



Rocky
Mountain
Conservancy

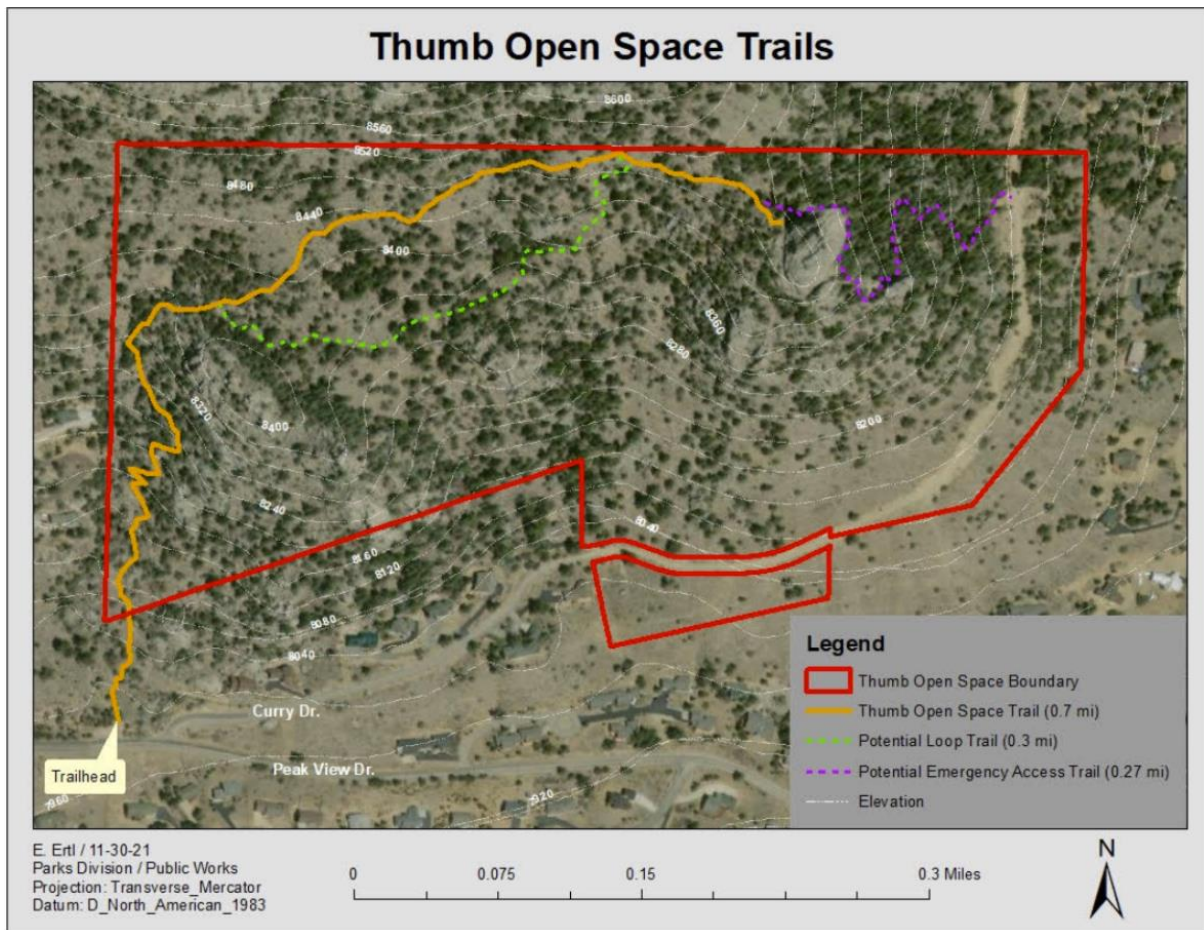
2022 Thumb Open Space Trail Report



Rocky Mountain Conservancy staff complete trail maintenance as the Thumb towers in the background.

