



IOWA'S RACCOON RIVER VALLEY TRAIL

HEART OF

BY BETSY RUBINER

For Des Moines city dwellers, the 89-mile Raccoon River Valley Trail (raccoonrivervalleytrail.org) has long offered much-appreciated, easy access to Iowa's rural heart. The trail's many paved miles—including a 72-mile loop—follow former railroad corridors through rural scenes that early-20th-century, Iowa-born artist Grant Wood (of "American Gothic" fame) could have painted: kids playing in a quiet small-town park, livestock grazing in a pasture, a whirring combine cutting through acres of soybeans, seemingly endless fields of young corn.

IOWA



The 89-mile Raccoon River Valley Trail runs through the center of the Hawkeye State, connecting three counties, 14 communities and Iowa's capital. For more information, go to raccoonrivervalleytrail.org.

Miles: 89
Surfaces: Asphalt, concrete
Endpoints: Jefferson > Clive
Counties: Dallas, Greene, Guthrie

"It's connecting Iowa's largest city and state capital with one of the world's most productive agricultural regions," says Chuck Offenburger, former *Des Moines Register* "Iowa Boy" columnist and a well-known Iowa cycling enthusiast. "Many people today do not understand farming, even in Iowa, so this is like an outdoor classroom."

The multiuse rail-trail not only serves as an urban-rural link, with a 5.5-mile connector east to Des Moines' extensive trail system, but it also connects three counties and 14 communities, from small rural towns to burgeoning suburbs, with populations ranging from less than 30 to more than 19,000. The gently undulating valley, dotted with farms raising crops and livestock, surrounds three forks of central Iowa's Raccoon River, the primary source of the Des Moines metropolitan area's drinking water.

The trail uses the former right-of-way of a railroad built in the late 19th century to connect Des Moines with northwest Iowa's Great Lakes. Rail service ended for passengers in 1952 and for freight in the mid-1980s. Since opening in 1989 with 34 miles connecting six towns, the trail has grown—and so has usage, especially closest to Des Moines, including the popular loop. In 1997, the trail expanded by 12 miles, in 1999 by 10 miles, and in 2013 by 33 miles to form the loop, which passes through a dozen communities. A 12-mile spur extends north from the loop's northwest corner, and another spur extends 5.5 miles east from the loop's southeast corner.

Raccoon's First Steps

A lifelong resident of the trail community of Redfield, population 826, 84-year-old James Baker grew up riding the railroad north with his mother to visit relatives. Today Baker volunteers at Redfield's restored depot, now a rest stop offering trail users free tips and homemade cookies, sold for 25 cents. Losing rail service was a blow, but the trail "makes a lot of difference," says Baker. "It generates revenue and helps the town because people come in on bikes. We're a friendly town and try being cordial."

His enthusiasm is shared by volunteers who power the Raccoon River Valley Trail Association (raccoonrivervalleytrail.org), a nonprofit started in 2006 with financial support and participation from county conservation boards. The association now has one paid staffer.

"The goal has always been to market the whole trail and all the communities," says Carla Offenburger, the association's founding chairperson, who first met her husband, Chuck, at a trailside ice cream shop. "The chambers

of commerce in the communities are interested in their portions, which is great, but we wanted to do the whole trail."

Strategically picking board members representing every county and most communities was key. "We kept each other in check to make sure that if we did something in Jefferson, we could do it in Panora or Adel," says Offenburger. After a road trip to consult with leaders of southeastern Minnesota's booming Root River State Trail (rootrivertrail.org), the Iowans better recognized their trail's potential economic return on investment and the importance of a consistent trail-wide promotional and organizational effort. They created a trail brochure and website, attended trail conferences and travel shows, contacted tourism magazines and advertised in newspapers.

They also increased trailside amenities. "Our goal was a restroom, something to eat and overnight accommoda-

14

No. of
communities
connected by
the trail

THE AVERAGE DISTANCE BETWEEN TOWNS CONNECTED BY IOWA'S RACCOON RIVER VALLEY TRAIL IS ABOUT 6 MILES.



tion in every community. I think we've done the restroom and 'something to eat' parts. Overnight accommodation is harder," she says, adding that although providing amenities in tiny towns is a challenge, they do what they can. "Things wouldn't have happened if people in those communities didn't get a feeling of support."

