

# 2020/2021

## *WTA Review*

CoVid 19 made last year one we will never forget. While some people would rather leave it behind, there were several things worth celebrating. The Wildlife Trail Ambassador (WTA) program is one of those. In a time when anxiety was high and everything was closing, Vail Valley Mountain Trails Alliance (VVMTA) and the USFS pulled together to assure WTA volunteers were implementing new safety precautions. With the surge of visitors and people relocating to our valley, the use and abuse on our trails skyrocketed. This year, more than any other, we needed to assure wildlife had the privacy they needed to survive and thrive.



Four years ago, the Vail Valley Mountain Trails Alliance and the White River Eagle-Holy Cross Ranger District joined forces to bring awareness to the importance of respecting trail closures in Eagle County. What started as a volunteer group of 15 has more than tripled in size and has helped educate thousands of people valley wide. This year we have over 60 people on our active roster.



In the Spring of 2018, there was a community meeting where some staggering statistics were shared by the USFS and the Colorado Parks and Wildlife departments including how only a few cameras documented 200 people on a closed trail over a 10 day period. Many trails in Eagle County are closed to allow migrating deer and elk to refuel after a long winter and people on these closed trails may be contributing to the steady decline of these species in our valley. Soon after that meeting, VVMTA and the Eagle Holy-Cross USFS came

together to create the Wildlife Trail Ambassador (WTA) Program. These Ambassadors are a volunteer presence in our community and at the closed trails to help enforce trail closures, offer education about local flora and fauna and to spread 'Leave No Trace' concepts.

The 2020 season was far from normal. We shut the program down in March and encouraged people to stay home and quarantine with the rest of the world. We did host a virtual Open House in April 2020 to keep people aware of the new CoVid 19 protocol changes that would be in place when quarantine ended. Late in May we relaunched the bigger, better, socially-distanced WTA program. People were excited to get out of the house and onto the trails, so having our volunteers at those closed trail heads was priceless! Volunteer participation also was off the charts. Anyone interested in joining WTA was





welcome and getting new volunteers up to speed with the program was as easy as watching a few videos. Topics covered at the training included seasonal wildlife migration, “Leave No Trace” principles, communication skills and how to handle confrontations.

There are two categories of Ambassadors including Social and Field. Social Ambassadors visit groups or organizations that offer recommendations for recreational opportunities in Eagle County. This includes athletic clubs, ski & bike rental shops, hotels, etc. This year our Social Ambassador program was put on hold to discourage public interactions, but we look forward to bringing that back soon. Field Ambassadors are an informative presence at closure gates. They help the public better understand the reason for the closures and offer suggestions for other open recreational trail locations close by that could be explored as an alternative. They also document what they observed while volunteering at the gates including the presence of wildlife at or beyond the gates, counting people passing by, cars parked at the trailhead, and dogs being on or off leash. Field Ambassadors are also invited to hike the open trails in the summer to share their education, record their observations, and update VVMTA on trail conditions on their Facebook page. These Ambassadors usually spread basic Leave No Trace concepts including pack it in, pack it out and staying on the trail.



## Field Ambassador Basics 2020 / 2021 Spring/Winter Season

- ANY AMOUNT OF VOLUNTEER TIME IS APPRECIATED!
- A suggested amount of time includes being present at the closed trailheads for about 10 days over the winter/spring season to count visitors, dogs, cars, etc. and answer questions about the closures (roughly 1 hour/visit)
- Suggested volunteer distribution over the next year includes:
  - 3 days enforcing the Everkrisp closure (Nov 23 - June 20)
  - 3 days on any other closed AAT trails (Eagle & Avon Dec 15 - April 15)
  - 3 days on USFS Spring wildlife closures (Vail area April 15 - June 20)
- When you volunteer is up to you, but we encourage being there at more popular trail use times (mornings before work, evenings after work or on weekends)
- No experience is necessary and training is provided
- Add your days to our shared calendar at least 24 hrs in advance
- Submit digital log information within 24 hrs after event

Trail closures in Eagle County can be confusing and our Wildlife Trail Ambassadors help people better understand when and why the trails close. The dates of the closures depend on wildlife migrational movement as well as the land management entity, so they vary across the valley. This year, the same day trails opened in Avon, several closed around Vail, so the confusion is understandable. The Avon area trails are closed to protect mule deer from disturbance on their winter range. The Vail area trails closures are intended to protect mule deer and elk during migration and/or fawning/calving. Eagle County has an active biking community and having a dry trail is tempting to people wanting to ride or hike. What they might not understand is that the closure isn't always about the trail condition. Deer and elk that have struggled to survive all winter need access to specific familiar regions to refuel their depleted bodies and safely raise their new young. Closing some trails allows them a familiar safe zone to refuel and give birth.





Volunteering at WTA doesn't just leave you with the satisfaction of community service and protecting our furry friends, it also rewards volunteers for every hour served. One hour out there gets you a 2-for-1 beer at Bonfire Brewing. This year's Spring incentives were awarded to those people volunteering between Jan 1 - June 20th, 2021. Anyone out there at least 5 hours was eligible for free camping on the property of VVMTA's board emeritus, Lee Rimel. These 5+ hour people were invited to choose between his tipi or sheepherder wagon for a one night stay on his property. Town of Vail also contributed a s'mores kit to anyone that took advantage of that camping perk. People that volunteered at least 5 times were also eligible to win one of 4 Vail Pass Recreational Passes which covers your fee at Vail Pass for parking there in the winter time. Congratulations to Hunter Askelson, Becky Kennedy, Jennifer Rose and Kyla Wolfe on winning those passes!



