

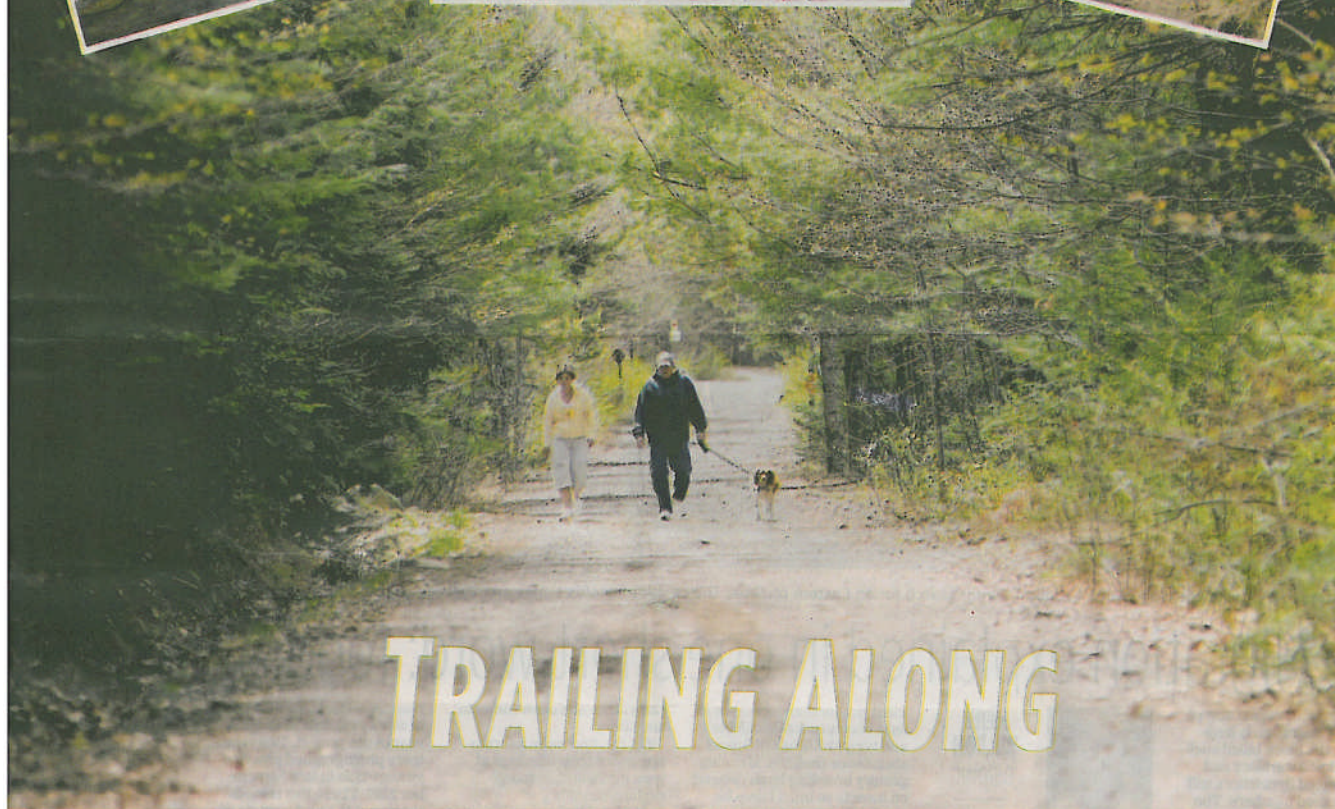
OUTDOORS

Hunting
Birding
Fishing Report

May 18, 2008

Maine Sunday Telegram

SECTION



TRAILING ALONG

Annie and Matt Gaudet of North Jay, above, make their way along the Farmington to Jay rail trail with their dog, Mocha. Top photos, from left, depict other scenes from the Farmington to Jay trail: a wooded area near a flowing stream, a spot where the trail runs through the town of Wilton, and a raised rail bed over a stream in Farmington.

Photos by Shawn Patrick Ouellette/Staff Photographer

By DEIRDRE FLEMING
Staff Writer

JAY — Moose, beavers, horses and hawks are only some of the travelers that can be found along the Whistle Stop Trail running from Farmington to Jay.

There also are bulls and donkeys, not to mention plenty of dogs.

When the Maine Department of Conservation converted this 10-foot-wide raised railroad bed into a corridor for pedestrians and bicyclists 10 years ago, it allowed slower travelers to go great distances through the woods and farmland.

Cyclists can avoid the busy double-lane roads of western Maine and cover 14 miles in a different world — if they put the time and muscle power into it.

This kind of gravel path that meanders along streams, over waterfalls and past farms also exists elsewhere in the state along old, out-of-use railroad beds from Bangham to Fort Kent.

Cyclists, pedestrians and off-road enthusiasts enjoy former rail beds converted into recreational paths.

