

SPOKE TALK



Donate to trails

This past Saturday afternoon, I had just put my cruiser bike away after riding in the 24-hour 'Boat Cruise. As I gazed out the window, reflecting on the past 24 hours, something strange started to happen. It began to rain. Suddenly it was hailing, and I watched my lawn furniture fly upside-down as I frantically closed every window in my house.

Once the rain and the wind stopped, I quickly called my riding buddy because I knew Sunday morning was going to be a powder day. A brown pow day. We have waited months for this day to arrive.

I coordinated schedules with my partner, her partner, our babies and the dog to arrange for an 8:30 a.m. departure to ride a two-hour lap on Emerald Mountain.

As we started up the Bluffs, we smiled in delight as the tackiness of the trail allowed our tires to roll through tight switchbacks. When we arrived at Morning Gloria for a 35-minute climb of switchbacks and conversation, we encountered downed tree after downed tree. We cleared what we could by proudly lifting small branches over our heads and tossing them aside victoriously. However, there were many trees we couldn't clear. At one point, we couldn't even find the trail.

I came home and gave my husband a 3.5-minute trail report as he handed me our son and ran out the door for his brown pow day. Little did I know he tucked his saw into his backpack.

He wasn't the only one out there that day who cleared trees on local trails across town. There were reports of trail angels working in anonymity on Flash of Gold, Soda Ditch, Emerald Mountain, Spring Creek and more. But trail angels can only do so much.

Public land managers followed the locals on Monday with chainsaws to clear the larger trees. Our community cares about trails and this is evident as, two days after the storm, our local trails are now mostly clear.

Besides carrying small saws in our packs, our locals have also reached into their own wallets to support trail maintenance work for the long term. To date, the Yampa Valley Community Foundation's Trail Maintenance Endowment Fund has received over \$560,000 in gifts from locals and visitors alike.

This fund was created in 2016 to support trail maintenance on nonmotorized trails, for the benefit of all human-powered trail users. To date, the fund has supported

PREPARING FOR FLIGHT



SHELBY REARDON/STAFF

Thomas Miller carries his skis while using the magic carpet to get to the top of the ski jump at Howelsen Hill on Friday. Sprinklers wet the jumps before Nordic combined athletes take flight, allowing them to keep their skills sharp even on a hot summer day.

Big break for big peaks

Hiker use fell last summer due to historic avalanche aftermath of winter 2019

Scott Condon
The Aspen Times

The lingering snowpack and avalanche debris from winter 2019 reduced the number of people hiking Colorado's tallest peaks by about 18% last summer, according to a new report.

Colorado Fourteeners Initiative estimated that hiker days fell to 288,000 from 353,000 in 2018.

The effects of late winter were even more pronounced in the Elk Mountains outside of Aspen where there was an estimated 44% plunge in use between summer 2018 and 2019, the report said. That was the largest decline among mountain ranges in the state.

Colorado was pummeled with heavy snow in March 2019, which triggered a prolific cycle of avalanches. Snowfall also lasted well into spring. As a result, trails on the fourteeners were covered later than usual while snow, tree trunks and debris from avalanches blocked many backcountry roads that provide access to trailheads.

CFI staff members install a counter on Castle Peak southwest of Aspen each summer to gauge use. A massive avalanche in upper Castle Creek Valley took out a bridge and littered the roadway with massive tree trunks.



COLORADO FOURTEENERS INITIATIVE/COURTESY PHOTO

An ample snowfield exists on the lower slopes of Conundrum Peak in July 2019. Many hikers on Castle Peak traverse to the summit of Conundrum.

"It was mid-July before we were even able to get in there," said Brian Sargeant, development and communications manager.

Hiking on many of the state's 54 peaks above 14,000 feet didn't start until about one month later than average, CFI executive director Lloyd Athearn noted in the report.

"The drop in hiking use between 2018 and 2019 was even more dramatic when

you consider that 2018 was a drought year in which some trails were snow-free in May, allowing fourteeners hikers to get out earlier than normal," Athearn said in a statement.

