



RIDING THROUGH THE FORESTS

How horse trails fit into landownership objectives

By Sara B. Baldwin, Ph.D,
Registered Forester

Photo by Mike Collins/opticalharmonics.com

Traveling the country with my horse and dog in order to ride through the forest is something I enjoy. So do so many other people – I am not alone in this hobby. Trail riding is an increasingly popular sport that rivals hiking, biking, and hunting as a recreational use of forests.

Twenty years ago I wrote an article for this magazine about developing horse trail systems on TREASURE Forests (see “A TREASURE Teaches Lessons,” *Alabama’s TREASURED Forests*, Spring 1995, p. 4). Since then, we have continued to host trail rides and manage the trail system on the McConnell and Willis family TREASURE Forests, but two big changes have come along the way.

First, I have become addictively involved in competitive trail riding. A competitive trail ride is a long-distance, time-paced event with both a veterinary judge that scores the horses and a horsemanship judge that scores the riders. These events are sanctioned by a national organization, the North American Trail Ride Conference (NATRC). I got started by hosting and managing NATRC-sanctioned rides here at our forest, then raising and training horses for this little-known sport. I now have a 1,000-mile champion horse as well as a 2,000-mile champion horse, while I have also competed others’ horses, personally logging nearly 4,000 miles in sanctioned competitions. I have ridden in 87 events in 16 different states. Last year, we reached the pinnacle of our sport when my horse Loco Motion won the NATRC “President’s Cup” as the top scoring horse.

The numbers indicate the second big change in the last 20 years: trail riding is growing! In Kentucky, horse racing capital of the world, they’ve recognized the sport’s growth. In a 2012 article of a leading horse enthusiast publication, the executive director of the Kentucky Horse Council was quoted, “It is our suspicion that there are more horses used for trail riding than any other use.” (<http://horsetalk.co.nz/2012/05/30/could-trail-riding-lead-kentucky/#ixzz3ZrRiP9VU>).

Former ‘Trails’ chairman of the Alabama Horse Council, Sandy Pegram, agrees, “...the popularity of trail riding is growing and outshines other horse industries like racing and showing. It helps families connect to nature.”

With these growing numbers, riders and their horses are always looking for new places to ride. In response, the number of trails on public and private land is increasing. Each year more agencies, local governments, and private ownerships are looking into the feasibility of adding trails.

Most of these rides occur in forests. Some are held in prairies and desert areas, but all are in managed wildlands. It takes a lot of land and a lot of trail to host an NATRC event – top riders ride a minimum of 50 miles in a weekend, while novices ride 35 to 40 miles. Trail rides occur on a variety of ownerships, both public (federal, state, and county-managed areas) and private family-operated forests and leased lands. Because I am first a forester, I pay attention to who owns the land and how trail riding fits into the management scheme.

Photo by Katrina Casey, kcasey design

Pursuing an avocation in competitive trail riding, Sara Baldwin has ridden in 87 events in 16 different states, personally logging nearly 4,000 miles in sanctioned competitions. Her horse "Loco Motion" (pictured left) won the NATRC "President's Cup" as the top scoring horse in 2014. Recently appearing on the cover of HoofPrints, the magazine of the North American Trail Ride Conference, this photo was taken during the Indian Territory Competitive Trail Ride (CTR) at the John Zink Ranch near Tulsa. While this 30,000-acre private ownership is a functioning ranch producing cattle and oil, its primary use is as an exclusive nature facility for scouting and conservation groups. The CTR is the only equestrian event allowed on the property.

Federal lands tend to have the oldest and largest trail systems. Recreation areas such as the National Park Service's "Big South Fork" in northern Tennessee become vacation destinations for trail riders. In Kentucky, the "Land Between the Lakes" National Recreation Area (managed by the USDA Forest Service) has a horse campground with 400 sites. National Forests belong to all of the people, and must include recreation in their management plans; most include horse trails. Large forests in the southern Appalachians, such as the Jefferson National Forest in Virginia and the Chattahoochee National Forest in north Georgia, have hundreds of miles of horse trails. In Alabama, there are horse trails on the Bankhead National Forest, the Tuskegee National Forest, and all three ranger districts of the Talladega National Forest.

There are not nearly as many state forests, but I have attended NATRC rides at the Blackwater

State Forest in Florida and the Appomattox-Buckingham State Forest in Virginia. On both these forests, trail riding is an established use that complements other management objectives: long-leaf pine restoration on the former, and timber production for revenue on the latter.



Sara and Loco Motion lead friends to finish a ride at "Heart of Dixie," a family-operated forest, farm, and camping facility near Troy, Alabama.



Photo by Amanda Rand

Dominoes at dawn: black and white horses line up at "Mingo Trails," a family forest leased by a saddle club near Toombsboro, Georgia.

State and county parks are numerous and exist to provide recreation for the public. Oklahoma, Kansas, and Nebraska don't have very much of what we Alabamians would call 'forests,' but they do have a lot of reservoirs for water supply. These reservoirs have wooded areas protecting the watershed, and a surprising (to me) number include horse trails. Kansas has 25 public horse trails with over 300 miles of trails! Perched high on bluffs overlooking the Missouri River, "Indian Cave" State Park in Nebraska is rich in local history and contains beautiful wooded horse trails. Annual NATRC rides take place there each October when the park is very crowded with all kinds of recreational users. One year at this park, I recall some hikers who had mistakenly camped on the horse trail – they were still in their tents and sleeping bags at 9:00 am when we rode through!

Trails on private properties are special to me, as I can empathize with the owners and managers. I have ridden on five ranches in Texas, and they're all run differently. Some allow riding to supplement their cattle operations, while others only own a few cattle for tax purposes (Texas law protects cattle ranching) so that they can keep their land open for riding. There's the huge John Zink Ranch and Nature Preserve near Tulsa, Oklahoma, which only allows one horse event each year, an NATRC ride. On the other hand, the posh Biltmore Estate in North Carolina allows regular horse use, and charges handsomely for same. Last summer, I rode at the "Flying R" Ranch deep in the Missouri Ozarks. Since there was not enough trail mileage on the family property, we rode down the highway a few miles and did a trail loop on the Mark Twain National Forest.

In 1993, my husband and I started the first company in Alabama offering trail rides on private forestland. Now, many family forests have adopted this recreational use, and some small businesses combine camping, riding, and access to trails on public land. All of this means more places to ride and more forests for all to enjoy throughout the state. 🐾

Editor's Note: A good listing of Alabama trails is available under the 'links and resources' tab on the Alabama Horse Council website at: www.alabamahorsecouncil.org. For more information on forest trail riding, contact the author at forestowners@wildblue.net.