Great Old Broads for Wilderness
engages and ignites the activism of elders
to protect wilderness and wild lands.

Three organizational perspectives:

1) We are women-centered and grassroots.

2) We demonstrate humor and hope.

3) We build community and offer a new vision of aging.

GREAT OLD BROADS FOR WILDERNESS

Broadbands

Local chapters advocate to:

- Protect public wild lands from damaging activities
- Achieve wilderness designation
- Engage in public lands planning, management, and restoration
- Have fun in the process!

Broadbands Across the Country
Map
Satellite
Canada
AB
MB
SK
NL
ON
QC
ND
MN
SD
ID
NV
CA
NE
IA
IL
IN
OH
PA
NY
VT
ME
NB
PE
NS
NH
MA
CT
RI
NJ
DE
MD
VA
WV
KY
KS
MO
OK
AR
TN
NC
MS
AL
LA
TX
NM
FL
Gulf of California
Gulf of Mexico
Mexico
Cuba
Puerto

Local on-the-ground activism is needed for policy and cultural change.

Advocating for Mexican gray wolf protection in Arizona

Speaking for education and public land in Utah

Monitoring off-road vehicle damage in Colorado

Wetland protection in Oregon

Our demographic and personality makes us a "media magnet"

Broadband leaders display their "Broad" faces. From left: Sherry Schenk, Amy Carpenter, Pat Welch, Nancy Ostlie, Chris Shaver, Elaine Simmons. STEPHANIE PAIGE OGBURN

Sisterhood of the public lands

Great Old Broads for Wilderness laugh and learn

It's a brilliant Sunday morning in southeast Utah, and a hag mask hangs on the fence before me. Gray hair askew, she gapes at red cliffs through dripping fake blood. The vandal who mounted the mask has also locked the gate to our campsite. No one can get in or out — a dangerous prospect, since most of the 50 or so folks here are senior citizens.

I'm about to photograph the scene, documenting what to me seems a gruesome tableau, when a voice pipes up: "She's kind of pretty, actually."

"Yeah, she looks wise," adds another.

"Like us!"

"Will you take my picture with her?"

Rose Chilcoat, the rosy-cheeked, energetic 54-year-old associate director of the Great Old Broads for Wilderness, mugs next to the mask as I snap away.

I'm startled by the Broads' calm response to this outrageous threat. The mask comes with an ominous note: "Get out of San Juan County. This is your last warning." But Chilcoat, whose group educates elders about public-lands issues in hopes of making them active stewards, seems unfazed.

Later on, in a more serious moment, she muses: "I never thought little old ladies in tennis shoes would be seen as such a threat." But such extreme reactions to their activism have only encouraged Chilcoat and the Broads to hold fast to what might be called an essential tenet of "Broad-ness": Humor is more powerful than fear.

IN A ROUNDABOUT WAY, Sen. Orrin Hatch, R-Utah, inspired the creation of the Broads in 1989. New Mexican Susan Tixier and some of her backpacking buddies in their 50s heard how Hatch had argued against wilderness designation, saying that prohibiting motorized access excludes the elderly from the backcountry. "We thought, 'Jeez, we are all old and we still hike!' " recalls Tixier. "So, what better than to have old people, particularly old women, stand up for wilderness?"

"We didn't really want to be 'ladies,' and 'women' seemed like kind of a weak noun," she adds, so Great Old Broads it became. The brash name is a selling point to women of a particular type, notes Chilcoat. Broads enjoy joking as they protest; when they picketed against snowmobiles in Yellowstone, one wore a Winnie the Pooh costume with a sign reading, "I can't 'bear' the noise and pollution." "When you get to a certain age, who cares?" she says.

By 2030, there will be about 30 million more senior citizens in the U.S. than there are now. But their growing numbers aren't the only reason to get them interested in public lands, says Chilcoat. Many are retired and have the time to get involved. And, "There's a certain credibility when elders speak, even in this day and age."

The fast-growing advocacy group has about 4,000 members and has opened 22 chapters, known as Broadbands, across the West and in places as far away as Florida. And while the group is unabashedly pro-wilderness, each Broadband has considerable latitude to choose what it works on. As former executive director Veronica Egan puts it: The Broads are "not anti-anything except poor land management."

Spending time with the group in Colorado and Utah, I met grandmothers who could hold forth in intimate detail on grazing policy and octogenarians who volunteer for the Bureau of Land Management, providing informed critiques of federal land-use plans and studies. How, I wondered, do the Broads transform their members from graying retirees into GPS-wielding, public-comment-making dynamos?

"WE'RE ALMOST THERE," shouts Liz Thomas. An attorney for the nonprofit Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance, Thomas leads a group of Broads — several women and a few men — over a small rise outside Canyonlands National Park, not far from where the Broads are camped. We're looking for an ATV right of way proposed by San Juan County. "It's not an open trail now," Thomas says. But we find faint treads where an ATV has tracked the route, and begin to follow them.

Along the way, group members kneel to examine native grasses and are surprised to find blooming native flowers in late September. Russian thistle and other invasives, which Thomas showed us earlier at a heavily used off-road area, could swiftly take over if ATV traffic ramps up, Thomas explains. After learning that the BLM is still taking comments, a number of Broads vow to write in.

