



## **Friends of the Forest Work North Wilson Trail**

By Mike Ward

On Friday, June 15<sup>th</sup>, with temperatures predicted to reach over 100 degrees, Al Gilson, Larry Frei, Mike Ward and Rick Zabor, members of the Friends of the Forest Trail Crew, met at 8 AM at the Encinoso picnic area. Their task was to put finishing touches on the lower section of the North Wilson Trail that is designated a National Recreation Trail, the only one in Arizona. Almost exactly one year earlier, the Brins Fire had totally obliterated portions of the North and South Wilson trails forcing the Forest Service to close them to the public over safety concerns.

Over the past year, the North and South Wilson trails have been completely rebuilt by volunteers of the Friends of the Forest and CREC (Coconino Rural Environment Corps) crews. Because the trails are in the Secret Mountain Wilderness, only hand tools are allowed for construction and maintenance of the trails. Within the next several weeks, members of the Red Rock Ranger District staff will be inspecting the North and South Wilson trails to the Vultee Arch and Sedona overlooks. They will make a recommendation to District Ranger, Heather Provencio, on reopening the trails to the public.

Over the previous two Fridays, the FOF Trail Crew had been working on the first mile of the North Wilson trail that was severely burned by the Brins Fire. On the first Friday they brushed and cleaned out 39 drainages, constructed 3 new rock reinforced rolling dips, blocked 1 social trail, reestablished 25' of trail that had been washed out by flowing water. On the second Friday, they built rock steps and did preparation work for two log retaining walls to reinforce the trail bench along the steep slopes of the switchbacks.

Loaded down with a minimum of 3 to 4 liters of water for each member, a pick, shovel, 3 McClouds (a versatile hoe-like implement), loppers, and safety helmets, the crew started up the trail. The 1.7-mile distance to the First Bench covers over 1450 feet of elevation with 1300 feet of that in the last half-mile.

Part way up the trail, the crew stopped for a photograph where a 24-inch diameter Ponderosa Pine had fallen across the trail the previous Wednesday. On that day, an eight-member CREC crew was up on Wilson Mountain finishing their last day of a two-week contract paid for by the Friends of the Forest from donations received during the Brins Fire. Encountering the obstruction at the end of the day on their way back to camp, they hand cut out the section of the tree trunk blocking the trail.

The Brins had spared widely spaced clusters of pine trees but burned more than 70% of the trees, numbering in the many thousands, leaving blackened sentinels of towering charred tree trunks. The fallen Ponderosa Pine is a demonstration of the forces of nature that will eventually topple these dead trees as part of the natural fire cycle. For their safety, hikers passing through the burn areas should be aware of their surroundings and keep an ear tuned for unusual sounds.

The Trail Crew split into two 2-person teams to build five rock steps at two locations where the trail is steep with loose soil. They added several erosion control features and cleared rock and brush from the trail. Many members of the Trail Crew are graduates of the Forest Service Trail Boss program where they are taught the proper techniques for building durable and long lasting trail features that aid the users of the trail and manage water erosion.

Skillfully lead by Rick Zabor, the 20 men and women Trail Crew volunteers annually invest nearly 2,000 hours of very physical labor in trail maintenance and construction. Meeting every Friday morning, the crewmembers

perform 75% of the maintenance work on the 177 miles of Forest Service system trails around Sedona. Since the fire, the Trail Crew has spent 231 hours working on the North and South Wilson Trails.

CREC crews have done most of the very heavy trail work in rebuilding the North and South Wilson Trails. In May an eight-man CREC crew worked on the South Wilson Trail as a training detail at no cost to the Forest Service. In June, another eight-person CREC crew worked eight straight 10-hour days on the North Wilson Trail. They removed fallen trees, cleared brush, built rock walls, rock steps, drainage crossings and level the trail tread with log shoring on switchbacks across steep slopes. The \$9,800 needed to fund this crew was paid for by the Friends of the Forest from the \$12,200 in donations made by the public during the Brins Fire combined with \$5,000 from the Friends. The remaining \$7,400 will be applied with other funds to begin work on the Sterling Pass trail in July.

The next time you are hiking the trails in Sedona, look for the many erosion control features, steps, soil cuts, and tread construction features that make and keep the trails accessible to forest visitors. And don't forget to say a word of thanks to the members of the Friends of the Forest Trail Crew: Susan Amon, Larry Frei, Shermane Frei, Roy Julian, Al Gilson, Kevin Harding, Mike Harris, Joe Landholm, Jan Lisowski, Gene Rector, Andy Rienert, Ron Rusk, Bob Tener, John True, Mike Vitek, Mike Ward, Frank Wirkus Rick Zabor, and Ken Zoll.



Standing among the burnt Ponderosa Pine trees, Al Gilson, Larry Frei and Rick Zabor pose in the opening cut in a tree that recently fell across the North Wilson Trail