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FEATURED TOP STORY

Something to whoop and holler about

New trails added at Spence Mountain

By LEE JUILLERAT For the Herald and News Jun 16, 2017



Drew Honzel is all smiles riding the Mazama Trail.

Photo by Lee Juillerat

Whooping and a'hollering.

"This is great!" yelled my buddy Mike, who isn't often known for shouting superlatives. "Wonderful! Awesome!"

We were riding mountain bikes on a newly opened section of the Spence Mountain Trail. Unlike other sections of the ever expanding network of biking, hiking and running trails, the new Mazama Trail is rated green, or beginner. For the most of the mile-plus, it parallels Shoalwater Bay, a rolling single-track route that rumbles under a canopy of aspens and ponderosa pines and, more remarkably, the delightful bay.

We were trailing behind Drew Honzel and other more skilled mountain bikers, who were taking a longer ride that would include another newly completed section, the black — or expert — North Ridge Trail. A one-way mountain bike only trail, Honzel said it dives nearly two very steep, curvy miles from its junction with the existing Hooligan Trail.

The Mazama Trail's one-way distance is 5 miles. The first 4 miles have occasional uphill sections, included one where I dismounted and walked my bike. The final mile, which has some steeper grades, rates as intermediate. From the new, still unfinished Shoalwater Bay Trailhead, Mazama goes south, eventually connecting with the one-way, mountain bike only Hooligan, which goes another nearly 2-1/2 miles to the Spence Mountain Trailhead off Highway 140.

50-mile goal

Mazama, Hooligan and North Ridge, along with South Ridge, are part of a network of 18 miles of completed trails. Before Honzel and other members of the Klamath Trails Alliance are through, they envision upward of 50 miles of trails bisecting 7,400 acres of lands mostly owned by JWTR, a timber company with extensive holdings in Klamath and neighboring counties.

It's a project still in its infancy. Planning began in 2013 with trail building. Trail construction, nearly all done through contracts with Dirt Mechanics of Bend, began in 2014. Honzel said costs for designing and building trails, developing trailheads and providing signs, have exceeded \$200,000, with most of the funding coming through grants. Major grants include \$50,000 from Travel Oregon, \$25,500 from the Sky Lakes Medical Center, plus others from Klamath County Tourism and Eco-Solar. When completed, Honzel said the total cost could range from \$750,000 to \$1 million.

No more trail building is planned this year, Honzel said design work for another 10 miles of trails will be done this summer and fall with construction planned in spring 2018. To meet user demands, the next phase will include two more beginner trails.

"Some people would love more easier and flatter trails," he explained, noting those types of trails are less costly to design and construct. From the Shoalwater trailhead, the Mazama Trail, still listed as Old Eagle on current maps, will head north another 1-1/2 miles along the bay and connect with the Shoalwater Trail, which is also planned to be built next spring, to create a nearly 4-mile green loop. Also planned in the Captain Jack Trail, a blue or intermediate route that will allow bikers to return to the Shoalwater trailhead and avoid the black North Ridge Trail.

Summer completion

Completion of the Shoalwater Bay Trailhead, located along Eagle Ridge Road, is planned this summer. Along with signage, plans call for creating parking pods and areas where picnic tables could be located.

Honzel said it's hoped the Spence Mountain trail network will entice overnight stays by Klamath Basin visitors. Although there are no accurate estimates of trail use — it's not unusual to see 10 or more vehicles parked at the Spence Mountain Trailhead — he believes 25 percent of the trail users are from outside the Basin, including "lots of people from Medford and Ashland" along with occasional visitors from the West Coast and eastern U.S. "The trail is a tourist attraction."

When the Spence Mountain trails are combined with the 27 miles of hiking-biking trails in and near Moore Park, there are already nearly 50 miles of trails within 15 miles of Klamath Falls. That figure doesn't include the 109-mile long, mostly unpaved, OC&E-Woods Line State Park that extends from Klamath Falls to Bly and to the Sycan Marsh.

"We definitely have a lot to offer for a variety of users," Honzel said, noting various sections of the OC&E, Moore Park and Spence Mountain trails are also popular with winter cross country skiers and snowshoers. There's also preliminary plans for a long distance trail run next summer.

Honzel also wants to see the numbers of out-of-area visitors increase. An early goal was to lure 250 overnight visits annually, a goal he sees as attainable — "I think we'll reach that figure for sure. There are definitely people coming in. We want to keep momentum up."

And keep people like Mike whooping and a'hollering.



Spence Mountain Trail map
Holly Owens Jun 15, 2017

Choose your favorite

What Spence Mountain trails are Drew Honzel's favorites?

Honzel, one of the people responsible for the ongoing development and expansion of the Spence trail network, is a mountain biker and trail runner.

"I'm definitely intermediate," he said of his mountain bike skills. "I love trail running, too, and I'll probably do as much or more running."

He terms the South Ridge Trail, popular with mountain bikers and hikers, as Spence's "signature trail," partly because of the frequent views of Upper Klamath Lake.

He terms Hooligan and North Ridge, both one-way, mountain bike-only trails, as "built for the younger people who like to get air off the jumps."