People that volunteered at least 10 hours this winter/spring were entered into a drawing for one of two America the Beautiful Parks passes. This pass gets you into more than 2,000 federal recreational sites across the country free of charge! Big THANK YOU to all those volunteers that got out there at least 10 hours including Jack Hughes (16 hrs), Lauren Morone (18 hrs), Deb Bolon-Feeney (20 hrs), Ellen Miller (42 hrs), and our 2021 WTA MVP, Lisa Currey who was out there for 93 hours! Big CONGRATULATIONS to Ellen and Jack who walked off with those Parks passes! New this year, we had WTA teams that were recognized for their cooperative efforts. Town of Vail Trail Hosts had the highest participation, followed closely by the International Youth Conservation Coalition and the Eagle Valley Land Trust in 3rd place.



VVMTA also introduced their own volunteer rewards this year including a community discount card for those that log at least 6 hours and a Patagonia hoodie for those that log at least 15 hours. Any time given to the Wildlife Trail Ambassador, Adopt a Trail program or any VVMTA crew nights counts towards those great perks!

After such a crazy year, it felt great to actually get together in person to celebrate the end of the spring closure season on June 29th. Thank you to Grant Smith for donating the Riverwalk Theater patio as well as some appetizers for our hard working volunteers and their families!



### 2020/2021 WTA Volunteer Statistics (April 2020 - June 2021)

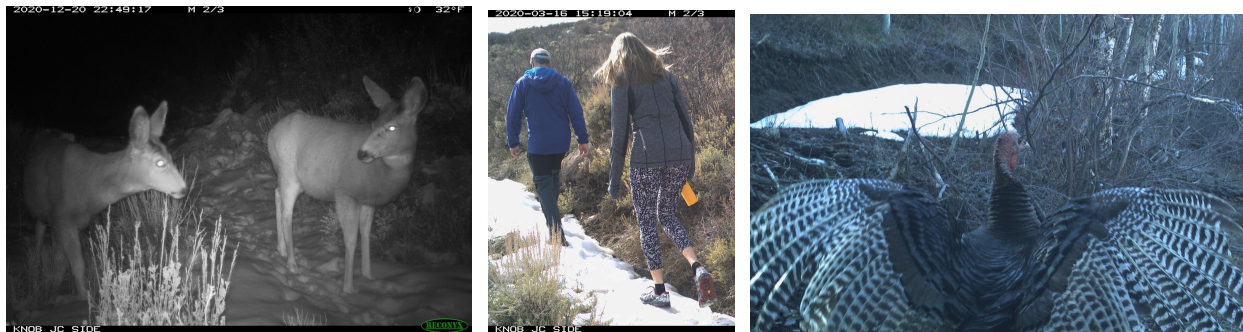
Total Volunteer Hours	387
Total Volunteer Days	327
Total People Contacted	448
People's temperament	95 % great/positive 5 % average

Although we have a strong presence at the closed trail heads, WTA can't be everywhere all of the time. VVMTA's new 6 member Trail Conservation Crew (TCC) were also present on a regular basis. The new TCC crew that began in May of 2021



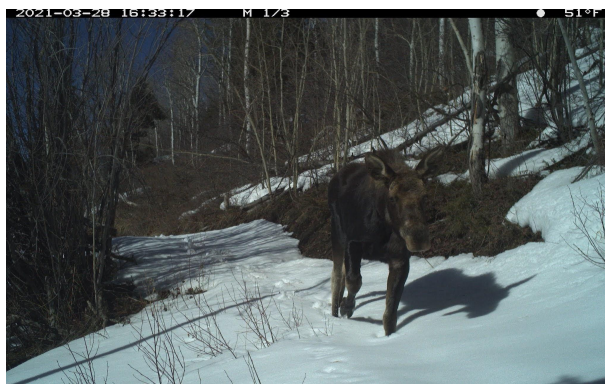
contributed to 19.5 hours in the last remaining and important weeks of our trail closure season. This new group of VVMTA staff will be a great asset in years to come with the Wildlife Trail Ambassador Program and education at the tail end of each season when people are very excited to get on to the trails.

There were also several motion activated cameras posted within the closed trails to help us better understand the activity beyond the gates. Photos were collected of people, dogs, bikers, skiers and all sorts of wildlife. Unfortunately, these images were only a fraction of the actual activity because cameras were smeared with mud, covered with hands when people passed, tilted down or stolen altogether.



### **Camera images captured Winter/Spring 2020-2021**

	<b>Date Closure</b>	<b>People (violations)</b>	<b>Dogs</b>	<b>Wildlife</b>
<b>Everkrisp</b>	Nov.23 - Jun.20	33	10	21
<b>North Trail (Garmitsch/ Buffehr)</b>	Apr. 15 - Jun. 20	49	5	37
<b>North Trail (Davos)</b>	Apr. 15 - Jun. 20	26	3	33
<b>Son of middle Creek</b>	Apr. 15 - Jun. 20	33	10	6
<b>Stone Creek/Paulie's Plunge</b>	May 15 - Jun. 20	30	11	10
<b>Knob Hill (Singletree)</b>	Dec. 15 - Apr. 15	99	40	51
<b>Knob Hill (June Creek)</b>	Dec. 15 - Apr. 15	30	13	74



Pictured left to right, Ernest Saeger: VVMTA Executive Director  
 Michelle Wolfe: Previous VVMTA Program Volunteer Coordinator  
 Erinn Hoban: New VVMTA Trails & Program Manager

Thank you to our volunteers, USFS and all VVMTA supporters for helping make this Wildlife Trail Ambassador program such an amazing success.

Anyone, anytime can become a Wildlife Trail Ambassador. If you are interested, please contact Erinn Hoban at [adoptatrail@vvmta.org](mailto:adoptatrail@vvmta.org)





View the Full [Volunteer Leaderboard on our Website:](#)

