

**SPECIAL EDITION**

**JANUARY 2023**

# SISKIYOU HIKER

**OUTDOOR NEWS FROM THE SISKIYOU BACKCOUNTRY**

## 50 DAYS IN DIRT

summer on a backwoods trail crew

Vincent DiFrancesco  
2022 Wilderness Corps Intern





Dear Readers,

Each season our Wilderness Corps interns are required to complete a portfolio project that documents their experience. It isn't evaluated or have any bearing on their reviews or standing with us. The idea is that the project is for them, so they have something to show for their summer on the trail.

Lots of times these projects are essays or a mash-up of their favorite journal entries. We've had interns put together storyboards and create art or poetry. In one case we had an intern, Leah Doeden, write a series of blogs we called Doe Notes that appeared on our website. In the case of 2022 Corps Intern Vincent DiFrancesco, he put together this stunning photo essay.

When I first read *50 Days In Dirt*, I was moved to tears, and knew right away we'd want to share it in some way. Vince gave us permission to do some light editing and reformatting so we could deliver something special to our readers. And this is it.

I could share a lot more about this powerful piece, and I redrafted this letter more times than I'll ever admit. But Vince's work left me feeling humbled and there's not a lot I could say to add to it. He's a senior at DePaul University studying film and has a passion for running and ultramarathons. He's someone we want on our team.

So we hope you enjoy this special issue of the Siskiyou Hiker and keep it out to share with friends and family. If you'd like us to send a copy to someone you know, just reach out.

Sincerely,

Gabriel Howe  
Executive Director



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*“Wilderness is not a luxury but a necessity of the human spirit, and as vital to our lives as water and good bread. A civilization which destroys what little remains of the wild, the spare, the original, is cutting itself off from its origins and betraying the principle of civilization itself.”*

- Edward Abbey

**Below:** Vincent DiFrancesco documents progress on a newly completed section of the Bridge Creek Trail, Marble Mountain Wilderness. Photo by Nick Hodges.



**In the summer of 2022,** I joined the Siskiyou Mountain Club Wilderness Conservation Corps. For eight days at a time, we were dispatched to the Southern Oregon and Northern California wilderness with the task of maintaining backwoods trail systems. The 2022 crew was composed of 13 college-age interns, most of whom were studying environmental science, forestry, or biology. We all arrived with a desire to learn and serve, but in reality, none of us knew what we were getting ourselves into.

In addition to learning the basic skills required to self-sustain in the outdoors, we also struggled with grueling work days, punishing elements, and most of all, mental fatigue. Nevertheless, despite the countless obstacles in our way, we found deep meaning behind our efforts.

I took it upon myself to document the summer through photographs. My camera came with me wherever I went, and was nearly always in my hands. The camera itself returned battered, but thankfully intact. I knew so little about this world upon entering it, and hope that the images I captured can shed light on the unknown, yet ever-vital work of maintaining backwoods trails.

*Morning commute to the worksite,  
Marble Mountain Wilderness*





View from the saddle of Horse Sign Butte,  
Kalmiopsis Wilderness.

# I. PEOPLE, PLACE, PURPOSE



## **The “footprint” of the Siskiyou Mountain Club,**

or area covered by its operations, consists mostly of lands the 1964 Wilderness Act designates as “untrammelled ... where man himself is a visitor who shall not remain.” As public land, wilderness is open to the American people as an escape from the marks of industry and civilization. Travel by foot or saddle are the only ways to achieve this escape, and SMC is dedicated to keeping wilderness trails open for all.

From a small, underground office in Ashland, OR, executive director Gabriel Howe runs backend operations. In the field, crew leaders, both seasonal and permanent, get their hands dirty, spending more of their time in the mountains than within cell service. They are assisted by volunteers and the Wilderness Conservation Corps summer crews. Much of the work, however, is thankless. Though SMC is known to many local hikers, there are plenty who pass through cleared trails and are none the wiser. Others find long-forgotten routes suddenly opened, but with no trace of the crew, as if it had been worked by ghosts. Regardless of recognition, those who serve take deep pride in their efforts.

Though most of these isolated wilderness routes are seldom visited, board chair emeritus Dave Brennan insists that “the worth of a trail is not defined by the number of people who hike it.”

This is the case for many of the trails I

worked while in the Wilderness Corps. A far cry from the pleasant rolling paths of a popular state park, backwoods trails are meant for true adventure. Their rugged switchbacks and remote single-track are built for those gritty hikers who have a desire to plunge deep into the heart of the mountains with no one else in earshot.

The Kalmiopsis Wilderness Area is a prime example of one of these seldom-visited places. Named after the rare *Kalmiopsis leachiana* flower, it is traversed by few hikers, but harbors rich biodiversity and unique soil compositions. These are the backwoods where the Club’s founders first began leading SMC volunteer crews over a decade ago. Steve DiCicco, Field Ranger for the Forest Service Gold Beach Ranger District, calls the Kalmiopsis a “hidden gem, not visited much,” a place where “nature still rules.” The unforgiving terrain and challenging trails are admittedly too daunting for many outdoors enthusiasts, but this makes it no less precious than a popular destination such as Yellowstone or Acadia. In fact, the lack of human presence adds even deeper value.

