

## Building new trail builds community

by Erin Mckittrick



*In late May, snow can still be thick on the top of 1200' Lunch Mountain. Looking west towards Tutka Bay (credit: Andy Banas).*

From Lunch Mountain, on Kachemak Bay State Park's Tutka Backdoor Trail, Mount Iliamna appears perfectly framed between the fjord's forested slopes. We wrapped up our last day of trail work this year on September 27, enjoying lucky fall weather and this incredible view. Behind us, a trail wound through unnamed mountains before spilling onto the remote coast of Taylor Bay.

A dozen volunteers stood atop a retaining wall of unreasonably heavy and painstakingly-placed rocks that replaced a bit of trail which had previously been a shimmy on a 4-inch wide ledge. We snapped a photo, then hiked four miles back to the beach, rock bars and generator in tow. It was good we now knew how

to build a proper rock wall, and just as good that we hadn't known much of anything in 2016, when we set out to build the Tutka Backdoor Trail. If we had, we might never have started.

On a small point a mile from the tidal flats at the head of Tutka Bay, streamers of blue and orange flagging decorate a small forest opening. The trail begins there, following the deep rainforest valley eastward before popping out onto Lunch Mountain. It winds through deer cabbage meadows, past ponds and lakes, through a braided valley of willows, into a playground of tundra and peaks. That's eight miles that anyone can follow.

Beyond that, the trail crosses the river twice, be-

fore leaving hikers to make their own way through a 4-mile mountain pass, picking up the rest of the marked trail on the eastern side of the Kenai Peninsula. This half of the trail is more remote and rugged, climbing and descending constantly to avoid impassable cliffs, crossing the Taylor River and ending on the beach in Taylor Bay. Since the route was completed at the end of 2017, nearly all through-hikers have done the 20-mile route one way only, most beginning with a float-plane ride to Taylor Bay.



*The newly-constructed Tutka Backdoor Trail treks 20 miles between Tutka Bay and Taylor Bay on the southern tip of the Kenai Peninsula. The dotted line shows a portion of the trail that is not maintained (credit: Bretwood “Hig” Higman)*

In those three seasons, I have spent 80 days living along that 20-mile stretch, with a rotating cast of dozens of volunteers. Seventy individuals have joined us, from babies to grandmothers. They have endured days-long deluges, toiling for weeks on the promise of nothing more than free beef jerky and granola bars. The adults among them have put in 626 person-days of work, nearly all of it with hand tools and sweat.

Why?

As one of the trail’s three parents, my initial reasoning was mostly along the lines of “Hey, wouldn’t that be cool?” It was a route Hig (my spouse) and I had roughed out in our pre-kid high-speed bushwhacking days. Beautiful alpine valleys, endless stretches of tundra, and a route to the stunning and rarely-visited eastern side of the state park. So when the park was

mulling over drafts of its new management plan, we drew a few lines on the map. All we had to do was cut a few bushes, and we’d open up a path for all the adventurers who weren’t quite willing to brave the devil’s club to get there.

We did have to brave the devil’s club. I spent a whole day in 2017 with an intrepid volunteer, crawling through devil’s club and salmonberries on the side of a cliff above Taylor River, while a half dozen other people fanned out in equally improbable directions, all looking for a single possible route. We crawled through all the bad ways and all the good ways, multiple times, with flagging tape and inclinometers and pouring rain. We had to uproot devil’s club, hand saw miles of alder, hack tread into long steep traverses, haul rocks, and smash other rocks.

Along the way, each of those hard-won miles acquired its own stories. I remember the pond where I surprised a moose, the salmonberry thicket where I sawed through a can of pepper spray, and a debate over the first steep hill that nearly caused us scouts to mutiny. Volunteers leave new names where none were known before. Ugh Hill...Whiskey Knob...Heart Lake Pass.

I didn’t know how to build a trail when we started. We learned about grade, controlling drainage, trail psychology, and stone-setting from Eric Clarke, the park trail guru, from other experts, and from our own mistakes. Eventually we found ourselves repeating the very same advice we’d chafed at when we started. I was surprised by how much work building 16 miles of trail turns out to be. I was even more surprised by how many people were eager to do that work. Who would have thought we would collectively spend more than a year and a half volunteering labor?

The first time a stranger hiked up the half-built trail to encounter our work crew, I was thrilled. We’d built something others could follow. Something that existed without us. And as I’ve worked on the trail, I realize that we’ve built two things: A line on the ground, and the community that came together to make it.

*Erin Mckittrick is a writer, adventurer, and scientist, who lives in Seldovia with her husband and two kids. See [http://www.groundtruthtrekking.org/tutka\\_backdoor/](http://www.groundtruthtrekking.org/tutka_backdoor/) for more information including how to get trail maps. Find more Refuge Notebook articles (1999–present) at [https://www.fws.gov/Refuge/Kenai/community/Refuge\\_notebook.html](https://www.fws.gov/Refuge/Kenai/community/Refuge_notebook.html).*