

**File Code:** 2350**Date:** February 3, 2023**Route To:****Subject:** 2022 Forest Service National Wilderness Awards Recipients**To:** Regional Foresters, Station Directors, IITF Director, Deputy Chiefs, and WO Staff Directors

I am pleased to announce the recipients of the 2022 Forest Service National Wilderness Awards. These awards honor individuals and groups for excellence in wilderness education, traditional skills leadership, decision-making, and overall wilderness stewardship in the year 2021. An awards ceremony co-hosted with the National Wilderness Stewardship Alliance occurred on December 15, 2022, to celebrate the individuals and projects described below ([view recording](#)). The physical awards will be mailed for presentation by local units.

Aldo Leopold Award for Overall Wilderness Stewardship

Lisa Ronald, Former Wildlands Communications Director, Wilderness Institute

For nearly 20 years, Lisa Ronald grew the [Wilderness Connect website](#), email newsletter, and social media channels as the Wildlands Communications Director for the Wilderness Institute. These great digital wilderness resources have supported Agency and partner education, communication, career development, and innovation around the world.

[Wilderness.net](#) was formed in 1996 through a collaborative partnership among the W.A. Franke College of Forestry and Conservation's [Wilderness Institute](#) at The University of Montana, the [Arthur Carhart National Wilderness Training Center](#), and the [Aldo Leopold Wilderness Research Institute](#). The latter two partners are the wilderness training and research arms of the Federal government, respectively. The daily activities of the program are overseen by a working group and steering committee, with additional oversight provided by the federal interagency National Wilderness Steering Committee and Wilderness Policy Council. In 2017, Wilderness.net became “Wilderness Connect” to bring the program's communications tools — website, community of practice, e-newsletter, social media channels — under a singular brand. Under Lisa’s leadership and skills, the website educates hundreds of thousands of visitors annually about the benefits of wilderness and stewardship of wilderness under the Wilderness Act.

Bob Marshall Award for Individual Champion of Wilderness Stewardship

Carol Hennessey, Recreation/Wilderness/Trails/River/Outfitters Program Manager, Nez Perce Clearwater National Forest

Carol Hennessey’s career managing wilderness spans over 30 years. In her current role as the Recreation/Wilderness/Trails/River/Outfitters Program Manager for the Nez Perce and Clearwater National Forests, Carol provides leadership in the stewardship of nearly 4 million acres of wilderness. Carol currently leads the coordination of the Selway Bitterroot Wilderness



Board of Directors as well as the Lead Working Group. This requires coordination across two States (Idaho and Montana), three National Forests, and five Districts. She also serves as a member of the Lead Working Group for the Frank Church-River of No Return Wilderness in addition to leading management of the Gospel Hump Wilderness. Carol artfully provides wilderness guidance to new line officers responsible for decisions in these areas, ensuring they get the proper training, helping draft “leader’s intent” letters, and providing staff input to decisions. She is passionate yet pragmatic in these efforts, and decision-makers include her in their thought processes because of her approach.

Recently, Carol has been the backbone of the Nez Perce Clearwater Forest’s Historic Travelways Project which maintains and interprets three important historic routes across the Forest. This project has involved many partners: the Nez Perce Tribe, Ni-Mi-Puu Trail managers, National Technology and Development Center, local universities, and more. In 2017, she began working with Regional Office staff to host the annual Northern Rockies Wilderness Skills Institute on Nez Perce Clearwater Forest and at the historic Powell Ranger Station. With this, she has taken on planning, hosting, and implementing various pieces of the training event.

Carol has passion for Wilderness, the people who use and enjoy it, and their surrounding communities.

Bob Marshall Award for Group Champion of Wilderness Stewardship

Bob Marshall Wilderness Foundation, Hungry Horse, Montana

In 1996, the [Bob Marshall Wilderness Foundation](#) (Foundation) was founded after a group of concerned citizens and Forest Service staff came together to address and assist with maintenance on trails in the Bob Marshall Wilderness Complex. Since then, the Foundation’s work has grown to span all aspects of wilderness stewardship, including public education, invasive species treatment, horse packing, and wilderness rangers, among other things.