Oregon-based authors and conservationists Ann Vileisis and Tim Palmer, passionate advocates for the Kalmiopsis and wilderness areas around the country, speak emphatically of place-based activism. In order to preserve a place, they say, people must draw on their personal link to the land. Politically,

their voices will always be louder than those of outsider activists. Trails play a massive role in building that personal link. They imbue places with identity, give hikers stories to bring home, and create an incentive to fight for further protection of the land.

Tim harped on the idea of incremental progress. Politics can be slow, and passing major bills or creating broad changes can be both daunting and frustrating. But clearing a few miles of remote trail can have an impact, albeit small. It may not attract the buzz of a thousand hikers the next season, but it will provide just as much passion and gratitude from handfuls of local enthusiasts, those who hoist their packs and drive to the trailhead the very moment SMC is finished clearing the last bit of brush.

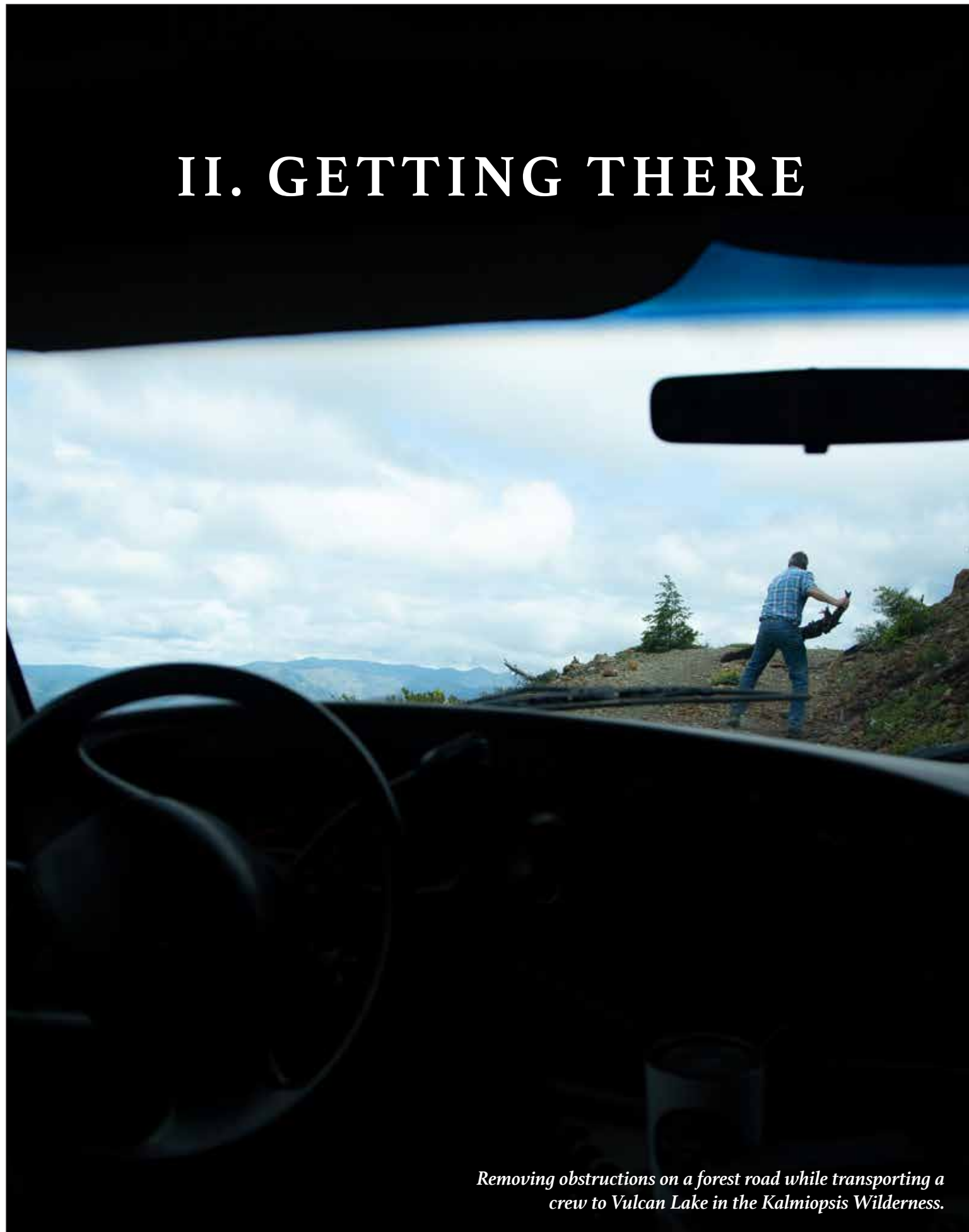
While working in the Wilderness Corps, I had the opportunity to meet several of these locals. Ashland native Luke

