

South Fork American River Trail opens gorge-ous 35 miles to pedestrians, riders

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Starting Friday, it will be possible to enjoy the American River's south fork from Folsom Lake to near Coloma and stay dry doing so.

The scenic stretch of (mostly) untouched nature has long been among the West's premier locations for whitewater rafting and kayaking. But for those on foot, horse or mountain bike, there hasn't been a way to traverse the full length of the winding south fork stretch that many say puts the "gorge" in gorgeous.

This morning, a ribbon-cutting ceremony at the Salmon Falls trailhead will trumpet the opening of the 25-mile South Fork American River Trail, a multiuse path featuring seasonally wildflower-saturated grasslands, oak woodlands, riparian habitats, sage-covered ridges and views of the river below.

The trail's opening Friday morning for use by hikers, runners, mountain bikers and (for most of its length) equestrians will be the culmination of decades of grant-writing, fundraising, property negotiations, trail cutting and bridge building by the American River Conservancy and the federal Bureau of Land Management.

"When we started the project in 1989, we had no idea if it'd be successful," said Alan Ehrgott, the ARC's executive director. "This (area) is important because it's a true wildlife corridor, and 18 percent of the native plant categories (in the state) are in that space."

Preserving this lush segment of the Sierra foothills was a major motivation for the organizations. But they also wanted to provide Northern California outdoors enthusiasts a long stretch of trail that connects at the southwest end to existing Folsom Lake State Recreation Area trails.

"That reach of the canyon was only available to boaters, but we sought to broaden the constituency for our efforts by including a recreational trail that would serve equestrians, fishermen, hikers and mountain bikers," Ehrgott said.

Eventually, ARC executives said, they would like to see the trail curve toward Auburn and connect with the Olmstead Loop in Cool. They also are working on an alternate path near Salmon Falls to accommodate equestrians, who don't have access to the final two miles of the new trail.

But for now, 20 years of work on 25 miles – nearly 80 percent of it newly cut trail – should be enough to satisfy users.

"This is a real gem, especially for us here in El Dorado (County)," said Elena DeLacy, the ARC's conservation and stewardship project coordinator. "I mean, the Tahoe Rim Trail is iconic. But this trail is truly impressive, too. It's the only place in the county where you can go from an urban area and completely get lost in nature."

From a recreational perspective, said avid mountain biker and trail runner Mike Bean, users could only go so far on trails on Cronan Ranch, bordering the south fork.

“This is a critical connection,” Bean said. “The big thing is to connect small trails to big ones, and this does that. When you’re a fairly fit bike rider, it’s nice to get longer rides in. To link up Salmon Falls and Cronan Ranch Regional Park is great.”

Before the extension, he added, the trail abruptly stopped at Norton Ravine, forcing users to double back. “Those extra miles heading (into Salmon Falls) are crucial,” Bean said.

So is the bridge that crosses Acorn Creek just before the Salmon Falls staging area. Mountain bikers have had to ford a ravine to hook up with the Folsom Lake trails.

“Believe me, people are going to like the bridge,” Bean said. “And on that last new section of trail (leading to Salmon Falls), you’re up on a hill of chaparral. On a clear day, you can see across the lake. It’s quite picturesque.”

That segment is mostly single-track and, because of a rare plant species found along that stretch, is not open to equestrians.

“I’m sure equestrians won’t be too happy that we’re closing down that last two miles,” Ehr Gott said. “But they



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shouldn't take it personally. It's a rare plant species. And we're working on that alternate route."

The BLM and ARC made sure much of the newly cut trail was wide enough to accommodate the often-clashing paths of mountain bikers and equestrians. Where the trail is narrower – some new steep switchbacks, for instance – builders provided turnouts or soft shoulders (away from fragile native plants) that allow cyclists to let horses pass. Switchbacks are in open areas, giving cyclists time to see horses approaching.

"There are some sections in there that can get kind of narrow," the ARC's DeLacy said. "Bottlenecks are bound to occur. That's because of the topography."

Mountain bikers and runners of all abilities will find the trail navigable, if challenging. It ranges from an easy two-mile stretch (Gerle Loop near the Magnolia Ranch access point off Highway 49) to the steep single-track portion near Salmon Falls.

"There are some hills and switchbacks, but totally rideable," Bean said. "If you aren't super-fit, you might have to push your bike on a couple of little hills. But that's part of the challenge."

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