



Discover America

Newsletter of the American Discovery Trail Society

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Winter 2008

ADT Featured Trail Raccoon River Valley Trail



The annual "Trails & Trills" ride features local musicians performing every mile or so for appreciative cyclists.
Photo courtesy of Chuck Offenburger

By Chuck Offenburger

When adventurers on the American Discovery Trail reach west central Iowa, they're going to experience a trail that, in about 65 miles, takes them through one of the most productive agricultural regions in the world and also right into the heart of Iowa's capital and largest city, Des Moines, with a metro area population of 546,000.

It's the 19-year-old Raccoon River Valley Trail, named because it meanders among the branches of the Raccoon River system. Currently, it is a 56-mile hard-surfaced trail that stretches south and east from Jefferson to Waukee. It is on the former right-of-way of a railroad, meaning that there are many stretches of the trail that have you going through veritable "tunnels" of trees.

Its proponents boast that with a major expansion project under way and lots of new amenities being added, the RRVT is becoming one of America's best recreational trails.

You travel through farmland that routinely produces a 200-bushels-per-acre corn crop and 60-bushels-per-acre soybean crop. During planting and harvesting seasons, you can often stop along the trail and visit with the farmers.

You also see prairie remnants along the right-of-way, thick patches of wildflowers, and vestiges of the railroad heritage, including a 600-foot-long trestle over the North Raccoon River. Nearby are spectacular natural areas, the most notable of

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Whiterock Conservancy

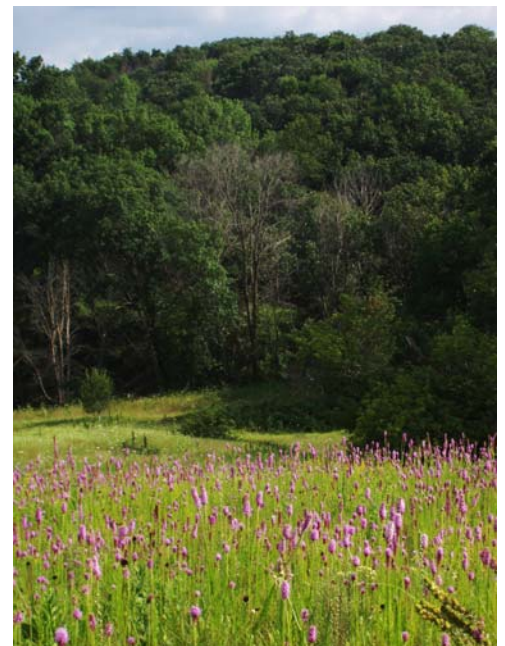
By Rachel Garst

Whiterock Conservancy is the newest natural and cultural attraction along the Iowa portion of the ADT. Founded in 2004, this unique Iowa land trust manages a beautiful eight-mile stretch of the Middle Raccoon River Valley starting at the southern edge of Coon Rapids.

Founded by the heirs of Iowa trail enthusiast Steve Garst, Whiterock Conservancy's timbered pastures, bluffs, prairies, and oak savanna remnants represent an important oasis of biodiversity in a state largely dominated by row-crop agriculture.

Whiterock has a three-part mission: to conserve and enhance the natural and cultural resources of the river valley; to promote sustainable land management; and to encourage the public to engage with the landscape.

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Prairie flowers border the woods.

Photo courtesy of Whiterock Conservancy

Missouri River Bridge Opens



Nebraska and Iowa trail enthusiasts enjoy the opening of the Bob Kerrey Pedestrian Bridge on Sept. 28. The bridge spans the Missouri River between Omaha and Council Bluffs.

Ohioans Walk the Walk

Volunteers have not only been attending meetings with the Ohio Department of Natural Resources Office of Trails to lay out a blueprint for trail priorities, they have also been hiking on the trails. And working on them. Various relocations have taken even more of the Buckeye Trail and ADT off road and made improvements such as eliminating steep grades to reduce erosion and taking the trail out of muddy streambeds.

From September 2007 to June 2008, 64 different volunteers worked a total of 2121 hours on the ADT in Ohio.

Colorado Project Provides A Missing Trail Link

The completion of an important project in Green Mountain Falls was celebrated on Oct. 7. The Pikes Peak Area Rural Transportation Authority (PPRTA) project widened Ute Pass Avenue, the main thoroughfare through town, to provide a badly needed pedestrian lane for a mile.

The new pedestrian lane fills a missing gap in the Ute Pass Trail and the American Discovery Trail. El Paso County had previously built segments of the trail from Ute Pass Elementary School to the east edge of Green Mountain Falls and from the town westward to Crystola. Now trail thru-hikers have a safe way to travel through the town.

The \$300,000+ project was too expensive for the small town of Green Mountain Falls to tackle itself but the PPRTA, a cooperative effort of three small towns and El Paso County, showed that by working together even little guys can accomplish big projects.

Maryland Dedicates Trail To ADT State Coordinator

Bi-county/state agreement was reached on funding and scheduling for the construction of a bridge and connecting trails over the Patuxent River at the Anne Arundel/Prince Georges county line. This

is the last remaining link needed to have an essentially off-road trail from the Chesapeake Bay to Bowie, Md., a distance of approximately 25 miles.