**Steve DiCicco, Field Ranger  
for the Forest Service Gold  
Beach District, calls the  
Kalmiopsis a “hidden gem,  
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where “nature still rules.”**

Brandy has put in countless hours as an SMC volunteer, particularly in the Siskiyou Mountains. Ryan Ghelfi, an elite ultra-runner and Club treasurer, leads fast-packing trips and often embarks on his own solo adventures throughout nearby wilderness. Chris Valle-Riestra met our crew at the Bridge Creek Trail in the Marble Mountains, hauling in his own tools and working alongside us to open a way through burned brush and tanoak logs. Jerit Carpenter cleared nearly a mile of thick, jungle-like ceanothus in the Kalmiopsis Wilderness by himself, weeks before our crew arrived. He’d even pulled poison oak from the ground by its roots so future hikers could walk through without worry. If for no one else, our work had deep meaning for these passionate few, to whom trails bring immense joy and fulfillment.



## II. GETTING THERE



*Removing obstructions on a forest road while transporting a crew to Vulcan Lake in the Kalmiopsis Wilderness.*

Out in the field, we put purpose into practice. Our eight-day work periods, called "hitches," were focused on clearing trail routes that were no longer accessible because of poor maintenance and fire damage. The first step in the process, however, was simply getting there. Without the ability to effectively mobilize to our worksite, we would be useless as a crew. We were dispatched to remote areas, and the process of getting to the trailhead and packing into the worksite would sometimes take up to twelve hours.

### **Transportation**

Driving to the trailhead would often be an ordeal of its own. Forest Service roads can be daunting even for an experienced driver. Some are carved with runoff and snaked with gullies. Others are steep or sloped precariously downhill. Sometimes the obstacle wouldn't be the condition of the road at all. Negotiating complex networks of fire access and logging routes was a skill in itself.

### **The hike in**

Once at the trailhead, our crew would load up with tools and packs. The hike to our first campsite could be arduous, sometimes requiring a trek of 10 miles or more. On my first hitch, the hardest part of my day was the very start, when I had to somehow find a way to shoulder my bag. With tools, a week's worth of food, and backpacking gear, my full load likely weighed almost 70 pounds. I could barely stand up. The views, however, made the journey worth every extra ounce.

**Left:** Program Manager Karly White's packed bag. **Below:** Karly White maneuvers over a downed log into the Bridge Creek Trail via the Half Moon Meadow Trail, Marble Mountain Wilderness





### Finding our way

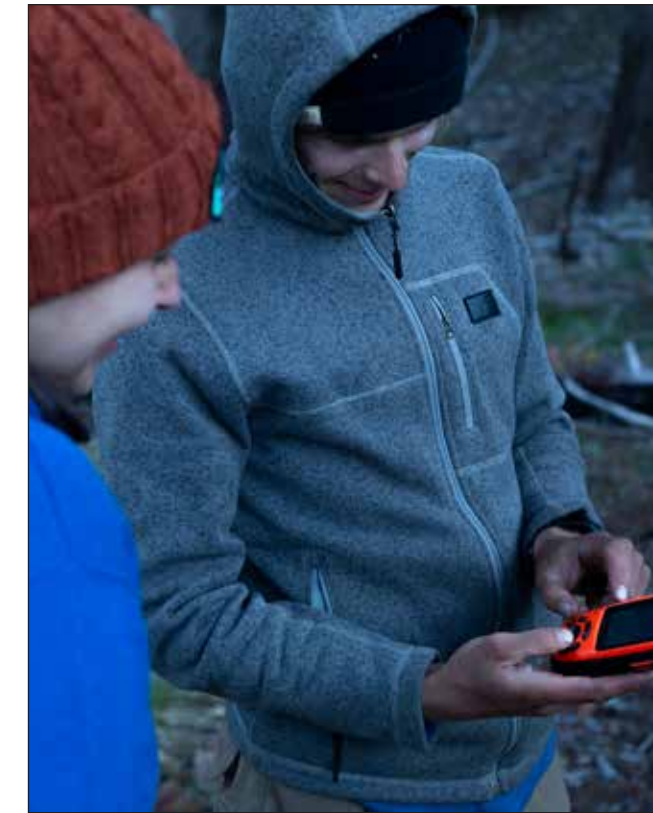
Navigation through wilderness areas, especially when established trails were overgrown, could be difficult. Leaders were always reviewing map data, both in digital and paper form, to determine the direction of travel, scope of work, and the progress made. They would also scout ahead or rely on reports from previous outings to determine trail conditions. This analysis would be shared with the crew as the hitch progressed.

### Communication

For many outdoor enthusiasts, part of the appeal of escaping to the backwoods is the separation from technology. On our hitches, we weren't permitted to bring our phones. For many of us, this was challenging at first, but we grew used to it and even enjoyed the time away from social media. Some technology, however, was necessary for day-to-day operations. Weather data, pick-up information, progress updates, or emergency strategies were all conveyed through messages on GPS devices. If multiple crews were dispatched to separate locations or a single crew was split, they could coordinate via radio.



