

GRAND CANYON NEWS

Grand Canyon Hikers and Backpackers Association volunteer along the Canyon's corridor trails

Grand Canyon Hikers and Backpackers Association partners with Grand Canyon National Park for service projects.



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Reporter

GRAND CANYON, Ariz. - Rob Jones loves the Canyon and is passionate about volunteer work and the opportunities it provides.

He has made over 40 backpacking trips into the Canyon and takes regular day hikes with his wife throughout the year.

Jones learned about the Grand Canyon Hikers and Backpackers Association (GCHBA) after seeing a Yahoo group requesting volunteers for a project at Bright Angel Campground in the Grand Canyon. Jones joined the trip and was hooked. He was about to begin an eight-year tenure as a volunteer with Grand Canyon National Park and GCHBA.

GCHBA is a 501(c)(3) organization that formed in 2000 as a way for concerned citizens to band together to ensure timely access to hiking and backpacking in the Grand Canyon, according to the GCHBA's website. They also wanted to encourage communication with appropriate federal and Native American agencies, aid in the goals of safe and enjoyable wilderness backpacking trips while protecting wilderness resources and provide a forum for do-it-yourself hiking and backpacking.

Originally from Idaho and later Utah, Jones has called northern Arizona home for the last eight years. Volunteering has always been an important aspect of his life.



Rob Jones displays a repurposed wheelbarrow support during a volunteer project in the Grand Canyon. Photo/Kathy Hayes



Volunteers help with various maintenance projects at Bright Angel Campground and Indian Garden.



"Each of those places, I always did volunteer work," Jones said.

Even before moving to Arizona, Jones was a Grand Canyon hiker and enthusiast.

Once he made the move to Arizona and joined GCHBA, he began volunteering and spending more time in the Canyon.

After joining the initial GCHBA trip, Jones realized that by volunteering, he could combine his love for hiking and his love for the Canyon. He became increasingly involved, eventually becoming a coordinating for volunteer event. He has been leading trips ever since.

"We always end up finding lots of things to do," Jones said.

On volunteer trips, service projects vary, but include general maintenance and upkeep in key locations along the Canyon's corridor trails.

"The GCHBA has held three hikers and backpackers symposiums, conducted numerous service projects and works directly with personnel from Grand Canyon National Park," said Jones on the association's website. "We are actively engaged in numerous resource management issues of importance to do-it-yourself hikers and backpackers."

Every year GCHBA sponsors two, one week volunteer projects in the Canyon - one in March at Indian Garden and one in October at Bright Angel Campground.

As trip coordinator for GCHBA, Jones is responsible for obtaining permits and communicating directly with NPS to plan and organize materials and projects. He works closely with on location rangers to determine what projects will be completed. Coordinating a trip can take him up to four months to plan.

"It takes a while to weed through and make sure everything is on track," he said.

For projects at Indian Garden, Jones works with Interpretive Ranger Elyssa Shalla.

"She's a real firecracker," Jones said. "She has become interested in getting stuff done there. She thinks ahead and organizes all the materials and all the jobs."

At Bright Angel Campground, Jones works with rangers and long time NPS volunteer, Sjors Horstman.

"I call (Sjors) the permanent volunteer," Jones said. "He's been down there forever (27 years) and he'll organize work for us that will last a couple of days. They (NPS) give us a task and we usually get it done. A lot of our job, initially is to make sure the campground is ok - primarily the irrigation system, and we trim trees and plant trees and make sure the screening is in place...we also do very minor trail work."

Cleaning irrigation ditches and winterize the irrigation system at the Bright Angel Campground has become an annual project GCHBA helps Sjors complete.

On average up to 11 volunteers are allowed per trip. The park supports the association by helping reserve the large group campsite at the project areas and packs in a portion of snacks and food for the volunteers.

"The park supports us by packing in 25 pounds per volunteer for the week," Jones said. "One thing that is really neat about our association is that we pay volunteers to come - we give them a food stipend."

The park also helps with camping on the rim at Mather Campground before and after the trip and grants access to the park for free.

For Jones there are many positives of volunteering, including spending time in nature, seeing a project completed and giving back to NPS and other public lands.

"I like to be in the Canyon, that's the selfish thing," he said. "But it's important for everyone to help out and have stewardship of their public lands. They are our public lands and we need to help provide stewardship to them and make sure they don't degenerate. We feel it is so important to do service projects."

GCHBA is open to the public, with members from across the country and many locals. The group does require membership to participate on service trips.

The two levels of membership are the Corridor - a free membership that helps to spread the word about the association and its mission and the Backcountry membership which allows access to service trips and opportunities to serve on the association's board and other committees as well as merchandise discounts.

More information about GCHBA and its volunteer projects is available at www.gchba.org.



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