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Trail renaissance

Don't damage paths; let areas dry

By MIKE CAMPBELL
 mcampbell@adn.com
 Published: April 20th, 2009 10:05 PM
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As the temperature approached 50 degrees Monday afternoon, snow finally began melting off Far North Bicentennial Park, bringing closer the day when nearly eight miles of new single-track mountain bike trail will be available to riders.



enlarge
 ERIK HILL / Daily News archive 2008 /
 Volunteer Mark Miner trims brush along a single-track mountain bike path going in along the Gasline Trail near the Prospect Heights trail head in August 2008. Over the last few years, trails have sprouted across Alaska -- from the Compeau Motorized Trail at the Chena State Recreation Area, to an ATV Subistence Trail in Hooper Bay, to the gorgeous Trail of Blue Ice in Portage Valley, to the Susitna Valley Winter Trail that runs from Big Lake to the south boundary of Denali State Park.



Janice Tower

Late last fall, mountain bikers got a taste of what's to come when a one-mile section in the southeast portion of the 4,000-acre park opened. The rest, however, was closed to give freshly disturbed ground time to firm up over winter.

Janice Tower, for one, can barely wait to ride the whole thing.

"I'm anxious, but there are so many wonderful projects going on statewide," said Tower of SingleTrack Advocates, the Anchorage group working to preserve, build and maintain natural trails. "We're just getting off the ground with the technical knowledge to build environmentally responsible trail systems.

"Trail building use to be real ad hoc. People just going out and making their own trails, and a lot of those trails are environmentally damaging.

We need to do better."

As the 2009 Statewide Trails Conference opens Wednesday at the Anchorage Hilton Hotel, organizers, planners, recreation specialists -- as well plain old walkers, runners and riders -- may have more to celebrate than they've had in a while.

And not just in Bicentennial Park.

Over the last few years, trails have sprouted across Alaska -- from the Compeau Motorized Trail at the Chena State Recreation Area, to an ATV Subistence Trail in Hooper Bay, to the gorgeous Trail of Blue Ice in Portage Valley, to the Susitna Valley Winter Trail that runs from Big Lake to the south boundary of Denali State Park .

"There's a real renaissance going on for sustainable trails," said Jillian Morrissey, executive director of Alaska Trails.

"More and more Alaskans are getting out on trails. We love the fact that we can have civilization in our front

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yard and wildness in our backyard. Trails are just an easy way to access what makes the state so amazing."

Although the Bicentennial Park single track -- like other unpaved Anchorage bike trails -- won't open to riders until June 1 in order to give the ground time to dry out, Tower said the route saw significant winter use, which surprised her.

"People have been using them -- skiers, snowshoers, hikers, anybody. We're getting rave reviews," said Tower, who was honored with a National Parks Service Volunteer-in-Parks Award two months ago for her 532 hours of volunteer time on the project.

The new trail is accessible from the Gasline Trail out of the Prospect Heights trail head in Chugach State Park, or from Hilltop Ski Area, about two-tenths of a mile off the intersection of the Upper Gasline and Spencer Loop trails.

But not yet.

"Right now, there's still snow on trails," Tower said. "They're pretty soft and punchy, and people need to stay off" to protect the trail surface.

She noted the care with which the trails were built using the sweat of a fair amount of volunteer labor. Only 20 trees were removed during the whole project, she said, and construction expenditures amounted to \$170,000 -- about 25 percent less than originally estimated.

"We came in way under budget," Tower said. "And we were able to raise a nice nest egg for future trail development."

She said a Sweco trail dozer used to put in the trail helped keep down both costs and environmental impact. The mini-dozer is four feet wide and able to "thread the needle" between trees.

Farther north, another beautiful single-track trail luring mountain bikers is the 1.5-mile-long Mooseberry Mesa Trail in the Susitna Valley.

"It's a real fun trail," said Pat Owens of Sutton, a board member with the association. "It's narrow. It winds through the trees. It's a swooping trail, fun to ride. Anybody can do it."

This year, Owens said, the association's top priority is making progress on getting some 2,000 miles of Mat-Su trails legally documented by the borough.

The association also aims to put a new 2.5-mile trail up Lazy Mountain from the trail head to the summit this summer.

"We'll probably fix up the exiting trail, too," she said. "It's steep and erodes badly."

The challenging trail is one favored by diehard mountain runners.

"But a lot of people can't hike it," Owens said. "We're hoping for something the average person can experience."

Reporter Mike Campbell can be reached at mcampbell@adn.com or 257-4329.



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Some recent trail successes

- 1) Completion of a paved route from Kincaid Park to Eagle River via the Tony Knowles Coastal Trail, a new Ship Creek Trail, Mountain View streets, and the bike trail paralleling the Glenn Highway. The route is good, but signs offering directions would help.
- 2) Nearly 8 miles of yet-unnamed singletrack through Far North Bicentennial Park.
- 3) The Bear Cub and Blueberry Pancake trails loop at Alyeska Resort. "It's designed to be a flowing free ride trail for easy ability," Warren Rowe of Alyeska said. "There are no drops, no tabletops, no ramps. For right now, simplicity is key."
- 4) Trail of Blue Ice in Portage Valley to link the Seward Highway with the Begich Boggs Visitor Center. Flat and scenic — with three yellow cedar bridges, intricate rock work and 600 feet of elevated boardwalk — the 6-mile trail get travelers off the main road and into some of the area's best scenery.
- 5) Mooseberry Mesa Trail, a 1.5-mile long single-track that's part of the Crevasse-Moraine trail system in Palmer. "It's very popular," said Mark Gronewald, a co-founder of Valley Mountain Bikers

and Hikers Association. He helped design the trail.