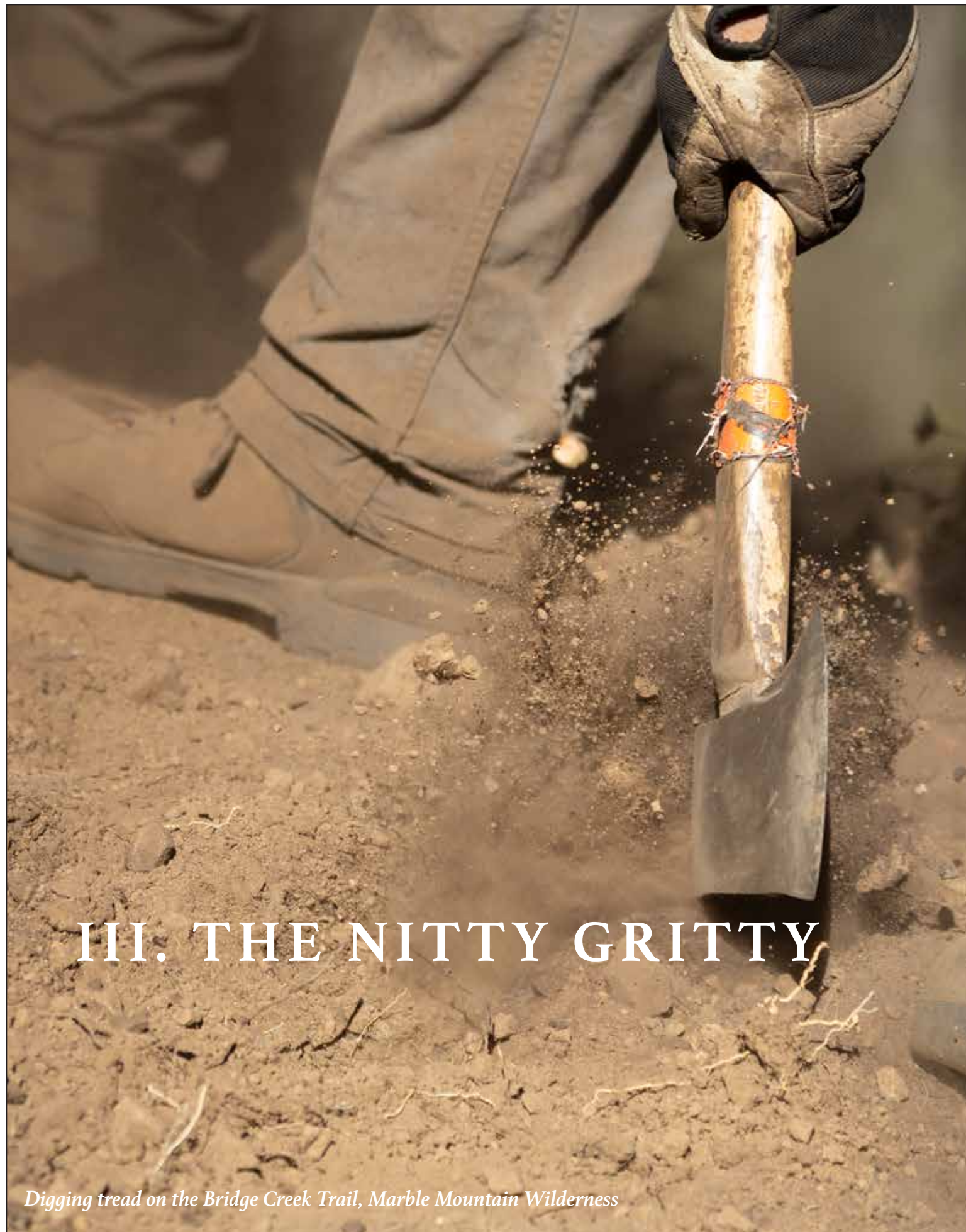
**Above:** Nick attempts to radio a crew working on the other side of the Kalmiopsis Wilderness. **Below:** Tiffani navigates via a GPS app on her phone while leading our crew up to Sandy Ridge, Marble Mountain Wilderness. We were awarded with a stunning view of the Cuddihy Lakes Basin.



**Top Left:** Jason prepares a crosscut saw for the hike in. **Top Right:** Program manager Nick Hodges and assistant crew leader Tiffani Ayres send a message using a Garmin inReach GPS device. **Bottom Left:** At the Tincup trailhead in the Kalmiopsis, Tiffani briefs our crew. **Bottom Right:** Tiffani outlines our objective - completing restoration on the Upper Chetco Trail.







