

Greenbrier River Trail great for bikers, hikers

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By Bob Downing / Akron Beacon Journal

CASS, W. Va. -- The Greenbrier River Trail is a gem.

It stretches 78 miles through a picturesque and surprisingly wild valley, next to a pretty stream, through forests and past open fields in the Allegheny Mountains of east-central West Virginia.

It runs from Cass, a one-time timber boom town in Pocahontas County, south to Caldwell at Interstate 64 near Lewisburg in Greenbrier County.

Backpacker magazine has called the Greenbrier River Trail one of the Top 10 hiking trails in the United States. It has also been designated a federal Millennium Legacy Trail, one of 50 in the United States.

It is one of the best long-distance bike-and-hike trails in the East, right up there with the 150-mile Great Allegheny Passage in Pennsylvania and Maryland and the 184.5-mile Chesapeake & Ohio Canal National Historic Park in Maryland.

Fat-tired bicyclists outnumber hikers on the Greenbrier trail, managed by the state of West Virginia. It is also used by equestrians and cross-country skiers.

You can pedal a section on a day trip, or bike-camp and cover the entire rail trail in two to three days. You can also find cottages and bed and breakfasts close to the trail for overnight lodging.

More biking trails in West Virginia

If you enjoy Greenbrier Trail, West Virginia offers more. You can pedal on the 26-mile West Fork Trail that runs along the West Fork of the Greenbrier River.

The rail trail stretches from Durbin off U.S. 250 in Pocahontas County in the south to Gladys on state Route 22 in Randolph County in the north. It is more remote and wilder than the Greenbrier River Trail.

The former CSX line, which once hauled coal and iron to Elkins, was purchased by the U.S. Forest Service in 1986. The trail is known for its spring

The trail -- a long and skinny state park -- is generally flat with a grade of less than 1 percent and a hard-packed, crushed-gravel surface.

It drops about 732 feet from north to south along its 78 miles. That makes it appealing to beginning and intermediate cyclists. You don't have to be an expert on this trail.

There are 35 bridges and two tunnels along the rail trail that parallels the Greenbrier River, the longest free-flowing stream in the East.

The most-photographed spot is Sharp's Tunnel and Bridge. The tunnel is 511 feet long; the nearby trestle is nearly 230 feet long and 30 feet above the gurgling river.

Further south, the Droop Mountain Tunnel near Horrock is just over 400 feet long.

The Greenbrier River Trail is the longest rail trail in West Virginia. But what makes it special is its wild surroundings, especially at its northern end.

It's a backcountry trail with few crossroads and you are pedaling through wild country in the 900,000-acre Monongahela National Forest. There are mountain vistas, heavy woods, rocky outcroppings and open fields.

The trail runs next to Seneca State Forest, Watoga State Park and Calvin Price State Forest. It runs through one town, Marlinton with nearly 1,200 residents, but there are 14 access points along the trail. Restrooms are found about every eight to 10 miles. Amenities along the trail are limited. There are 16 primitive campsites along the trail, or you can camp in adjoining state parks and state forests.

The Greenbrier Section of the Chesapeake & Ohio Railroad was built in the late 1890s to serve the timber industry. Sawmills once operated at Cass, Denmar, Watoga and Spice Run. Beard and Spring Creek were farming communities.

The rail corridor was abandoned in 1978 and the state of West Virginia opened the trail in 1980. Today it is a state park that is 78 miles long and averages 100 feet wide. The northern end at Cass is about four hours (150 miles) from Pittsburgh.

There are restored depots at Clover Lick and Marlinton, and original C&O mileage markers still stand along the trail.

wildflowers and its fall foliage. You can hop off the West Fork Trail and make shorter loops on connecting forest service roads and trails.

Durbin is about 20 miles north of Cass. Its Durbin & Greenbrier Valley Railroad has tourist operations. Call 1-304-636-9477 or 1-877-686-7245 or check www.mountainrail.com.

Pocahontas County is home to some of the best mountain biking in the East. The Elk River Touring Center at Slayfork (1-866-572-3771 or www.ertc.com) offers rentals, guided trips and shuttles on Gauley Mountain, Tea Creek Mountain and Props Run areas of the Monongahela National Forest.

More than 100 miles of single-track trails are available off the Highland Scenic Highway, and the nearby Cranberry Backcountry offers more than 150 miles of trails and gated roads.

Snowshoe Mountain, the biggest ski resort in West Virginia, offers mountain biking in the summer. Check out 1-877-441-4FUN or www.snowshoemtn.com.

Watoga State Park makes a good halfway stop on the trail. You can camp and swim in the Greenbrier or in the campground pool.

For information, call 1-304-799-7416 or 1-800-CALL-WVA, or see www.greenbrierrailtrailstatepark.com.

Cell-phone service is very spotty in the mountains along the trail because of the nearby National Radio Astronomy Observatory at Green Bank. The facility includes a 16 million-pound telescope that is 485 feet tall. Tours are offered. For information, call 1-304-456-2164 or check out <https://science.nrao.edu/facilities/gbt/>.

The Greenbrier River is popular with anglers and canoeists. You can tube the river during the summer.

Cass is the home of the state-run Cass Scenic Railroad State Park. The tourist rail line carries 75,000 passengers a year to Whittaker Station and to Bald Knob. It runs from late May through late October.

There's also a lot of timber history in Cass, including its rows of white company-owned houses where workers once lived. For Cass information, call 1-304-456-4300 or 1-800-CALL-WVA, or see www.cassrailroad.com.

For information, contact the Pocahontas County Convention & Visitors Bureau, 1-800-336-7009, <http://pocahontascountywv.com> or <http://naturesmountainplayground.com>, or the Greenbrier County Convention & Visitors Bureau, 1-800-833-2068 or 1-304-645-1000, <http://greenbrierwv.com>.

You can also check out the Greenbrier River Trail Association at www.greenbrierrivertrail.com.

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