

Chapter 9: Trail and Shelter Maintenance

Many GMC sections have been founded “to maintain and establish trails and shelters in the Green Mountains which the Corporation [GMC] assigns to the Section and/or for which the Section accepts responsibility.” Whatever the wording in a section’s bylaws, trail and shelter maintenance is a very important aspect of the section’s activities.

Set-up and Responsibilities

The maintenance of the Long Trail System and concurrent or other sections of the Appalachian Trail involves many partners. They include landowners (federal, state, and private), adopters, GMC staff, the GMC Trail Management Committee, and GMC sections.

The section trails and shelters chair is responsible for organizing the maintenance of the section’s assigned shelters and trails, in addition to coordinating activities with GMC staff and, if necessary, the landowners.

Some sections maintain their trail using section volunteer support. Other sections schedule work outings for major projects but have adopters perform general trail maintenance. Most adopters are assigned, if the section so desires, by the adopter coordinator at GMC headquarters. Trail and shelter chairs have the option of coordinating adopters themselves for their trail sections; this includes collecting and submitting end of the season reports concerning trail conditions and volunteer hours.

Shelters and trail sections should be visited at least twice a year, during the spring and fall, to assess conditions and perform necessary maintenance. This is a minimum, and chairs are encouraged to conduct maintenance outings more frequently. Maintenance or resource problems that need further attention should be noted in the course of these trips and reported to the section’s trail and shelter chair and the GMC director of field programs. Policy issues should be brought to the attention of the GMC Trail Management Committee.

The GMC director of field programs is available for consultation and can be reached at 4711 Waterbury Stowe Road, Waterbury Center, Vermont 05677-9904; phone: (802) 244-7037 ext. 20; e-mail: Dave@greenmountainclub.org. Consultation is necessary for all trail relocations and modifications of overnight sites.

Coordination with the U.S. Forest Service and Vermont Department of Forests, Parks and Recreation is best arranged through the GMC Field Programs office.

The Appalachian Trail Conference’s New England Regional Office is located in Lyme, New Hampshire and can be reached at (603) 795-4935.

Job Basics

While section trails and shelters chairs are experienced maintainers, it is important to state here the three precepts that determine trail maintenance priorities:

- hiker and maintainer safety
- natural resource protection
- quality of hiker experience

Who Maintains the Long Trail System?

- GMC Sections
- GMC Trail and Shelter Adopters
- GMC Field Programs Staff
- GMC Trail Management Committee
- Appalachian Trail Conference
- State of Vermont, Department of Forest, Parks & Recreation (FPR)
- U.S. Forest Service
- Private Landowners

Safety is the most important consideration while working on the trail. There is always the potential for accidents while using trail maintenance tools in the woods. Maintainers need to be aware of the following safety guidelines:

- Wear personal protection gear.
- Use safety equipment.
- Use the right tool for the job.
- Avoid fatigue or dehydration.
- Do not work alone.
- Communicate.

Basic trail maintenance includes:

- Cleaning out leaves and debris in existing drainage structures (waterbars, dips, and ditches) and draining areas of standing water.
- Keeping the trail clear of blowdowns, brush and annual vegetation. Think of carrying an upright 4 by 8 plywood sheet along the trail (but trim the path a little narrower below your waist to prevent excessive trail widening).
- Maintaining well-defined paint blazes.
- Blocking in unofficial trails and campsites with brush, and piling brush along trails that are too wide.
- Making an assessment of the condition of the trail and repairing or reporting problems that need additional attention. This includes reviewing and sharing information obtained from trail and shelter registers.
- Reporting on signs that are missing, inaccurate, or damaged.

Basic shelter maintenance includes:

- Inspecting, cleaning, and performing minor repairs on the shelter and outhouse.
- Cleaning and maintaining the shelter water supply and wash pit.
- Inspecting the outhouse or composteer.
- Removing trash from the shelter and surrounding area.
- Keeping paths clear of vegetation.
- Making an assessment of the condition of the structures and repairing or reporting problems that need additional attention.
- Reporting on signs that are missing, inaccurate, or damaged.

Assessments of trail and shelter conditions should not be limited to maintenance outings. Reports of trail and shelter problems observed during a hike are always welcome and should be sent to the GMC director of field programs. Section members should always be encouraged to look for and report maintenance needs to the trail and shelter chair.

Planning and Running a Work Outing

The trail and shelter chair is responsible for planning and running a trails and shelter work day. The process includes the following major elements:

- Scope out the work site. Know what type of work needs to be done and at which location. Estimate how much time the job takes and how many people. Use the assessment of trails and shelter conditions developed during prior walk-throughs.
- Schedule work outings. This needs to be done in coordination with the outings chair and the section newsletter editor/communication chair to ensure publicity.
- Recruit volunteers. Try to estimate how many helpers are likely to turn up at the meeting place.

