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Sunday, May 28, 2006

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Eastern Trail stretches to Nonesuch River

By MELISSA KIM

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The dream of riding from one end of Maine to another on an off-road trail just got a mile closer to reality. On Saturday, National Trails Day, a new one-mile-long off-road section of the Eastern Trail will open in Scarborough.

The Eastern Trail is a hiking and biking route that runs from Kittery to South Portland, primarily on roads but with several off-road sections. As envisioned by the Eastern Trail Alliance, it will one day be a mostly off-road route from Portsmouth, N.H., to Portland. It also acts as the southern Maine section of the East Coast Greenway, a project to create a continuous off-road trail spanning 2,950 miles from Florida to Maine.

The Eastern Trail's newest off-road section goes from Eastern Road to the Nonesuch River. Now cyclists or walkers can begin at Pine Point Road, cross a bridge over Scarborough Marsh, continue across Black Point Road down Eastern Road and meander through woods to reach the banks of the Nonesuch, with only one short stretch on a minor paved road.

The new trail is on land owned by the Desfosses family, owners of the Hillside Retirement Community. As part of the negotiation for a zoning contract to build 200 manufactured housing units, the Desfosses family granted the town an easement and donated \$60,000 toward the trail development. The town of Scarborough provided \$200,000 and oversaw the construction of the trail, which was done by Dearborn Construction.

There are two access points to the Scarborough sections of the Eastern Trail. There's a large parking lot, with room for maybe 20 cars, on Pine Point Road (Route 9 West). Turning coastward (east) from Route 1, you'll pass the Scarborough Marsh Audubon Center and, about one mile in, see a parking lot on the left signposted Scarborough Wildlife Management Area, Inland Fisheries and Wildlife, State of Maine.

You can also access the trail from Black Point Road (Route 207). From Route 1, turn coastward (east) and drive 0.4 mile. Take

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your first right onto Eastern Road. After about 0.3 mile, the pavement ends and you'll find a parking lot with room for about a dozen cars.

So, finally, the route: For a nice, comprehensive ride, start at the Pine Point Road parking lot and ride all the way to the Nonesuch and back, a total of just under nine miles. The first half of this ride is flat, suitable for beginners and families with children. The second half, the new section, has a few small hills and is a little more difficult. A mountain bike or hybrid would be more appropriate than a skinny-tire road bike.

From the parking lot, you'll head immediately over the bridge, which after about two years still looks brand new. There are tightly spaced bollards on either side to deter ATVs; a bike trailer might just fit through. The expansive views of the marsh and the Dunstan River are impressive. Early morning is the best time for bird-watching; look for snowy egrets, glossy ibis, herons, sparrows and dozens more species. This is a spot that looks completely different at different times of day and different times of year; it's something, I think, about the way the marsh grasses and water capture and reflect light.

Ride on from here along the wide dirt path. The path is heavily used by fishermen at this end, as well as walkers and other cyclists, so be sure to ride respectfully. As you leave this main section of the marsh, more and more signs of civilization appear on your left - storage yards with snowplows all in a row, signposts telling you that you're above a natural gas pipeline, the manicured greens of the Willowdale Golf Course and, toward the end, backyards of a housing development - so if that isn't to your liking, just keep your eyes focused on the swampy, wild growth lining the right side of the trail.

After about two miles you'll reach the parking lot at the end of Eastern Road. Here the dirt road turns into pavement. To check out the newest section of the trail, go straight across Black Point Road (Route 207) onto the other part of Eastern Road. Ride for about one mile; you'll pass several housing developments and one rotary (just go straight through it). The road takes a sharp 90-degree left turn; the trailhead is straight ahead.

Immediately you enter the woods on a wide dirt path that's edged with a foot or two of wood chips on either side. The path loops up, and there's a fork; the right branch leads quickly to a dead end that gives you a nice view of the Nonesuch River and surrounding marshland. Check it out and go back to the main trail, which swoops around a few wide curves and takes you up and down some gentle hills.

You'll soon see the backside of the construction site for the Hillside Retirement Community. When I rode the trail recently, I saw lampposts and street signs but no houses yet. As you pass, give silent thanks to owner Theresa Desfosses and her family for making this path possible.

You'll come to a T-junction; head right and follow the trail to the end, up onto the old bridge abutment for the Nonesuch River. This is one of the next challenges for Eastern Trail developers: how to get across the river and connect the path to the South Portland Greenbelt. As Eastern Trail Alliance president John Andrews says, "it's a mere mile away as the crow flies." Andrews

says there is a feasibility study under way, but no funds yet.

The Nonesuch is pretty here; birds sing in the dense vegetation, and the river swirls slowly below. It's a short stretch to the other side, and you almost want to toss your bike, jump across and keep going just to see what you can see. For now, I'll have to be content to turn around and retrace my route.

Melissa Kim, a freelance writer in Portland, is the author of "New England Biking: 100 of the Best Road and Trail Rides" (Foghorn Outdoors/Avalon Travel Publishing). She welcomes comments at bikes@melissakim.com

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