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FEATURED

## New bridges open access to 23-mile-long Willapa Hills Trail

Tom Paulu [tpaulu@tdn.com](mailto:tpaulu@tdn.com) Jun 9, 2016



Roger Werth, The Daily News

John Bergeson of Quigg Brothers touches up the new \$2.3 million Spooner Bridge.

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The Willapa Hills Trail keeps getting better — and longer. It's now possible to ride a bicycle or even walk the trail for 23 miles from Chehalis to Pe Ell without getting stopped by a washed-out bridge.

That doesn't mean it's advisable to ride the whole thing in one sweaty outing. In fact, a couple of miles I rode this week are rather boring. But there are several nice sections to the trail, and plenty of options for choosing a distance that suits your energy level.

The State Parks Commission will hold a public dedication to several new bridges on the trail at 10 a.m. June 18 in Adna. On June 25, the Willapa Hills Fat Tire Ride and Festival will celebrate the recent trail work. But any day with decent weather is a good time to explore the trail, which is about an hour's drive from Kelso.

Walkers and pedalers follow the route of a Northern Pacific rail line built around 1892 to serve busy sawmills and communities such as Dryad and Doty that back in the day had many more residents than live there now. These days, however, you'll see many more sheep and cows than people along the trail.

The last passenger train ran in 1954, and the route was abandoned in 1990, after which the state parks department acquired the right-of-way.

Work soon began to convert the rail line to a recreational path. Though a central part of the trail opened in 2001, it was broken up when two bridges were washed away by the Chehalis River's raging waters in 2007. Those bridges were replaced last year, along with decking of the 1,000-foot-long trestle crossing the Chehalis River near Adna.

Ace Daily News bicycling photographer Roger Werth and I started out at Adna this week. A warning: Now that the trail is a State Park, a Discover Pass is required to park in lots along the route.

About a half-mile west of Adna comes the newly finished Chehalis River trestle, which is an impressive structure indeed for mere non-motorized vehicles. The river flows languidly underneath the Bridge 5 trestle, which cost \$770,000 to deck, but there are better places to explore the shoreline.

West of here, paving on the trail ends. In general, the farther we went, the looser the gravel. It would be hard going on a road bike with skinny tires. Unlike rail-trails in other states, those in Washington welcome horse riders, said Virginia Painter, a state parks spokeswoman. The trail edges are purposely left softer for horses.

A mile past the Bridge 5 trestle, the trail crosses the Chehalis River on Spooner Bridge, a new structure that looks strong enough to hold a tank. The 300-foot-long Spooner Bridge cost \$2.3 million, paid for with federal FEMA funding.

This week, John Bergeson of Quigg Brothers construction was touching up some paint on the Spooner Bridge. He said FEMA wanted it three feet higher than the 100-year-flood level, and didn't want old creosote timbers from the former bridge in the water, so a new structure was built.

Past there, the route gets woodsier and mostly stays along the Chehalis. Pools and riffles look like nice places to cool the toes or have a snack, though there aren't any formal side trails down to the river.

It's another 3 miles to Ceres Hill Road, where there's a parking lot. Riding from Adna to Ceres Hill Road and returning would make a nice round-trip of about 10 miles.

But we pedaled on, Roger with the assistance of his spiffy new electric bicycle motor. About 8 miles from Adna, the trail crosses Meskill Road, where there's another parking area.

That's where the boring straightaway starts, devoid of shade. Two miles farther, watch for a couple of parallel gravel roads taking off to the left. They aren't marked, but they lead a few hundred yards to Rainbow Falls State Park, a great place to stop and relax under the big fir trees. A cell phone can help with navigation, though signals are spotty in this region.

A couple of long-haul bicyclers from Portland, Les Rink and Jim Craig, were pedaling this portion with full camping gear on their panniers, intending to go all the way to the coast.

Veterans of other rail-trails, they were particularly impressed with the new bridges. "It's a blessing," Rink said. "Washington has the best network" of bike trails compared to other Northwest states, he said.

It's easier riding back to Adna because the grade is downhill.

## Rainbow Falls-Pe Ell

Past Rainbow State Falls, the trail goes another 7 miles to the town of Pe Ell. This section is once again uninterrupted, thanks to the new Dryad Bridge, which was finished last year.

