

OUTDOORS

How to pitch in while enjoying the fresh air



**GERALD
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Many people love the idea of volunteering, but don't want to be stuck in an office licking envelopes or working at a casino.

Luckily there are many volunteer positions in Calgary and the surrounding area where people can pitch in while outside, enjoying some fresh air.

The possibilities include volunteering to help teach soccer or softball skills to children with Special Olympics Calgary, assisting Alberta Golf in rating local courses or tending a community garden with Parks Foundation Calgary.

Other opportunities include volunteering at a city park, helping a local community association run events such as winter tobogganing parties, becoming an area steward and hiking the trails in the Cross Conservation area, or being at the finish line of the Calgary Marathon to congratulate and assist runners.

April 6 to 12 is National Volunteer Week in Canada, and Calgary is tops when it comes to volunteerism in the country, says Jamie Niessen, president and CEO of Propellus, formerly known as Volunteer Calgary.

"We're the volunteer capital of Canada," says Niessen. "Fifty-five per cent of Calgarians have volunteered in the past year and that's above the national average of 47 per cent. It's a critical part of our community."

Volunteers are crucial to many local non-profit organizations in doing their work, but it goes above and beyond that.

"The benefit of volunteer service is really to community. When you are giving of yourself to an organization, by helping that organization, you're actually helping community," Niessen says.

There are almost as many choices of volunteer positions as there are volunteers, he says.

Propellus maintains an online database at propellus.org (follow the link to volunteering) and usually has about 800 to 1,000 volunteer postings from its member organizations.

That number can climb even higher during summer, which is peak season for festivals in Calgary.

People can search the database by volunteer category, type of position, age suitability or keywords.

Aspiring volunteers can even create profiles similar to those used by online dating websites. They would receive alerts when a volunteer position is posted that matches their profile.

Other resources, such as yycHelps.ca, which was started after last year's flood, or a volunteer component on websites such as LinkedIn, are also available.

People can also go to an organization they believe in, outline their skills and availability, and see if a volunteer position can be created for them, Niessen says.

Bruce Hleucka, construction manager with the Greater Bragg Creek Trails Association, says volunteers were vital for the improvements made to the hiking, biking and cross-country ski trail system near Calgary that was enjoyed by almost 90,000 people last year.

"Volunteers have led the efforts to breathe life into this forgotten area of Kananaskis Country," says Hleucka.

"Volunteers maintain the trail system, with repairs in the summer and trail grooming in the winter. To date, volunteers have contributed 7,000 hours."

Trail association work parties have included everyone from active seniors in their 70s to children as young as eight years old, he says, and trail days have a social aspect to them.

"It can be a fun family outing for those willing to get their hands dirty, so to speak."

To find out more about volunteering, check out the association's website at braggcreektrails.org.



Greater Bragg Creek Trails Association
Volunteers help out the Greater Bragg Creek Trails Association. April 6 to 12 is National Volunteer Week.

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