- Run the work outing in an efficient and safe manner.

Below is a logistics checklist that can and should be expanded as needed:

- Identify a meeting place and a time.
- Provide clear directions to the meeting place.
- Recruit enough section members and other volunteers to do the job.
- Be sure participants bring food, water, clothing, gloves, and bug dope.
- See that the appropriate tools are available in sufficient numbers.
- Provide a first aid kit or make sure a first aid kit is available for each work crew.
- Run a short tailgate safety session at the meeting place or trailhead. This an important step for a well run and safe outing.
- Divide your volunteers into groups of 3 or 4 to work on assigned trail sections. A crew of 4 can usually work ½ mile per hour but expect variations to this guideline. An assignment that takes more than 4 hours to complete can be overwhelming to some volunteers.
- Allow for time to walk to the work site(s) and back to the meeting place or where cars are parked.
- Arrange for car pooling to the starting point of each work section.
- Assign a leader for each working crew. Ask the leader to make notes and provide a report on the work done and special observations.

More advice:

- Have fun. When the weather turns bad, do not hesitate to call off the outing and get your volunteers home safely.
- Thank your volunteers! Remember, you may need their help again some time soon.
- Use the *GMC Trip Leaders Handbook* and the *GMC Trail and Shelter Maintenance Manual* as references for running trailwork outings.
- When all is done, write a work report. Include the number of volunteers, the total hours worked, and the part of your section's trail responsibility covered. That report (or part of it) will be needed by the GMC Field Office and at the section's annual meeting.

Identify Trail Ownership and Understand Regulations

The trails maintained by the GMC are located on a variety of properties. Be sure you know on whose land your sections are located. Each landowner or manager has different regulations and you should be aware of them. Within the Green Mountain National Forest, you should know the appropriate district office of the U.S. Forest Service. In designated wilderness areas there are special regulations where power tools cannot be used without special permission; please contact the GMC director of field programs to discuss obtaining that permission. On state land the regional office of the Department of Forest, Parks and Recreation is the contact. On private land and for any other clarification the GMC director of field programs can help you. It is a good idea to invite your contacts from government agencies, GMC staff, and members of GMC Trail Management Committee to your section annual meeting.

Ensure a Safe Working Environment

Safety is an important aspect of field work. Each year, the GMC and the U.S. Forest Service run safety workshops on the operation of chain saws and recommended personal protection such as gloves, safety chaps, safety goggles, hard hats, and hearing protection. According to GMC policy, chain saws should be operated only by persons who have attended a chain saw safety workshop offered by the U.S. Forest Service or other accredited entities.

Know your volunteers. Choose a trusted person for a crew leader. Be sure your volunteers can handle the job assigned to them. If in doubt, try to do a specific task at some other time and have it done by the right person. Send your volunteers to one of the safety and trail maintenance work shops that the GMC offers.

Track Project and Volunteer Information

Record keeping is an important task for the trails and shelters chair. Record each volunteer's name, their work completed, and their travel hours. This information significantly helps the GMC Field Programs office meet matching requirements for various grants as well as documenting public support for the Long Trail and backcountry recreation in general.

As with any committee chair, attending executive and outings committee meetings is part of the job, as is reporting to the section at the annual meeting.

Documents That Can Help You Do Your Job

The following references can be obtained through the GMC office by phone at (802) 244-7037 or by e-mail at gmc@greenmountainclub.org.

- *GMC Trails and Shelter Maintenance Manual (2001)* is a must-read. It fits in a pocket and provides trail standards and fieldwork guidance.
- *Long Trail System Management Plan* contains specific policies on trail management, developed by the GMC Trail Management Committee and adopted by the GMC Board of Directors.
- *GMC Trail Assessment Database*. This is an inventory used to analyze maintenance and land management needs for the entire trail and to focus on the most significant priorities and problems. Accurate completion of the GMC Trail Maintenance Report or the GMC Shelter Inspection Report by maintainers helps keep the database current.
- *GMC Trip Leaders' Handbook* gives tips on how to organize trips, including trail maintenance outings.
- *The GMC's Manual for Bin Composting and Waste Management in Remote Recreation Areas (1995)* is available for shelter adopters who maintain bin composters.
- *Appalachian Trail Design, Construction, and Maintenance (2000)*, by William Birchard, Jr. and Robert D. Proudman. This book, which can be purchased from the GMC, is an excellent reference on trail maintenance and construction.