If you go ...

- The Alaska Statewide Trails Conference, aimed at trail users, builders and guardians, runs Wednesday to Saturday at the Anchorage Hilton Hotel. It's part of the Alaska Recreation and Park Association Conference. Session details at www.alaskarpa.org.
- Iditarod Champion Lance Mackey will deliver the keynote address 8:30 a.m. Thursday, "Tales from the trails: Yukon Quest/Iditarod." Local historian Judy Bittner will introduce Mackey and discuss events surrounding the 100th anniversary of the Iditarod National Historic Trail.
- Audio Slide Show: To get a feel for Portage's new Trail of Blue Ice, go to www.adn.com/excursions.

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MollyMaguire wrote on 04/22/2009 09:48:55 AM:

Trails for recreation are nice, but what's far more important are trails for commuting, shopping, taking your kids to the parks, etc. Street side trails. Someone else mentioned trails for connectivity. To which I would add 'community'.

[Recommend \(0\)](#)



anhcskier wrote on 04/22/2009 09:01:44 AM:

akfba309 - Apples and oranges. My statement in the LTE section was regarding riding on the roads. Road biking is separate from mountain biking. You aren't going to see road bikes riding on your hiking trails. For me, when I am commuting to work or trying to get somewhere across town or just going for a road bike ride, it is far safer for me to ride on the roads than it is to ride along the parallel paved "bike paths" and sidewalks. When I am mountain biking, I am not riding 20 mph and not following the roads, so it has really nothing to do with the other subject.

You are right, it won't keep all the bikers off of closed trails, but it will keep some off. Us bikers need to do a better job of keeping to the trails open to bike use as well as policing ourselves and each other. There are certain people and groups that create a bad example for the rest of us. As with any group, there are ones that don't follow the rules, biking is no exception.

[Recommend \(0\)](#)



akfba309 wrote on 04/22/2009 08:47:42 AM:

i doubt if if all the riders will stay on the new designated trails check out a few of the letters in todays editorials matter of fact one of which is from anhcskier who finds the roads more practical THAN the TRAILS. :)

[Recommend \(0\)](#)

pixieteeth wrote on 04/22/2009 08:35:26 AM:

Insatiable appetites (even for trails) are seldom satisfied. Unfortunately.

[Recommend \(0\)](#)

pixieteeth wrote on 04/22/2009 08:30:56 AM:

For the reasons stated below I believe "connectivity", as a goal and value, is - tainted. Trails to everywhere...It's got ring to it...CLANG.

[Recommend \(0\)](#)

ekess wrote on 04/22/2009 08:20:36 AM:

Thanks anchskier. Too many people seem unwilling to look at things from a big picture. It's always me me me. Hikers vs. bikers vs. equestrians, it's the same old story. Now that there are very nice singletrack trails for bikers to ride, and the are extremely easy to access, it would be a waste of time to attempt to ride down these "hiking only" trails. People often take the easiest route, the route of least resistance and in this case, it's the new STA trails. In fact, STA has made life better for not only bikers but for you mr akfba309. You should thank them, cheers!

[Recommend \(1\)](#)

pixieteeth wrote on 04/22/2009 08:16:24 AM:

Alaska will grow in population only by Anchorage density. No new Alaskans want to live any place else. That would be unheard of. So, it is necessary to tear up the Anchorage countryside so the new comers can let off steam and "embrace" (diminished) Anchorage nature. Anchorage is not all there is. Consider economic and other possibilities in other communities. Otherwise you will keep building up "steam" that needs to be let off around Anchorage's ecology thus congealing your feverish paths to nature. North to Alaska!

[Recommend \(1\)](#)

anhcskier wrote on 04/22/2009 07:52:37 AM:

akfba309 - You have a point that there HAVE BEEN a lot of bikers going off-trail or poaching trails that they should not be on in the past. The key being HAVE BEEN. These new trails were only put in just this last summer, most not being opened to bikes yet. Opening these new trails will provide a huge increase in the amount of good single-track riding for bikers out there, most likely giving many of those people who poach other trails a legal place to ride without having to go searching for other areas that may be off limits. The great part about these trails is that they are sustainable and will not turn into rutted washouts like many other trails tend to do.

[Recommend \(0\)](#)

akfba309 wrote on 04/22/2009 07:32:05 AM:

excess,
please instruct the riders what a bicycle with a red x across within a circle means on a trail.
my rant is not about your lovely funded trail
it's about the ever inceasing number of bikes seen on HIKING only trails.
public land IS for everyone
unless the posted rules on that trail say bikes AREN'T.

[Recommend \(1\)](#)

ekess wrote on 04/21/2009 09:49:42 PM:

akfba309: Give me a break!!!!!! Firstly, the sustainable trails being built are done so with choke points designed to keep riders from venturing off trail. The sustainable singletrack will meander under canopy, through the shadows and all along the hillside. The track is now 3 ft and will diminish and tighten with time. It's also built in areas that specifically prevent erosion, and designed for unwanted sightlines.

The whole POINT of these trails is to prevent and limit outlaw riding. You've probably seen these people (those horrible mountain bikers!!) because no trails were previously constructed. By a clue and understand the idea of evolution of land use. Wouldn't want to mess up the ATV riders and equestrian's trails! PUBLIC LAND IS FOR EVERYONE!!!

Recommend (0)

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