This is the culmination of more than ten years of effort by an average of four ADT representatives attending three meetings a year for two hours and does not include untold behind-the-scenes efforts. In recognition of his sustained contribution to bringing this link to fruition a portion of the trail will be dedicated to the ADT state coordinator, Harry David Cyphers.



Many thanks to
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2008 Long-Distance ADT Travelers

Out for the long haul, these adventurers experienced extremes in weather and terrain but what they universally talk about is the wonderful people they met along the way. The ADT Society website (www.discoverytrail.org) has links to many of their journals.

Traveler	Start Date	Mode	Heading	Miles	Last Location
Michael Daniel	6/17/07	Hike	E	6,115	Point Reyes, Calif.
Josh James	4/12/07	H/Bike	W	4,668	Point Reyes, Calif.
Jim Shaner	2002	Walk	W	825	Pike Lake, Ohio
Jodi Harrington & Josh Howell	3/1/08	Hike	W	4,014	Point Reyes, Calif.
Ron Kessler	3/1/08	Hike	W	3,430	Point Reyes, Calif.
Lory Mitchell & John Wingate	3/31/08	Hike	W	3,473	Point Reyes, Calif.

Raccoon River Valley Trail

(Continued from page 1)

which is the Whiterock Conservancy, located 18 miles west of the RRVT, near the town of Coon Rapids. (See accompanying story.)

The RRVT extends to Waukee, one of the western suburbs of Des Moines, and continues east on connections to the Clive Greenbelt Trail and then the Des Moines metro trail system. That leads trail users all the way to the downtown confluence of the Raccoon and Des Moines rivers, where you are ringed by the city's skyline. It's there that the ADT joins another trail, the Neal Smith Trail, named for an Iowan who served 36 years in the U.S. House of Representatives, as it goes north out of Des Moines. Thirty miles north, you find the ADT's connection on to east central Iowa.

A big current project on the RRVT is an additional 33 miles of hard-surfaced trail, which will form a "North Loop," with fund-raising nearing completion. The total project cost is \$13.2 million, and more than two-thirds of it had been secured by early fall 2008. An application has been made for a major state government grant to complete the funding. Preliminary construction has already started, and with additional fund-raising success, the new loop could be completed by late 2009 or more likely 2010.

Its completion will make the RRVT, at 89 miles, one of the longest hard-surfaced recreational trails in the nation, with the unique feature of having a loop of 72 miles. The trail will then include three counties, with 14 communities that have populations ranging from 25 in Herndon to 8,100 in Waukee. All 14 communities and three counties made governmental or organizational financial commitments to the expansion project.

Little Herndon, by the way, will be an interesting community to watch in coming years. It is not an incorporated town, just a place that grew up at an important railroad junction. The village has been in decline for decades, but now it is destined to become one of the most important junctions of recreational trails in the U.S. The ADT will come from the west to join the RRVT at Herndon. While the ADT



The Raccoon River Valley Trail is used for cross-country skiing in the winter.

Photo courtesy of Chuck Offenburger

route heads south there, trail users will also be able to go east from Herndon on the RRVT's new North Loop.

The RRVT is already one of Iowa's most popular trails, with an estimated 125,000 annual users. Numbers have mushroomed in the nine years since the trail was connected with the Des Moines trails, and use is expected to triple or quadruple in the years ahead as amenities are added along both the original trail and the new loop. As its potential has become clear to entrepreneurs, the last two years have seen the addition of three new bicycle shops and the renovation of two 100-plus-year-old small town inns that once were railroad hotels. Plans are being finalized for at least three new trailside campgrounds.

The RRVT is multi-use, with slightly different rules in each of the three counties it traverses. In Greene County, hunting is permitted in-season. That may strike some trail users as odd, but the fact is, in Iowa by the time hunting seasons starts up in the late fall, few others are on the trail, and allowing hunting has brought along another group of trail advocates. In Guthrie County, in the central part of the trail, snowmobiling is allowed when there is at least four inches of snow cover. And all along the trail, in addition to bicyclists, runners, and walkers, you see birdwatchers, berry-pickers, mush-

room hunters, photographers, cross-country skiers, and more.

The first Saturday in June, the annual "Trails & Trills" ride is held on eight miles of the trail between Jefferson and Cooper, with local musicians performing every mile or so, while cyclists ride to lunch in Cooper, then ride back. Organizers call that event "the slowest bike ride in Iowa." On the first Saturday in October, all the trail towns offer special events, entertainment, and food for the RRVT Fall Festival.

The trail is owned and maintained by the Conservation Boards in Dallas, Guthrie, and Greene counties. Marketing and promotion are done by a three-year-old nonprofit corporation, the Raccoon River Valley Trail Association, which has about 250 members who help finance and advocate for the trail. Daily trail passes are \$2, yearly passes are \$10 and membership in the association costs an additional \$10.

Making Connections...