Founded in 1900, Dryad once had about 1,200 inhabitants. There's a classic white church, now Baptist, bell tower and all. It was built in 1903. Dryad was named for a nymph that lives in oak trees, by the way, so keeps your eyes open.

The route passes tidy barns and fields, with vistas of low, forested hills. At one point, the trail is wedged between Highway 6 and the river, and logging trucks on the road sound mighty close.

Every mile or so, a road crosses, with a gate to swerve around.

At Pe Ell, there's a restroom and parking lot for the trail at the site of the old train depot.

## Chehalis-Adna

The 5 ½ mile trail section from Chehalis to Adna makes a good family excursion because it's all paved — with one exception.

That section of trail starts on Hillberger Road and soon crosses the Newaukum River on a former railroad bridge. At 3 ½ miles from Hillberger Road, the bike trail crosses busy Highway 6 at a spot where visibility is limited. Plans call for eventually building a walker/bike bridge over the highway, but for now, caution is needed.

## Pe Ell-Raymond

Though a bridge several miles west of Pe Ell was recently finished, the trail is officially closed for 3 miles west of Pe Ell. The 26 miles of trail between that point and Raymond are rough, with the original 1890s rounded gravel rail ballast that's tough going on any bike. However, there are trailheads at Lebam and Menlo for adventurous explorers.

## South Bend-Raymond

The western-most 5 miles of trail, between South Bend and Raymond, are paved.

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### Willapa Hills State Park

For more information about the trail and a map, see <http://parks.state.wa.us/1023/Willapa-Hills-Trail>

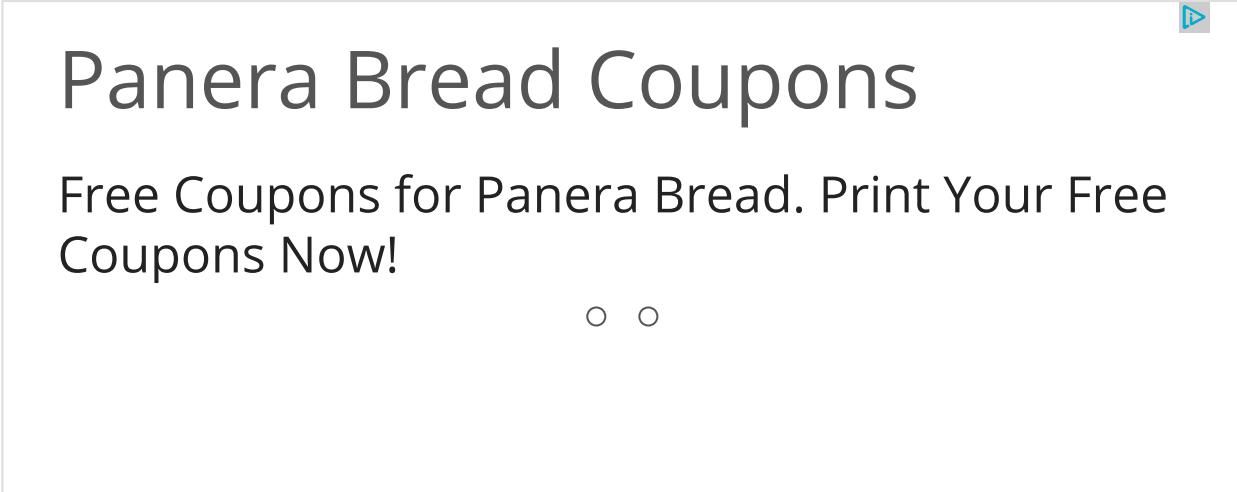
## Trail ride June 25-26


The inaugural Willapa Hills Trail Fat Tire Ride and Festival will be held June 25-26. The supported bike ride is recommended for families.

Cyclists will ride from Chehalis to Pe Ell the first day, camp overnight and return the second day. Meal tickets cost \$10.

For more information or to register, see [www.ridethewillapa.com](http://www.ridethewillapa.com) or [Www.facebook.com/ridethewillapa](http://Www.facebook.com/ridethewillapa)

## Tom Paulu





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