

THIS MONTH



Trail Troopers

CITIZEN HIKER

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"TODAY, we're fixing a rut in some 'liquid earth' on the Tom's Thumb trail," says Leona Weinstein, master steward for the McDowell Sonoran Conservancy, on a crisp February morning. "The high-maintenance, decomposed granite substrate found in Scottsdale's McDowell Sonoran Preserve is very vulnerable to erosion, especially after winter storms and monsoon rains."

As one of the leading volunteer organizations in the nation, the conservancy seeks to preserve and advance natural open space through science, education and stewardship. The nonprofit was formed in 1991 to care for the 30,000-plus acres of Sonoran Desert habitat in the north Scottsdale preserve.

Its highly trained stewards serve in many capacities including trail work, guiding hikes, patrolling and conducting educational events. Among the more than 650 volunteers, roughly 100 focus on monitoring conditions, and fixing and building trails. But it's not just rain and natural erosion that put dangerous dings in the preserve's liquid earth.

"People don't realize how much their behavior impacts trails," says John Loleit, natural resources coordinator for the city of Scottsdale. "Going off trail... disrupts soil crusts, plants, animal habitats and drainage systems. When patrol stewards see visitors engaging in damaging behaviors, they speak to them like they would want to be spoken to."

Steward Marge Heine concurs that a friendly approach works best: "We don't yell. We educate. Sometimes it's like mild verbal judo, but we get better results that way."

Decked out in bright blue shirts or vests, the stewards are a diligent and familiar presence in the preserve. "For me, the reward is being able to give back with like-minded outdoor enthusiasts," says Weinstein, an 11-year veteran of the program who also serves as its assistant chair of construction and maintenance. "We work hard, and we have fun, too."

— *Mare Czinar*

McDowell Sonoran Conservancy stewards discuss plans to repair a crack in Tom's Thumb Trail, above; master steward Leona Weinstein (with bucket) oversees a trail maintenance project, inset



IF YOU GO

MCDOWELL SONORAN CONSERVANCY
mcdowellsonoran.org

SCOTTSDALE MCDOWELL SONORAN PRESERVE
scottsdaleaz.gov/preserve

NEXT MONTH:
 High Desert Hiking Clubs

WANT TO SEE YOUR PHOTO HERE?

UPLOAD your photos to phoenix-mag.com/citizen-hiker

PHOTOS that best depict trail character and experience will be added to our website slideshow.

EACH MONTH up to three photos will be selected to illustrate the Citizen Hiker article in our print edition and online.

PHOTOS BY MARE CZINAR