

# Backcountry Boosters



Friends of the Tonto National Forest repair damage on the Sheep Creek Trail

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**T**HE SHEEP CREEK TRAIL is overdue for some love. An 8-mile backcountry route on the western side of the Mazatzal Wilderness in Tonto National Forest, it has been largely ignored by trail preservationists over the years. Overgrown, fire-singed and poorly signed, the trail would be beyond salvation, but for the brave few who are determined to resurrect the route from obscurity.

Enter Friends of the Tonto National Forest, a Phoenix-based 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization.

"Friends of the Tonto National Forest was formed by a former forest service worker about 10 years ago," says past president John Matteson. "Now, I'm involved with writing grants to maintain trails. Most recently, we got a grant to maintain the Sheep Creek Trail."

Matteson is an enthusiastic fan of the 252,500-acre wilderness located between Phoenix and Payson. "I live in Fountain Hills, so it's in my backyard. There are about 240 miles of trails, and probably less than 100 miles are maintained. It's my passion to get them brushed, cleared of deadfall and open for use. We've been working on that for the past couple years. It's a fantastic resource, and I hate to see it go to waste."

Matteson got to know the Sheep Creek Trail, which spins off from the Arizona Trail between the Mormon Grove and Mount Peeley trailheads in McFarland Canyon, when he was a steward for the Arizona National Scenic Trail. "[We] decided we had to work on it because it's a trail that will be a great link for a loop hike with the Arizona Trail. It's fantastic country, but getting back in there was tougher than I anticipated."

Laboring in a wilderness area, where motorized travel and power tools are verboten, is challenging. Volunteers will camp on-site and log 10-hour workdays. "They have to be stupid," Matteson jokes. "Why would anybody want to go out and hike 8 miles, sweat all day and chop weeds for nothing?"

To date, most of the Sheep Creek Trail has been cleared, but grant money ran out with a mile left to complete. Thus, Matteson is asking trail advocates to donate time and money. "We encourage people by saying that no matter how little or how much they contribute, it helps," Matteson says. "I'm hoping to rally the troops to get in there this fall/winter to clear the last bit."

— Mare Czinar

## IF YOU GO

### Friends of the Tonto National Forest

[friendsofthetonto.org](http://friendsofthetonto.org)

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