

Everybody Out | Crossing Washington on the John Wayne Pioneer Trail

by Marilyn Hedges.



A cyclist rides south on the John Wayne Trail toward the Beverly trestle across the Columbia River, south of Vantage.

Have you ever wanted to cross Washington by foot, bicycle or horseback without competing with motorized traffic? Every spring, the John Wayne Pioneer Wagons and Riders do just that on their annual Ride Across Washington.

They are now preparing for their 35th cross Washington ride (see www.jwpwr.org). Participants ride horseback or horse-drawn wagons, or accompany the horsemen on bicycles, to cross the state on the John Wayne Pioneer Trail, a trail also enjoyed throughout the year by hikers, Boy Scouts, geologists, railroad historians, bird watchers, dog walkers and outdoor enthusiasts of all types.

The John Wayne Pioneer Trail is a National Recreational Trail spanning approximately 285 miles of the state of Washington. It starts on the western slopes of the Cascades near North Bend, tunnels under Snoqualmie Pass, and crosses eastern Washington's vast landscape of rangeland, scablands and the rolling Palouse to reach the Idaho border. The trail passes over spectacular trestles and through dark tunnels that were once part of the Milwaukee Road railroad before the state purchased the right of way from the bankrupt railroad in 1980.

Washington State Parks has developed the western section of the trail from Cedar Falls to the Columbia River as Iron Horse State Park. This linear park includes four primitive campsites and has become popular for shorter adventures.

A favorite, family-friendly trip during summer months involves starting at the Hyak trailhead at Snoqualmie Pass and traveling west. The gentle, 21-mile downhill grade of hard-pack gravel takes in the longest trail tunnel in the country, the Snoqualmie Tunnel (2.3 miles long), as well as high trestles, mountain views and evergreen forests before ending at Cedar Falls, where it is possible to catch a shuttle back to your starting point. For a more epic tour, the John Wayne Pioneer Trail and various connecting trails can be used to travel nearly the entire distance from Seattle to the Idaho border, or from Seattle to Spokane, on nonmotorized trail.

The John Wayne Pioneer Trail east of the Columbia River remains largely undeveloped. In 2015, a 135-mile section of the trail was nearly lost to public use when a couple of Washington state legislators from the 9th District included a proviso in the 2015 Capital Budget proposal intending to give away this state-owned property to adjacent landowners. An error in the wording of the amendment nullified it, and the trail was not only saved, but the near loss of this recreational treasure mobilized supporters.

With the increased awareness of the John Wayne Pioneer Trail, more people are exploring its potential, planning cross-state trips on mountain bikes and fatbikes, or using the trail to hike and explore sections of Washington's landscape not easily accessed by road.

Washington State Parks is now working to develop more of the trail in eastern Washington, starting in the Palouse. This month, State Parks is holding two final meetings for public input on the planning process. Recreationalists are recognizing that this cross-state trail could revitalize small communities along the route, but the eastern Washington section of trail needs attention. Trestles and tunnels need renovation. There is need for new trailheads and campsites, noxious weed control and surface grading. And an important link between the western and eastern sections of the trail — the historic and picturesque trestle across the Columbia River at Beverly, south of Vantage — remains closed until funding allows renovation. Supporters are working to solve these issues.

If you value the opportunity to experience and travel across our state's diverse and spectacular landscape without need for a motorized vehicle or a busy interstate, help us preserve and develop one of Washington's greatest recreational assets, the John Wayne Pioneer Trail. For more information go to www.friendsofjohnwaynepioneertrail.org.

Marilyn Hedges is a retired nurse practitioner, board member of the Complete the Loop Coalition and founding board member of the Friends of John Wayne Pioneer Trail. WenatcheeOutdoors and The Wenatchee World collaborate on this column to help everybody in the community benefit from our regional outdoor resources.