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A casual appreciation

Lower Trail is great experience for novice outdoorsmen

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When it comes to the outdoors and nature, it's safe to say that none of my family shares my unbridled passion for those things, much less understands it. We were raised in the country, and all of them appreciate seeing wildlife and enjoying open spaces, but I'm the only one in our clan who hunts, fishes or regularly pursues any number of other outdoor activities. And sometimes my obsession for the natural world baffles even those who have known me all my life.

For instance, my sister and her fiance, who live in Florida, returned to Pennsylvania for a visit on Labor Day weekend. During a family gathering one afternoon, while everyone else relaxed in the shade, I wandered off to a field next to my parents' house where I spent several hours photographing grasshoppers, spiders and bees. Upon my return, no one questioned why I wanted to crawl around on my hands and knees for three hours in 90-degree heat looking at bugs, which is just as well. My standard answer for such situations is that I am easily amused - and glad of it.

Last Tuesday, however, I was able to share a wonderful day with our Florida visitors doing something that has become one of my favorite outdoor activities in recent months - bike riding on area rails-to-trails projects. I bought a bicycle last spring primarily with the idea to use it for some exercise now and then. One of my first rides was on the Lower Trail in Blair and Huntingdon counties, and that project quickly became one of my favorite places to ride.

The Lower Trail is owned and maintained by Rails to Trails of Central Pennsylvania and runs about 17 miles from just east of Water Street in Huntingdon County to just east of Canoe Creek in Blair County, closely following the course of the Frankstown Branch of the Juniata River. The trailheads at each end of the route are located close to U.S. Route 22.

The trail is smooth and virtually level, which makes riding there enjoyable without being overly strenuous and that allows one to enjoy fully the beauty of the river and the surrounding woodlands. There are several interim trailheads along the route, which allow additional access points.

The trail is open to almost any type of non-motorized transportation, so in addition to bikers, you will often encounter walkers, joggers, dog walkers and horseback riders. In the winter, cross-country skiing and snowshoeing are also possible.

Fishermen, kayakers and canoeists use the trail for access to the river, and history buffs can enjoy the remnants of the nineteenth-century canal, locks and outbuildings located at various points along the route.

Brochures are available at each trailhead, which include a detailed map noting points of interest and their locations. There is also an excellent Web site (www.rttcpa.org) that provides complete information on the trail along with current news and a calendar of events.

My sister and her fianc both ride bicycles for recreation at home in Florida, so I invited them to experience the Lower Trail with me while they were here. We probably had ridden less than two miles, and my companions were already telling me what a great idea the ride was. Our original plan was to ride for about 12 or 15 miles round trip, but no one wanted to make the decision to turn around, and we ended up riding the entire length of the trail and back. That 34-mile trek was my longest single ride to date and took us just about five hours, including a handful of stops for drinks, snacks or sightseeing.

Along the way, we saw the ever-present rabbits and squirrels scampering about the right of way here and there. At one spot, I spied a couple of painted turtles basking on a rock in the river. From one of the many bridges on the trail, we watched a nice-sized smallmouth bass cruising the current below, along with some sunfish and suckers. But the best sighting of the day occurred when a large hen turkey walked across the trail with five young birds in tow.

I certainly enjoyed the opportunity to show the Florida branch of our family tree a slice of Pennsylvania outdoors that they never may have experienced otherwise. As we loaded the bikes for the trip home, both of them vowed to make this ride a regular event whenever they returned to Pennsylvania. And the best part for me was I didn't have to explain why someone would want to do that.

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