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## Upper Coos rail trail's a northern delight

Marty Basch

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The Upper Coos Recreational Trail meanders through a landscape of forest, farms and fields. (MARTY BASCH PHOTO)

The Connecticut River wiggled its way through the landscape, dotted by the rounded peaks of Vermont like Mount Monadnock to the west and the verdant farms and fields of northern New Hampshire to the east.

Though the ride was bumpy at times due to stray railroad ties still in place and a variable surface that is shared with off-road vehicles, the Upper Coos Recreational Trail is a raw northern gem somewhat reminiscent of the Ammonoosuc Rail Trail in the western White Mountains. Though the Upper Coos did seem a bit tamer.

Recently, my wife, Jan, and I made the journey to ride the nearly 10-mile-long trail just shy of the

Canadian border between Colebrook and Beecher Falls, Vt. in the Green Mountain State's northeast corner with retro on our minds. No e-bike for her and not a stitch of Spandex between us. It was shorts and comfortable hiking boots, and mountain bikes.



Parking was plentiful on Bridge Street in Colebrook where a sign for the local River Walk made the trailhead easy to find. The River Walk is a whimsical hiking loop incorporating nature lore and storytelling along the banks of the Connecticut River and its tributary the Mohawk River.

The trail is on what once was the Upper Coos Railroad, a line built to support lumber mills and the sizable Ethan Allen furniture company in Beecher Falls, Vt., that ran for some 108 miles through the North Country from Whitefield into Vermont and finishing in Quebec. Built between 1888 and 1890, the railroad didn't live up to expectations for either freight or passengers and was eventually abandoned in three stretches between 1921 and 1977.

The multi-use pathway sees ATV traffic so non-holiday midweek ventures could alleviate some of the trail dust that gets kicked up by motorized vehicles. The course is an excellent example of various helping hands coming together to make improvements.

In the first edition of Charles Martin's "New Hampshire Rail Trails" book published in 2008 he writes of a trail surface that is "problematic" with "track still in place and fast-growing weeds."

He rode a mountain bike and "got stopped dead by an occasional exposed railroad tie. The further south I got, the more overgrown the trail became."

But he marveled at the scenery and fantasized that with track removed and a hardpack surface in place, it could be one of the state's finest rail trails.



In 2013, some of that vision became a reality due to a partnership with the New Hampshire Bureau of Trails, Metallak ATV Club and Colebrook Ski Bees Snowmobile Club.

Those organizations removed track and ties, and made a “workable trail,” he writes in the book’s second edition, published in 2016. The “reasonably smooth dirt road surface” is “quite acceptable for mountain biking.”

The ride itself is rather straight-forward, with parking available at both ends, as well as the visitor center on Route 3 outside of Colebrook. The route parallels Route 3 on the New Hampshire side, the roadway disappearing for long stretches.

Given the midweek ramble, the only other users that morning were a handful of walkers and one man using an ATV to get around to trim some brush.

So for the most part it was splendid isolation, save for the cows lolling about and a couple of wild turkeys crossing the path. Farm machinery stood idly by waiting for its operators. The river was a nearly constant companion. Small wooden bridges were speckled along the way.

Toward the northern end there were a couple of road crossings, but traffic was light on this day. From Colebrook, which has plenty of food opportunities and The Spoke 'n' Word bicycle shop on Spring Street, the next chance is in West Stewartstown, home of the Spa Restaurant.

From there, a fine steel bridge by a dam leads over the Connecticut and into Beecher Falls where the trail passes through the 400-plus acre Canaan Community Forest, by homes and eventually ends with the last few hundred yards being traveled on pavement until the way ends in the small town with its ice cream, pizza and park with benches.

To give you an idea of how close it is to Canada, there is a “Welcome to the United States” sign affixed to one of the local businesses.

Of course, you can always cycle up to the border right by that Ethan Allen plant and know that soon the fully vaccinated can ride across.



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**Marty Basch**