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Go with the flow on this rivery ride

A “flow trail” mountain-bike system sprouts near Alsea Falls

MULTIMEDIA PHOTO



Eric Emerson hits a jump and gets air on the lower half of High Baller Trail in the Alsea Falls Trails System southwest of Corvallis. (Zach Urness/Statesman Journal)

BY ZACH URNESS*(Salem) Statesman Journal*

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The thing that struck me during a recent ride through Alsea Falls Trails System was how engineers had conjured something unique, maybe even beautiful, from an uninspiring canvas.

The mountain-bike system southwest of Corvallis — which opened to the public June 22 — was created amid thin second-growth forest, without scenic vistas and among logging roads, deprived of even the waterfall that gives the area its name.

But the 6-mile network stands out through the artistry of specially designed “flow trails,” pathways that curve, weave and roll down the mountain with such natural fluidity it feels as though you’re following a river.

“It’s tough to define exactly what ‘flow’ is, but for me, it’s a trail with a sort of sinuosity — an ebb and flow that keeps you in the groove, whooshing back-and-forth without losing speed so that your skills match the trail,” said Eric Emerson, who helped design the trail as advocacy and trail coordinator of Corvallis-based group Team Dirt.

The flow trails, defined by banked turns, rolling terrain and small jumps, are the highlight of a re-imagining of Alsea Falls Recreation Area between Alpine and Alsea in the Coast Range.

Known for a 30-foot waterfall and small campground, the site is getting a facelift by the Salem Bureau of Land Management starting with the trail system in the park’s southern half.

BLM, in collaboration with Team Dirt, took a rarely visited collection of steep trails and

logging roads and turned it into a showcase of mountain-bike routes during the past year.

A total of 10 to 12 miles are planned for the future, and next year the BLM plans to expand the campground and create hiking-only trails in an overall effort to create a small recreation hub.

The project has cost about \$115,000 so far, with the entire project slated to run between \$200,000 and \$240,000. Team Dirt has contributed more than 1,700 hours of volunteer work, which at a market value of \$22.14 per hour, brings a savings of \$37,500.

“We realized we had the chance to overhaul the trail system and bring a new and improved recreation asset to the community,” said Rich Hatfield, field manager for the Marys Peak Resource Area. “The response from the mountain biking community has really been amazing, better than I ever would have expected.”

The trails feature options that range from beginner to intermediate. Even new riders will get the chance to experience going with the flow.

“Mountain bikes can ride on almost anything, but it’s usually trails that were designed for hiking, which doesn’t always make it the most fun,” said Mike Ripley, board chairman of Team Dirt. “My vision is to bring trails that — no matter if you have a \$5,000 bike or a \$300 bike — you can ride and get enthused about cycling.

“We want to have something that’s just fun, that leaves people with a smile.”

The routes

Riders currently have options for both an easier or more intermediate level loop.

I started with the easier loop — a good way to become accustomed to flow trails if you’ve never tried them.

From the trailhead, I followed Dutchman Trail on a gradual climb of 1.4 miles to BLM Road 36, where an additional easy mile brought me to the top of Springboard Trail. The climb was 580 feet.

This is where the fun begins. The trail swoops downhill and the difference between riding regular single track and a flow trail becomes obvious right off the bat.

With high-banked turns, you can swoop around corners without slamming on the brakes. In fact, brakes are optional here (so is peddling), because the trail's collection of rolls and hills allow riders as much or as little speed as desired. The flow of Springboard Trail is 1.5 miles — it goes quick — the full loop is 4.4 miles.

The intermediate option, likely to lure more-experienced mountain bikers, begins with a 3.6-mile and 995-foot climb up paved Fall Creek Road (just beyond the trailhead gate) to the top of High Baller Trail.

This stretch is a significant step up from the easier loop and you get a sense of what's to come from a sign attached to a tree that reads: "Danger: drops and roots oh my!"

True to form, the trail squeezes through narrow gaps, over roots and along a series of quick drops that will punish those not prepared (helpful signs warn riders before the drops). After a half-mile, the trail hits a flat spot. The lower section of High Baller is flow trail, with bigger turns, jumps and more speed possible on what I'd consider the most thrilling stretch of the trail.

High Baller Trail connects to Springboard Trail and the easier stretch, concluding a loop of 6.7 miles. There are signs and markers at every intersection, making getting lost unlikely.

Overall, the High Baller and Springboard route is among the best mountain biking that I've experienced and a great start for the Alsea Falls Trail system. It will be fun to see where they take it next.

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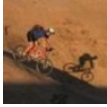
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