

By Mark Freeman  
For the Tidings

July 15, 2016 10:16AM

## A loop with a view

Roxan Alfordue scratches intently into the forested hillside, sloughing the duff away to make room for a future footpath, and all the while missing the big picture.

That would be the incredible panoramic views on the peak of this new Lewis Loop Trail in the Ashland Watershed, which shows Mount McLoughlin over one shoulder and Mount Ashland over the other.

"I hope to get up there today and see it," says Alfordue, as the 16-year-old Northwest Youth Corps crew member swings her hoe into the duff. "I hear it's awesome, definitely a great view."

It's a view available only by foot or by hoof.

The Lewis Loop Trail is the latest, but not the last, in a series of changes to the Ashland Watershed trail system aimed at matching different user groups to different trails in order to reduce conflicts in an area enjoyed by thousands of hikers, bikers and horseback riders annually.

Now getting scratched into the hillside by Northwest Youth Corps crews and volunteers, the loop will be designated for hikers and equestrian riders only, to complement other new trails designed solely for mountain bikers not interested in slamming on the brakes when they happen upon a hiker.

The 1.2-mile loop is off the Caterpillar Trail on Rogue River-Siskiyou National Forest land where mountain bikers and hikers regularly got in each others' way. The Caterpillar Trail is adjacent to the new Lizard Trail, recently completed for mountain biking only.

The two run very close to each other and parallel in places, yet they are distinctly apart, a metaphor for the new paradigm unfolding in Ashland's favorite backwoods playground.

"That seems to be working, and that's partially by design and partially fortuitous," says Torsten Heycke, president of the Ashland Woodlands and Trails Association, which has partnered with the city of Ashland, the Forest Service and other groups on watershed trail work.

"So far, the designs of the trails are helping define the users," Heycke says.

That's the idea behind the Ashland Watershed Trails Project, which is adding 25 miles of trails to the existing 16 miles of dedicated trails within the watershed on both city and federal lands.

The project will include 17.5 miles of previously unapproved trails, including a mix of "historic" old trails not part of the network and eight "rogue" trails built illegally in the watershed and used largely by downhill mountain bikers blazing down Mount Ashland toward town.

The plan, adopted last winter, also calls for decommissioning almost 10 miles of rogue trails that are creating unacceptable impacts to soil, water, plants and wildlife, according to an extensive review of the area.

Each of the plan's trails will be marked for specific users based on the trail's features, so hikers and traditional cross-country riders will gain access to up-and-down trails that suit their passions, while downhillers will get trail features that suit their passions.

When it was adopted, the plan was touted as a systematic approach to the entire trail system, maximizing the growing interest and use of these trails while reducing the urge for some watershed users to go rogue.

The work in and around Lewis Loop Trail is a clear snapshot in the collage of what will be happening this summer and in future summers in this trail system that draws 50,000 visitors annually.

First, Ashland Woodlands and Trails Association volunteers helped build the new Lizard Trail, with its high, swooping banks and other features mountain bikers asked for in meetings that helped hammer out the project.

"It was to get mountain bikers off part of the Caterpillar Trail, and because the mountain-biking community wanted it," forest spokeswoman Chamise Kramer says.

When completed, the Lewis Loop Trail will take the place of Pete's Punisher Trail, a steep trail that will be decommissioned.

"The face of recreation is changing, and we're all going to have to adjust," Kramer says.

Also needing a few adjustments are expectations when it comes to the pace of trail-building.



Justin Tanner of Beaverton, with the Northwest Youth Corps, works on a new section of the Lewis Loop Trail in the Ashland watershed. Daily Tidings / Jamie Lusch

"So far, what's done is less than I would have liked, but more than I would have expected," Heycke says. "People don't realize how much trail that is to build, but it's a lot."

Pushing it forward is the hiring of Northwest Youth Corps crews with a \$36,000 federal grant to the forest for four weeks of work, two weeks each of trail-building and invasive plant removal, Kramer says.

So far this summer, the diverse users seem to be respecting each other's trails and showing more interest in learning what's new for them than peeking over the fence.

"I think there will always be some bad apples, some exploratory users," Heycke says. "So it's not ever going to be 100 percent successful. But I think we're going in the right direction."

For mountain bikers who want to take in the panoramas that will be available once Lewis Loop is complete, they're certainly welcome.

They just need to lace up some hiking boots or go see a man about a horse.

"I think it'll be a really popular view to see," Heycke says.

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