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NH Outside: Rail trail system offers 380 miles to keep you moving

By Jill Armstrong Special to the Union Leader
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Exposed rock on the sides of the Windham Rail Trail provides a glimpse of the old railway.

Jill Armstrong

With 52 trails totaling more than 380 miles, the New Hampshire Rail Trail system offers an exciting way to get outside and explore communities throughout the state.

Rail trails follow the routes of abandoned railroad lines. Renovated stations known as “depots,” remnants of stone bridges and rock cuts provide recreationists with glimpses into the past, when passenger lines and freight trains contributed to the state’s prosperity.

Today, most of the rail trails in New Hampshire are multi-use pathways, allowing access to walkers, runners, hikers, naturalists, bicyclists, in-line skaters, equestrians and even cross-country skiers in the winter. Snowmobilers also are allowed once the snow settles in, as they have proven to be allies to the organizations that help maintain the trails throughout the year.

While trail surfaces vary widely – a few are paved, but most are either dirt, stone dust, sand or gravel – they all offer pleasant surroundings away from major roadways.

A key supporter of the system, the New Hampshire Rail Trails Coalition works with 29 local rail organizations throughout the state to develop new trails and maintain those in place. Last week, I met with three NHRTC board members to talk about the network of trails.

“Last year people were just itching to get outdoors,” said treasurer and president pro tem Dave Topham, “so we saw the usage factor go up two or three times from the prior year.”

With growing concerns stemming from the dangers of public roadways, a greater number of people are turning to these trails as a safer way to travel.

Chuck Redfern of Keene appreciates the impact this movement has on his community.

“It makes you proud of your hometown for what they’re doing,” he said.

Although each member boasted about the rail trail in his local area, they all expressed the importance of uniting at the state level to usher in support for the development of the rail trail system.

Interested in a local rail trail experience, I set out to ride the Windham Rail Trail toward Salem. This 4.3-mile paved trail begins at the restored 1849 Windham Depot and connects with the Derry Rail Trail to the northwest and the Salem Bike-Ped Corridor to the south.

I took off from the parking area on my mountain bike. The paved trail brought me past marshlands and ponds covered in lily pads, scenery reminiscent of French painter Claude Monet's landscapes. Farther down, predominant ledge cuts exposing moss-covered granite revealed the scope of this engineering feat accomplished during construction of the railways in the 19th century.

Although no turtles crossed the trail on my evening ride (a common occurrence, I hear), wildlife was abundant. Birds zigzagged across the trail, their calls distinct and loud, and chipmunks pounced along, sneaking into crevasses in the rock walls. Crickets chirped methodically as the sun dipped lower in the sky.

Even though it was dinner time, many people were out enjoying the trail. I passed mothers running with strollers, a family of four biking, couples walking and cyclists zooming by.

Back at the depot, I connected with Al Jarvis, 80, who uses the pathways frequently for exercise on his electric bike.

“I just like this trail because it’s the easiest thing for me to do. I live in Derry Center, and this rail trail is 80 feet from my door,” he said.

Jarvis will sometimes travel north from Derry toward the Manchester airport, but he considers the Windham trail smooth sailing.

“There’s more people on this one here, more places to stop, it’s just much nicer on this end,” he said.

Although the trails are commonly used for recreation, many people, especially in urban areas, use the trails for commuting, making connectivity a major focus of improvement for organizations like Manchester Moves.

Its flagship project, “Rail with Trail,” aims to close the gap between Manchester and Concord by completing the Granite State Rail Trail — a 125-mile off-road route from Salem to Lebanon.

Similarly, other future plans support the organization’s core mission to connect all people in Manchester to all of New Hampshire via trails and greenways.

NH Outside appears in the Union Leader on alternating Fridays. Contact Jill Armstrong at jaarmstr1@gmail.com.

