A Mountains-To-Sea Trail Section Maintainer's Worst Nightmare

Glen Hess



In Western North Carolina (WNC) the Mountains to Sea Trail (MST) is an exceptionally popular hiking trail for locals as well as tourists. In the Asheville area the MST follows the Blue Ridge Parkway, allowing for spectacular views along with easy access.

To keep the (MST) safe and accessible to hikers, the Carolina Mountain Club (CMC) uses volunteers to keep the trail clear. The role of the Section Maintainer (SM) is a significant part of this effort because they are the "eyes and ears" of the club for finding and reporting the need for heavy maintenance and for taking care of light maintenance. The SM are not alone as the CMC trail crews support them.

Carolina Mountain Club Section maintainers are expected to do a walk-through on their section at least four times per year. For example, March/April Spring walk-through to look for trees and limbs across the trail, which means lopping or hand-sawing smaller trees. Water bars and swales are also cleared. For larger trees and larger clearing, a local CMC trail maintenance crew will chainsaw those trees off the trail. For Mid-May to

end of June string trimming is needed, and August/September is another walk-through for new debris falls or additional weed growth.



In late September 2024, with a preceding wet period, Hurricane Helene hit western North Carolina with unspeakable force. One of the epicenters of the effects of the hurricane was just north of Asheville along the spine of the Blue Ridge Parkway near Craven Gap. For several months in the spring of 2025, the BRP was closed while the National Park Service sawyers from across the USA cleared the Blue Ridge Parkway. In



the summer of 2025, CMC trail maintenance crews scouted the effort needed to open the connecting MST. The scouts saw almost total tree destruction along the trail. With very heavy trees in some areas, the tread was lost, and scouts had to rely on GPS to find the historic trail tread. Large rootballs from overturned trees consumed large sections of trail tread. One footbridge was crushed. In one section stone steps were washed away by Helene's floods.

It was a section maintainer's worst nightmare.



However, the CMC responded by sending several volunteer crews including the Section Rovers from Tuesday, the Thursday Asheville crew and the Friday Asheville crew. Many more CMC volunteers showed up for this herculean effort. What evolved was a safe method of getting a very rough path for only experienced hikers through the trees, then trimming back those logs and branches to where most hikers could pass. At times, the sawyer work was quite challenging and dangerous. The next step was to return the tread to its original condition by filling in rootball holes. And sawing the branches and logs back to trail-width size which is about forty inches. And fixing the crushed trail tread. All along the way, swampers, assisting the sawyers, were preparing the logs for cutting, removing hazards, and removing the newly cut wood for the work area.

With a phalanx of trees in many areas, the safety aspects of sawyering were the major focus of these crews. Part of CMC sawyers' safety training is the acronym OHLEC- O-Objective, H–Hazards, L–leans and binds, E-escape plan, and C-cut plan. When the trees are twisted and piled atop each other, several sawyers communicate a safe cut plan.

In March 2026, a CMC group removed rotten wood steps and replaced them with a new seven-foot-plus "ladder" with five steps. The prepared cut and debarked logs were carried in and then assembled onsite. The area surrounding the new steps was reinforced with log cribbing fill and large rocks.

CMC volunteers have spent considerable time to restore/repair Craven Gap after Helene, close to 1900 hours just the past 12 months. Today the MST near Craven Gap



is almost back to its former conditions. A dream come true for these section maintainers! And there were no CMC injuries over these 1900 hours.

CMC is 100% volunteers. After the horrific devastation caused by Helene, it is reassuring to see volunteers spend their time restoring and repairing a very popular MST trail along the Blue Ridge Parkway.



