rfmba
ROARING FORK
Mountain Bike Association

Roaring Fork Transit Authority
0766 Industry Way
Carbondale, CO 81623

March 24, 2009

RE: Rio Grande Trail closure dates at Rock Bottom Ranch

Dear RFTA Board of Directors,

This letter is in response to RFTA's request for comments on the Rio Grande Trail closure dates near Rock Bottom Ranch. The Roaring Fork Mountain Bike Association (RFMBA) is a grassroots organization comprised of mountain biking enthusiasts in the Roaring Fork Valley and connecting areas. We are an advocacy group that is working to create the best possible trail system and experience in the Valley.

It is without surprise that we support a sound management policy for this section of trail that allows quiet access and use of this critical connecting corridor thereby permitting recreational and commuter use through all the dry months (March through December). We feel there should be a well balanced analysis of the effects of the trail opening/closing dates. Objective biological and wildlife study of fisherman's trends, local homeowner activity and the effects of natural predators on the herons should be included in the decision process as well as the benefits of commuting and recreation. We strongly believe that there is a solution here that sufficiently protects our natural habitat yet allows harmonious recreational/commuter use.

With the deepest respect,

Charlie Eckart
Roaring Fork Mountain Bike Association

I believe the trail should be open all year around. The impact to wildlife would be minimal. It did not seem to impact the animals when a train when up and down this corridor.

The NIMBYs opposing this trail just don't want their view obstructed by a historical access which should be open to the public.

Thank you, Scott Keating

RE: Seasonal Closure of Rio Grande Trail (RBR to Catherine Store Bridge)

Dear Board Member:

I highly encourage you to vote for the removal of the seasonal closure or at a minimum keep the status quo closure (closed December 1st to April 30). As most people will admit privately, this is an issue of NIMBY~ism gone wild. The waste of tax payer supported funds for wildlife studies alone flies in the face of the RFTA's mission and the significant investment in the RG trail. Personally, I am disappointed in RFTA for allowing a vocal minority to sway decisions to close the trail seasonally. I publicly supported RFTA's push for tax increases, but the lack of sound decision making on the seasonal closure makes me question that support.

Sincerely,

George

George D. Trantow

Chair, Midvalley Trails Committee

I am in favor of minimizing the closure on the Rio Grande Trail between Kathryn's store and Hooks Spur. Surely the trains impacted the residents and herons more than a quiet bike rider.

Heather

Heather Froelicher
Learning Specialist

Colorado Rocky Mountain School
1493 County Road 106
Carbondale, Colo. 81623

(970) 963-3810
hfroelicher@crms.org

Open it more. I think it should be dictated by weather. When the trail is clear, open it to bikers and pedestrians.

I use it as a route to work, leaving my car at home during the summer/fall months. I think I behoove wildlife more that way. Fewer emissions!

Teri Bruna
tbruna@rfclub.com

I am opposed to winter closure of the Rio Grande Trail from Catherine Store Bridge to Rock Bottom Ranch. The trail should be open at all times. I am comfortable with the exclusion of dogs but not with the exclusion of human beings. I hope that you will change your current policy and open the trail permanently to foot and bicycle traffic.
And finally, I look forward to the day when the right of way can be returned to its original use as a railroad right of way for safe, modern, and convenient transit serving the entire valley.

James Breasted
678 Sopris Avenue
Carbondale, CO 81623
970.963.4190

RFTA Board members,

I was glad to hear about the issue on the table about the Blue Herons' nesting area, and the bike path passing thru. I urge you to keep the bike trail closed through that section until a June 1st opening, as recommended by the CO Division of Wildlife.

Just as much as recreation and beautiful scenery, this area behefits from Wildlife. All wild animals are a wonderful and important part of enjoying the outdoors for residents and tourists alike! Let's do what we can to keep the natural local species returning and thriving!

Yes, the bike trail is awesome in it's own right, but spotting natural wildlife on the ride makes it all that much more special and memorable!

I thank you, and so do the Herons.

-Vijita J. Evans, "VJ"
RFTA Bus Driver,
and Roaring Fork Valley resident for the past 6 years.

Members of RFTA Board

I am in total support of Dave Johnson's letter to the editor in the April 1 edition of the Glenwood Post.

I have fished that section during the winter months for more than 25 years. Any pressure by anglers is almost nonexistent.

We spend all this money for trails, only to have them closed and more restrictive than before.

Steven H. Lampman, CPA
Monahan Lampman and Hays, PC
810 Pitkin Avenue
P.O. Box 370
Glenwood Springs, CO 81602
Phone: (970) 945-8588
Fax: (970) 945-2398

Sir,
I think the current trail closures are all about the people living along the trail and have nothing to do with Herons or other wildlife. There used to be trains on that trail, and that did not stop Herons and Deer from whatever they do. So, what has changed? Eliminate these ridiculous closures so I can fish.
Thanks
Bill Grant
1124 Heritage Drive
Carbondale

As a long-time supporter of mainstream conservation organizations such as the Nature Conservancy and the Trust for Public Land, I believe very strongly that public lands should be open to the public under all but the most unusual circumstances, as supported by rational interpretation of scientific data. To put it bluntly, RFTA's closure of the Rio Grande trail carries the highly desirable goal of wildlife protection to a ridiculous extreme -- clearly driven by hypocritical efforts by adjacent private property owners to occupy desirable wildlife habitat themselves while denying a far less intrusive use of public land to the public.

I lived in Missouri before moving to Colorado, and am familiar with an example there of a rational, justifiable example of restricting public access to a public resource. Onondaga Cave is a truly spectacular cave owned by the Missouri State Parks Division, and is open to tours during warm weather. But during winter it is closed to the public because it is critical habitat for hibernation by an endangered species of bat. It doesn't require extensive scientific research to support the reasonable conclusion that the presence of people in a cave, requiring lighting, would pose a threat to the welfare of bats needing it for hibernation.

In stark contrast, the assertions of possible disturbance of wildlife by non-motorized use of the Rio Grande Trail (with dogs prohibited) are so speculative as to be irrational.
They ignore the basic principle of wildlife conservation that has been long established and promoted by both public agencies and private conservation organizations...that practically all species of wildlife will thrive when hunting or trapping is limited, and they have adequate food, water, and cover for concealment and nesting. Before the public is prohibited from using a trail (particularly in winter in this case) there should be sound, logical evidence that there is a significant exception to this principle

whereby humans threaten wildlife by their very presence. And that analysis should not just apply to the thin strip of right-of-way on which the trail is located, but consider the entire surrounding area where trail users very seldom venture to go.

As one example of the insignificance of the trail to wildlife, consider deer. In years of using trails and waterways, there have been numerous times when I have come upon deer.
That especially occurs early in the morning and late in the afternoon, because deer do not like bright sunshine and bed down during the day (when most trail use by humans occurs).
Rather than fleeing in terror, they simply amble into surrounding cover, of which there is plenty along the Rio Grande Trail (except where it has been cleared by adjoining property owners).

I live in River Valley Ranch, which becomes the winter range for over 100 mule deer.
These deer have adapted so well to co-existing with people that they will continue grazing up to the time that a person approaches within about 50 feet. At that point they will walk or trot away by perhaps a few hundred feet. Hardly a traumatic experience for them!
Elk are similarly tolerant of human proximity. If wild animals such as these were greatly stressed by every sight of a potential predator, they never would have survived the evolutionary process. I would also note that their population along the Rio Grande Trail will be affected much more by habitat conditions at higher elevations, and by weather, disease, and hunting, than by non-motorized trail use.

