.

"Scoutmaster Brophy told me to call any time I needed a hand, and as a result, the Scouts have helped a lot," says Langley, as he directs a Scout to drill holes in a wooden water bar, which will help prevent erosion along the path. "They haul in materials and do the carpentry work. As the saying goes, 'Many hands make light work.'"

Troop 23 has 36 Scouts who alternate shifts throughout the year, so Langley benefits from many helping hands. Under his direction, the boys have installed irrigation pipes, helped build footbridges, trimmed foliage, and cleared brush.

"I'd rather do this than wash windows," says Michael Brophy, 17, the Scoutmaster's son, as he raises a pickax and starts chipping away at a boulder whose shards will be used to fill rough spots along the trail. "You get to make something better that lots of people will use."

Warm, lemon-colored light filters through the maple, oak, and birch trees, and the call of wild geese punctuates the pine-scented air. It's easy to see why thousands of hikers are drawn to the trail annually and why the Scouts are so enthusiastic about tending it.

In 1997, the association awarded Troop 23 a certificate of merit for its contribution to trail maintenance.

"Connecticut is blessed with great volunteers," says Ann Colson, director of volunteers and trail coordinator for the Connecticut Forest and Park Association, "and we're very grateful. For a small state with a lot of urban areas, we have a large number of trails, and we couldn't maintain them without help."

Challenging work

Trail work is rewarding and satisfying, but not without its challenges. The bugs can get nasty in summer, so the Scouts tend to restrict their visits to spring and fall. A bad rain or snowstorm can flood the trails and cause erosion damage, so much of their time is spent doing preventive maintenance. Despite posted warnings, some recreational users take off-road vehicles on the trails, causing deep, hazardous ruts.

"Most people who come out here are respectful," says Langley, "but we do sometimes also have to pick up litter."

Trail work helps most Scouts pass certain requirements for rank advancement. But that's not the only—or even the main—reason they spend sunny Saturdays humming along to the rhythms of saws and pickaxes.

"I like working outside more than inside," admits Brian McCauley, 17. "It's rewarding to be outside enjoying nature and making the trails safer for everyone."

Building bridges, learning skills

The Scouts are particularly proud of one project that makes the trail easier for the public to hike: a short footbridge that traverses a wet area near the trailhead.

The weekend project involved digging out a foundation, laying down heavy stones, securing heavy oak stringers with rods to create the walkway, and carting in fill. Some Scouts are still amazed at the impressive results of their elbow grease.

"I never built a bridge before," says James Newman, 14, a trail volunteer since 1998. "It took awhile, but it was fun, and it looks pretty good."

Trail work also rewards the Scouts by helping them learn individual and group skills. On the bridge project, for example, James and his fellow Scouts used sledgehammers, drills, saws, pick-axes, and rebars to complete the task.

"Some of the boys haven't done these things before, so this is a chance to learn something new," says Scoutmaster Brophy. "And it's gratifying for them to see the results."

Later in the morning, the Scouts work tirelessly to complete a water bar. No one's yawning, so you'd never know this is the second service project they have been involved

in today. Their morning began at 6:30, when the troop assembled at a local lumber yard to set up old television sets, weed trimmers, and exercise machines for the troop's annual tag sale. (The sale is going on several miles away, staffed by other Scouts from the troop.)

Additionally, the Scouts routinely clean up Torrington's First Congregational Church, their chartered organization, and host money-earning projects like spaghetti suppers.

But in true Yankee tradition, they enjoy keeping busy.

"I like hard work," says Ryan Barry, 17, who is often called upon to do heavy lifting during trail outings. "I'm used to farm work, cleaning out stalls, shoveling manure, stuff like that. You feel really good after you do it."

Freelance writer Deborah Geigis Berry lives in Connecticut.

Scouts for Volunteer Trail Maintenance Service Projects

If your troop is interested in maintaining local trails as part of a community service project, consult the following Web sites for information about volunteer opportunities in your area.

www.americanhiking.org: The American Hiking Society is a nonprofit organization dedicated to establishing, protecting, and maintaining the country's trails. This site connects volunteers with local affiliates who can assign appropriate projects. You'll also find information about National Trails Day, when thousands of nature-lovers across the country will pitch in to beautify local paths. Call (800) 972-8608, ext. 206, for more information.

www.outdoors.org: In the Northeast, the Appalachian Mountain Club maintains more than 1,400 miles of recreational trails, including a portion of the famed Appalachian Trail, which stretches 2,100 miles from Maine to Georgia. Click on the site's Volunteer Opportunities category (Hiker's Info Center) for a list of projects, events, and volunteer opportunities by state.

www.cdtrail.org: In the West, the Continental Divide Trail Alliance needs volunteers to help maintain the 3,100-mile Canada-to-Mexico trail (30 percent has yet to be built), which runs through New Mexico, Colorado, Wyoming, Idaho, and Montana. Volunteers can either adopt part of the trail or find a project in the online volunteer guide.

www.pcta.org: Running for 2,650 miles through California, Oregon, and Washington, the Pacific Crest Trail winds past desert, volcanic peaks, and glaciated expanses. The Pacific Crest Trail Association needs volunteers to adopt and maintain a section or to tackle projects listed in the volunteer section of the Web site.

www.ctwoodlands.org: The Connecticut Forest and Park Association, the private, nonprofit conservation organization, has managed the Blue Blazed Hiking Trail System since 1929. For general information and volunteer opportunities, call (860) 346-2372.

[Top of Page](#)

[Current Issue](#) | [Archives](#)
[October 2001 Table of Contents](#)

Copyright © 2001 by the Boy Scouts of America. All rights thereunder reserved; anything appearing in *Scouting* magazine or on its Web site may not be reprinted either wholly or in part without written permission. Because of freedom given authors, opinions may not reflect official concurrence.

The Boy Scouts of America  <http://www.scouting.org>