### III. THE NITTY GRITTY

*Digging tread on the Bridge Creek Trail, Marble Mountain Wilderness*



**Left:** Grace Law clips manzanita on the Game Lake Trail, Kalmiopsis Wilderness. **Below:** Assistant crew leader Owen Brodie handsaws a limb from a downed tanoak log.

#### **Brushing**

After hiking in and pitching camp, the real push started. Work days typically lasted between 8 and 12 hours. Occasionally, shorter days would be necessary because of extreme cold, heat, or rain. Barring dangerous storms, however, we were always expected to start the day at 6 AM sharp. Such was the case on my first hitch in the Kalmiopsis. Despite wind, rain, and unforgiving 45-degree temperatures, we showed up and got to work.

Using shears, or "loppers," and small handsaws, we took on the task of brushing the trail, or removing overgrown vegetation. Though it was the most common and arguably most tedious kind of work, brushing made a noticeable impact. Occasionally, vegetation was thin and manageable, especially in live forest, where shade prevented the undergrowth from growing rampant. The majority of SMC's footprint, however, covers land recently burned by wildfires. These burned areas are desolate, and often chock-full of dead plants, some blackened with ash, others whitened

and tangled in a skeletal mass. Thick, dead stems were frustrating to cut and could break tools. At Johnson's Hunting Ground in the Marble Mountains, I shamefully broke three pairs of loppers on dead ceanothus, and was tasked with running back and forth along the trail, handsawing what I could while the rest of the crew continued brushing.

Fire can also destroy the tree canopy and allow sun to seep into the previously shaded forest floor, encouraging the reemergence of live brush. On the Upper Chetco Trail, our crew met walls of vegetation so dense we could barely squeeze through. In this "jungle," the trail was barely visible, swallowed completely in a screen of ceanothus, manzanita, and tanoak. The focus was turned from maintenance to restoration. We spent hours determining where the true historic path was located, and what brush should be cut accordingly. It was a painstaking task, but worth the effort. We could rest easy knowing our work matched the original route from 1917.







On the Bridge Creek Trail in the Marble Mountain Wilderness, I tagged along with assistant crew leader Owen Brodie as he scouted the brush ahead. After climbing over stacks of thick logs, sliding down ruined tread, and enduring countless cuts and bruises from hiking through dead thickets, Owen turned to me and sighed. He said I could go back and wait for him at nearby Yellowjacket Creek if I wanted, warning that things would get even worse ahead. I shrugged, and agreed. After a relaxing half-hour by the shaded water, I saw Owen trudging back toward me, bedraggled and wild-eyed. "I call that section 'The Gates of Doom,'" he said. The next day, our crew dove head-first into that brush.

*I saw Owen trudging back toward me, bedraggled and wild-eyed. "I call that section 'The Gates of Doom,'" he said.*

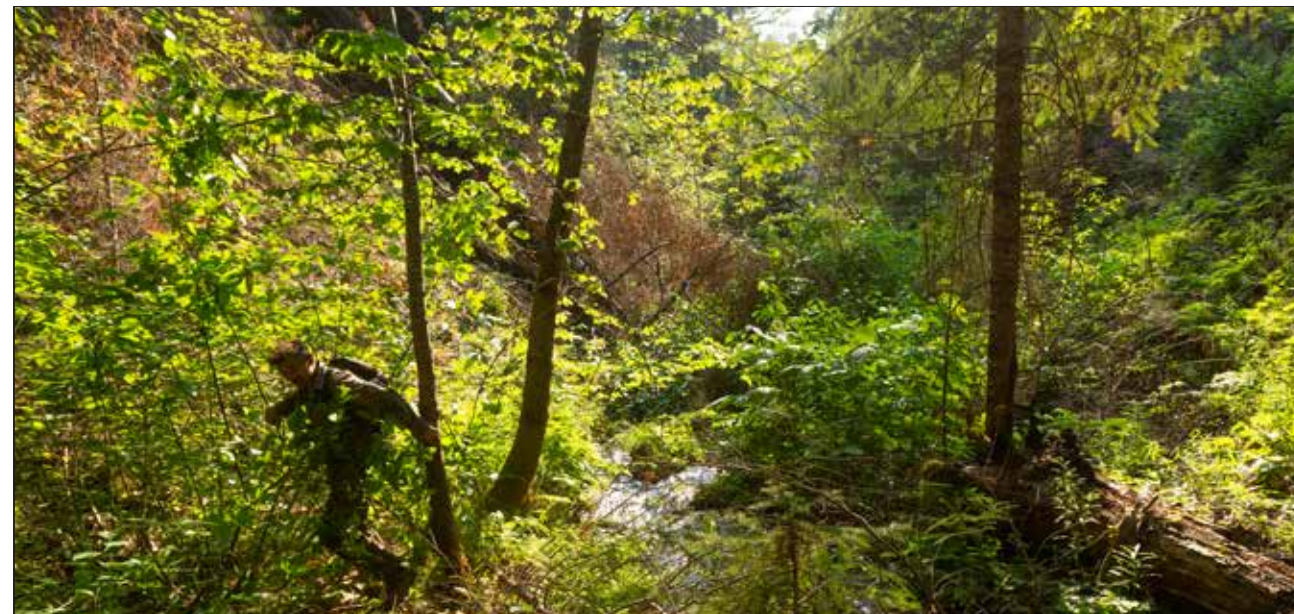


**Logging**

Once the trail was brushed, the next priority would often be logs. Because no mechanized tools can be used in Federal Wilderness Areas, SMC crews use crosscut bucking saws to clear downed trees from the trail. These saws cut on both the push and pull stroke, and come in a variety of tooth patterns. Widely used before the production of power tools, all of the saws in the SMC inventory are decades-old antiques.