Of all the bird species that I have observed in some 50 years of outdoor activities, great blue herons are among the most shy. It is reasonable to believe that they require mature trees for nesting that are removed by at least 100 yards or so from areas frequented by people. But these birds migrate south in winter, and where the trail is immediately adjacent to the river (and therefore has the greatest scenic value for human users) there are very few if any large trees that might serve as roosts.

If RFTA is really all that concerned about its environmental impact, I would suggest more effective steps to insure that its buses travel at legal speeds -- particularly through Snowmass Canyon on Highway 82.
Excessive traffic speed through that area creates much more noise along the river in that area (not to mention hazard to human safety) than non-motorized use along the Rio Grande Trail, or occasional maintenance of the trail with power equipment.

Please show as much concern for humans whose enjoyment of the outdoors is enhanced by opportunities to view wildlife, as you do for wildlife for its own sake.

Carl Ted Stude
706 Perry Ridge

Carbondale, CO 81623

Dear Michael,
RFTA has done an amazing job getting the Rio Grande completed before 2010 and what an amenity it has turned out to be. I often ride and ski the trail, so I'm a 4 season user. I cannot believe the increase in usage each year. More and more people are discovering that this is the crown jewel of our valley's trail system. People of all ages and ethnicity are appearing on a regular basis. "If you build it they will come." And they have. In all my use I have never run into to any sign of real wildlife on the trail. It's not a major thoroughfare for them. I would recommend limiting as much as possible the closures for Rock Bottom Ranch. There are a lot of NIMBYs in that neighborhood and it would be a shame if their vocal protesting overshadowed the public's interest. Please keep the trail open!
Sincerely,
Bruce Gabow

Dear Michael,
Thank you and the board for your interest in collecting solid data on the RBR section of the Rio Grande Trail; I believe that the winter impact of humans on the trail would be devastating to the elk, deer, and heron that currently use this area. This section is not only beautiful, but is one of the only safe havens left for winter wildlife.
Again,
Thank you,
Paula Lozano Canning
56 Flying Fish Road
Carbondale, Colorado 81623
704-1460

The wildlife can rehabituate - I don't want to - so please keep the trails as open as possible to us exercisers. I am a senior 73 and bike ride the trails at least 4 times per week, 15-20 miles each time. What a valuable asset to this healthy community.

Thanks, Ann Mitchell

Oh, no! I hear there is huge pressure on you to open the bike path through the RB Preserve even during heron breeding season. I have made two trips from Eagle County with guests just to bird this path in early season and experience the rookery, from afar. All birders I speak to tell me the numbers of birds have been in decline due to human disturbance. Please do not risk driving them out all together due to even more human intrusion. Why do humans think only they matter and not the creatures that were here long before us? Eagle County has similar pressure to open the bike path through Dowd Jct. even when deer, elk, and other wild creatures are migrating, but they are holding the line at seasonal closures.
Anne Esson

Herons vs. Recreation: A Win/Win Solution

First a little history. The most beautiful section of bike trail in the Roaring Fork Valley is located on The Rock Bottom Ranch Preserve. The trail skirts the Roaring Fork River and passes through meandering streams, healthy ponds, rich wetlands, and giant cottonwoods. The Preserve also happens to be the best nesting site in the Roaring Fork Valley for the magnificent Great Blue Herons.

There are 6 species of herons nesting in Colorado; the Roaring Fork Valley has just one- the Great Blue Heron. The herons are not endangered here *yet*, but quality nesting sites are becoming scarce, and as we continue to develop, we squeeze them even tighter. Now there are only 4 viable heronries in the entire Roaring Fork Valley. The Rock Bottom heronry has historically been the largest. Many of the bird species we once thought of as common have begun to plummet in numbers, and biologist are very worried - we need to think of how to protect what we have (stateofthebirds.audubon.org/cbid/).

In April 2007 there were 11 nests with 22 herons sitting on eggs in just the west section of the Rock Bottom preserve. As soon as the bike path opened, all the nests were abandoned. In April 2008 there were 5 nests with 10 herons sitting on eggs, and again, when the path opened the nests in the west section were abandoned; but this time nests in the east section were also abandoned. Herons will not attempt to build a new heronry once disturbed from their eggs. These birds have not reproduced for two years now, and it would be very dangerous to push them another year without reproducing. Some of them may have moved into one of the less established, less viable, sites in the valley, but not in sufficient numbers to maintain their original nesting population. We have learned from past mistakes that there is no such thing as a dispensable species.

The RFTA Board is bound by a Categorical Exclusion to ensure that the trail causes no negative impact to wildlife in the preserve. However, the Board is under pressure from trail users to open the trail early so it can be enjoyed as soon as possible. There is equal pressure from environmentalists to keep it closed a little longer. The RFTA Board's own paid wildlife biologist, the Colorado Division of Wildlife, the Roaring Fork Audubon Society and others have been recommending a June 1st opening which would help to promote the continued nesting of the Great Blue Herons.

The pressure is strong from both sides, but we think we have an answer –

ROARING FORK AUDUBON•POST OFFICE BOX 1192•CARBONDALE•CO•81623

Our solution, while it may not be ideal for the birds, is better than the situation they now face, which is the May 1st opening. May is a time of the year which is crucial to the herons because this is when they are sitting on their eggs. We don't think *anyone* really wants to see the herons chased from their nests, so our idea is to have RFTA's wildlife biologist monitor the nests this spring and if he determines that the adult herons are sitting on eggs, the path would remain closed the extra 3-4 weeks. This would provide the necessary time for the eggs to hatch and for the parents and chicks to bond – the adults are much less likely to abandon the nests once the chicks have hatched. Because of frequent trail use, we are hoping that the adults as well as the juveniles will quickly become accustomed to the bike traffic and habituated to this type of disturbance so that this later opening may only need to occur this year. All that this strategy requires is a little patience - and everyone, herons included, will feel better for the small sacrifice it will take to help maintain a stable heron population.

As you read this, a few of the herons are already back investigating their old nesting sites. We won't know for a few more weeks if they will attempt to nest there again. Public comment is due by April 2nd. If you agree that the herons deserve a fighting chance to habituate to trail traffic, and if you agree, and that we should implement this policy immediately this year to give these beautiful birds a chance, please send an e-mail to the RFTA Board at trails@rfta.com.

Roaring Fork Audubon Society

ROARING FORK AUDUBON•POST OFFICE BOX 1192•CARBONDALE•CO•81623

I agree with the Roaring Fork Audubon Society that we need to monitor the Heron nests *this* spring and if the adults are sitting on eggs, we leave the trail closed the little extra time it takes for the eggs to hatch and the adults to bond with their babies. I hope that this will habituate them to the bike traffic and then we will not have any more controversy over the spring opening date. I hope you will agree, that this is the least we can do to help protect these beautiful birds.

It is also imperative to maintain the winter closures to ensure our mammals and bald eagles have winter solitude and river access. I hope you take the advise of your wildlife biologist, the CDOW, and the Roaring Fork Audubon Society.

Thank you,
Mary Harris

To whom it concerns (all of us),

Please do not table the wildlife closure issues on the trail from Rock Bottom Ranch to Carbondale. This trail is not used for transportation. Follow the advice of the DOW and your own wildlife biologist. It is time we quit thinking that the highest use of something is what humans want to use it for. We need to allow other species their space. The species of "road bicyclist" has plenty of other habitats.