Art and History

Although the trail has become an Iowa favorite, regionally and nationally, "it's still a bit of a hidden jewel," says Eric Oberg, trail development director for the Midwest Regional Office of Rails-to-Trails Conservancy (RTC). But that could soon change, thanks to new projects that may attract more visitors, further boost the economies of trail communities and extend the trail's reputation.

First up is a \$1.1 million public art installation at the major southeast trailhead in the Des Moines suburb of Waukee. With the project scheduled for completion this

fall after years of planning and fundraising, trail champions hope the "Waukee Railroad Pergola: In the Shadow of the Rails" will become an iconic feature akin to the public art bridge that has made the nearby 25.6-mile High Trestle Trail (inhf.org/what-we-do/protection/high-trestle-trail) one of Iowa's most popular and best known.

The pergola was designed by Des Moines-based public artist David Dahlquist (read an interview with Dahlquist in the Fall 2016 issue of *Rails to Trails*: rtc.li/dahlquist). He has won national acclaim for the High Trestle Trail's spectacular half-mile-long, 13-story-high bridge featuring dramatic sculptural elements recalling the region's coal-mining past. "The bridge on High Trestle is a huge [draw]," says Cooper Riley, Raccoon River Valley Trail Association chairperson. For Waukee and the Raccoon River Valley Trail, the pergola is "going to be a community gathering space, a landmark."

With red-and-white striped columns designed to visually echo former railway signage that marked the area when train riders passed through, the pergola celebrates the rail history of Waukee and the trail. "It really does tell the story; it's based on the railroad heritage," says Jim Miller, an avid cyclist, trail association member and community volunteer spearheading the project with the city of Waukee, which owns it. "Years ago, people were traveling town to town on this route in a train. Now they're traveling town to town on this route on bicycles."

Buy-in and Build Up

With several other communities planning their own similarly themed smaller installations, the public art effort reflects the multijurisdictional, public/private/business cooperation and passionate civic involvement—including via the well-regarded trail association—that has spurred development on and near the trail.

The association "has really done a lot of work with communities and taught them how to use the trail as an economic tool and community asset. There's a lot of buy-in from the communities to continue to build up their towns around the trail and to promote coming to their town," says Andrea Boulton, trails and greenways director at Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation (INHF), a nonprofit that has helped create more than 65 percent of Iowa's rail-trails.

"The importance or priority that the Raccoon River communities have put on (the trail) seems a bit more" than elsewhere, notes Boulton. She adds, "One thing that stands out about the trail and the association is that they are constantly doing improvements."

"In Perry, we need to do everything we can to reach all our potential customers. Cyclists are one of those target bases."

Jay Hartz,
Co-Owner,
Hotel Pattee,
Perry, Iowa

USING THE TRAIL

Miles: 89, with a 72-mile interior loop

Surfaces: Concrete, asphalt

Grade: 1-2 percent

Fees: Daily = \$2; annual = \$10; ages 17 and under = free

A trail user permit is required on all county conservation board sections. Permits are available at trailheads and conservation board offices or by becoming a Friend of the Trail for \$25 (includes \$15 donation). For more information, go to raccoonrivervalleytrail.org.

TRAIL CONNECTIONS

Communities: 14, including Waukee, Adel, Redfield, Linden, Panora, Yale, Herndon, Cooper, Jefferson, Jamaica, Dawson, Perry, Minburn, Dallas Center
Average distance between towns: About 6 miles
Largest communities: Waukee, population 19,248; Perry, population 8,108
Smallest communities: Herndon, population about 25; Cooper, population about 30

TRAIL IMPACT

Estimated trail users annually: 350,000

Estimated economic impact from the trail in Dallas Center – Summer 2016: \$76,896 to \$98,704

89

Length of the trail in miles



“We started with humble goals to have flush toilets in all towns, and now here we are doing million-dollar public art projects.”

Chuck Offenburger

PHOTO: Prairie remnants are among the Raccoon River Valley Trail’s collection of natural Iowa features.

Another long-awaited major project is a \$5 million, 9-mile paved connector to the High Trestle Trail, which begins just north of Des Moines. The connector between the premier trails is at least three to five years away, according to Mike Wallace, executive director of the Dallas County Conservation Board, which owns and manages the Raccoon River Valley Trail, along with two other county conservation boards and several cities. But once complete, RTC’s Oberg predicts that it will “change overnight” the Raccoon River Valley Trail’s national profile.