In the field, we faced anything from piles of smaller logs, called "jackstraw," to monstrous logs several feet in diameter. Some massive trees took hours to cut, some smaller ones only minutes, but all required an experienced sawyer to ensure safety and efficiency. The bind of the log was determined by analyzing the compression and tension of the wood fibers. The angle, bevel, and pitch of the saw was carefully planned. Safety, however, always took first priority. In the words of program manager Nick Hodges, it was always an option to just "walk away" to avoid injury, even if it meant leaving a log blocking the trail.

**Left:** Jason debarks a log to prepare a cut.  
**Below:** Owen using a single crosscut.



**Above and Right:** Owen Brodie returning from his scouting mission into the Gates of Doom.





**Top Left:** Karly Scott and Tiffani Ayres operate a double crosscut. **Bottom Left:** As Nick finishes a cut, Owen jumps out of the way, and the round tumbles downhill. **Bottom Right:** Jade Sollinger approaches the log. **Above:** After a smaller logging crew makes a cut, the whole crew joins in an effort to push the round out of the trail.

*I learned that while it may take only one or two people to make a cut,*

*it could take five times that many to move it out of the trail. On one of our hitches in the Marble Mountains, we cut some rounds that were so large it took the entire 17-person crew to move them. Moments like these were often the clearest indication that we needed every bit of manpower we had. Each crew member was vital, and we depended on each other.*





**Treading**

While brushing and logging could be performed alone or in small crews of two, treading was often more efficient with a crew of four or more. The purpose of treading was to improve or reestablish the “tread” or surface on which hikers walk. Trails can be susceptible to landslides, damaged by runoff, or covered by shifts in soil under fallen trees. When reworking tread, we would form a line and move downhill. The first worker dug into the hillside with a pick to establish the width of the trail.

The second removed the excess fill and the third smoothed the bumps in the tread with a Pulaski or hoe. The fourth acted as quality control and added final touches, ensuring that the tread was sloped gently downward to prevent damage from runoff.

Digging tread was by far the dirtiest job I performed. At Johnson’s Hunting Ground, clouds of dust rose into my face and filled my eyes, nose, and mouth. My spit was black, and my eyes stung, but the laughs we shared admiring each other’s dirty teeth always lifted my spirits.

**Left:** A tread line on Johnson’s Hunting Ground in the Marble Mountains. **Bottom Left:** The Pulaski. **Bottom Right:** The “thingamadig.”



*Jason brushes the Horse Sign Butte Trail, Kalmiopsis Wilderness*



*“We are the stewards of the land here”*

Ranger Steve DiCicco



Fires created volatile conditions for our crew. A trail in a burned area may only remain clear of logs for a few weeks because of burned trees, or "snags," that fall frequently. Brush will always grow back and tread will always give out, despite the hard work of our crew and those of past seasons. After a few years, a new crew will have to be dispatched to clear the same trail again, and again, and again. Gabriel Howe quips, "It's the gift that keeps on giving."

Ranger Steve DiCicco understands this eternal struggle. "There will always be endless fields of brush," he says. "But we are the stewards of the land here ... we are conserving these places that the country needs. People may not realize they need them, but they do."

### **The McKinney Fire**

On the last day of my fifth hitch, we discovered that a wildfire had started not far from our location in the Marble Mountains, burning over 14,000 acres. It eventually swelled to over 60,000 acres. Questions about our next hitch lingered over the following few days, but the Forest Service soon gave us the green light to continue working. Smoky skies became a common sight on our last several hitches in the Marble Mountains, and we learned that a crew of rappelling firefighters had landed not far from our camp one night to put out a smaller blaze caused by frequent lightning storms.

**Below:** Watching lightning strikes from camp. **Top Right:** A smoky sunset over the Bridge Creek Trail. **Bottom Right:** Sage Reddish views smoke from the McKinney Fire while en route to the Wooley Creek Trailhead.





## IV. SELF RELIANCE



*Tiffani climbs up toward Pleasant Lake in the Marble Mountains*

Whenever we weren't working or sleeping, we were tending to our bodies and recovering. Working a trail maintenance job is exhausting, even for someone who returns to the comforts of a warm bed each night. We had no such comforts.