Gerry
Gerald R. Terwilliger
grterwilliger@sopris.net
PO Box 2839
Basalt, CO 81621
(970)927-4629

Hi:

Please open the trail. I use the trail for commuting, recreation, and showing our valley to visitors. I can commute in 31 minutes from my house to work and it takes me at least 22 minutes by car. Please help support valley commuters. Thanks, Mark

Mark Grice
Ross Montessori School
407 Merrill Avenue
Carbondale, CO 81623

March 21, 2009

To: RFTA Board

Re: Rock Bottom Ranch trail

Dear Board Members,

I wish to thank you for the terrific, "green" bike path your board has provided for the use of residents and visitors of the Roaring Fork Valley. My husband and I use the path frequently during the summer and fall months; the beautiful, scenic portion through Rock Bottom Ranch is a treasure.

It has been brought to my attention that pressure is mounting from the public for your Board to open the trail on a year round basis, or to open the trail earlier in the spring. What a tragic mistake this would be for another treasure: nesting Great Blue Herons at Rock Bottom Ranch.

This week in Washington D.C., Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar released the first comprehensive "U.S. State of the Birds" report, showing a sobering 1/3 of our nation's 800 bird species either endangered, threatened, or in significant decline due to habitat loss, invasive species, climate change, and other pressures. The report also suggests that though bird

populations are in dramatic decline, history has shown that human intervention can reverse a bird species in trouble.

Nesting Great Blue Herons at Rock Bottom Ranch require solitude and privacy to nest and raise their young. Activity on the path through Rock Bottom Ranch during the nesting season has caused disturbance and alas, forced the birds to abandon their nests in previous years.

As a member of Roaring Fork Audubon, I ask that your Board dismiss suggestions to open this portion of the trail earlier, or on a year round basis. I ask that you please consider keeping the trail closed for a longer time period and extend the seasonal closure to at least June 1. The Rio Grand trail may then provide enjoyment to bikers and will ensure no negative impact to the Herons in the Preserve.

I appreciate your consideration of my request.

Respectfully,

Sue Mozian
Basalt

Dear RFTA Board,
How can you possibly refuse to consider the environmental impact of your trail system for the next 3 years? This is akin to taking a 3 year nap. We did not elect any of you to shirk your responsibilities by a mere majority vote. This is beyond unethical. Give the return of the heronry a chance. Don't refuse to consider this issue EVER.
Thank you,
Rebecca Doane
Aspen

I'd like to see the trail closed through the time the herons are sitting on their eggs. It would be a shame to disturb the nests of these beautiful birds because some people have a selfish need to use the bike path. If RFTA can send their biologist out to monitor the birds and see they are sitting on their eggs, then keep the trail closed.
Thanks,

Scotty Giddings
Pitkin County Assessor's office
506 E Main St. Ste. 202
Aspen, Co. 81611
970-920-5165

I seem to remember when this trail was initially proposed, the deal was that wildlife came first. So I'm kind of confused as to why this is still an issue. I think the proposed idea in Mary Harris' letter in the ADN 3/23 is a good. And I use the path a lot. I'm a bicyclist and think the valley bike path is a fabulous amenity. I really don't like to play in traffic. But the wild life of this valley is a more important amenity to the real quality of life here. I prefer that the bike path be kept closed until the hatchlings can live on their own.

Stu Huck

I would like to see the trails closed when the herons are nesting – whatever time that is. It is time we (humans) don't take precedent over everything else. The trail is for recreational use – we can manage with the 100's of other recreational opportunities in the valley when this particular spot is closed so another species can survive.

Thank you,

Linda Singer Froning

963-2172 x 2300

lfroning@coloradomtn.edu

Dear RFTA,

Since moving to the Roaring Fork Valley in 1989 our family has grown to cherish the opportunities the area provides to recreate and to appreciate the natural habitats that harbor a rich variety of wildlife. We particularly love the almost prehistoric sight of great blue herons following our rivers and the thought that they could be nesting in the vicinity of the Rock Bottom Ranch. It is disheartening that they have displayed nesting behavior in the last two springs and subsequently abandoned their nests. We vehemently urge that the trail be kept closed after May 1 this spring so that their behavior can be carefully monitored and if they are displaying nesting behavior that the trail remain closed at least until the chicks have hatched and the parent birds and young have bonded. We also urge that careful thought be given to the possibility of creating an alternate bicycle route up the back road from Catherine's Store.

It is understandable that bicycle enthusiasts are clamoring to use this wonderful trail, but we need to step back and look for alternatives that take into account more fully the needs of wildlife. For that reason, we also urge that the winter closure of that portion of the trail continue as well.

This issue provides an opportunity for the citizens of this valley to demonstrate honest concern for our wild residents, and to seek a resolution that will meet all of our needs. Please do give serious consideration to the two alternatives mentioned in this letter: 1) close monitoring of nesting behavior this spring with subsequent continued closure at least until the young hatch. 2) the development of an alternate route past the heronry.

Thank you,

Sam and Ann Johnson
Carbondale, Co.
trnslate@yahoo.com

Dear Mary Harris,

Yes we are extremely fortunate to have a wonderful bike/walking path system in place. Of course those of us that regulerly ride and walk on the section at the Rock Bottom Ranch Reserve love not only the beauty and peace afforded to us but also enjoy not being on the roads. Where, all too often, car drivers and bike riders alike often do not respect eachothers rights to the roadway, causing dangerous situations. That said, waiting a few weeks to give the herons a fighting chance will not hurt any of us.

Will Frothingham
Blue Lake

The thought of lengthening the closure of the Rio Grande trail from Catherine's Store to Rock Bottom seems absurd. Given that the trail was heavily used by fisherman and horseback riders BEFORE the trail was built, and was a functioning rail road before that, I have trouble believing that the bikers and walkers on the trail are more of a disturbance than the homes across the river, or the wind events that blew all the heron nests down (heron's are the birds of concern, right? name might be wrong :)

Beyond all that, many (including myself for a year that I worked in El Jebel) people use the trail to commute INSTEAD of driving. I reduced my driving to work by 40% or more during the summer of 2007 thanks to the trail. Enough people do that, and what's the environmental benefit?

Thanks for your time.

dave downing

_____
dave@snowman-x.com

970.948.0024

I ride the trail regularly and do not believe that bicycle pedestrian traffic has a significant impact on wildlife. The impacts of motorized vehicles on HY 82 are so much greater. If we are to close the trail longer and divert more traffic on to the already crowded roads we are doing more damage to the ecosystems and wildlife than allowing non-motorized traffic on this section of the path.

Thanks for considering this.
--
David Rasmussen
Waterfall Studio
802.236.2677

To whom it may concern,
I heard that there was a possibility of the Rio Grande Trail being opened before the scheduled April 30th. I wanted to email my support of that idea. That's one of my favorite sections of trail and would love to get onto it early.
That's my piece and I thank you for listening.
Dan Giese.

Dear Michael Hermes,

I am in favor of not extending the closure of the Rock Bottom Ranch section of the Rio Grande Trail and, if anything, reducing the winter closure so that it would open April 1st rather than May 1st. The trail was created for the purpose of allowing non-motorized use of a very scenic and utterly delightful trail. It would be ironic to extend the closure when hiking and biking are 2 activities with the least effect on wildlife, when compared to habitat loss due to ranching and housing developments as well as the mortalities that result from motorized traffic on highways.

