



*Sarah Johnson and crew use a grip hoist to move a heavy load.*

## Giving Back to Philmont: The First PSA® Volunteer Vacation

by Brad Plumb and Phil Winegardner  
Photos by Phil Winegardner & John May

*“Far and away the best prize that life has to offer is the chance to work hard at work worth doing.” - Theodore Roosevelt*

Mark Anderson, Director of Program, recited those very appropriate words at the closing dinner for the 27 participants in the first annual PSA Volunteer Vacation held September 17–24. It was definitely hard work as the volunteers built the first 800 feet of new trail to Cimarroncito Peak, a Philmont summit with no previous access of any type other than bushwhacking your way to the top. The new trail, along with other new routes in the area, will

greatly aid crew itineraries, especially the increasingly popular 7-day treks.

The volunteers immediately sold out the event when registration first opened back on March 1. They were more than willing to commit their own dollars and time to have the opportunity to give back to Philmont. IWGBTP didn’t translate to just “I wanna go back to Philmont;” it now stood for “I wanna GIVE back to Philmont.”

When the volunteers arrived at Philmont, they were welcomed wholeheartedly by Director of Conservation John Celley and his autumn seasonal staff. On Saturday in Base Camp, the first evening was spent describing the work to be performed, logistics, schedules, equipment shakedown, and participant intro-

ductions. The PSA volunteers spanned six decades of Philmont employment and history. Young to old – they were ready to begin work.

Sunday morning consisted of final equipment preparation and then transportation to a trail-road intersection above Sawmill Camp. From there, a short hike took the volunteers to Whistle Punk Trail Camp. This would be their home for the next five days. Whistle Punk, at approximately 10,000 ft. elevation, was just put into service for campers in 2016. It’s a beautiful wooded and level site with a spring nearby. The conservation staff had already spent several days packing in large quantities of food and supplies. Their hard work was greatly appreciated by everyone. The volunteers finished camp setup, established a group cooking area, cleared tent areas, set up personal tents, hauled water, and performed some nearby trail maintenance. The conserva-

tion staff cooked the first night’s meal for everyone – fantastic fish tacos. Fresh food throughout the week was greatly appreciated!

Serious trail construction began on Monday morning. The staff first performed an in-depth tool talk and demonstration before the volunteers hiked to the actual work site, approximately ¾ mile away. No work had been performed on the new trail other than the survey and some chainsaw activity. Wooden stakes in untouched ground showed the direction.

Dirt, rocks, and debris quickly began to disappear from the new trail location. Corridor branches were trimmed. Tree stumps were dug out by hand or removed with a grip hoist. Huge rocks were excavated. Proper back slopes, tread, and critical edges all began to take shape. Everyone quickly realized that performing this physically demanding



*Brothers Joe (left) and Jim Schmidt tackle a stubborn stump.*



*The panoramic view just east of the Cito Peak summit.*

work was going to be a lot harder at the 10,000 ft. elevation. Any of the volunteers who were new to trail building, other than the typical three-hour conservation project during a trek, definitely developed a deeper understanding and profound respect for what it takes build a properly designed trail. High quality, sustainable trail was built. Everyone contributed. Everyone gave back.

The Philmont conservation staff was professional, enthusiastic, and extremely knowledgeable. They were excellent instructors directly responsible for the volunteers' successful week. During the week, the volunteers divided into three groups to handle the regular camp chores of cooking, cleanup, and water support. With fresh food on the menu in the evenings, the dinner menu was always eagerly awaited and each crew did an outstanding job. There were huge appetites after each day's hard

work! Also, there was nothing easy for the water crews – the spring was nearly a half mile away. Carrying three- and six-gallon water containers back to the campsite after having worked on the trail all day long was not a fun activity.

