

To savor nature, take the slow road

By Susan Weiner, Globe Correspondent | October 24, 2004

AYER -- A vehicle looking something like "the surrey with the fringe on top" rolled in front of me on the Nashua River Rail Trail, which runs 11 miles from Ayer to the New Hampshire border in Dunstable. A bright yellow vinyl sunroof shaded the horseless carriage with a bold blue metal frame forming two rows of seats. Four adults laughed as they pedaled.

"That looks like fun!" I yelled.

"It's fun, but slow," groaned a smiling man clad in jeans and a polo shirt as I whipped past on my trusty Mongoose hybrid bicycle.

Unlike its better-known brethren in Greater Boston, the Nashua River Rail Trail seems to attract those who want to slow down and savor life, rather than to bicycle mainly for speed, exercise, or a commute. Jeans and T-shirts were the garments of choice. I saw no sleek, perspiration-wicking garb or aerodynamic helmets from specialty retailers on muscled Lance Armstrong wannabes. Families on traditional two-wheelers like mine predominated. The trail's smooth, uncracked surface makes it especially child-friendly. The only traditional tricycle I spotted was when we pulled into the Ayer parking lot. A young mother was coaxing her youngster on a yellow and orange trike. "Pedal, pedal. . . . You've got to steer," she said.

I also saw dog walkers, in-line skaters, stroller pushers, two-seater trikes, and a tandem bike with a mother providing more pedal power than the pink-helmeted little girl behind her. The exotic array of vehicles came mostly from a bike shop that went out of business earlier this year because business was slow. However, its former owner still does bicycle repairs out of his auto repair shop and is considering resuming rentals next spring.

When I have been on the trail on other occasions, equestrians have been in the mix. Horses are allowed on almost two-thirds of it, from Groton Center to Dunstable, on a 5-foot-wide gravel trail abutting the 10-foot-wide pavement. Signs along the trail, which officially opened in 2002, instruct cyclists to yield to horses and skaters.

Those cyclists and skaters seemed mellower than those I encounter along the Charles River in Boston and Cambridge or on the Minuteman Rail Trail. They were definitely slower. I had the unusual experience of being passed only once while rolling at an average speed of about 11 miles per hour.

There is plenty for a naturalist to savor because a good chunk of the trail, which follows a former route of the Boston & Maine Railroad, lies along the Nashua River, brooks, or ponds. Most of it runs under trees, which are particularly striking when they take on the golds, oranges, and reds of fall. I savored the colors of leaves backlit by sun reflecting off one broad pond. At another pond, bare tree trunks thrust up through the water as geese cackled in the background. At various spots I saw couples and families pulled off the road, gazing at the wildlife, contemplating the foliage, or simply taking in the brisk fall air.



PHOTO / ALLAN LEWIS

Not all the nature was wild. My husband and I glimpsed a couple of pumpkin patches, what was probably a Christmas tree farm, and white fenced-in enclosures that looked like horse corrals.

Some of the other sights were more modern. A dirt biker rode through a clearing under utility poles about a mile out of Ayer, although he didn't cross the trail.

Only briefly, in Pepperell, does the trail run next to a big road with offerings of food or drink. By then, it was the perfect time to break at a takeout ice cream counter, the Rail Trail Ice Cream Stop next door to, and operated by, Charlotte's Cozy Kitchen. We waited briefly behind three young children patiently shepherded by a lanky man wearing a leather jacket with an eagle and "U.S.A." embossed on the back. A rich butter pecan cone was a nice complement to a ride redolent of sensory delights.

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