I understand that wildlife observational surveys and data collection are limited to the months of closure. However, I do feel that we should be encouraging those of us who want to enjoy a relatively pristine section of the valley via very non-invasive methods compared to motorized traffic and habitat destruction caused by hayfields and housing developments.

Please, at the very least, maintain the current winter closure, if you cannot reduce it to December 1 – April 1.

Sincerely,

Jim Gaw
Colorado Rocky Mountain School
Carbondale, CO 81623
Cell: 970-309-6025

Please keep the biking trail closed as long as possible. These wonderful birds deserve a chance.
The attachment is a photo of a bronze statue, “Wetland Dwellers” that I did from natural, found wood and clay and then had cast in bronze. It is currently on display at the Toklat gallery in Basalt. Thanks.
Susan Olsen
Aspen, CO

Dear RFTA,

I am still shocked that your organization is fighting to keep the trail open when the herons need it to be closed. It is so beyond the pale that you and bicyclists and other trail users are so incredibly selfish as to the use of this trail. Your continued attempts to change the recommendations of PEOPLE WHO REALLY KNOW WHAT THEY ARE TALKING ABOUT is pathetic. In this day and age when we are so much more aware of our impacts, generally negative, on wildlife your attitude is appalling, short sighted and greedy. Same for all the bicyclists who feel they are more important "than a few birds". Please stop the foolishness – it is not as though human lives are being endangered to help the herons nest.

Thank you for your time.

A biking enthusiast,

Yvonne Troyer

4341 County Road 117
GWS
970.928.0097

There is no question that the trail should be kept closed. We struggle everywhere, let alone in this valley, to protect wildlife which certainly means taking care of their breeding/nesting area. Thank you for closing the trail until the chicks are ready.
Carol
Caroline W. Duell
64 Nighthawk Wood
Carbondale, CO 81623
970-963-2541
cwduell@rof.net

March 27, 2009

Dear RFTA Board Members,

As a former resident who was raised in Aspen and a now frequent visitor, both as a birder and a biker, I would like to encourage the RFTA board to listen to the voices of Interior Secretary Ken Salazar and the Roaring Fork Audubon to delay the opening of the bike path on the Rock Bottom Ranch preserve. A delicate balance exists for these Great Blue Herons whose populations are declining precipitously in the valley through the potential loss of this heronry. I can appreciate bikers wanting a straight path from east to west, but surely a delay of three or four weeks is a small price to pay for the well-being of these beautiful birds.

Sincerely,

Judy Scheig

Dear Mr Hermes,

I recommend you table discussions or decisions regarding trail closure until Jan 2012. I believe that the wildlife in or near the Rock Bottom Ranch section of the Rio Grande Trails can and will thrive in parallel with public recreational use. I do not recommend closing the trail any longer than it already is. I believe wildlife and people can coexist. The trail is an important recreational amenity in this community.

Thanks,
/Kathy Small
Carbondale

As residents of Glenwood Springs since 1976, my husband and I have so much enjoyed bicycling the Rio Grande Trial many, many times since it has been completed (and before in increments). It is our hope that the section between Catherine's Store and Hook's Bridge will remain open as it is presently. Not being an "expert", it seems to us that the bicycles are very quiet, as are the riders. We've noticed loud pick-up trucks and autos coming and going in and out of the properties along that section of the trail. We've seen chain saws and other motor vehicles such as ATV's on the properties, which I assume are used at various times during the year. I believe the Rock Bottom Ranch has frequented the area near the trail to bring in groups of children to learn about the area. All of these things have been occurring over the years as the wildlife, including the herons, continued to live and have offspring. I don't believe the addition of the bicyclists has been or will be the ruination of the wildlife in the area. Continue to observe the area until 2012, and I hope you will concur that the trail should be left open as it is presently.

Thanks you for considering my comments.

Sheila R. Markowitz
945-6884

Dear RFTA Trail Management--

I believe the bike trail access from Catherine's Store Bridge to the downvalley end of Rock Bottom Ranch should not only open on May 1st, but should be open all year long. This parcel is a large and very important public fishing access, that like many places in the past several years, has had access restricted and/or closed.

The lower end of Rock Bottom Ranch (and ACES, which is where fishing access conveniently ends) already has a large fence in place, which would be a perfect point at which to close winter and spring access for calving elk and nesting herons. The steep, hilly land downvalley of this point is not important winter range for deer or elk—there is very little forage until you get into the meadows upvalley of that gate. Herons don't nest here, and deer and elk use the path below that point infrequently—mainly in transit to and from areas like those meadows above where they have to spend lots of time to survive.

As a fisherman and outdoorsman, there is no valid reason in my mind for this lower portion of the trail to ever close—especially considering the money it took to build it and the number of fishermen in this area who contribute significantly to the tax base and who need public access to be preserved. Didn't a lot of our money go into building this trail, when we used to be able to access this water on the railroad tracks any day of the year? The Blue Creek access on the other side of the river is much smaller, with less quality fishing water.

When I moved here 18 years ago, no one cared if you fished many areas like this, that have since been subdivided or developed or just plain closed to the public (and not always legally). And now suddenly there is a perception amongst a few people that a closed trail is somehow negatively impacting deer, elk, and herons that did just fine all those years when no one—man or animal-- cared who came or went. What is

becoming more endangered than herons are places for responsible fishermen to go and enjoy what's left of the wild.
Sincerely,

David Johnson--Owner
Crystal Fly Shop
208 Main St.
Carbondale, CO 81623
970-963-5741
www.crystalflyshop.com

I am sending this from a friends email account as my lap top has recently crashed...

I am a Garfield County Resident living just outside Carbondale City limits. I am a high school biology teacher and outdoor education administrator, and an avid cyclist. I ride several times a week and also teach and coach cycling at the Colorado Rocky Mountain School.

I have been a resident of the Roaring Fork Valley for 9-years and would consider myself both a conservationist, and a naturalist. I also place a high value on the natural resources that the valley offers and feel that it is our responsibility to strive to take care of the wildlife, and natural habitat that the valley harbors. I take a larger view on the argument about the seasonal closure on the RBR section of the trail than some and felt compelled to share it here.

First of all I wholeheartedly agree with the boards decision to wait until adequate scientific data exists to make an informed decision about the dates of the seasonal closure. As a scientist I applaud the commitment to document and study the possible ongoing impacts the trail corridor and its ensuing pedestrian traffic may or may not be creating. The fact remains that there is simply not enough data to inform a change to the current closure schedule at this time.

Additionally, there are clearly multiple factors at play here. To single out the trail corridor users as the culprit for some of the deleterious impacts that some local wildlife may be experiencing is unfair, and alarmist. It must be noted that anglers, residences, people not respecting seasonal closures, and a whole array of natural/ regional issues impact this section of the trail. After all this corridor was a railway for many decades, and it was in at least part time use all the way up to the early nineties.

In my estimation the benefits of the Rio Grande Trail (and the RBR section in particular) must be acknowledged and celebrated. One of the most significant ways that we can better care for our valley and its natural resources is to address the large scale issues such as automobile traffic and pollution. Providing not only alternative transportation resources such as bus service, but also opportunities to commute by bicycle during the warmer months are key services that RFTA provides.

