

Trail users hope for new era of co-operation

Kraal Case: sleuths share story of how they caught a trail vandal on camera

Jane Seyd / North Shore News

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Avid mountain bikers Shaun Rivers and Gordon Berg set up infrared cameras similar to ones they hid in trees on Mount Fromme in December 2014 that helped lead to the capture and conviction of a trail vandal. photo Mike Wakefield, North Shore News

The unusual case of a North Vancouver trail saboteur would never have come to light without the equally unorthodox investigation conducted by two citizen sleuths.

Shaun Rivers and Gordon Berg have both spent many years mountain biking the trails on the slopes of Mount Fromme. Like other mountain bikers, they'd noticed an unusual and reoccurring pattern of forest debris appearing on the mountain biking trails.

"You could see that it was physically placed," said Rivers. "It wasn't windfall from the trees."

"Every time I rode down I would clear the trail," he said. But each time he went out, the debris was back again.

Mountain bikers – concerned the forest objects placed across the trail could end up hurting someone as they hurtled downhill – had begun to openly discuss the problem.

"A lot of people were saying something about it but no one was really doing anything," said Rivers. "I got fed up. I decided I needed to do my part to help the community."

Mutual friends put Rivers and Berg in contact. Then the two hatched a plan worthy of Columbo.

To catch the trail vandal, they bought several infrared motion-triggered battery-operated cameras, which they hid near trails where the debris was showing up. The cameras weren't cheap, said Rivers – they ranged from \$150 to \$300 each. Each one also took six to 10 batteries – which had to be changed every night.

At first they captured little on their video surveillance – except lots of images of people's dogs out for a walk. The debris

turned up again – on other nearby trails.

The pair bought more cameras and widened their net. They hid cameras up trees, behind ferns and in rotten tree stumps at the side of trails.

For over a month, the two men visited the mountain twice a day with a laptop, pulling out the digital card and downloading images from each camera. About a week into the project – an unusual image showed up – a person in the dark clearly moving objects about on the trails. The time was even more strange – between 4:30 a.m. and 5 a.m.

The pattern repeated itself on many mornings after that. Rivers and Berg were sure they'd captured an image of the trail vandal, but it still wasn't clear enough to see who it was – or even if the person was a man or a woman. "I could have been standing next to them at Safeway and not known," said Rivers.

The thought of waiting in the bushes to catch the vandal themselves never occurred to them. "We weren't looking to be vigilantes," said Rivers. Instead, they went to the RCMP with their evidence, then later led officers up the mountain to point out the area where the vandal had been walking out of the trail.

Police were waiting when Kraal exited the trailhead at 5 a.m. on Jan. 4 last year. When he found out who had been arrested, Rivers admits he was surprised.

Despite talk of the "war in the woods" between mountain bikes and hikers, Rivers said he doesn't see things that way. The vast majority of trail users get along, he said.

Since Kraal's arrest, there has been no more debris mysteriously placed on the trails. Rivers said he hopes the fact that she was caught will act as a deterrent. "We're proud of what we accomplished," he said. "We're glad we did it in the right way."

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