Contents

| | |
|---|----|
| History and Overview..... | 3 |
| Rocky Mountain Conservancy Trail Crew: September-October | 4 |
| Rocky Mountain Facelift 2022 | 5 |
| Rocky Mountain Conservancy and Estes Valley Land Trust Volunteer Day..... | 8 |
| Recommendations for Future Projects..... | 10 |
| Appendix: Final 2022 Trail Maintenance Statistics | 11 |



The Yellow trail on the left is the publicly accessible Thumb Access Trail. The dotted purple trail on the right is the emergency access Search-and-Rescue trail, established in 2022. Map originally published in the 2022 [Thumb Management Plan](#), written by Brian Berg and Town of Estes Park.

History and Overview

The Thumb Open Space was officially purchased by the Town of Estes Park in May 2021 after years of meetings, discussions, and collaborations between local governments, private landowners, and nonprofit organizations. First climbed in the 1940s by Estes Park legend Tom Hornbein, the namesake “Thumb” is a large free-standing spire of rock on the southwest side of Prospect Mountain in the heart of the Estes Valley. Until the Town’s recent purchase of the land, many climbers, hikers, and recreationalists were trespassing on privately owned property to access the Thumb. However, now that the Thumb Open Space is a publicly managed landscape, people of all ages and abilities are invited to responsibly enjoy and connect with the natural sights and sounds of the land.

The work done on the Thumb trail in 2022 was primarily focused on clearing and widening the trail corridor to allow for easier access for hikers and climber. A particular emphasis was extended towards [electric-assist hand cycle](#) users, for whom a wider trail and less debris would make accessing the Thumb possible. Trail requirements for hand cycles include a 36-inch-wide trail surface, flat paver-like stones placed throughout the trail for increased tire traction, and a mellow grade to ease navigability.

In 2022, a variety of organizations including the Town of Estes Park, Rocky Mountain Conservancy, Access Fund, National Park Service, Estes Valley Land Trust, Boulder Climbing Community, and dozens of volunteers from across Colorado were able to collectively **clear 3,696 feet of corridor, widen 1,057 feet of tread, build 55 feet of rock wall, and install 40 feet of stone pavers and armoring** (see Appendix).

As the world of outdoor recreation evolves and grows and includes users of more diverse abilities and interests, the physical infrastructure that supports these activities must evolve as well. One of the goals for the Thumb Open Space Trail is to adapt the trail usage to make it adaptable for intermediate/challenging hand cycle users. Getting the trail to meet this criteria will take time, but through hard work and collaboration we hope to evolve a trail system that will increase recreational opportunities for Estes Valley residents and visitors alike to explore a historical recreation area, experience gorgeous vistas, and create memories and connections to the natural world.



*June 30th 2022: Estes Park Mayor Wendy Koenig cuts the ribbon to mark the grand opening of the Thumb Open Space.
Photo by Nathan Welton.*

Rocky Mountain Conservancy Trail Crew: September-October

The Rocky Mountain Conservancy, in association with Parks Supervisor Brian Berg and the Town of Estes Park, sponsored a trail crew for four weeks out on the Thumb Open Space public access trail. Rocky Mountain Conservancy staff members Charlotte Graeve, Grace McMahon, and Nathan Morrow formed the RMC Field Team, and made large improvements on the trail.

The main goals of this crew were to: widen the trail's tread to better accommodate handcycles used by athletes with disabilities; widen trail corridor by lopping and sawing vegetation; control erosion through rock wall construction; and collect construction materials (rocks, boulders) for use by future trail crews.



Nathan uses a rock bar to maneuver a boulder.

In total, the crew made significant progress on the condition of the trail. The three-person RMC trail crew **brushed and cleared 3696 feet of trail corridor, widened 676 feet of tread, constructed 55 feet of rock wall,** and prepared dozens of small boulders and rocks to be used in future construction projects.

No trail is ever “done” or “perfect”, but the regularly revised three-year plan, in collaboration with other local land conservation agencies, is invaluable for the maintenance and progression of the trails within the Thumb Open Space.



Charlotte and Grace pose after building a 15-foot section of rock wall.