During my time in the Wilderness Corps, I had to become experienced in sustaining myself and honing basic backpacking skills, not only for survival, but to keep my body fueled and ready for the next day of work. Simple acts such as drinking, cooking, and sleeping would take much more time and effort than in everyday life. Packing the wrong gear could cause major inconvenience, if not outright disaster.

### **Water**

Clear, filtered water was necessary, not only for drinking, but for cooking and re-hydrating meals. Far removed from the luxury of a municipal system, our crew had to find sources from which to purify and drink. This could mean drawing from a lake, river, creek, or even a trickle of snowmelt.

### **Food**

Resupplying our bodies with calories was a constant task. I enjoyed cheese sticks, tortillas, pepperoni, chocolate granola, Oreos, peanut butter, potato chips, couscous, noodles, and dried fruit. Preparing meals for eight days in the woods is no joke, and overpacking is always better than being unprepared, as there are no resupply points on hitches. My food bag could weigh upwards of 20 pounds (and occupy the majority of space in my pack) but that extra weight was worth every ounce.

On day seven of my fifth hitch, I rested with fellow crew member Cole near Fowler Cabin. We had reached the halfway point of the day's hike, and it was a sweltering afternoon. He sat slumped against his bag in the shade, jaw working slowly through a snack. He'd been sick the past few days, and was only now feeling a little better. He was smiling now - the first real smile I'd seen on him in a while. "A piece of dried mango and a cheese stick just changed my life," he said.



**Far Left:** Lucy Gallagher prepares her favorite trail lunch ... PB&J! **Left:** Owen boils noodles near Pleasant Lake in the Marble Mountains. **Above:** Cole filters water at Cedar Camp in the Kalmiopsis. Because of the potential risk of contracting the parasite *Giardia*, all streams, no matter how clear, must be filtered before drinking





### Sleep

Without adequate rest, we would not be able to pull our own weight during the workday. Some of the crew chose to camp without a tent, or with only a mosquito net. While spending several nights on the saddle below Horse Sign Butte in the Kalmiopsis, heavy wind and frigid downpour meant a secure rain cover was vital for keeping clothes and gear dry and ready for the following workday.

Chores such as cooking dinner, filtering water, bathing, washing clothes, journaling, or repairing tools would be performed at camp. There was, however, almost always time for leisure. Sometimes we took turns reading from a book together at dinner, played card games, or climbed to a nearby ridge to enjoy the sunset.

We often stayed several nights in one area, hiking further and further each morning to work where we'd ended the day before. Eventually, moving camp up the trail was necessary for the sake of efficiency, as that placed us closer to where we'd left off.

**Left:** The view from inside my tent. **Below:** Our camp at Cedar Flat, Marble Mountain Wilderness



**Above:** The glow of headlamps fills the early morning darkness as our crew prepares to move camp. **Below:** Assembling for another 6 AM start at Fowler Cabin while working the Bridge Creek Trail





# V. PERSISTENCE



*Jade, Cade, and Cole stop for a rest while hiking down from Vulcan Lake toward the Chetco River in the Kalmiopsis Wilderness.*

## **The Mind Game**

While becoming more skilled and self-reliant improved my performance in the field, the work itself was impossible without the correct mindset. My attitude had as much of an impact as physical fitness. Steve Diccio told us that, without the comforts of civilization, we "become animals." But just as our bodies were hardened to the elements, our minds would be toughened as well.

I would often see the signs of internal struggle etched on the faces of my fellow crew members. Sometimes, motivation from others was enough to break through the pain. As a crew, spending every waking hour together fastened strong bonds. Our ties grew deep, and convening for social time at the end of the day always infused me with new motivation. Without the friendship of my crew, I am certain the work would have been unthinkable.

Often, however, there were no words that could console us, and we had to find inspiration within ourselves. It sometimes seemed impossible to take one more step, work one more hour, give one more axe swing, one more saw push. And yet we pressed on. Time and time again, I was proven wrong about my true limits. There were countless times I told myself, "I can't go on." But within the next few moments, I somehow found myself still going.

After her fourth hitch, my fellow crew-member Sage Reddish learned that "everything is temporary." In our own separate ways, we came to understand how there was always light to be found, even in the deepest suffering.



**Left:** Lucy rests after a long day of work. Several of us had heat exhaustion that day. **Above:** Jason takes in the view from camp below Pleasant Lake.