And in the Down East region, the department is working on its twelfth and longest rail trail yet. The Ellsworth to Ayers Junction trail will stretch 85 miles through blueberry country, offering stopovers for campers in Public Reserve Land. (The current longest, the Presque Isle to Van Buren rail trail, runs 53 miles.)

Each of the state's 11 existing rail trails are open to a variety of outdoor enthusiasts, from ATV riders and equestrians to cyclists and campers.

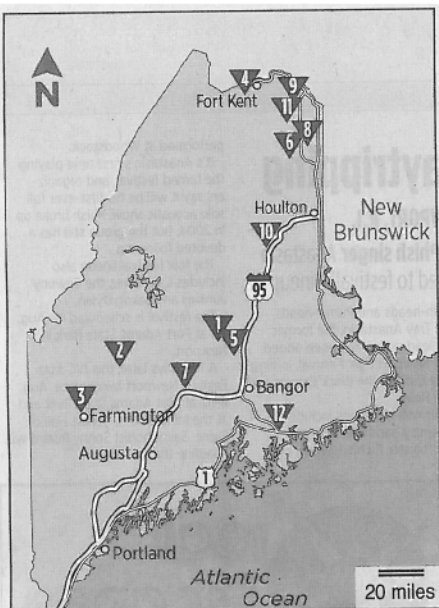
The paths not only offer views of Maine's northern mountains and farm fields, they each tell a story not necessarily found in the towns they pass through.

For example, the Farmington to Jay Whistle Stop Trail runs by the site of the now defunct North Jay quarry that was built in 1886. The large white granite blocks mined here a century ago were shipped by train to major cities for state buildings, such as the Hibernia Bank in San Francisco and the Bowling Green Building in New York City.

The Newport to Dover Foxcroft trail has its own historic features, such as the ornate culverts that allowed water or cattle to pass underneath, said David Rodrigues, director of the state's division of off-road vehicles. "As we have time and money, we want to create stops with signs to show off the old culverts built from granite," Rodrigues said. "They were beautifully constructed. Some have cattle passes, when the railroad built big tunnels so the cattle could go under."

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INSIDE: FOR A MAP SHOWING THE LOCATIONS OF THE STATE'S 11 RAIL TRAILS, TURN TO PAGE K3.



The state owns or manages 11 rail trails, paths built on old railroad beds, and it is working on the longest yet Down East.

1. Brownville Junction to Katahdin Iron Works, 6 miles
2. Emden to Bingham, 14 miles
3. Farmington to Jay, 14 miles
4. Fort Kent to St. Francis, 16.5 miles
5. Lagrange to Medford Center, 12 miles
6. Mapleton to Washburn, 6 miles
7. Newport to Dover-Foxcroft, 27 miles
8. Presque Isle to Washburn, 9.6 miles
9. Presque Isle to Van Buren, 53 miles
10. Sherman to Patten, 6 miles
11. Washburn to New Sweden, 18 miles

STAFF GRAPHIC | ALFRED WOOD

TRAILS

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For the most part, the Whistle Stop Trail, western Maine's rail trail that runs through Farmington, Wilton and Jay, is peaceful in its plainness, which is reason enough to ride it.

A WAY OF LIFE

On a sunny Saturday in early May, the Farmington to Jay rail trail was empty, possibly due to a weather forecast of rain.

Farmington town manager Richard Davis said the trail normally attracts runners, bikers and walkers in the evening hours during spring.

Matt and Jeannie Gaudet were walking their dog, Mocha, along the North Jay section of the Whistle Stop Trail at midday. They said the rail trail is a way of life to many in Jay and Farmington.

"There used to be beaver ponds. You'd come by, and they'd smack their tails, telling you to go away," Matt Gaudet said.

Come summer, horseflies and black flies will be so bad, everyone traveling the rail trail will be on a bicycle or ATV, Gaudet said. In the fall, hunters travel the trail to get from one patch of farmland to the next.

During the fall, the Gaudets

only walk the trail on Sundays, when hunting is not allowed. Their walks on the trail are fewer, but it's still their favorite season.

"It looks like a Norman Rockwell painting," Gaudet said. "There is a big bull moose around here somewhere. We've seen his tracks."

During every season, animal life abounds around the Whistle Stop Trail.

The all-natural odor of cow pastures rises along one swampy area that could be the inside of Baxter State Park.

Another area opens up to views of western hills to one side and farm fields patrolled by bulls to the other.

At one point, the old railroad bed rises so high above the forest, it runs through treetops full of birds like a skyscraper in the woods.

And closer to Jay, the south terminus of the trail, the farm fields, woods and bubbling streams are left behind in return for near views of the Androscoggin River.

Here, close to town, a Cooper's hawk dashed amid branches along the trail.

Not the moose hoped for, but a critter worth counting nonetheless.

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