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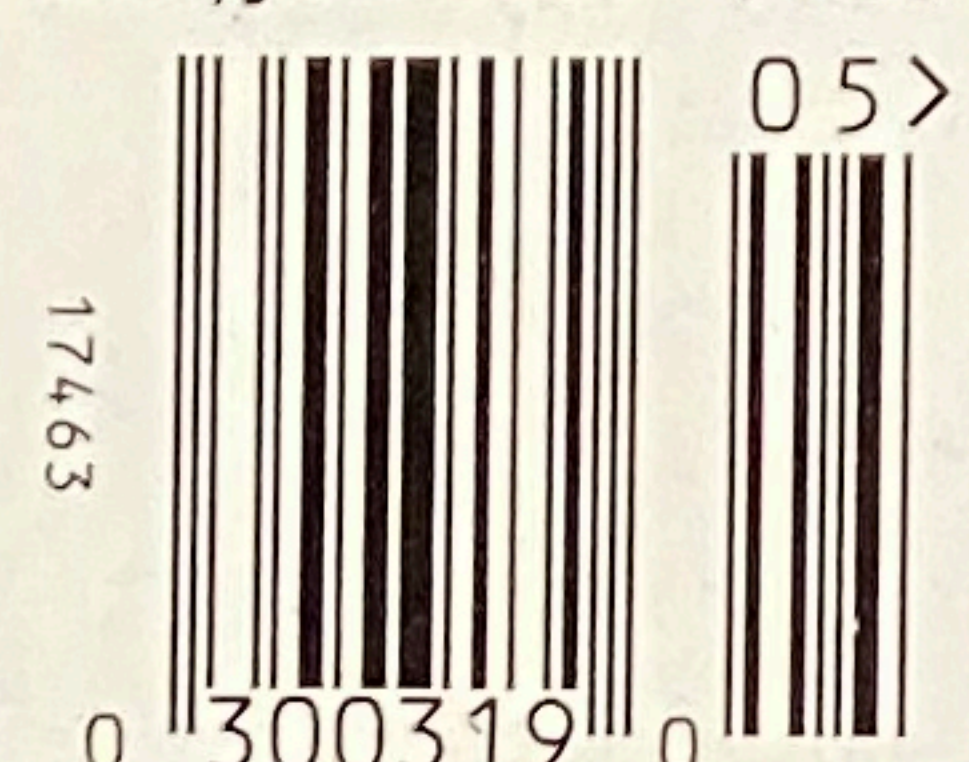
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HAPPY TRAILS

Iowa's bike trails range from spectacular to serene, and the 'rails-to-trails' conversion yields a network that boosts Iowans' safety and fitness

Text by Emery Styron



Pushing pedals isn't the only thing that makes Melanie Rosenow's heart race as she rides Iowa's bike trails. Once, a flock of wild turkeys exploded from the woods, fanning her face with their wing beats. Another time, she found herself locked in a trailhead restroom, wondering if she would ever be rescued.

The laidback cyclist, who blogs about her two-wheeled adventures at iowabikerides.com, appreciates the spectacular view of the Des Moines River valley from the iconic High

Trestle Trail bridge, but it's "out of the ordinary spots" she celebrates most.

She treasures Trout Run Trail in northeast Iowa for its "windy places, restored prairie, switchbacks and hills," plus a chance to ride past the famous Decorah eagles' nest. One of her favorite stops on the Raccoon River Valley Trail, which passes by Waukee, where she lives, is a marker commemorating the bygone circus village of Ortonville.

"There are lots of historical things, especially along trails that are former

train tracks," she notes. Iowa's more than 260 trails offer "something for everybody, whether it's a nice, flat paved trail, limestone or gravel roads," says Rosenow. "Use the bike trails to see a part of Iowa you might have missed in your car."

Iowa may have the best bike trail system of any state in nation, says former *Des Moines Register* Iowa Boy columnist Chuck Offenburger, who moved to tiny Cooper, near Jefferson, specifically to locate on the Raccoon River Trail. Iowa's bike trail bounty, he says, came from the large number



Opposite: Cruising on one of Iowa's more than 260 trails. Photo by Brian Abeling.
Above: The 16½-mile Great Western Trail runs from Des Moines to Martensdale.

of railroads abandoned in the '60s, '70s and '80s as freight moved to trucks. "They were either going to revert to farm use or something. A group of people really pushed to convert them into recreational trails."