Finally the health and well being that this section of trail has provided for me and the numerous students that I have been able to "turn on" to the experience of recreating and transporting through frequent and regular use of the Rio Grande Trail. If anyone wonders about the benefits that this trail provides I would encourage them to stroll or ride out to one of the benches or tables mid-way along the trail section and witness the disposition of the users. Greet folks, talk to them, and ask them about their experience along the trail. I feel quite confident that this would help folks realize the need and efficacy of creating and maintaining both commuter friendly and recreational trails in our valley.

Please keep the big picture health of our natural resources in our valley in mind when deciding about any modifications to the current trail closure dates. Know that there are many, many folks who are passionate about wildlife, and human powered transportation, and believe that co-existence is the best course of action.
Please consider a campaign of awareness, as well as further planting of vegetation to screen potentially sensitive nesting or rookery areas and keep the trail open during its current schedule!

Sincerely,

Darryl Fuller
dfuller@crms.org

I would encourage you to listen to the information offered by the Audubon Society and other wildlife management groups regarding an extra month to six weeks of closure to the trail in El Jebel/Carbondale in question.

If this were the only trail available to residents in the area, or indeed in the valley - perhaps not closing it could somehow be considered. I however, even under that circumstance would support it remaining closed. With the literally hundreds of other options for biking, hiking, walking - why would we NOT listen to those who know the patterns and preferences of these magnificent birds.

Just because we can do something - and just because the herons that beautify our world cannot speak for themselves -- does not mean that we should.

The trail should be closed long enough for the birds to hatch their young and fledge them - and let the young ones fly. The trail closure will not affect one human significantly.

When do we become true neighbors to our animal and bird friends? Not listening to what we KNOW is a big enough problem. Not listening to our hearts - even bigger.

Cheryl Cain
1801 Grand Avenue
Glenwood Springs, CO 81601

Greetings, I feel the current closures, on the Rock Bottom Ranch trail section are adequate for all concerned. The number of people that use the trail, and the safety of these people, is a good reason to keep the trail open. Walking or riding bikes on Katherine Store Rd, and the side road, along hwy 82, are not safe, because of motorist, and the blind curve at the bridge, on Katherine Store, at the gate closure. This section of trail is a big link for a lot of people, like me, that ride bikes home from up valley.
The number of people that use the trail, is a great indicator of how important this trail system is to all of us, especially in a time when people really need to be outdoors, exercising, in a safe enviorment.
The trails were built for us to use, and enjoy year round.
Thank you for your hard work, and tough decisions.

James Gilliam
Carbondale

Dear RFTA Board

Let's open the trail segment from Catherine store to rock bottom ranch for year round use. The few home owners on this stretch of trail have held the community at large, hostage to keep a prime recreation area to themselves. I for one believe that homeowners have contributed to the unhealthy state of the Roaring fork watershed by cutting down tree's, and building patios, and the like, to close to the river itself. This has caused erosion into the watershed, and hurt our beautiful river much more then public access on a trail that was built with PUBILIC FUNDS! The land that the trail sit's on was originally a railroad right of way, and still might be in the future. What would happen if light rail came through? Close it to public transportation for a good part of the year. I don't think so. Thank you

Patrick Murray

Patrick Murray
Engineering Concierge
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I suggest we keep in mind the needs of wildlife, not just fishermen and bicyclists. Maintaining a trail closure will not severely impact these two groups, but opening it will possibly have a negative impact on wildlife. The closure is also a valuable reminder to recent transplants and other users that our actions do have consequences and if we selfishly pursue our own recreational desires over a temporary sanctuary for wildlife we are responsible for damaging one of the elements that make that section of trail special. Patience please. There are plenty of places in the valley for us to play and still respect the earth.

Julie Ross

Julie Ross
970-923-0590

To all who care to read:
Re: DJ's letter to the powers to be...I float fish upstream of Catherines store bridge yesterday and three times prior in the last month or so and I saw plenty of Great Blue Herons killing fish along the banks but, no detected nesting sights...those are down in Aspen Glen by the way. I also saw no sign of Elk or migration trails, no bald eagles either...again, they hang out in Aspen Glen. Open the bike path now!!

To the Roaring Fork Transit Authority Board:
I have lived and recreated in the Roaring Fork Valley since 1963 and have observed both the extraordinary beauty and opportunities in this valley and the great diminishment of wildlife and bird habitat over the past 45 years. In following the controversy regarding the bike trail which runs along the length of the river from above Aspen to the Colorado River I have been concerned about the threats to wildlife due to both human disturbance and the dogs who accompany people (and often not very closely). And, I am a dog owner who believes it imperative that they be on leash whenever they are off one's property.
I recall taking our children to the Rock Bottom Ranch in the 1980s when it was still owned by the Cole family and standing at a distance from the tall cottonwoods watching the Great Blue Herons through binoculars. The children marveled at the young, flightless birds and nests perched precariously so high above the ground. They and their friends learned a great deal about nature's wondrous ways from that experience. I am greatly saddened that we, as knowledgeable, ostensible conservationists cannot make room for these birds. I strongly recommend that the RFTA Board adopt the compromise advocated by the Roaring Fork Audubon Society to maintain the current winter closure and keep the trail closed this year, 2009, through June 1st to enable the herons' eggs to hatch. While this may not ensure that the birds maintain this historic rookery it at least gives them a chance to hatch out their eggs and start feeding the young. Surely we can adapt this much for other inhabitants in the valley. Should this experiment prove successful the closures should be maintained through June 1 at a minimum every year.
Thank you for your attention.
Cynthia Wayburn

Sunday, March 27, 2009

Dear RAFT Board Members,

Last week Department of the Interior Secretary Salazar released the first-ever study showing the widespread declines in bird populations. I'd like to quote from that report. "Birds today are a bellwether of the health of land, water and ecosystems. We are seeing disturbing downward population trends that should set off environmental alarm bells. We must work together now to ensure we never hear the deafening silence in our forests, fields and backyards that Rachel Carson warned us about."

Although Great Blue Herons are not threatened nationally, their numbers are declining in the Roaring Fork Valley due to loss of habitat. If we can do anything to help the valley maintain a viable population, we should do it. Roaring Fork Audubon has created a compromise that is a win-win answer to the abandonment of the Rock Bottom Ranch heronry.

There is a ongoing conflict between the environmentalists and recreationist in the valley on this issue, and a compromise for the benefit of the birds seems a small price to pay.

Studies show that after the eggs of the herons have hatched, the adult birds will not abandon their young. We believe if the trail is not opened until the 1st of June that the herons, after a few years, will not abandon their nests and will become acclimated to the activity on the path making it possible for earlier openings. Studies also show that many heronries co-exist where all kinds of activities occur, but the herons just need the time and opportunity to accumulate to the activity.

Ken Salazar's report emphasizes "Across America, birds face a gauntlet of threats to their survival including pesticides, collision, domestic cats and ***habitat loss***. U.S. State of the birds calls attention to the problems and solutions. Now we need to act before it is too late, to ensure that future generation of Americans will enjoy a better quality of life, and the same magnificent diversity of birds that we enjoy today."

To read the complete report go to http://www.stateofthebirds.org.

This solution is a win-win answer to saving and solving the problems of the largest heronry in the Roaring Fork Valley; please consider it before continuing to open the path on May 1st.