Rocky Mountain Facelift 2022

On September 17, 2022, the largest single-day volunteer event in the history of Estes Valley public lands conservation occurred at a variety of locations across Estes Park, including the Thumb Open Space.

Numerous partners collaborated to produce and direct this massive event. RMC, Rocky Mountain National Park, Boulder Climbing Community, and the Town of Estes Park all played major roles in transforming the access trails within Thumb Open Space.

Boulder Climbing Community's Front Range Climbing Stewards trail crew (led by Ryan Kuehn and Kiana Smith) guided a team of 9 volunteers to create nearly **40 feet of "armored" trail**, where large, flat-topped boulders are placed in the trail to create a durable and level walkway. This team focused primarily on the switchbacks near the start of the trail.

Rocky Mountain National Park's Trails department (led by Jesse Miller and other Park staff) guided

their team of volunteers to **widen 381 feet of tread** on the upper sections of trail towards the Thumb. Using Mcleods, pick mattocks, and shovels, this team was able to noticeably transform a massive section of trail to make it more accessible and accommodating to people of a variety of abilities.

Rocky Mountain Conservancy's Field Team utilized the help of volunteers to build the emergency access Search and Rescue (SAR) trail off Curry Drive. The most direct route to the Thumb and Needle formations, this route was historically used before the Thumb Open Space (and its new trail) was established. However, in the event of an emergency when rescue crews need to get to a patient as soon as possible, this SAR trail provides the quickest route.



Over 30 volunteers await instruction at the Thumb Trailhead on the morning of the Facelift.



“Armoring” on switchbacks completed by Boulder Climbing Community’s Front Range Climbing Stewards.



Many hands make for light work.

Thanks to the team of dedicated volunteers, **the emergency access SAR trail was established in just one day of work.** This is a huge step towards safer outdoor recreation at Thumb Open Space.

Overall, the 2022 Rocky Mountain Facelift projects at Thumb Open Space were a massive success. Thanks to a variety of inter-agency collaborations, access by trail to the Thumb was overhauled for the benefit of hikers, climbers, dog-walkers, and all who choose to recreate at this historic location.



National Park Service staff and volunteers discussing logistics.



Freshly smoothed and widened trail corridor.



The Thumb from the start of the emergency access trail.



This emergency access trail is closed to the public. In an emergency, first responders or Search-and-Rescuers will be able to utilize this newly cleared, direct route to the base of the Thumb.

Rocky Mountain Conservancy and Estes Valley Land Trust Volunteer Day

On Wednesday, September 28, the RMC held an open volunteer event (rescheduled from Sept 21) at the Thumb Open Space. The event was planned and coordinated by RMC with Madeline Green from the Estes Valley Land Trust.

Dalia, an Estes Park local for 17 years, volunteered her time and effort to help the team out as well.

With the mighty power of the five-person squad, **over 120 feet of trail were cleared, maintained, and widened** to better accommodate recreational traffic of all types, including handcycles, rock climbers, dog walkers, and families.

In the future, the section of trail widened by this volunteer day will be under construction once again with the installation of several “check steps” to act as both erosion barriers and stair steps.



Dalia, Maddie, Grace, and Charlotte giving a thumbs up!



The crew hard at work widening a section of trail. The large boulder in the background is called the “Equalizer” boulder and is another climbing destination in the Thumb Open Space.



Maddie and Dalila use pick mattocks to remove rocks, shrubs, and widen the trail corridor.

In total, the RMC and EVLT
Volunteer Day widened over
120 feet of trail corridor at
Thumb Open Space.

Thank you to our volunteers!



