America’s National Trails System

Overview

"In the early days of this nation, before railroads and highways were constructed, people traveled overland on foot, on horseback, or by wagon. Some of these trails remain in existence today as reminders of our rich historic past. Stories of the Oregon Trail, the Santa Fe Trail, the Trail of Tears, and others bring to mind exciting and sometimes tragic chapters in our national heritage.

Other visions come to mind with trails. In the early 20th century, outdoor enthusiasts in New England and the Sierra Nevadas constructed footpaths to gain access to scenic mountain terrain. Trails became a way to gain access to spectacular natural beauty and at the same time to pursue healthy outdoor recreation. The first interstate recreational trail was conceived in 1921 as a national preserve parallel to the East Coast; it is known today as the Appalachian Trail.

In 1968 to provide federal assistance to the Appalachian Trail and to establish a national system of trails, Congress passed the National Trails System Act. The Appalachian and Pacific Crest trails were named in the act as the first two national scenic trails. Today the National Trails System consists of Congressionally designated national scenic trails, which are continuous protected scenic corridors for outdoor recreation, and national historic trails, which recognize prominent past routes of exploration, migration, and military action. The historic trails generally consist of remnant sites and trail segments, and thus are not necessarily continuous. Although both types are administered by federal agencies, land ownership may be in public or private hands. Of the 17 national scenic and national historic trails so far established, 12 are administered by the National Park Service, four by the Forest Service, and one by the Bureau of Land Management. View the National Trails System Map (a large pdf file which must be viewed with Adobe Acrobat reader. Click on magnifying glass to magnify charts and graphics).

National recreation trails are existing trails recognized by the Federal Government as contributing to the National Trails System. They vary in length, terrain, difficulty, and accessibility. These trails are managed by public and private agencies at the local, state, and national levels and include nature trails, river routes, and historic tours.

Besides administering and coordinating national trails, the National Park Service conducts a variety of programs to enhance and build a national system of trails available to all. Trail system planning occurs at the metropolitan, state, and regional levels to fulfill the requirement for a National Trail Plan. Through its Rivers, Trails, and Conservation Assistance Program, the National Park Service provides technical assistance to local and state public agencies and private organizations working on river and trail corridor projects. Some of these involve establishing trails on abandoned railroad rights-of-way.

For further information on the National Trails System and its various components and programs, contact: National Trails System Branch, National Park Service (782), P.O. Box 37127, Washington, D.C. 20013-7127, or call 202-343-3780.
National Scenic Trails

Appalachian National Scenic Trail

National Park Service
Established 1968
2,144 miles (3,452 km)

Appalachian Trail Conference
P.O. Box 807
Harpers Ferry, WV 25425
304-535-6331

National Park Service
Appalachian Trail Project Office
c/o Harpers Ferry Center
Harpers Ferry, WV 25425
304-535-6278

The Appalachian Trail was first envisioned in 1921 by Benton MacKaye as a greenway from Maine to Georgia. The trail hugs the crests of the Appalachian Mountains and is open only to the hikers. Shelters are spaced for convenient overnight stays. The Appalachian Trail Conference established in 1925, developed the trail and maintains it today through 32 affiliated volunteer trail clubs. Only 65 miles still needs protection through public ownership. Almost 175 people each year hike the entire trail, while millions find inspiration and adventure on shorter trips along the “A.T.”

Continental Divide National Scenic Trail

Forest Service
Designated and Established 1978
3,100 miles (4,988 km)

Continental Divide Trail Alliance
P.O. Box 628 Pine, CO 80470
303-838-3760

Continental Divide Trail Society
3704 N. Charles St., #601 Baltimore, MD 21218-2300
410-235-9610

The Continental Divide Scenic Trail (CDNST) corridor provides spectacular backcountry travel the length of the Rocky Mountains from Mexico to Canada. This National Scenic Trail is still under construction with about 2,000 miles currently providing for high-quality hiking and horseback riding experiences. More information about the CDNST can be found on the CDNST Website.

Florida National Scenic Trail

Forest Service
Established 1983
1,300 miles (2,090 km)

Florida Trail Association
The Florida Trail was conceived and initiated by James A. Kern, who formed the Florida Trail Association in 1964. The trail will eventually extend from Big Cypress National Preserve in South Florida through Florida's three national forests to Gulf Islands National Seashore in the western panhandle. It is especially delightful for winter hiking and camping, passing through America's only subtropical landscape. Side loop trails connect to nearby historic sites and other points of interest. More than 1,000 miles are completed and some 300 miles are officially open to public use.

