

End of Trail

Written by Gary Hubbell



Across the United States, riding trails are at risk. More than ever, backcountry horsemen must compete with hikers, mountain bikers, ATV riders and others for public-land access. And, with increasingly restrictive—even anti-horse—regulations in some locales, trails on which riders were once welcome are now hostile environments for horsemen. Learn how 10 of the country's top riding destinations have come under threat, and how you can get involved in the fight to save them.

1. California Riding & Hiking Trail

Location: Statewide

In 1945, the State of California created the California Riding and Hiking Trail to honor returning veterans of World War II and their fallen comrades. More than 40,000 pages of trail easements (rights of way for trail users) were negotiated, and a 3,000-mile statewide loop through 37 counties was mapped.

More than 60 years later, the trail is in danger of going to waste despite efforts by dedicated volunteers. Part of the problem lies with uncooperative landowners, notes Backcountry Horsemen of California activist Pete Spencer. According to Spencer, landowners continue to disregard deeded easements by building structures atop the trail, destroying signs and trail markers, erecting gates and fences, and even threatening horseback riders and trail volunteers who try to access the loop.

Volunteer Opportunities:

Backcountry Horsemen of California

- Pete Spencer, activist
- (760) 782-3747
- muleman2@wildblue.net

Voice Your Opinion:

California State Parks

- parks.ca.gov
- Steve Musillami,
statewide trails manager
- (916) 653-6501
- smusi@parks.ca.gov

2. Shawnee National Forest

Location: Southern Illinois

The Shawnee National Forest covers more than 277,000 acres, south of Harrisburg, Illinois. Under its 2006 Forest Plan, the U.S. Forest Service enacted regulations in the Big Grand Pierre Creek, Eagle Creek, Lusk Creek and Upper Bay Creek watersheds to prohibit riders from leaving established trails, with a \$5,000 fine and six-month imprisonment for violators.

According to USFS recreation program manager Tim Pohlman, such regulations became necessary because the Shawnee trail system had long been neglected, and riders were venturing into biologically sensitive areas. Under the new plan, riders have access to 150 miles of designated, maintained trails.

USFS officials say that other areas of the forest will be studied in 2008 or 2009, with additional riding restrictions a possibility.

Voice Your Opinion:

Shawnee National Forest

- fs.fed.us/r9/forests/shawnee
- (618) 253-7114
- mailroom_r9_shawnee@fs.fed.us

3. Cheyenne Mountain State Park

Location: Colorado Springs, Colorado

Currently open to hikers, bikers and campers, the 1,680-acre Cheyenne Mountain State Park is closed to riders due to concerns by the Colorado Parks Board that horses will disturb wildlife or be a source of invasive weed species.

The potential acquisition of an additional 1,000 acres abutting the Pike National Forest, though, could present an opportunity for riders to access both the park and the forest. Horsemen are encouraged to take part in discussions over potential uses for any newly acquired parkland.

Volunteer Opportunities:

Backcountry Horsemen of Colorado

- bchcolorado.org

Colorado Horse Council

- coloradohorsecouncil.com
- (303) 292-4981

Front Range Backcountry Horsemen

- □ frontrangebackcountryhorsemen.org
- □ John Leavitt, president
- □ (303) 646-2135
- □ johnlevitt@evocohs.com

Voice Your Opinion:

Cheyenne Mountain State Park

- □ parks.state.co.us/Parks/cheyennemountain
- □ (719) 575-2016
- □ cheyennepark@statepark.co.us



4. Ozark National Scenic Riverways

Location: Southeast Missouri

Home to idyllic stretches of beautiful rivers, the Ozark National Scenic Riverways offer ample riding opportunities along historic trails, as well as spectacular views of the Current and Jack's Fork rivers. However, user conflicts and proposed trail relocation threaten the area's riding trails, says Gail Gartside, chair of Show-Me Missouri Backcountry Horsemen's public-lands committee.

Each summer weekend, she notes, outdoor enthusiasts from St. Louis descend on the area to float the rivers. According to National Park Service personnel, litter, loud stereos and a "family-unfriendly" atmosphere are the norm.

That issue aside, NPS has concluded that horse trails, despite the fact they've paralleled the river since pioneer days, might pose a danger to floaters and therefore should be relocated farther away from the river, where views are not nearly so spectacular.

Volunteer Opportunities:

Show-Me Missouri Backcountry Horsemen

- Showmebch.org

Voice Your Opinion:
Ozark National Scenic Riverways

- nps.gov/ozar
- (573) 323-4236

5. Emigrant Overland Trail

Location: Nevada County, California

One of the main wagon-train routes to California since 1844, the Emigrant Overland Trail winds along the mountains through stands of wild oak, pines and manzanita as it makes its way into California's Central Valley.

Though other portions of the trail are in danger of being abandoned by the Nevada County Board, a 12.5-mile section located midway between Truckee, California, and Sacramento is considered most in danger, says Jaede Miloslavich of the Emigrant Trail Conservancy.

According to Miloslavich, the problem stems from landowners' rejection of public easements through their properties. Owners have installed gates and barbed-wire fences, and removed signage to discourage trail use. In one instance, notes Miloslavich, an owner threatened to shoot a rider if she attempted to cross his property.

