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Ride on the Wild Side *Rail-Trails as a Window to Wildlife and Wilderness*

By Laura Mize



Gainesville-Hawthorne State Park Trail, Florida

It's a balmy winter afternoon in north-central Florida, and the sun is shining on the 16-mile **Gainesville-Hawthorne State Park Trail**. Nearby, hundreds of American alligators crowd a canal along an unpaved offshoot of the rail-trail.



An alligator sunning in Paynes Prairie Preserve State Park.

These reptiles, seriously endangered in the 1960s, have rebounded remarkably. They are draped over one another for a mile and a half, vying for space at the water's edge. Some are barely visible, their beady eyes peeking out of the water amid patches of reeds. Others are soaking up the sun with their thick, green-black skin.

This is **Paynes Prairie Preserve State Park**: 22,000 acres of real, dangerous, wild Florida. Home to alligators, bison, bulls, eastern diamondback rattlesnakes, cottonmouth vipers and bobcats, the park shows what Florida used to be, before beach resorts and theme parks.

"That is an alligator show like nowhere else in the world," Park Manager David Jowers says about the alligators that sometimes line the park's waters in droves. "Where else can you leave the city and within a 10-minute drive be right there among the top predators in the country?"

The Gainesville-Hawthorne Trail runs along the former Florida Southern Railway track through

the park, numerous other nature preserves and private land to connect Gainesville, home of the University of Florida, to the small lumber town of Hawthorne. An unpaved trail for horseback riders parallels the paved one.

The rail-trail's northern trailhead is inside Boulware Springs Park, a municipal park that contains an old pumphouse, Gainesville's first city-run water source. A municipal trail extension heads north into town, while the main trail portion rolls south from Boulware Springs across gentle hills shaded by pine and oak trees. Residential homes lie east of the trail between Boulware Springs Park and Paynes Prairie Preserve State Park, while the landscape west of the trail varies for several miles.

The scenery changes to open fields before the trail reaches the Sweetwater Overlook on its western side. This northernmost offshoot of the trail offers the first glimpse of the Great Alachua Savannah—a nickname for the 16,000-acre wet prairie basin that dominates Paynes Prairie Preserve State Park.

The vista here includes a sweeping view of Alachua Lake and wetlands. A plethora of plant species, 270 kinds of birds (including bald eagles) and an intriguing collection of other wildlife live in the park. Not all the animals are menacing. Spanish horses and "cracker" cattle roam the prairie as nods to its ranchland past. Raccoons, gopher tortoises, rabbits, deer, turkeys, otters and other animals also live in the park.

The trail meanders south from the Sweetwater Overlook to an intersection with the unpaved La Chua Trail, which features two observation platforms and the park's best alligator viewing spots. Right before the La Chua Trail, the main trail curves to run east and west. Past this offshoot, the Gainesville-Hawthorne Trail drifts away from the park's dominant water features into its most challenging terrain: a series of hills that could be considered steep, by Florida standards. Most of the trail, however, is relatively flat. Another offshoot juts south of the trail in this area and curves back toward the park's center for a final view of Alachua Lake.

Past this offshoot, the trail continues to a viewing platform at Red Wolf Pond. Soon after, it crosses Prairie Creek, which runs south into the park from a nearby lake. Paynes Prairie Preserve State Park ends shortly afterward, but the trail continues through fields, woods and smaller nature preserves. Old, wooden houses still stand on some properties, recalling a simpler time in Florida's history.



A view of the prairie basin from Sweetwater Overlook.

Trail users should be careful traveling through two state-run wildlife management areas west of Hawthorne. Hunting is allowed in these areas most of the year, though not on or from the trail.

Bayshore Bikeway, California

Like the American alligator several decades ago, the light-footed clapper rail is staging a comeback.

Named for its dainty walk and clap-like call, this endangered bird sports mostly brown feathers, with dashes of white and gray thrown in, and a cinnamon-colored breast. It has an elongated, gently curved beak and thin little legs that support a body similar in size and shape to that of a small hen. Decades of extensive filling, damming and development of Southern California's coastal salt marshes hit the light-footed clapper rail especially hard. These birds don't migrate, or even relocate to nearby marshes. They prefer instead to stay in the exact marsh where they hatched, even when its size and quality won't support them or enough of their favored prey: small invertebrates such as fiddler crabs and snails.

Ongoing efforts to restore the salt marshes of Southern California and Mexico and a decade of captive breeding programs are working. Last year's California population of light-footed clapper rails was the second-largest ever recorded.

Thanks to the **Bayshore Bikeway**, a 24-mile rail-trail that borders 2.3 miles of the **San Diego Bay National Wildlife Refuge**, Southern Californians can see the birds in their natural habitat. They also can see nearly 200 other bird species that live in or stop at the refuge while traveling the Pacific Flyway. Millions of birds use the flyway to migrate between South and Central America and places as far north as



A 1.1-mile extension of the Bayshore Bikeway passes through the San Diego Bay National Wildlife Refuge, offering beautiful views of salt marsh and coastal uplands. The refuge serves as breeding and nesting grounds for migratory and resident bird species.

the Bering Strait.

The refuge consists of two parts: the 3,940-acre "South Bay Unit," where efforts are under way to restore natural marshes and mudflats; and Sweetwater Marsh, a 316-acre property near National City Marina that features a nature center, aviaries, exhibits and more. Both units are home to a great variety of birds, fish and plant life.