Respectfully submitted,

Linda Vidal
Roaring Fork Audubon

RFTA board,

I support keeping the trail open on the current schedule with no reduction in the season. The Rio Grande trail is a vital transportation and recreation corridor which must be kept open as much as possible. It improves the quality of life for users by providing a safe, separated platform on which to pursue a healthy lifestyle.
Jeanne Golay
Glenwood Springs

Dear Michael - I am a 6 year Carbondale resident.

As a trail runner, recreational and commuting bicyclist, I am writing to discourage full-time closure of the Rock Bottom Ranch Section of the Rio Grande Trail for wildlife studies until 2012 for the following reasons:

1 - Historically, this corridor has been in place for over a century. I would expect that wildlife habitat and migration trails have adapted to it accordingly over the years.

2 Safety issues This section helps provide in RFTA's own words "44 miles of continuous multi-use trail and is completely protected from vehicular traffic except at intersections[2]. Taking this section of trail would mean increased bicycle traffic from Catherine Store to Basalt, particularly on the frontage road between Catherine Store and El Jebel which has no shoulder, rough road conditions and is ill-equipped to handle bicycle traffic.

3 - The only type of traffic I have ever observed are foot and bicycle during Spring, Summer and Fall months. I find that either types of traffic are quiet and non-obtrusive and and are traveled continuously (without stopping or off-trail excursions) and during daylight hours where there would be little direct contact with wildlife.

4 This is an important connector route which allows a continuous mountain bike loop between Carbondale, Prince Creek Road and the mountain bike trails on the Crown. Shutting this section down would mean increased use on trails in and around the Crown. More user-conflicts not to mention increased trail wear and maintenance.

Thanks,
Traci

Traci Schalow
Graphic Designer

Promotional Concepts
1101 Village Road € Suite UL4B
Carbondale, CO 81623
p:970.963.6554 x13
f:970.963.6559

Dear RFTA Board,

Please check out this trails impact study conducted by Durango Open Space Board. (**See study below**) This sort of info seems very pertinent to our situation. While the opportunity for public input is appreciated, please keep in mind that this issue is not technically subject to local popular demand any more than Spotted Owl protection should have been left to the discretion of local loggers from that region. It is a condition of the use of the Categorical Exclusion. Please keep in mind that, although Board Members refer to the baseline wildlife inventory, there was no such inventory conducted. The inventory referred to was conducted until months after construction had started and the vast majority of wildlife had already been displaced. Have you ever heard the sound of tons of RR steel being dropped into huge steel dumpsters? It was ear splitting even to us less sensitive humans hundreds of yards away. The best approximation of such an inventory would require first protecting what wildlife remains. Please take Mr. Lowsky's recommendations and protect the heronry before tabling closure discussions. A wildlife management plan that can't respond to the needs of wildlife in a timely fashion is a waste of time, effort, and money. Thanks for hearing my concerns. Jim Duke

----- Original Message -----

From: Will, Perry
To: jim duke
Sent: Saturday, March 28, 2009 6:41 PM
Subject: FW: trail effects -- handout for open space meeting

Jim thought you might find this of interest. Perry

Dr. Catherine Ortega, Director
San Juan Institute of Natural and Cultural Resources
Fort Lewis College, Durango, CO 81301
970-247-7393

E-mail: ortega_c@fortlewis.edu
SJINCR Website: http://www.fortlewis.edu/sjincr
Faculty Website: http://faculty.fortlewis.edu/ORTEGA_C/
Southwest Wetlands Focus Area Website: http://www.southwestcoloradowetlands.org
Tamarisk/Russian Olive Website: http://www.sjwwii.org

Effects of trails on wildlife
Durango Open Space Advisory Board 12-12-2007

Two main issues to consider

(1) physical presence of the trail itself
(2) disturbance on trails (mainly human and pets)

Effects of physical presence of the trail

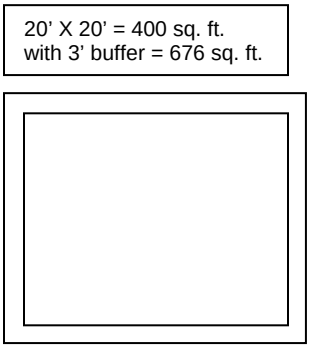
Barrier

- Disrupts natal dispersal
- Disrupts migration patterns
- Disrupts gene flow among populations

Reduction in use

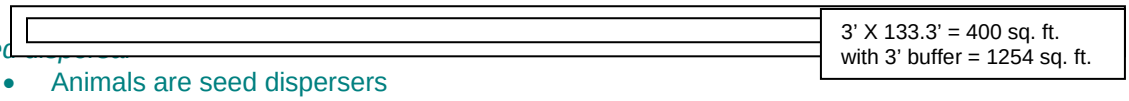
Most severely affected:

- Species needing contiguous habitat
- Species sensitive to fragmentation
- Species with large home ranges
- Rare species
- Threshold for every species
- Social disruption



Decreased resources

- Trails remove habitat and resources
- Loss is often greater than it appears
- Weeds along trails can result in lost resources
- Trails are linear so take more space with buffers (see example)
- Many species need a buffer



Seed dispersal

- Animals are seed dispersers
- Animals pollinate flowers
- Fragmentation and trails can cause loss of these ecological services

Increased predators and cowbirds

- Trails often (not always) attracts predators and brood-parasitic cowbirds
- Predation is the major source of nest mortality for most open-cup nesting birds
- Can result in "sink populations"
- Specific Horse Gulch concerns
    - Experiment conducted in 2006 by FLC senior
    - Results were that 96% of eggs had been depredated by the 4th day

Disturbance

Foot traffic and bicycles are generally more disturbing than cars

- Most animals have a flushing distance (distance between them and disturbance that causes the animal to flush)
- For most, flushing distance is greater (more disturbed) with foot traffic than cars
- Even large carnivores avoid trails
- Predators on bird nests may or may not avoid trails (mixed results)

Mountain bikes are also disturbing, more so for some species

- Some animals get killed (e.g., snakes)
- Mountain bikes allow people to go further into wildlife habitat than they would on foot

Disturbance can lead to loss of breeding

- Decreased time at the nest
- Decreased incubation rates
- Decreased feeding rates

Relevant literature

Chace, J. F., J. J. Walsh, A. Cruz, J. W. Prather, and H. M. Swanson. 2003. Spatial and temporal activity patterns of the brood parasitic brown-headed cowbird at an urban/wildland interface. Landscape and Urban Planning 64:179-190.

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Mader, S. 2006. Comparing the Ecological Effects of Linear Developments on Terrestrial Mammals. Autumn Equinox Volume 11 #3.

Merkle, W. 2002. Recreational effects on the behavior and nesting success of American robins and yellow warblers. Ecological Society of America Annual Meeting, Tucson, AZ.

Miller, J. R., and N. T. Hobbs. 2000. Recreational trails, human activity, and nest predation in lowland riparian areas. Landscape and Urban Planning 50:227-236.

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Chace, J. F., J. J. Walsh, A. Cruz, J. W. Prather, and H. M. Swanson. 2003. Spatial and temporal activity patterns of the brood parasitic brown-headed cowbird at an urban/wildland interface. Landscape and Urban Planning 64:179-190.

