

The Trail Provides

A good friend of mine, a section hiker and someone who has completed the A.T., frequently repeats that mantra, “The trail provides.” Another word for those unexpected but well-timed circumstances that change your day for better or worse is serendipity. Webster’s definition for that word is, “the ability to find valuable or agreeable things not sought for, also, luck that takes the form of such finding.” I ran into a little luck the last time I was out doing some maintenance on the trail.

Since the end of August is getting close, and I’ve got another trip or two to get in before the end of the reporting year, I’ve been watching the weather for a day that wouldn’t be too hot or steamy to go up and repaint the blazes on my section. A day was coming up that looked pretty good, especially with all the heat and humidity we’ve been having this summer.

The night before I headed up, I packed up my paints, brushes and scraper so I could paint both the white and the few blue blazes on my section. Not ever knowing what I may come across, I always pack my folding saw and snips. I hadn’t been up in a couple of months, so I threw the fire rake into the back of the truck, too. Dips can always use a cleaning.

I got up early for the two hour drive up to the trailhead. I wanted to get an early start because my grandson had his first soccer game of the season at 6:00, and I wanted to get back in time to see it. I arrived at Dicks Creek Gap about 9:00 and, luckily enough, there were only two others in the parking lot. I jumped out and grabbed my pack and fire rake, and headed up the trail. I have about a mile hike in before my section starts.

At the gap where my section begins, there’s a campsite, with a water source just below it, and the first white blaze I’m responsible for is just south of the side trail to the campsite, so as I arrived, I took off my pack and prepared to paint. I hadn’t seen anyone on my hike up, and with only a couple of cars in the lot, I expected a quiet day.

I continued on up Powell Mountain, painting the few blazes I came across, eyeing the work I would have on the way out clearing drains, and inspecting and admiring previous trail repairs and rock work that were made on previous work trips where whole trees had fallen and created craters in the trail. I got real lucky with one: the tree had pulled up a bit of the trail, but had fallen parallel to the trail and only required a minor repair of the trail. The second one, about a quarter mile further south, fell 90 degrees to the trail, and when it fell, it left a gaping hole in the trail and a steep incline on the path that developed around it, so my wife and I used the time we had to build some rock and earth steps to help with the elevation change. Those rock steps were holding up well!



About another half-mile in, I came on another big, old dead oak that looked like it fell only a couple of days earlier, and it had completely removed the trail. A mountain goat perch of a trail was just starting to be formed by hikers around the crater, but it surely couldn't be widened into the mountainside. It didn't look like anything I would want to negotiate as a

backpacker or dayhiker. A large chunk of mountain would need to be removed to make anything remotely walkable. On the uphill side, there was a three-foot drop into the crater, so that wasn't going to work either.

As I stood there looking at it, I considered just leaving it for another day, especially since I still had a good chunk of trail to hike, blazes to refresh, and drains to clear. And a family event I didn't want to miss at the end of the day. About a minute or so into exploring my options – stay and fix it – and potentially give up the work I came to do – or ignore it and hike on – I decided I can't ignore this hole. Something's got to be done.

The only thing I had that approached the usefulness of a digging tool was the fire rake I was carrying, so I took off my pack and started scraping dirt and cutting roots with my folding saw. I wasn't too far into the job when I noticed a backpacker coming down the trail. I paused my work as he got closer to help guide him around the hole, but as he got to the rim, he stopped and pulled off his pack. I didn't really know what he was preparing to do, and he didn't seem too



anxious to get around the hole, so I went back to work raking out the hole, trying to create some kind of treadway.

Then I turned around, and he had pulled out one of those folding shovels from his pack and had commenced to dig at the top of the crater! As he dug and I raked dirt and cut roots, we talked about his hike. I asked about his destination, and he said it was Katahdin. I said, “You’re off to a late start for that, you know.” And he said, “Yeah. I had to go to court back home in Mississippi, so I’m here now.” He had found some flat rocks that he threw onto the tread to harden it up, and we both packed down the dirt walking back and forth on the newly repaired trail. About a half-hour later, we had created a respectable trail.



Now, if I had seen this guy down at the Hike Inn where I have frequently volunteered, I probably would have talked to him about some of the choices he had made about his gear. I would definitely have recommended against carrying a folding shovel on a thru-hike, but today I was happy he had it! I asked if he had a trail name yet, and he said he didn’t, but he gave me his name, which I’ve unfortunately forgotten. In my mind, I’ll always think of him as “Dozer” for the way he moved that dirt. I wish him good luck in finding himself and success in finding the destination he’s seeking!

Serendipity at work. The trail provides.

-- Ron Hamlin