

Sierra Club Service Trip: Adventure in Idaho Panhandle National Forests

By Matthew Self

In August 2023, I participated in a week-long service trip with the Sierra Club's national outings program to the Idaho Panhandle National Forests. We met the Forest Service crew that would be leading us in trail work over the next five days in the Forest's backcountry. After a challenging 5 mile hike with 2000 feet of elevation gain, we made camp on the granite outcrops at Two Mouth Lakes, so named for two small lakes connected by a gently-flowing creek.



On days 1 and 2 we rerouted the current trail to the lakes, to better manage water flow and prevent future erosion. The Forest crew and a few seasoned volunteers provided guidance for us less-experienced members, making sure our trail work was up to their standards. Fortunately, all of the work was routine for the crew, and they kept spirits very high during the arduous work days. Creating a new trail on a hillside was an incredible physical challenge, but full work days make for delicious food and heavy nights of sleep.





On day 3, we had a rest day. Some people stayed in camp or explored the lakes while a group of us took a bush-whacking tour up Myrtle's Turtle, a steep granite mountain rising 600 feet above the lakes. Our guide Gary had been coming to this area for 20 years and carved his way up and down the mountain as if a trail was laid out before him. As an outings leader, watching him was a treat because he knew the land very well and would pick up on subtle changes in terrain and vegetation to determine the best path for the group.



On days 4 and 5, we finished the trail reroute, repaired several boardwalks, stabilized a section of rockfall, and added drainage paths for several downhill sections of trail. The variety of work kept things lively and our bodies guessing about what would come next. The hike out the next day was much easier going downhill, but there was a bitter-sweetness to leaving a place in the wilderness we called home for a week.



Sierra Club's National Outings program is a tremendous gateway to explore new lands with less management of logistics. With offerings of service trips, lodge trips, hiking, backpacking, kayaking, and more, there are year-round opportunities for all ages, skill levels, and desires. This was my second National trip, and I will definitely be coming back for more—maybe even as a leader in the future!