We examined the impact of the urban environment on the spatial and temporal activity of brood parasitic Brown-headed Cowbirds (*Molothrus ater*) in Boulder County, CO, USA. We found that cowbirds used the urban areas for foraging and roosting and traveled into the 3240ha wildland preserve of ponderosa pine in the mornings to parasitize songbird hosts. Cowbird abundance decreased with distance from the urban/wildland boundary, and Plumbeous Vireo (*Vireo plumbeus*) nests closer to the urban/wildland boundary were more likely to be parasitized by cowbirds than those farther away. A linear regression accurately predicted the relative abundance of cowbirds based on parameters of distance from residential areas, and distance from roads and trails within the wildland preserve. For species of concern that are known cowbird hosts, creating larger preserves, reducing residential encroachment, and reducing preserve perforation by roads and trails might alleviate high frequencies of parasitism for a portion of the host population. However, even large preserves, such as found in Boulder, CO, USA cannot insulate all focal nesting species from the urban effect of increased brood parasitism. Efforts to reduce food resources and cover for cowbirds in the urban areas might prove to ameliorate host reproductive success close to the urban/wildland boundary through decreases in cowbird abundance.

Estrada, A., A. Rivera, and R. Coates-Estrada. 2002. Predation of artificial nests in a fragmented landscape in the tropical region of Los Tuxtlas, Mexico. Biological Conservation 106:199-209.

Predation rates of artificial nests were investigated in a fragmented landscape in the lowlands of Los Tuxtlas in southern Mexico. Hen and plasticine eggs were used to assess predation pressure in four habitats: the interior of forest fragments, the forest-pasture edge, corridors of residual forest vegetation and linear strips of live fences across pastures. Three sites per habitat were used in three experimental trials. Hen and plasticine ground nests with three eggs each were alternated every 50 m along transects at each site. Predation rates on each type of nest were monitored for 9 days. Survey of potential avian and mammalian potential nest predators were conducted at each site prior to the experimental trails. Readings of amount of light illuminating the ground were taken by each nest at each site to assess exposure of nests. In general, average predation rates were significantly higher for both hen and plasticine nests in the forest-pasture edge and in the corridors than in the interior of the forest fragments. While birds and mammals were the principal predators on hen eggs in the forests, mammals were responsible for the majority (>=70%) of eggs damaged at the other habitats. Surveys of potential nest predators showed that avian and mammalian potential nest predators were significantly more common at the forest-pasture edges and at the other habitats than in the forests. Readings of light reaching the ground suggest that concealment of nests by the vegetation may play an important role in predation risk. Our results are consistent with reports from other Neotropical rainforests indicating an increase of artificial nest predation pressures from forest interior to open habitats. Restoration of forest fragments, allowing the vegetation to grow along the forest-pasture edge and the planting of arboreal crops at the forest-pasture edges may be measures that could increase cover and nest protection.

Francl, K. E., S. B. Castleberry, and W. M. Ford. 2004 Small Mammal Communities of High Elevation Central Appalachian Wetlands. The American Midland Naturalist 151:388-.398.

We surveyed small mammal assemblages at 20 high-elevation wetlands in West Virginia and Maryland and examined relationships among mammal capture rates, richness and evenness and landscape features at multiple spatial scales. In 24,693 trap nights we captured 1451 individuals of 12 species. Small mammal species richness increased with wetland size and was negatively correlated with trail

density. Generalists, such as meadow voles (*Microtus pennsylvanicus*) and shrews (*Sorex cinereus*, *Blarina brevicauda*), dominated larger, more open wetlands, whereas southern red-backed voles (*Clethrionomys gapperi*) were more prevalent at smaller sites surrounded by mixed coniferous-deciduous forest stands. Furthermore, meadow voles were captured more often at sites with higher road density and lower trail density. Southern bog lemmings (*Synaptomys cooperi*) were captured at less than half the sites, all of which were surrounded by a high proportion of deciduous forest. Although significant relationships were found, landscape features explained <20% of total variation at any spatial scale. Other factors, such as land use history or competition, likely have exerted a greater influence in small mammal abundance and distribution at these sites.

Koch, F. H., H. M. Cheshire, and H. A. Devine. 2006. Landscape-Scale Prediction of Hemlock Woolly Adelgid, *Adelges tsugae* (Homoptera: Adelgidae), Infestation in the Southern Appalachian Mountains. Environmental Entomology 35:1313-1323.

After causing substantial mortality in the northeastern and mid-Atlantic United States, the hemlock woolly adelgid, *Adelges tsugae* Annand (Homoptera: Adelgidae), has recently invaded the southern Appalachian region. Although general estimates of regional spread exist, the landscape-level dynamics of *A. tsugae* invasion are poorly understood—particularly factors predicting where the pest is likely to first infest a landscape. We examined first-year infestation locations from Great Smoky Mountains National Park and the Blue Ridge Parkway to identify possible factors. For 84 infested and 67 uninfested sites, we calculated values for a suite of variables using a geographic information system. After identifying significant variables, we applied four statistical techniques—discriminant analysis, *k*-nearest neighbor analysis, logistic regression, and decision trees—to derive classification functions separating the infested and uninfested groups. We used the resulting functions to generate maps of *A. tsugae* infestation risk in the Great Smoky Mountains. Three proximity variables (distance to the closest stream, trail, and road) appeared in all four classification functions, which performed well in terms of error rate. Discriminant analysis was the most accurate and efficient technique, but logistic regression best balanced accuracy, efficiency, and ease of use. Our results suggest that roads, major trails, and riparian corridors provide connectivity enabling long-distance dispersal of *A. tsugae*, probably by humans or birds. The derived classification functions can yield *A. tsugae* infestation risk maps for elsewhere in the southern Appalachian region, allowing forest managers to better target control efforts.

Merkle, W. 2002. Recreational effects on the behavior and nesting success of American robins and yellow warblers. Ecological Society of America Annual Meeting, Tucson, AZ.

I examined the effects of recreational trail-use on the behavior and nesting success of American robins (*Turdus migratorius*) and yellow warblers (*Dendroica petechia*) in willow/cottonwood riparian habitats located on public open space lands in Boulder County, Colorado. In 1999-2001, 319 robin and 113 warbler nests were located and monitored in riparian corridors with and without trails, to determine success. Behavioral observations were conducted on pairs of birds associated with active nest-sites, and frequencies of trail-use were recorded. Increasing intensity of recreational trail-use was associated with increased incubation behavior and reduced feeding of nestlings by female robins. Male robins appeared to increase their feeding with recreational use, countering the reduction in female feeding. No behavioral effects were detected for yellow warblers. Both American robins and yellow warblers achieved higher nesting success and productivity per nest with increasing intensities of trail-use. For robins, nesting success and productivity per nest were lowest at low-use trails. Cowbird parasitism of warbler nests increased with trail-use, reducing but not negating the productivity benefits of nesting at higher-use trail-sites. Although robins altered their behavior with increasing trail-use, no fitness effects of these behavioral alterations were detected. In conclusion, higher-use trail-sites for robins and trail-sites for warblers apparently provided refuges from nest predation that allowed for higher productivity, possibly due to the displacement of potential nest predators by disturbance from recreational users.

Miller, J. R., and N. T. Hobbs. 2000. Recreational trails, human activity, and nest predation in lowland riparian areas. Landscape and Urban Planning 50:227-236.