In areas where the bikeway borders the refuge, a chain-link fence protects refuge land and the birds, many of which nest on the ground, from traffic.

Throughout its loop, the trail varies between being a separate path and a part of local roadways. San Diego County is working to move more bikeway sections off the roads, says Greg Cox, San Diego County supervisor.

Trail users can board a ferry at the bikeway's northernmost point, in San Diego's Embarcadero neighborhood, and cross the bay to Coronado. From the ferry landing, the trail passes through the city of Coronado, then continues south along an isthmus that connects to the city of Imperial Beach. It passes near the Naval Amphibious Base Coronado and travels parallel to Silver Strand Boulevard, with San Diego Bay on the left and the Pacific Ocean on the right. The Coronado Belt Line, a rail line, once ran here and across the south end of the bay, connecting

Coronado to downtown San Diego.

Along the isthmus, trail users also will encounter Silver Strand State Beach and, on the left, the South Bay Unit of the wildlife refuge. This unit is an extensive collection of open waters, marshlands, salt ponds and uplands, much of which has been filled, reshaped or closed off from the rest of the bay for development purposes. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is slowly restoring the wetlands the light-footed clapper rail and many other species love.

After 1.1 miles of skirting the refuge, the trail continues east to Main Street. Once there, trail users can jaunt south a short ways or turn left and travel back north along a recently constructed segment of the bikeway into Chula Vista. This new section includes an elevated path built on the old rail line. Cox says this segment offers "gorgeous views of downtown San Diego" and spectacular views of the wildlife refuge.

From there, the trail merges again with city streets to take users past the Chula Vista Marina, where another portion of dedicated bike path was completed in March 2012.

Next, the bikeway curves toward the bay while heading into National City, past the Sweetwater Marsh and the National City Marina. It continues north past U.S. Naval Station San Diego. The San Diego Association of Governments plans to start construction in 2012 or 2013 on a three-mile section of dedicated bikeway that will replace some of the current on-street bike lanes through National City.

The path runs through an industrial area toward the convention center and an entertainment complex. The bikeway's loop ends where it began: near the ferry in the Embarcadero.



An adult light-footed clapper rail.

Patagonia Train Track Trail, Arizona

Hundreds of miles east, Fremont cottonwood and Goodding's willow trees are suffering at the hands of civilization, too. These trees once lined Arizona's rivers and streams. But population growth and flood control have changed water flows in the state, and cottonwood-willow forests have declined significantly.

They still thrive in several areas, including along Sonoita Creek. The creek flows more than 4,000 feet above sea level in southeastern Arizona, into the tiny town of Patagonia. Cottonwood-willow forests are abundant along this creek, and provide a foundation for a diverse ecosystem.

The **Patagonia Train Track Trail** is a natural-surface rail-trail that runs for two miles in town. It crosses the bed of Sonoita Creek three times and travels for about a mile over a segment of the Patagonia-Sonoita Creek Preserve, a series of land parcels owned and managed by The Nature Conservancy to protect Sonoita Creek and cottonwood-willow forests.

On this preserve, trail users can see some of the oldest Fremont cottonwood trees standing today. Juliet Stromberg, an associate professor at Arizona State University and a cottonwood-willow forest expert, says the creek's relatively tame floods give trees here enough water to survive and reproduce without knocking down older specimens.

"They're over 100 years old," she says of the area's senior cottonwoods, "which is old for a cottonwood tree, and they're incredibly huge."

The forest here nurtures a diverse population of birds that draws birdwatchers from across the country. It also serves as a migration route for mammals and birds traveling northward from Mexico.

Built in 2010, the Patagonia Train Track Trail starts at the old depot of the New Mexico and Arizona Railroad (now the town hall) and runs northeast. The trail, best for foot travel and mountain biking, is mostly flat, with small inclines for bridges over creek beds. It initially parallels Highway 82 and soon intersects with the Arizona Trail, a recreational trail that crosses the state. After this intersection, the trail drops onto the old rail line and makes its first pass over the bed of Sonoita Creek.



View of Red Mountain from the Patagonia Train Track Trail.

This part of the creek is dry much of the year. It flows in town after significant precipitation, and wells up dramatically during July, August and September—rainy season. Southwest of town, in the main parcel of Patagonia-Sonoita Creek Preserve, the creek flows permanently. But seasonal floods maintain the area's ecological diversity.

"This is a flood-adapted community," says Matt Killeen, the preserve manager, "and many of the species found within would diminish greatly without regular flooding."

The trail soon passes a school complex on the left, then enters a parcel of the nature

preserve.

Just before the northern edge of town, the Patagonia Train Track Trail makes two right turns and a second pass over Sonoita Creek before heading south toward town hall. At this point, the trail borders the preserve parcel and a conservation farm owned by Native Seeds/Search, an organization that works to grow and preserve native crops.

Betsy McGee, a Patagonia resident who helped establish the rail-trail and the Mountain Empire Trail Association, says the association plans to expand the trail to Sonoita, a neighboring town.

Other organizations, including The Nature Conservancy, also have built trails in and around Patagonia—part of an informal local movement focused on recreational trails, Killeen says. "They're kind of re-establishing connections within our communities. We want to be a partner with the community and utilize these simple trails as a way of connecting people to each other, as much to the natural world around them."

Laura Mize is a science writer and former newspaper reporter living with her husband in southwest Florida. She currently works for the University of Florida and loves exploring patches of real, wild, dangerous Florida wherever she finds them.

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