Coast to Coast

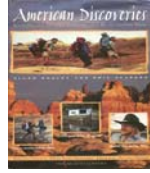
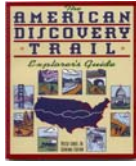
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American Discovery Trail Merchandise



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The American Discovery Trail Explorer's Guide , by Reese Lukei, Jr., ADT National Coordinator Provides an overview of the trail and the vast resources that can be experienced along its route.		\$14.95	
American Discoveries – Scouting the First Coast-to-Coast Recreational Trail , by Eric Seaborg and Ellen Dudley - Describes the adventures while scouting the initial ADT route in 1991.		\$24.95	
Getting to the Point In a dozen pairs of shoes - by Brian Stark–He bills his book as the first modern day run across the United States. 		<u>\$ 15.95</u>	
ADT Trail Data (updated ADT Data Books of Bill and Laurie Foot, who hiked and biked the trail in 1997/1998). An excellent tool for detailed trip planning and on-the ground navigation. <input type="checkbox"/> DE to Cincinnati(Cin) <input type="checkbox"/> Cin to Denver (South) <input type="checkbox"/> Cin to Denver (North) <input type="checkbox"/> Denver to CA		\$15.00 ea.	
ADT Trails Illustrated Maps - Good for overall trip planning and traveling in the urban areas. Please check those you want: <input type="checkbox"/> CA <input type="checkbox"/> OH/Western WV		\$9.99 ea.	
American Discovery Trail Glossy Decal (4-inch)		\$1.00	
American Discovery Trail Patch (3-inch)		<u>\$3.50</u>	
ADT Bandana – Beautiful 4-color 22"x22" cotton bandana with a map of the ADT		<u>\$7.00</u>	
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Tamarak Hiking Stick w/ADT Medallion Check one: <input type="checkbox"/> Standard (43"-48") <input type="checkbox"/> Tall (53"-58")		<u>\$40.00</u>	
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A membership in the American Discovery Trail Society helps to promote and sustain America's only cross-country non-motorized trail. It also makes a great gift!

Each membership includes a member I.D. card, a lapel pin, and *Discover America* newsletter. Discovery and Life members also receive an ADT decal, a patch, and a guidebook.

Yes, I want to be a part of this American adventure!

Life Member - \$1,000

Corporate Member - \$250

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Did you know that the American Discovery Trail Society is a non-profit 501(c)3 organization and your donations are tax deductible?

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Whiterock Conservancy

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Building trail in the Whiterock Conservancy.
Photo courtesy of Steve Milanowski / Whiterock Conservancy

The conservancy helps anchor the Raccoon River Savanna Bird Conservation Area by offering large-scale habitat to struggling populations of Iowa's native birds. Another big attraction is its excellent star-gazing (and annual late-August astronomer gathering) because highly rural Whiterock is probably the darkest place in Iowa.

In 2005, Whiterock Conservancy and neighboring Coon Rapids (population 1,300) partnered to win a coveted guber-

natorial designation as one of Iowa's first three "Great Places." Significant investments are now under way in a four-mile loop trail to link the northern part of Whiterock (containing restored wetlands, fishing ponds, and an osprey restoration project) with the town's business district. Next up will be a 30-mile internal dirt trail network to serve hikers, mountain bikers, and equestrians and to showcase sustainable trail-building practices.

The conservancy also operates as a bed and breakfast the historic Garst Farmhouse visited by Nikita Khrushchev in 1959 and rents several cottages to small groups, including wedding parties and family reunions. Canoe trips, public art icons on the theme of hybrid corn, and tours of a neighboring raptor rehabilitation facility and a stained-glass workshop round out the recreational offerings.

In addition to the Whiterock lodging, there is a beautiful county campground just east of Coon Rapids alongside a timbered cemetery and 3.5-mile county bike trail. Local eateries include a pizza shop, diner, bowling alley, bakery, and Danish tea room.

The last glacier stopped right at Coon Rapids and the geography shows it. To the south and west lie rolling hills, to the north and east lie huge expanses of Iowa's fabled flat, deep, black soils. For those heading east from the newly completed 16 mile T-Bone Trail at Audubon, the 25 miles of county roads to Coon Rapids feature climb after climb.

But going east on county road E63 from Coon Rapids, it is 18 miles of easy sailing until the rider reaches the excellent Raccoon River Valley Trail just north of Herndon. Then it's 54 miles of hard-surfaced trail all the way to the state capital of Des Moines.

A local farmers' cooperative has offered to donate large stretches of an abandoned rail-bed to be developed as an eventual off-road link between Coon Rapids/Whiterock and Herndon. If and when this RRVT linkage can be developed, Whiterock's potential as a biker destination area will be fully secured.

More information is available at www.whiterockconservancy.org.

Rachel Garst, granddaughter of hybrid corn promoter and citizen diplomat Roswell Garst, lives in her hometown of Coon Rapids, where she supports community development and diversity activities. She can be contacted at 712-999-7031 or rachelg@creatinggreatplaces.org.

**A membership in the
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Society makes a great
gift at any time of year!**