The volunteers did take a break on Wednesday afternoon and hiked to the new trail's eventual destination, Cimarroncito Peak. They followed the stake line that marks out the future route of the trail, but currently stops on a saddle west of the summit. The final push required a bushwhack straight up the side of the peak. The top of Cimarroncito Peak (10,475') is a little underwhelming – too many trees for a good view. However, just a few hundred feet to the east, a talus field opens up to provide a spectacular panoramic view. Beautiful skies, vibrant fall colors, Tooth Ridge, eastern New Mexico plains, Villa Philmonte - all combined to totally impress the

volunteers. It will be several years before the trail is completed, but everyone understood their hard work and effort for the week would help to provide future Scouts and backpackers with yet another inspirational mountain view at Philmont.

On Thursday, the volunteers spent the morning breaking camp at Whistle Punk, cleaning up, and assisting the conservation staff with various tasks. Next on the agenda was the opportunity to relax and enjoy some traditional Philmont backpacking. The destination was another new campsite, Minnette Meadows Trail Camp, located on the recently acquired Cimarroncita property. A beautiful 7-mile hike, almost all downhill, took the hikers through Sawmill Camp, Upper and Lower Sawmill Trail Camps, Ute Park Pass, and eventually Minnette Meadows. Some rain along the way, the first precipitation of the week, kept the hikers cool and rewarded everyone with



a fantastic full rainbow just after reaching the meadows. The three crews each took a campsite and cooked a traditional Philmont trail meal. A steady rain moved in at nightfall and lasted through most of the night. No one complained and the sleeping was excellent.

The following morning, the volunteers awoke to a foggy Minnette Meadows. Camp was quickly broken since the group was scheduled for a 9:00 a.m. bus pickup at the new Ute Park Turnaround.



*Fresh food = happy campers! Kristi Noble and Carol Munch chop dinner.*

The trail passed by the old buildings of Cimarroncita. The fog shrouded the decrepit structures and presented a ghostly feel. However, by the time everyone reached the nearby turnaround, the sun was beginning to burn off the low-lying clouds and a beautiful view of Baldy Mountain emerged while waiting for the bus.

Back at Base Camp, many of the volunteers stored their gear, did a quick clean-up, and gathered again for an afternoon Tooth of Time hike. 55 mph winds did not deter them and everyone reached the summit. They especially enjoyed looking to the northwest and pinpointing the recently conquered Cimarroncito Peak.

The final event for the vacation volunteers was the previously mentioned

closing dinner, held at the Baldy Pavilion. The continuing strong winds seemed to make it colder than any time spent through the past week at Whistle Punk and Cito Peak. Nonetheless, everyone enjoyed the dinner, highlighted with buffalo steak as the main entrée. To close the event, John Celley presented each volunteer with the first-ever edition of the Philmont Conservation PSA Volunteer Vacation patch, an instant collector's item. Also, John had prepared for everyone a special map printout from Philmont GIS that showed their week's trail work as well as their hike to Minette Meadows. A great souvenir.

Yet another treat for the volunteers were some statistics that John had assembled. The 27 volunteers had completed 800 feet of finished trail in less than one



Before and after – 800 feet of finished trail!

week. This represented nearly 20% of all new trail completed on the Whistle Punk conservation project for the entire summer. Truly a great accomplishment. But, regardless if it was 100 feet or 800 feet or whatever, the volunteers left the dinner that night knowing they had experienced a great week in Philmont's backcountry, had a lot of fun, had worked extremely hard, and most importantly, had given something back to Philmont that would last for a very long time.

The 2016 PSA Vacation Volunteers:

Jeanne Babiez	Alex Johnson
Suse Bell	Dan Johnson
Daniel Bihn	Sarah Johnson
Mark Clasen	Pete Johnson
Edward Cook	Lynn Larkin
Wesley Daugherty	Gerry Larkin
Justin Fletcher	John May
Matthew Galchus	Carol Munch
Brian Gill	Kristi Noble
Kevin Hogan	Jack Person

Brad Plumb  
Michael Rounds  
Jim Schmidt  
Joe Schmidt

Dan Shamblin  
Craig Vandell  
Phil Winegardner

Editor's Note: Registration for the 2017 PSA Volunteer Vacation will open on March 1, 2017. Additional details will be published in future editions of High Country and on the PSA website.

