

10 Winning Rail-Trail Courses for Horses

BY DANIELLE TAYLOR

There’s nothing like enjoying a trail on horseback. There’s a bond with the animal carrying you, which in turn helps you connect with your natural surroundings. Although some rail-trails prohibit equestrian use, plenty across the U.S. welcome riders, and they showcase some magnificent scenery and significant railroad history alike. Take a look at these 10 greats.

Washington

JOHN WAYNE PIONEER TRAIL



Spanning from Cedar Falls to the Washington-Idaho border, the iconic John Wayne Pioneer Trail gives riders a true taste of America’s Old West. The corridor passes through many of the Pacific Northwest’s biomes, ranging from dry scrubland to dense forests—and as it traverses the Cascade Mountains, it goes subterranean through the 2.3-mile Snoqualmie Tunnel (open May to October). Serious horseback riders may check out the John Wayne Pioneer Wagons and Riders Association, which organizes an annual 18-day cross-state trail ride.

Washington State Parks manages the western portion (Iron Horse State Park, Cedar Falls to the Columbia River) and the unconnected segments between Lind and the Idaho border, and the Washington Department of Natural Resources oversees the portions between the Columbia River and Lind. Please note that the eastern side is unimproved, and water is scarce (do not attempt in excessive heat). Horse trailer parking is available at the Cedar Falls, Hyak, Easton, South Cle Elum, Thorp, Kittitas, and Yakima Training Center Army West and Army East trailheads.●

**Length:** 223.8 miles/285 miles with on-road connections  
**Surfaces:** Ballast, crushed stone, sand  
**Other Uses:** Biking, walking, cross-country skiing, snowshoeing, snowmobiling, dog sledding, rock climbing, horse-drawn wagon driving

Before riding on the John Wayne Pioneer Trail, check with the proper managing organization to ensure you have necessary permits, passes, gate codes and closure info!

To learn more about these and other trails, check out TrailLink.com.

Kentucky

DAWKINS LINE RAIL TRAIL



As the longest rail-trail in America’s most horse-friendly state, it’s no surprise that this corridor in eastern Kentucky welcomes trusty steeds and riders alike with open arms. Along its route, which travels through a national forest and a state park, the trail crosses 24 trestles and passes through the 662-foot Gun Creek Tunnel, all of which are open to equestrians. Horse trailer parking is available at Swamp Branch, Royalton and Jane Beshear trailheads. Eventually, the state will double the trail to span 36 miles and encompass the 1,556-foot-long Tip Top tunnel, which crews are working on to make safe for visitors. The full trail will also pass by Breathitt County’s new elk-viewing station and feature amenities for horses and riders alike, including water fountains for both, hitching posts, mount- ing blocks and corrals.

As the first portion of the trail only opened in June 2013, the word is still getting out, so riders can often enjoy long stretches uninterrupted by other users. From Royalton, the trail gradually slopes downhill as it meanders northwest—something to keep in mind as you plan your round-trip or shuttle.●

**Length:** 18 miles  
**Surface:** Crushed stone  
**Other Uses:** Biking, walking

**Michigan Iron Ore Heritage Trail**  
**COUNTY:** Marquette  
**ROUTE:** Republic Township > Chocolay Township  
**LENGTH:** 47 miles (asphalt, crushed stone, dirt)  
**OPEN FOR HORSEBACK:** 20-miles between Ishpeming and Republic  
**HIGHLIGHTS:** Historical mining structures, Cliffs Shaft Mine Museum, Iron Industry Museum, Kawbawgam Pocket Park

**California El Dorado Trail**  
**COUNTY:** El Dorado  
**ROUTE:** Camino > Sacramento County/El Dorado County Line  
**LENGTH:** 35.9 miles (asphalt, dirt, gravel)  
**OPEN FOR HORSEBACK:** Full trail  
**HIGHLIGHTS:** El Dorado County Historical Museum, El Dorado Western Railroad, Placerville (historical gold rush town), Weber Creek trestle

**Wisconsin Newton Blackmour State Trail**  
**COUNTY:** Outagamie  
**ROUTE:** Seymour > New London  
**LENGTH:** 20.6 miles (crushed stone)  
**OPEN FOR HORSEBACK:** Full trail  
**HIGHLIGHTS:** Hamburger history in Seymour, Oneida Indian Reservation, farmland, wildlife (including bears)

**Missouri Rock Island Spur of Katy Trail State Park**  
**COUNTIES:** Cass, Henry, Johnson  
**ROUTE:** Pleasant Hill > Windsor  
**LENGTH:** 47.5 miles (crushed stone)  
**OPEN FOR HORSEBACK:** Full trail  
**HIGHLIGHTS:** Rock Island Lake, Pleasant Hill Downtown Historic District

**Texas Chaparral Rail Trail**  
**COUNTIES:** Collin, Delta, Fannin, Hunt  
**ROUTE:** Farmersville > Pecan Gap  
**LENGTH:** 35.2 miles (asphalt, crushed stone)  
**OPEN FOR HORSEBACK:** Full trail  
**HIGHLIGHTS:** Historic Onion Shed; forested segments; geocaching; small towns of Farmersville, Merit, Celeste, Ladonia, Wolfe City and Pecan Gap

OPPOSITE PAGE, FROM LEFT: COURTESY WASHINGTON STATE DNR - SOUTHEAST REGION; STEVE BESHEAR. THIS PAGE, FROM TOP: ORVILLE ALLEN; COURTESY VIRGINIA DEPARTMENT OF CONSERVATION AND RECREATION; COURTESY TIOGA COUNTY VISITORS BUREAU

Florida NATURE COAST STATE TRAIL



A lesser-known Florida gem, this rail-trail welcomes equestrians on the 20-mile segment between Old Town and Trenton and also includes a 4.5-mile sidepath between the Old Town and Fanning Springs trailheads, both of which offer limited horse trailer parking. Manatees and jumping sturgeon can often be seen from the Suwannee River trestle, and you might glimpse a tortoise or bobcat on the shore!●

**Length/Surface:** 32 miles/Asphalt  
**Other Uses:** Biking, walking, inline skating; wheelchair accessible

Virginia NEW RIVER TRAIL STATE PARK



This National Recreation Trail features trestles, tunnels, a 210-year-old ammunition manufacturing tower and a caboose on its picturesque, remote route from Galax to Pulaski. Equestrians can park/ride from Cliffview to Pulaski/Dora Junction (54 miles) with additional horse trailer parking at the Fries, Ivanhoe, Austinville, Foster Falls, Allisonia and Draper trailheads.●

**Length/Surface:** 56 miles/Crushed stone  
**Other Uses:** Biking, walking, fishing, cross-country skiing; wheelchair accessible

Pennsylvania PINE CREEK RAIL TRAIL



This scenic trail travels through Pine Creek Gorge, a 1,450-foot-deep channel known as the Grand Canyon of Pennsylvania. Those without horses can schedule a guided trail ride with a local stable or even book a horse-drawn wagon ride from May to October. Riders can park horse trailers at the Marsh Creek entrance (near Ansonia) and ride to Tiadaghton (9 miles).●

**Length/Surface:** 62 miles/Crushed stone  
**Other Uses:** Biking, fishing, walking, cross-country skiing; horse-drawn wagon riding; wheelchair accessible