

The Long and Winding Road

Avid Biker Treasures the Down East Sunrise Trail

BY JULIA BUSH

Cars, like dogs, reflect their people. Sue Shaw's heige adventure-mobile is proof enough.

The license plate behind the 72-year-old's bike rack reads "SHAWZY." Kayak racks stick up off the top of her vehicle like antennae, and the backseat and trunk of the car are full of adventuring equipment, from first aid supplies to maps to an extra jacket just in case.



The Down East Sunrise Trail winds through scenic Schoodic Bog, where wetlands draw all kinds of wildlife, from ospreys to beavers.



A turtle basks in the sunshine on the Down East Sunrise Trail, oblivious to oncoming bike and ATV traffic. Sue Shaw pulled over her bike to move the turtle off-road.

When Shaw and her group of outdoorsy friends (who also enjoy painting together) go on biking or kayaking trips, she insists on driving. She needs her car and all the stuff in it whether she's birding, paddling or cross-country skiing. It's her home base.

Although Shaw sometimes travels around the East Coast to ride bikes or to ski, she often takes to the local trails on weekdays, when they're emptier and quieter.

The former Ellsworth High School physical education teacher fell in love with the Down East Sunrise Trail just a few years ago.

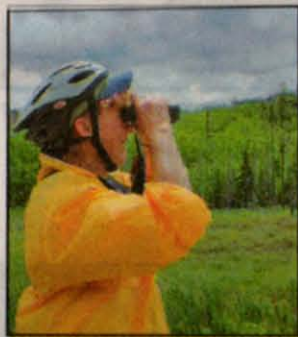
"It's just a huge present to the people of Ellsworth," she said.

The 85-mile dirt trail winds from Wasbington Junction in Ellsworth to Ayers Junction near Calais. It's recognized as part of the East Coast Greenway, a 2,500-mile, traffic-free path that runs from Maine to Florida. The Sunrise Trail began construction in spring of 2008, and all 85 miles were complete by 2010.

Permits are in to begin construction on the final two-mile section of the trail, from Pembroke to Washington Junction, said Stephen

Rees, president of the Sunrise Trail Coalition. Until then, the mile markers start at two and end at 87. The coalition planned to construct a primitive campsite at Mile 32, outside downtown Cherryfield, by the end of July.

At about marker 15, Shaw pedals on the trail through Schoodic Bog, near



Biker and birder Sue Shaw searches for the baby osprey she heard calling from a tree near Schoodic Bog.

the base of Schoodic Mountain. She bears a shrill cry.

The experienced birder glides to a stop and lifts heavy binoculars to her eyes. She could tell from the sound, but the sighting confirms it: a baby osprey calls for its mother from a nest in the top of a spindly tree.



A quick jaunt through the woods near Whitten Parritt Stream off the Down East Sunrise Trail leads to this bridge and bubbling brook.

The trail is great for birding because of the diverse habitat along the route, Shaw said. Birds make their home between the shrubbery, the wetlands and the coniferous and deciduous trees in the forest area.

Redwing blackbirds, tree swallows and a magnolia warbler chirp from the trees beside the dirt path. A swallowtail butterfly flits around Shaw as she pumps her legs, the wheels of her bike spinning and kicking up a little dirt behind her back tire. The trail's surface is part of its natural appeal.

"You kind of feel more 'one' with the environment, if you will, instead of just riding on a strip of asphalt," Shaw said.

Rees said the desolate section coming out of East Machias is one of his favorites.

"It offers some real beauty in the diversity of what you see and the stillness and quiet," Rees said. "You're not going through a town."

The trail was built on old railroad beds — construction workers removed the rails and replaced them with a wide dirt surface suitable for ATVs, wide-tire bikes, horses and hikers

in the summer. In the winter, snowshoes, cross-country skis and snowmobiles share the pathway.

"The four-wheelers actually keep the trail in good condition, and in the winter it's wonderful to have the snowmobile traffic out here because it grooms it for cross-country skiing," Shaw said. "We all co-exist quite nicely."

The trail's railroad origins mean that, unlike Acadia's hilly carriage roads, the path is limited to a 4 percent grade, the most a train can handle. It's much less intensive to pedal.

Shaw's red bicycle whirrs along the flat path near mile marker 22. Nothing marks the spot except a laminated sign with "Whitten Parritt Stream" scrawled on the paper in what looks like Sharpie, but it's a place Shaw knows well. Her red bicycle rolls to a stop, and she leans it against the wooden signpost.

The cyclist busheswhacks her way through the forest area across from the path until she steps out onto the shore of a quiet stream.

The water bubbles underneath a stone bridge while sunlight beams through the other side. This is a spot Shaw and her friends found one day while venturing off-trail. It's one of her favorites, but it's not unique.

"There are a lot of hidden gems," Shaw said. "You could probably make a whole necklace with the Sunrise Trail."

After admiring the tranquility of the brook for a bit, Shaw hikes back up to her bike. She'll ride back to "SHAWZY," parked on Unionville Road, and load her bike on the bike rack.

She'll be off by the time the dust settles on the trail, but like many Sunrise Trail visitors, Shaw won't be gone for long.

