

# Building On Badger

Flocks of volunteers build a 1.2-mile trail in a new reserve outside Richland



GARY ZINK

*Volunteers break new trail on Badger Mountain. Community members in Richland recently secured protection for this landmark above the Tri-Cities.*



By CHRIS BELL

The residents of Richland who happened to look over at Badger Mountain on the weekend of October 8 and 9 must have blinked twice, to make sure that they weren't looking at an oversized anthill. That's certainly what it might have looked like from a distance. What they were really seeing was the construction of a new hiking trail up the mountain. And droves of people scattered around the mountain to make sure that it happened.

Badger Mountain is located on the edge of the City of Richland, in southeastern Washington. From the top of the mountain it is possible to see the Tri-Cities (Richland, Kennewick and Pasco) along with the convergence of the "Tri-Rivers" (Columbia, Snake and Yakima). The mountain is the most prominent ridgeline in the Tri-City area, and is considered a shrub-steppe ecosystem, with most of the native vegetation still intact. The elevation gain from its base to the summit is slightly more than 800 feet. The tallest vegetation on the mountain is sagebrush, so the views of the surrounding area are unimpeded. During the summer, an occasional rattlesnake may take an interest in the passing of hikers, but they generally ignore these two-legged animals.

## TRAIL MAINTENANCE



TED ROTH

*Each work party at Badger had more than 60 volunteers, a record for recent WTA-led work parties. The new trail will replace an unsightly and erosion-prone network of makeshift trails up the 800-foot hill.*

Based upon all of the new home construction I observed in the Tri-Cities, it is apparent that this has become a popular place to live. A large housing development is already underway near the base of Badger Mountain. It was the threat of homes being built right up the slope of the mountain that prompted a local citizens' group to form an organization called the Friends of Badger Mountain in order to find a way to acquire the property, preserving it for the public. The Trust for Public Land, Benton County, the City of Richland and the Friends of Badger Mountain found the resources to purchase 574 acres, now called the Badger Mountain Centennial Preserve. It will be maintained in its

natural state.

Badger Mountain has long been popular with hikers. It is close to the Tri-Cities, it is the most prominent and undeveloped of the local ridgelines and offers an invigorating hike to the summit. When the land was privately owned, the public was permitted to hike up the mountain and it has become a popular recreational area. Unfortunately, there has never been a formal trail to the summit. Rather, hikers started up a shoulder of the mountain, heading straight for the top. There is one major problem with this approach. When dry, which is most of the year, the soil is like talcum powder. When the wind blows, which is much of the year, any disturbed soil is blown into the next

county. Consequently, when you look at the mountain from a distance, it is possible to see lines of eroded paths, parallel to each other, leading up a shoulder of the mountain. As one path became too deeply eroded, the hikers simply started a new one. The effect of this access to the summit is unsightly erosion and damage to fragile vegetation.

The Friends of Badger Mountain and the Benton County Parks Department were concerned about this erosion and damage to vegetation, while also recognizing the value of Badger Mountain for hiking and recreation. They decided that what was needed was an environmentally appropriate trail to

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the top. This would be accomplished by constructing a new, gravel trail. That also meant reducing the grade of the trail so the gravel would not quickly erode. This presented the old conundrum: how to construct a trail that is both a challenge to those who want a workout, yet also provide an enjoyable experience to the less-physically active. Add to these concerns the requirement that the trail be environmentally sound.

The Friends of Badger Mountain looked to Washington Trails Association for help. WTA has considerable experience building new trails, especially when it involves digging out tree stumps, moving huge boulders, building rock walls and constructing wood bridges. Could that same expertise be applied to southeastern Washington, which receives only a few inches of annual rainfall, and where there are no trees and few rocks? I suppose that question will be answered shortly, because WTA took on the project. On Friday Matt Contorchick, Project Manager for WTA, along with myself, Adam Fyall, who is the Community Development Coordinator with Benton County Parks, and Jim Langdon of the Friends of Badger Mountain, laid out the trail. On Saturday and Sunday the volunteers swarmed across the field to the assembly area, ready to go to work.

On Saturday 86 volunteers were on the trail, and on Sunday 67 showed up. I can't remember a larger work party during the time I've been with WTA. Where no trail had previously existed, by the end of the weekend there was a brand new trail 1.2 miles in length, with an elevation gain exceeding 800 feet. In addition to cutting in the new trail, much of it was graveled to prevent wind erosion. How big was this effort? It is not unusual to have engineers volunteer on our work parties, and this one was no exception. Here are the statistics that result:

Jim Langdon: *I calculated (that is what engineers like to do) we graveled 1,800 feet of the lower trail. With 1.3 feet of trail graveled per 20 pound load, this was 1,400 loads of gravel (13.5*

*tons). At an average of 900 feet per load, that comes out to be about 240 miles our workers walked the gravel! And don't forget they had to walk back for the next set of buckets. This is not counting what was graveled from the top using wheelbarrows (15 tons).*

The ants were really busy on Badger Mountain.

When a WTA work party is concluded, the volunteers have an opportunity to evaluate the event. The following response is typical of why so many people regularly volunteer on trail work parties:

What did you especially enjoy about the work parties you've been on?

**Response:** I enjoyed the camaraderie with everybody. When I first got there, I knew two people. By the time I left on Sunday afternoon, I had made ten new friends, including Matt, Gary, Anne and Ted of WTA, as well as meeting countless other people with similar interests. I especially appreciated how well organized the WTA people were, and how they got right in and got dirty with the rest of the volunteers.

It's always great when we receive positive responses from volunteers after a work party. What they may not know, but which Matt, Anne, Ted and all the other WTA crew leaders do know, is that we feed off of the enthusiasm of the volunteers. When more than 80 people show up at the trailhead, most of who have never been on a trail crew, and dig in the dirt, haul gravel, sweat, joke and laugh—the enthusiasm is infectious. It's what inspires eight crew leaders to drive more than 220 miles to participate in the building of a new trail. The trail at Badger Mountain is a real credit to the many people who in two days made it happen and WTA was proud to be a part of the project.

Contact Chris at [chris@wta.org](mailto:chris@wta.org).

## MEET OUR VOLUNTEERS!

### Mike Owens



Thursday, October 6 began as many other Thursdays. Denny's in Issaquah sat under cloudy skies. Subaru, pickups and vans were parked outside, many sporting WTA stickers. At 7:03 (or thereabouts) Chelsea placed a tea pot and cup at the head of one of the many tables in the back. Men and women dressed for a day in the woods talked about many subjects, though the overriding subject was working with Mike Owens. This was not, in fact, just any other Thursday; it was Mike's one thousandth work party with WTA.

One thousand days on trail is a huge accomplishment. Though Mike is now on WTA staff as a paid crew leader, the vast majority of those days were spent as a volunteer. WTA is privileged that Mike leads so many trips for us and even more so that he continues to volunteer every Friday. Over the seven years Mike has been with WTA, many, many stories have been told and most retold. It might be hard to pick a favorite Mike story, but most of them involve the common thread of Mike getting lost.

After the work party on Thursday, about 20 people huddled under a tarp, eating cake and reminiscing about Mike's enormous contribution to the trail community. Thanks, Mike!