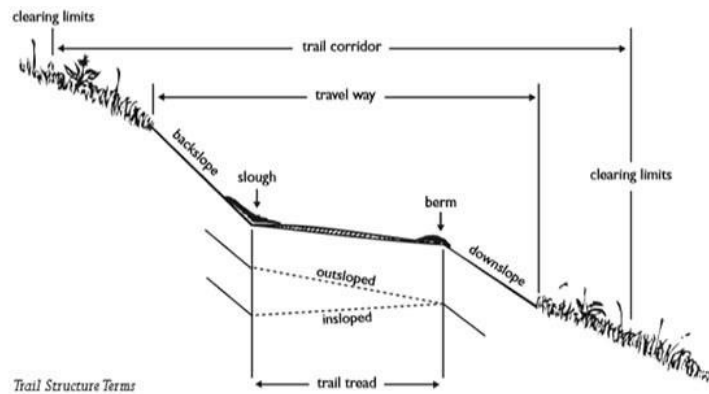
The finished product after a hard day's work.

Recommendations for Future Projects

Trails require regular maintenance for a variety of issues, and the Thumb Open Space trail system is no different. Below are various suggestions for improvements and projects.

Yearly maintenance such as limb-logging and brush removal must be done on both the public Thumb Access Trail as well as the Emergency Access Trail. Aside from the 36-inch-wide tread, the trail corridor must be lopped and brushed several feet further on either side of the trail. This prevents sticks and other vegetative material from getting stuck in the wheels of handcycles, prevents tripping hazards, and mitigates future erosion through social trails.

Armoring is necessary on several stretches of the public Thumb access trail. The technicality of this type of rockwork requires trained, experienced crew leaders and specialized tools just as grip hoists, feathers and wedges, rock bars, and more. Access Fund and Boulder Climbing Community trail crews should be involved in these projects.



A trail is more than just tread. (from "Lightly on the Land" by Birkby and SCA)

Rock wall construction is required in many instances as well.

This sort of construction is less technical, though it still requires experienced supervision. Some sections of trail require substantial rock walls to maximize user safety while minimizing erosion, puddling, and trail destruction.

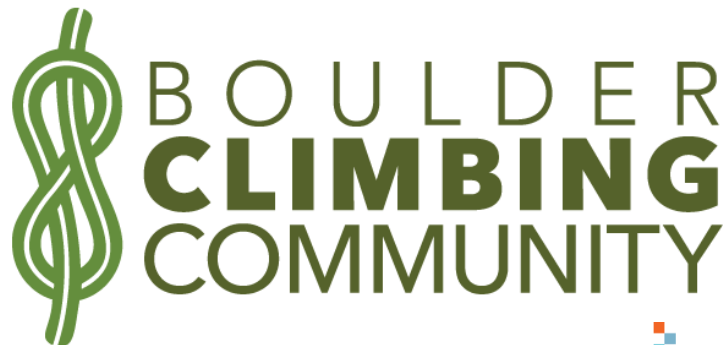
Check step installation is also necessary on various sections of the trail's route. Most importantly, the section near the Equalizer boulder and the trail camera follows the main "fall line" of water erosion. To protect and preserve the trail, steps are necessary to slow the flow of water while facilitating trail travel.

The junction of the Thumb access trail and the trail to the summit of Prospect Mountain is intriguing and will likely require construction. There is a massive boulder on the downhill side of the junction that may be maneuvered further downhill into a platform. As it is now, the trail makes an unnecessary and jarring increase (and sudden decrease) in grade and elevation for no obvious reason. Similarly, the trail to the summit of Prospect Mountain requires significant repair in brushing, clearing, widening, rock wall construction, and more. It is unclear the future of this offshoot of the Thumb access trail. The three-year maintenance and construction plan will soon be approved and published and will guide volunteer efforts at Thumb Open Space from then on.

Appendix: Final 2022 Trail Maintenance Statistics

| | Total | RMC/EVLT Crews | Facelift Volunteers |
|--------------------------|-------|----------------|---------------------|
| Trail Widened (ft) | 1057 | 676 | 381 |
| Corridor Cleared (ft) | 3696 | 3696 | 0 |
| Rock Wall Installed (ft) | 55 | 55 | 0 |
| Rock Armoring (ft) | 40 | 0 | 40 |
| Rock Steps Installed | 1 | 0 | 1 |

Thank you to everyone involved in the 2022 trail maintenance at Thumb Open Space!



Protect America's Climbing

