

Volunteer hybrids exist, too

Yes, Randy Roberts gets paid, but that pays for some of his materials and parts, and sometimes gets him a bagel, too.

By Kate Ready

Being the summer Mayor of Teton Pass is a busy job, but 15 years in, Randy Roberts shows no signs of stopping. As a Backcountry Ambassador for the Friends of the Bridger-Teton, a nonprofit dedicated to protecting the Bridger-Teton National Forest, Roberts patrols the Teton Pass area every summer on foot or atop his mountain bike.

“When I pull out of my driveway, I don’t know what the day is going to bring,” Roberts said.



Snaking through the 3.4 million-acre forest is a winding, high-elevation highway that connects Idaho with Wyoming. On either side of the concrete, the forest bustles with tourists and locals, hikers, campers,

mountain bikers, horseback riders and wildlife. It’s like having a really big yard — and there’s a lot to keep the 72-year-old busy.

Roberts patrols 11 dispersed campsites, educating folks how to have a clean and safe campsite that protects wildlife and reduces wildfire danger. He picks up other people’s litter, reminds them to leash their pets, and douses abandoned fires. (Metal campfire rings are the product of Roberts’ advocacy, and installation).

“In a bad season I’ll put out 12 abandoned fires, some with flame on them,” Roberts said. “There’s a lot of people that say ‘We’re in Jackson Hole — let ‘er buck!’ and it’s just trash, liquor bottles, everything. This is right in the height of bear season.”

Last summer, 2,840 hikers, 1,151 bicyclists, 15 horse riders, and 1,300 dogs passed through Teton Pass, according to now-retired Bridger-Teton Recreational Supervisor, Linda Merigliano.

A busy day used to mean 20 cars parked in the parking lot at the top of the Pass, Roberts said.

“Last summer we pushed 75 to 90 cars, not only parked in the parking lot but farther down in the overflow lot,” Roberts said. “The challenge is the crunch of people right now. There’s just not enough of us there. The ratio of ambassador to all of the users, it’s almost overwhelming.”

Roberts’ work is a hybrid between paid work and volunteering, with a heavy emphasis on the volunteering. He loves what he does, and is grateful for the small stipend paid for the season by the Grand Teton Association to the tune of about \$3,500. With the 12 weeks he works, and the number of hours he puts in, he says that pay is enough to keep the mountain bike that he sometimes patrols on, and his chainsaws, in good shape.

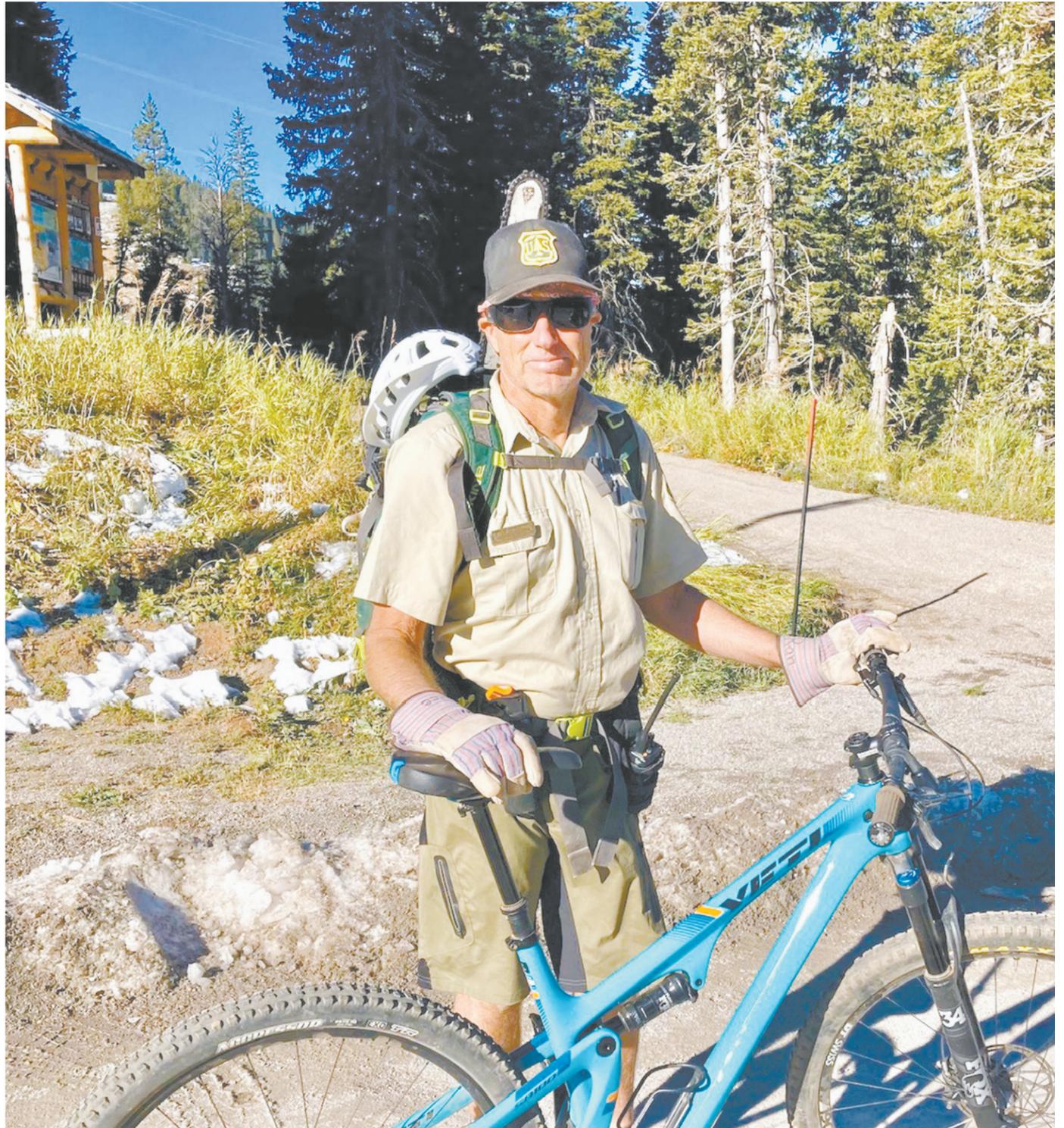
And he’s OK with that.