**Above:** Griffin Davies rests in the shade. **Right:** View from Sandy Ridge, Haypress Trail, Marble Mountain Wilderness

### *One memorable afternoon,*

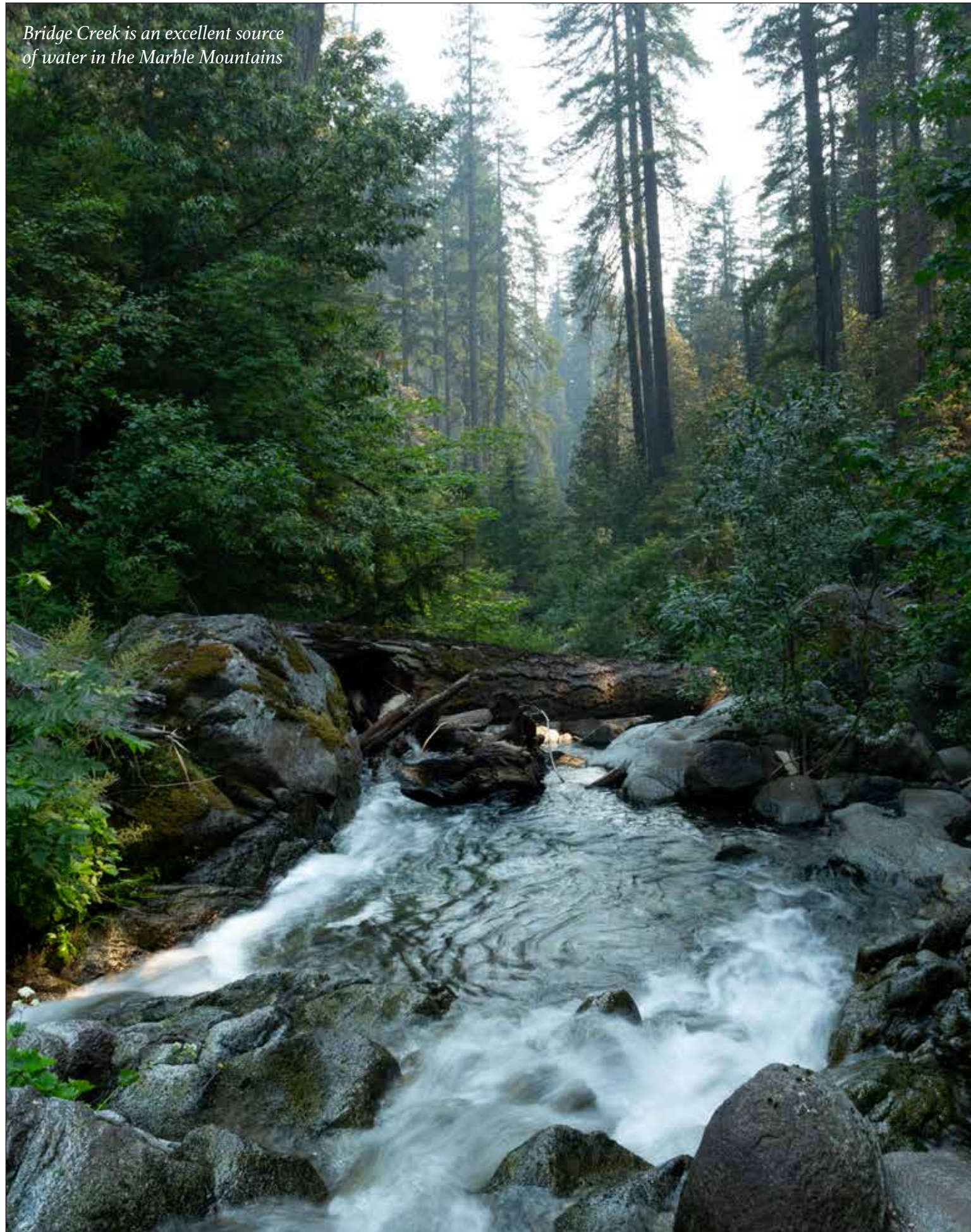
as we worked during a heat wave, I sank into the dirt under a tree and began shaking rocks from my shoes. I sighed, and took a moment just to wallow in my misery. A poison oak rash was climbing my arms, blistering angrily. Mosquitos swarmed against my shirt, sweat soaked my pants, and the sun seemed to cook me even in the shade. My hands were blackened from the dirt and ash, and the lenses of my glasses coated in dust. I thought, "Why do people choose to come out here? Why in the world do they brave all this?"

I went to sleep that evening, silent and uncertain, and woke the next morning with heavy legs. While trudging to our worksite, I stopped to catch my breath and lifted my eyes to the horizon. At first glance, the mountains there were only shadows - black shapes against the sky. Behind them, however, there was a faint glow. I realized then that I was looking east. Without warning, the sun suddenly crested, and its rays shot out toward me. Like molten gold, light passed down through the trees, touching leaves, then branches, then dirt, then me. I felt a little chill down my spine and smiled. As if offended, the wilderness had replied - and in full force. There I sat, in awe of it all, wondering why I'd ever doubted.





*Bridge Creek is an excellent source of water in the Marble Mountains*



**Vincent DiFrancesco**

*Photo by Owen Brodie*



**About the Author:**

As a midwesterner, mountains are a luxury for me. I'm incredibly grateful for the opportunity to spend my summer with the Siskiyou Mountain Club. It felt both purposeful and fulfilling to help preserve wild places so that others might enjoy them as I did. I would encourage anyone with interest to pursue the same experience.

Originally from Cincinnati, I now study documentary film at DePaul University in Chicago. I run ultra marathons and love peanut butter.