**Ice Age National Scenic Trail**

National Park Service  
Established 1980  
1,000 miles (1,610 km)

Ice Age Trail Foundation  
207 East Buffalo Suite 515  
Milwaukee, WI 53202  
414-278-8518

At the end of the Ice Age, about 10,000 years ago, glaciers retreated from North America and left behind a chain of moraine hills which defined their southern edge. In Wisconsin, the band of hills zigzags across the state for 1,000 miles from Lake Michigan to the Saint Croix River. A trail along these hills was conceived by Ray Zillmer in the 1950s and publicized by Rep. Henry Reuss in his book, On the Trail of the Ice Age. Today, with help from the State of Wisconsin and the Ice Age Park and Trail Foundation, almost half of the trail is open to public use. Certain sections are popular for marathons, ski races, and ultra-running.

**Natchez Trace National Scenic Trail**

National Park Service  
Established 1983  
110 miles (180 km)

Natchez Trace Trail Conference  
P.O.Box 1236
Jackson, MS 39215-1236
601-680-4016

The Natchez Trace National Scenic Trails within the boundaries of the Natchez Trace Parkway, extending for 450 miles from Natchez, Mississippi, to Nashville, Tennessee. The Parkway commemorates the historic Natchez Tracer, an ancient path that began as a series of animal tracks and Native American trails. It was late used by early explorers, "Kaintuck" boatmen, post riders, and military men, including General Andrew Jackson after his victory at the Battle of New Orleans. In the trail's 1987 comprehensive plan, four segments near Nashville, Jackson, and Natchez totalling 110 miles were selected for development as hiking and horseback trails.

**North Country National Scenic Trail**

National Park Service  
Established 1980  
3,200 miles (5,150 km)

North Country Trail Association  
229 East Main St.  
Lowell, MI 49331-1711  
616-897-5987

National Park Service  
700 Rayovac Drive, Suite 100  
Madison, WI 53711  
608-441-5610

Conceived in the mid-1960s, the North Country Trail links New York's Adirondack Mountains with the Missouri River in North Dakota. The trail journeys through a variety of environments: the grandeur of the Adirondacks, Pennsylvania's hardwood forests, the farmland and canals of Ohio, the Great Lakes shorelines of Michigan, the glacier-carved forests, lakes, and streams of northern Wisconsin and Minnesota, and the vast plains of North Dakota. Today, almost half of this trail is open for public use. Some of the longer segments cross nine national forests and two national park areas along the route.

**Pacific Crest National Scenic Trail**

Forest Service  
Established 1968  
2,638 miles (4,247 km)

Pacific Crest Trail Association  
5323 Elkhorn Blvd., Suite 256  
Sacramento, CA 95842  
800-817-2243

Lying along the spectacular shoulders of the Cascade and Sierra Nevada mountain ranges from Canada to Mexico, the Pacific Crest is the West Coast counterpart of the Appalachian Trail. Inspired in the 1930s by the idea of a long-distance mountain trail, citizen activists worked with the Forest Service to establish the trail. It passes through 25 national forests and seven national parks. The trail was completed in Oregon and Washington in 1987. Today only 30 miles in California are not protected.

**Potomac Heritage National Scenic Trail**
National Park Service
Established 1983
700 miles (1,130 km)

Potomac Heritage Trail Association
c/o Potomac Appalachian Trail Club
118 Park St., SE
Vienna, VA 22180

National Park Service, National Capital Field Office
Assoc. Supt., Stewardship and Partnership
1100 Ohio Drive, SW
Washington, DC 20242
202-619-7025/7038

The Potomac Heritage Trail recognizes and commemorates the unique mix of history and recreation along the Potomac River. Much is already in place: the 184-mile towpath of the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal in the District of Columbia and Maryland, the 18-mile Mount Vernon Trail in Virginia, and the 75-mile Laurel Highlands Trail in Pennsylvania. In western Maryland, members of the Potomac Heritage Trail have recommended a 55-mile hiking path from Cumberland, Maryland, north to Pennsylvania's Mount Davis and on to the Laurel Highlands.