“I am very, very appreciative of the help that the Grand Teton Association has given me, and for what it has done for Teton Pass,” he said. “Almost all of it goes back into my program, back into materials for signs that I make for the Forest Service. ... That’s really all I’m looking at.” (He jokes the stipend also allows him to get an ice cream sandwich or a bagel.)

The signs and materials are ample. At the dispersed campsites and along the roads, signage is either shot, defaced, backed into, eaten by porcupines, or torn down and used for firewood, regularly.

“I’m constantly like, ‘Oh, shit, I have to get these signs back up tomorrow,’” he said. “So I’m going out and buying material and working in the garage until 10 p.m.”

Amidst the summer surge, Roberts can be found locating lost dogs, closing trails due to bear activity and hand-pull-



Super volunteer Randy Roberts patrols Teton Pass in the summer on foot and bike.

COURTESY PHOTO

Super Volunteer nominations

Heather DeVine
Rick Gordon
Diane McGee
Kaycee McNinch
Annette Osnos
Gary Kofinas
Augusta Friendsmith
Magen Marshall
Ariel Mann
Angelica Jones Nieto

Jenny May Shervin
Michael Schrotz
Sofia Peterson-Olivares
Patti Mull
John Freeze
Lisa Robertson
Randy Roberts
Lucretia Finley
Patricia McKibbin
Linda Fuller

ing huge bags of invasive musk thistle or mullein along Old Pass Road. It’s not uncommon for him to pack up his own chainsaws and tools, clearing downed trees from Black Canyon to Phillips Canyon and the Pass Ridge Trail.

If an emergency arises, like a mountain bike crash or a traffic accident, he may make the first call to rescue teams or be the first pair of hands performing first aid.

“Randy has a particular knack for being nearby when an incident occurs,” Merigliano, also Roberts’ nominator, wrote in an email. “And over the years he has responded to many medical incidents as well as vehicle fires along the highway.”

Roberts counts it a blessing to bear witness to the quirky parade of humanity: from people skateboarding up the Pass, to people walking backward, to a young Alabama couple who hitched up a wagon one day, deciding to walk themselves to Alcatraz with a couple hundred dollars in their pocket, roaming

Teton Pass to get there.

“Whether they are local, or people passing through, they all have a uniqueness to them in the sense of why they’re here and how they found this place,” Roberts said. “You have this deep feeling of ‘Wow, what a life. How can I help them?’”

To help volunteer patrollers better assist Pass users experiencing mental health issues, Roberts facilitated training workshops with a local counselor.

“I think every ambassador that has worked with Friends of the BT has run across a person on our national forest here that is having some kind of a crisis,” Roberts said. “You got to say things right and you got to say things very fast or else you’re going to have a big problem.”

His knack for educating stems from a 30-year career spent teaching elementary school. There, he volunteered for the schools cross-county ski meets. When Roberts first moved to Jackson nearly 50 years ago, he would supplement his

teaching with weekends spent building trails on Teton Pass and in Cache Creek. He has volunteered with Special Olympics and with Friends of Pathways. He helped get Teton Backcountry Alliance going.

Now, when he isn’t patrolling, he channels his boundless energy into painting, playing electric guitar and ski instructing.

“The goal is to get consistent local users involved so if they see something, they know they can call me,” Roberts said. “We’re turning locals into pseudo-volunteers. To me it’s a great source of pride when I can get local people to help say ‘Randy, you have three trees down over there. Randy, there’s a patch of thistle over there.’”

Teton Pass users can expect to see Roberts out there for years to come, doling out education with a side of humor and connection, his shears sticking out of his green backpack, part educator, part ranger.

“I’ve been in two bureaucracies in my career: education and the Forest Service,” Roberts said. “I’ve never seen more dedicated people that are doing the most amazing job under extreme pressure and working for nothing but the public good. Our public lands would not be the way they are without these people.”

“If my name can be said among theirs... that’s why I do it.”

— Whitney Royster contributed to this report.

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