Many Draws

In June 2017, 2,700 cyclists/bacon-lovers hit the Raccoon River Valley Trail for the fourth annual BACoon Ride, pedaling between trail communities in the nation’s top pork-producing state to sample bacon chorizo burritos, bacon donuts and bacon corn dogs. With proceeds going to Iowa cycling-related and other charities, the ride also benefits communities by luring visitors (some in goofy, bacon-inspired outfits).

Because the trail can provide almost a 100-mile “century” ride—but with many connecting communities—it is popular with cyclists training for triathlons and long-distance events such as RAGBRAI, the major annual summer ride across Iowa. “I value the trail because I used to ride a lot on the highway,” says Cooper Riley, who

began riding the trail as a kid and now occasionally rides with his kids in tow. “After getting run into the ditch I don’t know how many times, I started riding the trail exclusively for training.”

The trail offers a low-key, peaceful recreational experience for all. Along the route, trail users pass a variety of natural features—including wildflowers, tree cover, prairie remnants, a river and a lake. They may see such wildlife as birds, deer, snakes and butterflies. And they can see evidence of a variety of businesses and industries—from farms, grain elevators and livestock terminals to wind farms, retail shopping centers and brickyards. County seat highlights include a 1902 courthouse in Adel modeled after a French castle, and a 168-foot bell tower in Jefferson. Rail buffs enjoy visiting restored depots along the way featuring old photos, kiosks showcasing rail history, and trail signage with rail motifs.

Happy Trail Users—and Trail Communities

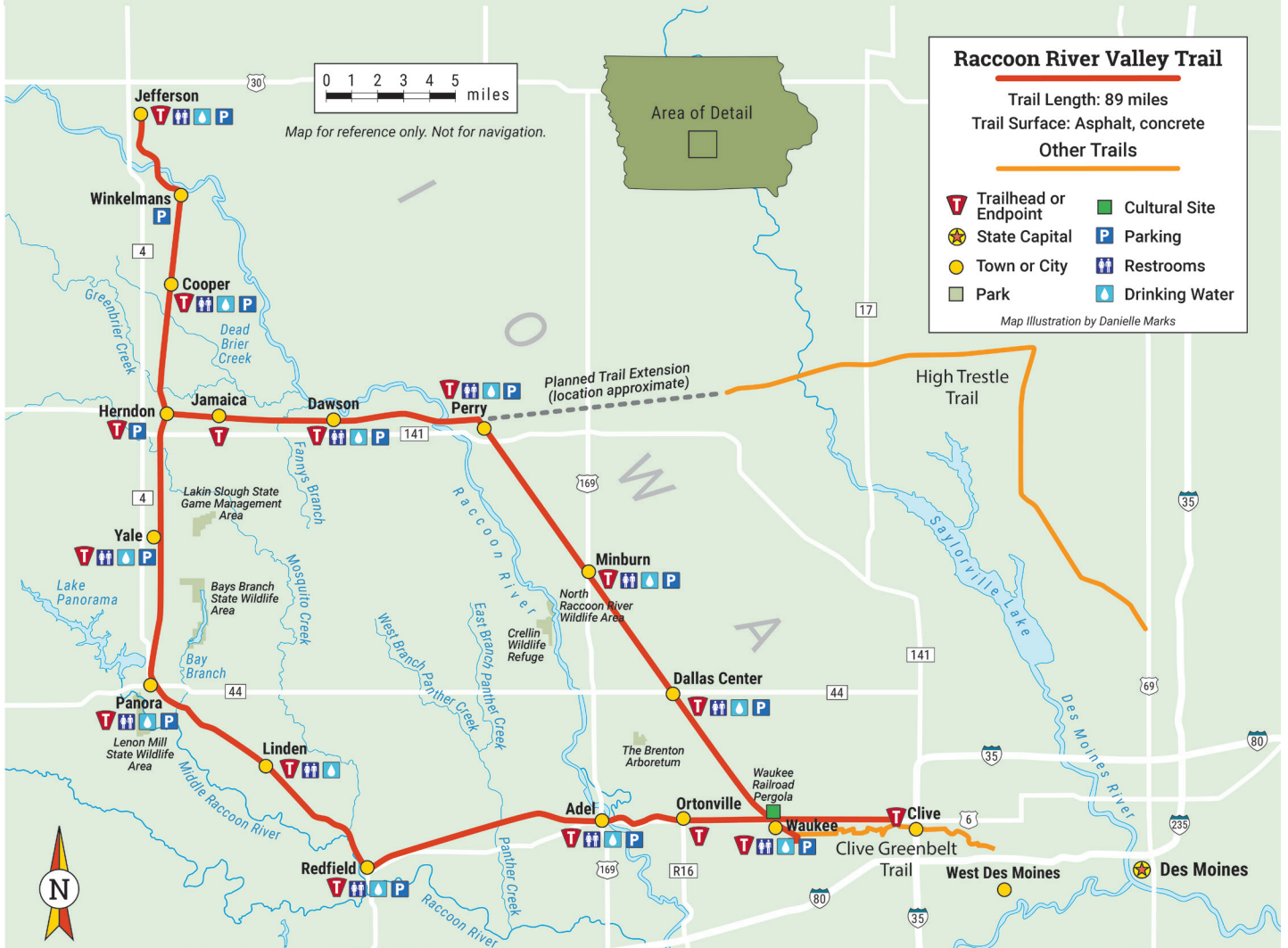
On a hot summer day, John Lamb, a cyclist visiting from Rock Island, Illinois, praises the trail’s newest section. “It’s just in beautiful condition,” he says, noting the trail’s flat terrain (a welcome change from his Mississippi River rides) and a chance to ride past the farm where he grew up.