National Historic Trails

California National Historic Trail

National Park Service
Established 1992
(5,665 miles)

Oregon-California Trails Association
P.O. Box 1019
Independence, MO 64051-0519
816-252-2276

NPS Long-Distance Trails Office
324 S. State St., P.O. Box 45155
Salt Lake City, UT 84145-0155
801-539-4094

Following the discovery of gold at Sutter's Mill in California, the 1849 goldrush followed many paths. Starting at several points along the Missouri River, gold seekers converged on the Great Platte River Road, overlapping with Oregon and Mormon emigrants, until they had crossed the crest of the Rockies. From there a variety of routes - determined by the availability of water and grass, the knowledge of guides, or the presence of Indians - were used to get to and cross various passes through the Sierra Nevada mountains. Over 70,000 crossed to California in 1849 and 1850 alone. Recent Oregon settlers used the newly opened Applegate Trail to come south into the California mountains. Today the Trail's comprehensive management plan is being completed to outline auto tour routes, public land management policies, interpretive themes, and public-private partnerships essential to commemorating this important chapter in opening the American West.

Iditarod National Historic Trail

Bureau of Land Management
The Iditarod is a system of historic trails made famous by Alaska gold prospectors and their dog teams during the late 19th and early 20th century gold rush. Most of the trail is usable only during Alaska's six-month winter when rivers and tundra are frozen. Each year the renowned 1,150-mile Iditarod Sled Dog Race is run along the trail from Anchorage to Nome. Other events include the 210-mile Iditasport race for skiers, mountain bikers, and snowshoers, and the Alaska Gold Rush Classic Snowmachine Race. A network of shelters is being installed by the Bureau of Land Management and the Iditarod Trail Committee.

Juan Bautista de Anza National Historic Trail

In 1775, a party of Spanish colonists led by Col. Juan Bautista de Anza set out from Mexico to establish an overland route to California. They sought to build a presidio and mission overlooking the Golden Gate and secure it from threats by the Russians and British. This party of 30 families, a dozen soldiers, and 1,000 cattle, horses, and mules spent three months traversing the deserts of the Southwest before reaching the missions of the California coast. Another three months were spent traveling up the Pacific coast to the Golden Gate where the city of San Francisco now stands. In 1975 and 1976, an expedition re-enactment took place from Horcasitas, Mexico, to San Francisco.

Lewis and Clark National Historic Trail

In 1804, Meriwether Lewis and William Clark led their expedition along the Missouri River and beyond to the Pacific Ocean. Over the years, the trail has drawn thousands of visitors to witness the magnificent scenery and to learn about the history and culture of the region. The trail is maintained by the National Park Service and is open to hikers, bikers, and horseback riders. A network of shelters is being installed by the Bureau of Land Management and the Iditarod Trail Committee.
In 1804, President Thomas Jefferson commissioned Meriwether Lewis and William Clark to explore the newly acquired Louisiana Territory and the "Oregon Country." Setting out in boats from what is today Wood River, Illinois, and following the Missouri River upstream, their expedition eventually reached the Pacific Ocean at the mouth of the Columbia River in 1805 and returned east the next year. In Idaho and western Montana, the route follows roads and trails as it crosses the Rocky Mountain passes. Along the route, state, local, and private interests have established motor routes, roadside interpretive markers, and museum exhibits telling the Lewis and Clark story.

**Mormon Pioneer National Historic Trail**

Mormon emigration was one of the principal forces of settlement of the West. Departing from Nauvoo, Illinois, in February 1846, thousands of Mormons crossed into Iowa seeking refuge from religious persecution. They spent the next winter in the Council Bluffs, Iowa, and Omaha, Nebraska, area. Early in 1847, Brigham Young led an advance party west along the Platte River, paralleling the Oregon Trail, to Fort Bridger, Wyoming, where they turned southwest and eventually came to the Great Salt Lake. The 1,624-mile auto tour route in five states is generally marked with the trail logo and closely follows the trail's historic route.