Volunteer Opportunities:
Bear River Recreation & Parks District

- brrpd.org
- (530) 268-7275
- brrpd@nccn.net

Emigrant Trail Conservancy

- Jaede Miloslavich
- jdmilo@inreach.com

Voice Your Opinion:
Nevada County Master Plan

- brrpd.org/master%20plan
- (530) 265-7040
- ceo@co.nevada.ca.us

6. Otter Creek Wilderness

Location: Tucker and Randolph counties, West Virginia

A popular destination for hikers and campers from nearby Washington, D.C., Otter Creek Wilderness isn't so popular with riders of late. According to USFS spokesperson Carol Wetzel, waterlogged, rocky conditions and dense vegetation have made difficult any horseback travel along the 42-mile trail network, based on old logging roads and railroad grades. USFS policy, she adds, is to not maintain Otter Creek trails for horse use; official USFS publications discourage equestrians from accessing the wilderness, even though riding is allowed.

USFS is at work on a revised plan for the area, and is inviting input from riders.

Volunteer Opportunities:

American Endurance Ride Conference

- aerc.org
- (866) 271-AERC
- aerc@foothill.net

West Virginia Horse Council

- mysite.verizon.net/resww34d/westvirginiahorsecouncil
- Amanda Stewart, president
- (304) 282-2177
- amandastewart@gmail.com

Voice Your Opinion:

Monongahela National Forest

- fs.fed.us/r9/mnf
- (304) 636-1800
- r9_monong_website@fs.fed.us

7. Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forest

Location: Northern Georgia

As riding opportunities dwindle in the heavily developed Atlanta area, riders and outdoor enthusiasts have headed north to the 430 miles of trails in the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forest, home to red clay hills, trout streams, hardwood forests, beautiful riding trails, and the origin of the 2,135-mile Appalachian Trail.

USFS has backed away from regulations that would have restricted horses to the Chattahoochee-Oconee's established trails, many of which are shared with vehicles, but continues to monitor horse travel. Resource damage from riders creating trails across open spaces could lead to horses being restricted to system-only trails.

Forest supervisor George Bain is working with horse groups to create partnerships that will ensure

open access and minimal resource damage.

Volunteer Opportunities:

Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests

- fs.fed.us/conf
- Supervisor George Bain
- (770) 297-3000

8. Coronado National Forest

Location: Southeastern Arizona

The Coronado National Forest, home to countless miles of remote riding trails, serves as one of the most active corridors for illegal immigrants and drug smugglers entering the United States from Mexico.

Riders in the area often encounter signs of recent illegal traffic—typically litter or the remnants of recent campfires. Local ranchers and hunters report that such traffic is a daily occurrence along the border, and while riders' encounters with illegal immigrants and drug smugglers tend to be fleeting, the potential for violence exists. According to Santa Cruz County Sheriff Tony Estrada, the safety of riders venturing into the region's backcountry can't be assured.

Volunteer Opportunities:

Coronado National Forest

- fs.fed.us/r3/coronado
- (520) 388-8300
- mailroom_r3_coronado@fs.fed.us

9. Frank Church River of No Return Wilderness

Location: Central Idaho

Between 2000 and 2007, hundreds of thousands of acres of forest burned in the Frank Church Wilderness, including 180,000 acres last year alone. According to USFS trails coordinator Kevin Fitzsimmons, it's not uncommon to find 300 to 400 dead trees across the trail in a three-mile stretch. Landslides caused by unstable soil in the steep country are also an issue, often washing out trails. Approximately 700 miles of the region's 2,616 miles of maintained trails are endangered. The USFS ranger district in Challis is currently coordinating with outfitter, backcountry and volunteer groups to procure grants and manpower to implement trail-maintenance projects.

Volunteer Opportunities:

Backcountry Horsemen of Idaho

- bchi.org
- Raenette Didier, chairman
- (208) 926-4910
- raenette.didier@gmail.com

Idaho Outfitters and Guides Association

- ioga.org
- Dave Melton
- (208) 756-6963

Salmon-Challis National Forest

- fs.fed.us/r4/sc
- Cavan Fitzsimmons, trail coordinator
- (208) 756-5100
- kfitzsimmons@fs.fed.us

Student Conservation Association

- thesca.org
- Boise Field Office
- (208) 424-6734

10. Altadena Crest Trail

Location: Los Angeles, California

Envisioned as a continuous west-to-east trail from the Eaton Canyon Natural Area to Hahamongna Watershed, the Altadena Crest Trail, nestled between the eastern edge of Los Angeles and the foothills of the San Gabriel Mountains, is a dream in the making—for now. Once the 12.4-mile trail is completed, Los Angelenos will have quality riding and hiking trails at their back doors. The difficulty lies in gathering easements across numerous parcels of private land so that four major gaps can be closed in densely settled areas.

Voice Your Opinion:

Michael Antonovich

Los Angeles County Supervisor

- (213) 974-5555
- fifthdistrict@lacbos.com

County of Los Angeles

Adrian Garcia

- (213) 974-4266
- agarcia@cao.lacounty.gov

Los Angeles County Parks & Recreation

- parks.lacounty.gov
- (213) 738-2951
- info@parks.lacounty.gov

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