The Foundation fosters “active wilderness stewardship” by offering a range of programs to engage a diverse group of volunteers, youth, and partners, helping them become competent backcountry users and develop a strong wilderness ethic. In 2021, the Foundation embarked on a new type of backcountry adventure: an introductory “Wilderness 101” trip for an affinity group, with the goal of improving access and building belonging in The Bob. Thanks to a partnership with Here Montana, the trip brought eight Black, Indigenous, and People of Color individuals into the Great Bear Wilderness where they learned the history of the area, practiced setting up a backcountry camp, and hiked to the Middle Fork of the Flathead River. Adding Affinity trips along with the other volunteer programming, like the girls-on-trail programs and packer apprentice program, helps to ensure access and supports communities whose members historically lack adequate access to outdoor education, recreation, or other stewardship opportunities. On this same front, the Foundation hosted one of the most popular sessions of the 2021 National Wilderness Skills Institute: [A New Way into the Wild – Inclusion as a Criteria for the Future of Conservation](#).

Excellence in Wilderness Research Application Award

“A history of wilderness fire management in the Northern Rockies”

Julia Berkey, Community preparedness and wildfire prevention program manager, Montana Department of Natural Resources & Conservation

Carol Miller, Research Ecologist (emeritus), Aldo Leopold Wilderness Research Institute, Rocky Mountain Research Station, USDA Forest Service

Andrew Larson, Professor, University of Montana

Julia Berkey, Carol Miller, and Andrew Larson recently published a General Technical Report (GTR) titled [“A history of wilderness fire management in the Northern Rockies”](#). The report recounts historically important fires in the Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness, the Bob Marshall Wilderness Complex, and the Frank Church – River of no Return Wilderness and analyzes the development of wilderness fire management in the 1970s and 1980s through the present. The GTR describes how fire management has evolved through time as more wilderness and fire managers began to recognize the ecological importance of fire to forests in the northern Rockies and elsewhere. Providing details of this evolution through photographs, maps, narratives, tables, and interviews, the GTR provides compelling documentation as to how variation in fire management strategies has led to variability in fire activity in each wilderness over the time periods analyzed. The authors also provide narratives and photographs of the current vegetation mosaics resulting from cumulative fire management strategies.

As land management agencies such as the Forest Service grapple with strategies to allow fire to play a more natural role, lessons learned from the wilderness fire programs can help inform policy and aid in communicating fire management to partners. In one of the GTR’s concluding statements, the authors stress that lessons from wilderness set the stage for a cultural shift in how the nation regards fire management for resource benefit, and that the northern Rockies will continue to play a pivotal role in shaping national fire policy and management.

Wilderness Partnership Champion Award

JMT Wilderness Conservancy, Menlo Park, California

The [JMT Wilderness Conservancy](#) (Conservancy) is a non-profit organization with a mission of “caring for the wilderness, wildlife and waters along the John Muir Trail in the high Sierra Nevada of California for people to enjoy in the centuries to come.” In 2019, the Conservancy began working with the Inyo National Forest to help fund summer wilderness rangers and fill severe gaps in staffing needed to properly steward the John Muir and Ansel Adams Wilderness Areas. The Conservancy and the Inyo National Forest developed a four-year wilderness restoration proposal that was subsequently funded by the State of California Wildlife Conservation Board.

The Conservancy was successful in securing \$23 million in State funding for wilderness projects on the Inyo National Forest, Sierra National Forest, Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Park, and Yosemite National Park. This additional funding will allow for substantial improvements to the visitor experience, including better trail connectivity between campgrounds and wilderness trailheads. Overall, the Conservancy will be able to contribute about \$12 million to Inyo

National Forest's wilderness and trails management over the next decade and will have a similar impact on the Sierra National Forest. In addition to restoring campsites, protecting water quality, preserving meadow habitat, and maintaining trails, this funding will also ensure the northern half of the Inyo National Forest continues to have a full complement of wilderness rangers to provide public education in the field and protect completed restoration work. The Conservancy will also be able to support annual field crews from the Eastern Sierra Conservation Corps, a local youth crew provider with a mission to train skilled field leaders from underrepresented communities.

Traditional Skills and Minimum Tool Leadership Award

Bald River Trail Project, Tellico Ranger District, Cherokee National Forest

Tellico Ranger District Recreation/Trails/Wilderness Staff, Cherokee National Forest

Brandon Burke, Jesse English, Gray Buckles, Mason Boring

Southern Appalachian Wilderness Stewards

Eric Giebelstein, Rebekah Morrisson, Barak Brashear, Christopher Brooks, Sarah Hersee, James Lyles, Drew Mayberry, Luzy Plankenhorn, Travis Stanley, Bridget Stuart, Nicholas Sparling, Matthew McWilliams, Benton Wright

Jolly Rovers Trail Crew

Artie Hidalgo

Rigging Instructors

Robert Fina, Martha Becton

The Bald River Gorge Wilderness is in eastern Tennessee, within the Cherokee National Forest's Tellico Ranger District. The primary trailhead to the Wilderness is adjacent to the Tellico River Road, near the base of Bald River Falls. One of the most popular and heavily used trails on the District, the Bald River Trail climbs steeply from the parking lot, taking visitors to the top of Bald River Falls and providing access to the northern boundary of the Wilderness. Heavy trail use and the existing trail layout had contributed to significant soil and vegetation impacts in the vicinity of the trail and to soil sedimentation into the Tellico River. Examples include the formation of gullies, loss of vegetation cover, and exposure of tree roots.