This summer, it's back to drought. Sargeant said it's a safe bet that hiker days have soared again due to dry conditions early in the season as well as the surge in

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trail work on Fish Creek Falls, Uranium Mine, 1101 (CDT Trail), Spring Creek Pond Loop, Yampa River Core Trail improvements, Emerald Mountain and hired a full-time summer employee to clear countless trails on nearby U.S. Forest Service land.

The list of projects and trails that will be improved will continue to grow as this fund was established to provide funding towards trail maintenance for generations. The goal of the

fund is to raise \$1 to \$1.5 million by 2026.

To learn more about the Trail Maintenance Endowment Fund or to make a donation, head to yvcf.org/trails. Now is the time to make a donation, as a \$15 thousand dollar-for-dollar matching challenge is underway in honor of Marc Sehler — whose legacy continues to inspire us to maintain and enjoy our local trails.

Helen Beall is the community impact manager for the Yampa Valley Community Foundation.

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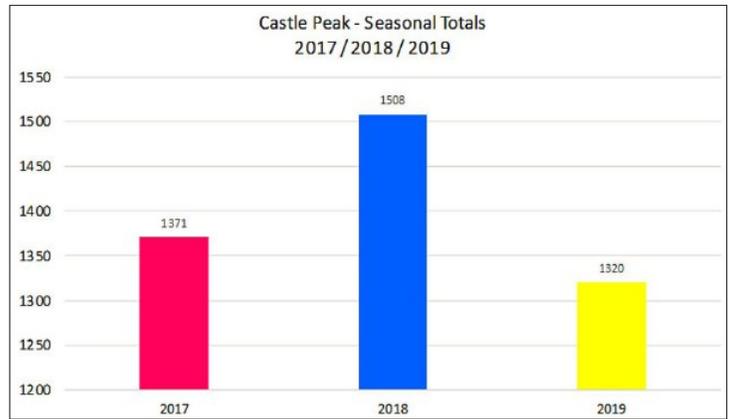
outdoor activity during the coronavirus pandemic. Trails of all types are seeing increased use as people try to stay active.

“We’re expecting it to be higher than 2018,” Sargeant said. It’s likely to be record use, he said.

CFI monitors hiker days rather than hikers because some people make trips up several peaks or repeated trips up the same fourteener.

CFI has produced an annual report in recent years about the use of the tall peaks. The conservation group was founded in 1994 to preserve and protect the natural integrity of the 14,000-foot peaks through trail improvements and education. As part of its mission, it tracks how many people are using the peaks and the effects on the trails.

CFI’s collected data last year from counters at 19 locations adjacent to summit hiking trails on 20 peaks. Hiking use for other fourteeners was based on crowd-sourced checklists on the popular website 14ers.com, used by 17,000 individual hikers, as well as modeling that uses factors such as trail difficulty and length,



COLORADO FOURTEENERS INITIATIVE/COURTESY IMAGE

and distance from the Front Range.

The Elk Mountain fourteeners tend to be among the least hiked and climbed in the state because of the difficulty, Sargeant said. Castle Peak is the exception. While access can be challenging, the hike itself typically is not. The number of hikers fell to an estimated 1,320 last year from 1,508 in summer 2018, according to CFI.

The other fourteeners near Aspen are Maroon Peak, Pyramid Peak, Capitol Peak and Snowmass Mountain. Annual hiker days are estimated at lower than 1,000 per peak.

La Plata Peak and Mount Elbert, part of the Sawatch Range, are located on the east side of Independence Pass.

CFI started an education effort a couple of seasons ago to alert hikers about the challenges and danger of the Elk Mountain fourteeners. Sargeant said that could be affecting the number of hikers attempting to summit those peaks.

CFI’s data indicates hikers emerged with gusto once the snow melted last year. Statewide hiking levels were down an estimated 55% in June and 20% in July. Hiking was up an estimated 16% from 2018 between

Aug. 1 and Oct. 7.

Following are various findings in CFI’s report:

- Quandary Peak near Breckenridge edged out Mount Bierstadt near Georgetown as the most climbed Colorado fourteener for the second year in a row. Both mountains had season use totals near 35,000 hiker days.

- 57% of statewide hiking occurred on the 11 peaks closest to the Front Range.

- If you want anything resembling solitude, don’t climb on weekends. Saturday use was highest at 25.7%, Sunday was at about 20% and Friday at nearly 14%.



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