Winfield cyclist Mark Hamilton is also fan. "I'm just tickled to death that Iowa is doing a lot of work with its trails," he said, noting that Minnesota

is known for its Root River Trail and Missouri for its Katy Trail, but Iowa has destination trails in all regions that are growing into a statewide network.

Offenburger, admitting his bias, calls the 89-mile Raccoon River Valley Trail his favorite. One of the longest paved bike trails in the U.S., it connects 14 communities and four counties between Jefferson and Des

Moines along a former rail route. "Like a railroad, it moves people from community to community, and drives commerce from town to town," he said. "The thrilling thing is that there are more people coming into these towns on the trail than ever came on the railroad."

The Raccoon's 350,000 riders per year contribute to the annual \$365

HAPPY TRAILS

Continued

Here are some bucket-list bike trails our sources recommend. Visit bikeiowa.com for more trails, along with maps, descriptions and directions.

- **Wabash Trace Nature Trail**, along the route of the Wabash Railroad of “Cannonball” fame, through the scenic Loess Hills along the Missouri River. Starts in Omaha, stretches 62.6 miles to Blanchard at the Iowa-Missouri border. Requires \$1 day pass or \$12 annual pass. Mark Hamilton, who grew up in southwest Iowa when the train still ran, said he never imagined in his wildest dreams he would someday ride the route as a bike trail. trailink.com/trail/wabash-trace-nature-trail/

- **Trout Run Trail**, 11-mile loop recreational trail around Decorah. Runs next to Iowa’s second largest trout hatchery, crosses trout streams five times, features three art pieces and passage over Hwy. 9 bridges lit with LED lighting that varies with the seasons. troutruntrail.com

- **Raccoon River Valley Trail**, 89-mile paved trail from Jefferson to Waukee, with 72-mile interior loop. \$2 per day or \$10 per year, free for 17 and under. Opened in late March: the \$1.1 million, 340-foot-long, 15-foot-tall Waukee Railroad Pergola, designed by Iowa transportation artist David Dahlquist as a gateway to the trail. Components will be placed at six other trailheads. raccoonrivervalleytrail.org

- **High Trestle Trail**, built by the Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation, and considered the shining star of Iowa’s trail system. Runs between Woodward and Ankeny for 25 miles through five towns and four counties, and includes iconic, half-mile, 13-story-tall bridge across the Des Moines River valley, one of the largest trail bridges in the world. trailink.com/trail/high-trestle-trail/

- **Cedar Valley Nature Trail**, 51-mile trail connecting Linn County Metro area to Waterloo area, following the floodplain of the Cedar River through forested areas, wetlands, and rolling farmlands. A multi-use trail used for biking, hiking, in-line skating, cross-country skiing, running, and nature study. Mark Wyatt notes the trail is two-thirds paved with the remainder in crushed limestone, providing an “interesting old rail perspective” as it passes by a few existing Cedar Valley depots. linncountytrails.org/maps/find-a-trail/cedar-valley-nature-trail/



Above: The High Trestle Trail bridge is the highlight of a 25-mile trail that spans four Iowa counties. It was built atop existing 130-foot-tall piers previously owned and used by the Union Pacific railroad. Photo by Brian Abeling.

- **Siouxland Trails**. Paved urban system in the Sioux City Area featuring four trails along the Missouri River, spanning more than 12 miles and featuring spectacular views, including Dakota Point, where Iowa, Nebraska and South Dakota meet. Includes access to all three states. iowabikeroutes.com/trails/siouxlandtrails/

- **Iowa Great Lakes Trail**. Multi-use trail for biking, walking, rollerblading, running and cross-country skiing around Spirit Lake, West Okoboji, Arnolds Park, Milford and Lake Park. Spine of system is 14-mile hard surface trail looping around Spirit Lake and connected with smaller trails. Offenburger: “It was just really visionary for people up there. Vehicle traffic is so heavy, but you can ride safely around Okoboji and Spirit Lake without having to deal with it.” dickinsoncountytrails.com **I**