In addition to locals who enjoy using the trail regularly, it gets Des Moines metro users, some riding in, others driving to, a favorite trailhead. In and around the trail, they can get supplies at a convenience or grocery store, picnic in a park, stop for a burger, beer or brunch, and get flats fixed at bike shops. Overnight options include campgrounds, cabins, motels and the remarkable Hotel Pattee, a restored Arts and Crafts-style building with guest rooms individually decorated to highlight an aspect of small-town life.

“We welcome cyclists. We don’t care if people walk in with their clickety-clack shoes or bike outfits, sweaty or muddy,” says Jay Hartz, co-owner of the hotel, where cyclists make up about 15 percent of overnight guests and where the bike shop next door offers rentals. “In Perry, we need to do everything we can to reach all our potential customers. Cyclists are one of those target bases.”

Reopening the hotel in 2013 after buying it with his wife, Hartz surveyed cyclists to determine their needs. He responded by providing indoor bike storage, an outdoor fix-it station and discounted rates to cycling groups. Those groups have ranged from five Kansas





City women who stayed four nights to about 30 Des Moines friends celebrating a 60th birthday. The “Pedal Perry” committee also started an initiative that has led several businesses—including a dental office, music shop and paint store—to display window stickers showing cyclist-friendly services offered, such as restrooms, water and Wi-Fi. Informational trailhead signs, with smartphone scan codes, help visitors find Perry businesses and services. And, as is often the case along the trail, this effort has been shared to inspire other communities.

Growth Trend

Counters placed at checkpoints in Dallas County, home to most of the trail and the loop, illustrate the trail’s growing popularity, especially after the loop’s 2013 debut. There were 157,777 counter clicks in 2012 (pre-loop) and 330,518 clicks in 2014 (post-loop). The figures do not neatly translate into distinct users because visitors often pass several checkpoints, and the trail’s two other counties are not included, but Chuck Offenburger estimates that the trail attracts about 350,000 visitors a year. (Offenburger is such a trail fan that he and his wife moved to a home beside it.) The typical user is a cyclist between the

ages of 45 and 64 who spends \$6 to \$20 a visit and buys food at restaurants when stopping in a town, according to a recent economic impact study by Iowa State University.

Not inclined to coast on its laurels, the trail association’s work continues. Projects have included creating consistent trail signage, upgrading the trail surface and paving gravel trail intersections. Challenges remain, including funding for trail maintenance, especially on older asphalt sections (although revenue from user fees helps), and Offenburger states that more needs to be done to attract young riders and expand agricultural learning opportunities.

But there is much to look forward to, including the pergola. “We started with humble goals to have flush toilets in all towns, and now here we are doing million-dollar public art projects,” he says.

And of course, there is the future link to the High Trestle Trail, which will allow people to “experience two different trails and their unique characteristics, as well as [more than] a dozen communities and all they have to offer,” says INHF’s Boulton. “The connector is this long-awaited ‘final’ piece of the puzzle. But as soon as it’s done, I’m sure there will be another one.”



Betsy Rubiner is a Des Moines-based travel writer who enjoys riding her bike on trails in Iowa and beyond. She shares her adventures via her travel blog, [TakeBetsywithyou](#).