The Cherokee National Forest coordinated and worked with the Southern Regional Office to secure funding from the Great American Outdoors Act and established a project agreement with the Southern Appalachian Wilderness Stewards to provide the capacity needed to complete a trail restoration project.

Over a 2-week period, Southern Appalachian Wilderness Stewards crew members and Forest Service staff received training at the project site covering such topics as worksite safety, grip hoist winch operation, load balance, load slings, snatch block attachment, belaying, knots, stone busters, rock drilling, stone feathers, and using wedges to split large stones, among others. The crew then split, shaped, and honed the stones further with hammer and chisel until they fit into the trail and surrounding landscape. The crew then placed the steps on the steep trail grade,

delicately ensuring that each stone properly interlocked with each other. This was critical to prevent the trail from erosion.

Throughout the project, the public observed the crew using traditional tools and skills. District staff interacted extensively with the public, answering questions about the project, wilderness management, use of traditional tools and skills, and preventing visitors from circumventing trail-closure barriers. The District received glowing comments about the quality, skill, and care taken while addressing the resource impacts and marveled at the crew's use of traditional tools, skill, and dedication.

Connie G. Myers Award for Leadership in Wilderness Education

Urban Connections Wilderness Youth Engagement, USDA Forest Service Eastern Region

Leah Anderson, Susan Cox, Teri Heyer, Barbara McGuinness, Lisa Perez, Jessie Scott, Jon Thompson

In 2021, Congressionally directed language encouraged the Forest Service to make additional investments in the Urban Connections Program, with the specific goal of conducting regionwide youth engagement and activities focused on outdoor recreation and learning in Forest Service-managed wilderness areas. The Eastern Region's Urban Connections Wilderness Youth Engagement team did an outstanding job deepening and expanding partnerships to allocate \$1.8 million to support 28 projects across the Eastern Region, with a partner match of about \$1.6 million. This is about nine times the amount this program typically spends in a year!

Through close collaboration with several partners and national forests in the Eastern Region, this group was able to expand Urban Connections programming to connect youth from diverse and underserved communities, including youth with disabilities, to a continuum of experiences in nature, including visits to national forest wilderness areas. While most of the projects are multi-year projects, and partner work was constrained due to COVID-19 restrictions, this work reached nearly 12,000 participants and more than a quarter of a million social media contacts in fiscal year 2021. This work will continue for several years.

Line Officer Wilderness Leadership Award

Connie Cummins, Forest Supervisor, Superior National Forest

Over the past several decades, the popularity of the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness (BWCAW) in Minnesota has grown, attracting both new and returning visitors. While increased visitation allows more people to experience and appreciate designated wilderness and a legislated opportunity for a primitive recreational experience on our public lands, it also brings additional management challenges. The Superior National Forest has fielded concerns from many wilderness users and stakeholders about the degradation of the BWCAW; over the past 10 years, the public has submitted nearly 3,000 comments about the natural resource degradation and social impacts of overcrowding, littering, cutting live trees and causing erosion at campsites and portages, and illegal camping, among other challenges. Many partners, including cooperators and outfitters, have voiced similar concerns and shared that clients are not returning due to the declining state of the wilderness and visitor experiences.

Forest Supervisor Cummins determined that action was necessary in the wilderness to address physical and social resource damage and selected the minimum method or tool used within the constraints of law and Agency policy. In 2019, the Superior National Forest added more wilderness rangers and volunteers, created a new education video series, updated its website and trip planning guide, encouraged the use of recreational areas on the rest of the Forest, and made changes to the wilderness permit quota. After the pandemic-related surge in visitation in 2020 compounded existing negative impacts to the Wilderness, the Superior National Forest started conversations about these issues and changes with cooperating businesses, partners, and other stakeholders. In addition, local media covered the story, and the reaction of the public to the news about quota reduction has been overwhelmingly positive and supportive. This award recognizes Connie Cummins for her outstanding contribution to wilderness stewardship and her commitment to meeting Wilderness Stewardship Performance goals.

Please join me in congratulating this year's Wilderness Awards recipients!



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Signed by: TROY HEITHECKER

CHRISTOPHER B. FRENCH
Deputy Chief, National Forest System