**Nez Perce National Historic Trail**

This trail route honors the heroic and poignant attempt by the Nez Perce Indians to escape capture by the U.S. Army. In 1877, the Nez Perce were forced to leave their ancestral homelands and move to a reservation east of Lewiston, Idaho. During this journey, hostilities broke out between white settlers and some groups of the Nez Perce. The U.S. Army was called in. The resisting bands headed east, crossed the Rocky Mountains, and hoped to find refuge in Canada. Led by several commanders including Chief Joseph, they eluded capture for months, traveling through the newly established Yellowstone National Park and out onto the Great Plains. Just short of reaching the Canadian border in Montana, most of the party were overtaken near the Bearpaw Mountains.
Oregon National Historic Trail

National Park Service
Established 1978
2,170 miles (3,495 km)

NPS Long Distance Trails Office
324 S. State St., P.O. Box 45155
Salt Lake City, UT 84145-0155
801-539-4094

NPS Pacific Northwest Region, Oregon National Historic Trail
83 South King Street, Suite 212
Seattle, WA 98104
206-553-5366

As the harbinger of America's westward expansion, the Oregon Trail was the pathway to the Pacific for fur traders, gold seekers, missionaries, and emigrants. Beginning in 1841 and enduring for more than 20 years, an estimated 300,000 emigrants followed this route from the Midwest to Oregon on a trip that took five months to complete. Today the trail corridor contains some 300 miles of discernible wagon ruts and 125 historic sites. The approximate route can still be followed by automobile, and opportunities are available to travel by foot, horse, or mountain bike in many places.

Overmountain Victory National Historic Trail

National Park Service
Established 1980
300 miles (485 km)

Overmountain Victory Trail Association,
c/o Sycamore Shoals State Historic Area
1651 West Elk Avenue
Elizabethton, TN 37643
615-543-5808

National Park Service,
Southeast Region
Planning and Compliance Division
75 Spring Street SW
Atlanta, GA 30303
404-331-5465

In the fall of 1780, upcountry patriots from Virginia, Tennessee, and North Carolina formed a militia to drive the British from the southern colonies. This trail marks their 14-day trek across the Appalachians to the Piedmont region of the Carolinas. There they defeated British troops at the Battle of Kings Mountain, setting in motion events that led to the British surrender at Yorktown and the end of the Revolutionary War. Each year history buffs commemorate this patriotic event. Much of the trail has become road and highway; only a small 20-mile portion remains as a foot trail across the mountains. In most places roadside signs indicate proximity to the trail. A guide to the seven walking sections of the trail is available.
Pony Express National Historic Trail

National Park Service
Established 1992
1,855 miles

National Pony Express Association
P.O. Box 236
Pollock Pines, CA 95726

National Park Service
Long-Distance Trails Office
324 S. State St., P.O. Box 45155
Salt Lake City, UT 84145-0155
801-539-4094

Begun in 1860 as a vital mail route connecting the eastern United States to California, this privately financed operation only lasted 18 months before it was supplanted by telegraph. Dozens of wiry riders and hundreds of horses conducted the relay of mail through desert and plain, mountains and storm around the clock to get the mail through. Average travel time from St. Joe, Missouri, to Sacramento, California, was 10 days. Nearly 35,000 pieces of mail were transported, some containing the momentous news of Lincoln's election and the outbreak of the Civil War. The transcontinental railroad followed much of its route in later years. Today many portions of the route are marked by highways sign and reenactment rides - complete with souvenir mail - take place every year.

Santa Fe National Historic Trail

National Park Service
Established 1987
1,203 miles (1,937 km)

National Park Service, Southwest Region,
Branch of Long Distance Trails
P.O. Box 728
Santa Fe, NM 87504-0728
505-988-6888

After Mexican independence in 1821, U.S. and Mexican traders developed the Santa Fe Trail, using American Indian travel and trade routes. It quickly became a commercial and cultural link between the two countries. It also became a road of conquest during the Mexican and Civil wars. With the building of the railroad to Santa Fe in 1880, the trail was largely abandoned. Of the 1,203 miles of trail route between Old Franklin, Missouri, and Santa Fe, New Mexico, more than 200 miles of ruts and trace remain visible; some 30 miles of these are protected on federal lands.

Trail of Tears National Historic Trail

National Park Service
Established 1987
2,052 miles (3,304 km)

NPS Long Distance Trails Group-- Santa Fe
P.O. Box 728
Santa Fe, NM 87504-0728
505-988-6888
After many years of pressure from white settlers, 16,000 Cherokee Indians from the southeastern states were moved by the U.S. Army in the late 1830s to lands west of the Mississippi River. Various detachments followed different routes west to the Oklahoma Territory. Thousands died along the way. Today, the designated trail follows two of the principal routes: a water trail (1,226 miles) along the Tennessee, Ohio, Mississippi, and Arkansas rivers; and an overland route (826 miles) from Chattanooga, Tennessee, to Tahlequah, Oklahoma."