Later, we come across a trail sign defaced with a sticker reading: "Our land my ass." The Broads gather around, open-mouthed. Then, Broadness takes over and one of the hikers pulls down his pants and moons for a photo, positioning his derriere next to the sticker.

Educational hikes like this one are regular fixtures of the four-day outings known as Broadwalks, held several times a year around the country. At Broadwalks, attendees also help with service projects, including trail construction and fence building, and spend nights around the campfire, listening to speakers and catching up with each other. They leave well-versed in federal land management and ready to engage in public-lands issues.

They also learn, as we just did, how passionately anti-wilderness some folks are. The vandalism came as the Broads joined other wilderness groups in a campaign for a new national monument surrounding Canyonlands, which could limit four-wheeling in sensitive areas, such as the one we hiked through. In 2007, the group's documentation of ATV damage at archaeological sites led to a trail closure to off-roaders in southeast Utah's Recapture Canyon — and made some enemies in the process. But many Broads also engage in a quieter, more service-oriented activism, supporting often short-staffed government agencies as volunteers.

"SO I AM LOOKING 300 DEGREES." Janice Shepherd glances up from her compass to make a note in a small yellow book. Then, she photographs a spot where ATVs have widened a trail near Grand Junction, Colo., likely causing increased erosion and other damage. With her fanny pack, rucksack and a pouch dangling from her neck, the small, gray-haired woman looks like a dauntless explorer, off to map some distant clime.

It's a chilly winter morning, and Shepherd and Sherry Schenk, who leads the local Broadband, are following one of several BLM routes they monitor for damage like this. Later, Shepherd will enter her photos and notes into a database linked to a map, so the local BLM — which oversees 1.2 million acres — knows which trails need repair and can reference photographs of problem areas.

Alissa Leavitt-Reynolds, archaeologist for the agency's Grand Junction Field Office, credits Shepherd with documenting rock art the BLM didn't even know existed; she's also helped their recreation planner find and map new user-created rock-climbing routes. And Schenk's activities range from monitoring trails for dog-poop overload to stewarding archaeological sites and regularly documenting their condition.

In 2011, Schenk, a retired school psychologist, attended her first Broadwalk and was inspired to lead a Broadband. She attended Bootcamp, a four-day leadership training, where she fumbled with GPS devices, learned online organizing tools and attended workshops on public-lands law. "It was," she laughs, "kind of overwhelming."

Yet Schenk persisted. Her Grand Junction Broadband, which now has about 30 active members, emphasizes volunteering and participating in agency land-management planning. Schenk and Shepherd spend so much time at the BLM office that an employee told me, "When I first started, I thought (Shepherd) worked here."

Rose Chilcoat, associate director of Great Old Broads for Wilderness, poses in southeast Utah with the old hag mask meant to intimidate her. STEPHANIE PAIGE OGBURN

As the three of us start uphill in the warming air, a mountain biker rattles down the trail, and we leap out of the way. "Hey, Sherry! How's it going, Janice?" he calls. It's Mike Jones' day off, but Jones, who works on trails and recreation for the BLM, stops to chat and answer Shepherd's questions about work the route we're on might need. He agrees with her assessment, noting that if some volunteers could build up the trail's outside edge, the "water would run off of it."

As Jones prepares to wheel away, the Broads mention that I am with them to learn about the group's involvement with public lands.

He nods approvingly.

"Yup, these guys do a lot of work for us. A lot of work. So you got the right ones." □

"Broadening" your vocabulary

Some Great Old Broads terminology

Broad
A female member of the Great Old Broads for Wilderness.

Bro
A male member of the group.

Training Broad
A young member (somewhere under the age of 50).

"Yoo-hoo!"
A high-pitched call used by Broads to get attention.

Broadsides
Thrice-yearly Broads newsletter.

"Study a Broad"
Section of Broadsides newsletter that profiles members who are making a difference for wild lands.

Deanna Mooney, Audrey Mee, Susan Ostlie, Karen Ryman, Misti Ballard, Shelley Spalding. STEPHANIE PAIGE OGBURN

GREAT OLD BROADS FOR WILDERNESS

Preserving Wilderness for Future Generations

"I'm a mother. I'm not always optimistic about the fate of the world – especially the natural world, but I'm still hopeful…Entire future generations will have to sort out this mess we've left them. So I have to participate in solutions, because to do otherwise would feel like child abuse."

--Barbara Kingsolver, in an interview with *The Sun* magazine, Spring 2014

Building community and creating a new vision of aging

"The fellowship of older women with a mutual commitment to environmental activism is incomparable in my experience." - Mary Black, after Yaak,Montana Broadwalk Event

Empowering and Encouraging Activism

"Thank you, Broads, for your stellar performance at our Kanab workshop, and for the Off Highway Vehicle (OHV) monitoring program. In regards to getting a handle on the issue of OHV damage to public lands, I've drawn more encouragement and empowerment from the weekend's activities than from the previous year's experiences."

- Susan Hand – Kanab, UT