In areas of human settlement, greenways and open-space land are often intended to serve recreational purposes as well as provide wildlife habitat, but the compatibility of these goals is uncertain. We examined the effect of recreational trails on the risk of nest predation and nest predator activity at four lowland riparian sites along the Front Range of Colorado. At one site on each of two streams, we placed a transect of artificial nests near a recreational trail and another transect on the opposite side of the stream. We also placed another transect of nests at a second site on each stream that was not

associated with a recreational trail. In 1995, nests were baited with quail eggs; in 1996 a clay egg was also added to nests to aid us in nest predator identification. Artificial nests are not perfect surrogates for natural nests, but are useful in generating hypotheses about causes of nest failure and for detecting changes in predator assemblages. Overall, predation rates were high (94%). There were significant differences in vulnerability to predation on the different transect types, with a tendency for predation rates to increase with distance from trails. There was a significant effect of time with a greater risk of predation in 1996. In 1996, 83% of the clay eggs that were recovered showed signs of predation. House Wrens destroyed 11% of the clay eggs; impressions from Black-billed Magpies, Blue Jays, and Common Grackles were found on 69%; mice preyed on 25%; and squirrels on 12% of the eggs. Birds attacked more nests near trails than away from trails, whereas mammals appeared to avoid nests near trails to some extent. These results support the contention that recreational trails and human activity may affect nesting success for some species, and suggest that patterns of nest predation reflect the unique, and sometimes, counter-intuitive responses of individual predator species. Rather than relying on simplistic assumptions about the compatibility of recreation and wildlife, it is important to consider how individual species respond to the habitat alteration and human activity associated with trails when deciding where trails should be located and in developing overall conservation strategies in human-dominated areas.

Miller, S. G., R. L. Knight, and C. K. Miller. 1998. Influence of recreational trails on breeding bird communities. Ecological Applications 8:162-169.

We investigated the influence of recreational trails on breeding bird communities in forest and mixed-grass prairie ecosystems in Boulder County, Colorado, United States, during 1994 and 1995. Species composition, nest predation, and brood parasitism by Brown-headed Cowbirds (*Molothrus ater*) were examined near and away from existing recreational trails. Bird species composition was altered adjacent to trails in both ecosystems. Generalist species were more abundant near trails, whereas specialist species were less common. Within the grassland ecosystem, birds were less likely to nest near trails. Within both ecosystems, nest predation was greater near trails. In forests, the rate of brood parasitism was not influenced by trails. No brood parasitism was found in the grassland ecosystem. Our results may be useful to natural-lands managers who must implement management policies regarding the spatial arrangement of trails and trail-use restrictions.

Sauvajot, R. M., M. Buechner, D. A. Kamradt, and C. M. Schonewald. 1998. Patterns of human disturbance and response by small mammals and birds in chaparral near urban development. Urban Ecosystems 2:279-297.

We report on the extent of disturbance (including habitat alteration and road and trail proliferation) in chaparral near urban development and analyze the effects of disturbance on small mammal and resident bird species. Disturbance patterns were evaluated in a 6700 ha study area in southern California: effects on mammals and birds were investigated by analyzing relationships between vegetation structure and animal species richness and abundance. Disturbance was prevalent throughout the study area and included extensive human-altered habitat (from past human activities such as vegetation clearing, human-caused fires, refuse dumping, and vegetation trampling) and 157 km of roads and trails. A nonsignificant trend was found between human-altered habitat and proximity to development, but human-altered habitat was significantly associated with roadway proximity. Trails were also more frequent near urban development and roads. Small mammals responded strongly to disturbance-related vegetation changes, while birds showed little or no response. Mammals endemic to chaparral vegetation were less diverse and abundant in disturbed sites, whereas disturbance-associated species increased in abundance. Close proximity of urban development to natural areas resulted in alteration of natural habitat and proliferation of roads and trails. Variation in life history traits between birds and mammals may affect response to disturbance and influence persistence if disturbance continues. Conservation efforts must recognize the potential for habitat damage and associated declines in native animal species caused by disturbance near urbanization and implement strategies to reduce these threats.

Schumacher, J. V., R. L. Redmond, M. M. Hart, and M. E. Jensen. 2000. Patterns of Human Use and Potential Resource Conflicts on Public Lands. Environmental Monitoring and Assessment 64:127-137.

Focusing on a 2.2 million hectare area surrounding the Lolo National Forest in western Montana, USA, we illustrate a GIS method for predicting patterns of human use on public lands and highlighting potential for impacts on fish and wildlife species. Data inputs include human population count (derived from the 1990 Census), roads and trails, and the predicted distributions of bull trout (*Salvelinus confluentus*) and

41 terrestrial vertebrates of special concern. Because results highlight areas where conflicts between humans and resources may occur, they are of potential use to land managers. This approach can be applied wherever data are available, and inputs can be varied according to the topics of interest.

Sutter, G. C., S. K. Davis, and D. C. Duncan. 2000. Grassland songbird abundance along toads and trails in southern Saskatchewan. Journal of Field Ornithology 71:110-116.

We conducted roadside and trail-side point count surveys to determine whether grassland bird abundance differs along ditched and non-ditched sampling points in southwestern Saskatchewan. Savannah and Vesper Sparrows were more abundant along roads, while Baird's Sparrows, Chestnut-collared Longspurs, and Sprague's Pipits were more abundant along trails. Clay-colored Sparrows, Horned Larks, and Western Meadowlarks were detected equally along roads and trails. The lower abundance of Sprague's Pipits along roads may be attributed to the 20–30% reduction of suitable habitat associated with the road right-of-way within a point count of 100-m radius. Larger differences for Baird's Sparrows and Chestnut-collared Longspurs (42 and 56% less abundant along roads, respectively) suggest that these species tend not to establish territories adjacent to roadside ditches. Our results indicate that roadside studies designed to estimate the abundance of grassland songbirds should either include trailside counts or interpret roadside data based on the affinity of a species for roadside habitat.

Taylor, A. R., and R. L. Knight. 2003. Wildlife responses to recreation and associated visitor perceptions. Ecological Applications 13:951-963.

Outdoor recreation has the potential to disturb wildlife, resulting in energetic costs, impacts to animals' behavior and fitness, and avoidance of otherwise suitable habitat. Mountain biking is emerging as a popular form of outdoor recreation, yet virtually nothing is known about whether wildlife responds differently to mountain biking vs. more traditional forms of recreation, such as hiking. In addition, there is a lack of information on the “area of influence” (within which wildlife may be displaced from otherwise suitable habitat due to human activities) of different forms of recreation. We examined the responses of bison (*Bison bison*), mule deer (*Odocoileus hemionus*), and pronghorn antelope (*Antilocapra americana*) to hikers and mountain bikers at Antelope Island State Park, Utah, by comparing alert distance, flight distance, and distance moved. Within a species, wildlife did not respond differently to mountain biking vs. hiking, but there was a negative relationship between wildlife body size and response. We determined the area of influence along trails and off-trail transects by examining each species' probability of flushing as perpendicular distance away from a trail increased. All three species exhibited a 70% probability of flushing from on-trail recreationists within 100 m from trails. Mule deer showed a 96% probability of flushing within 100 m of recreationists located off trails; their probability of flushing did not drop to 70% until perpendicular distance reached 390 m. We calculated the area around existing trails on Antelope Island that may be impacted by recreationists on those trails. Based on a 200-m “area of influence,” 8.0 km (7%) of the island was potentially unsuitable for wildlife due to disturbance from recreation.

Few studies have examined how recreationists perceive their effects on wildlife, although this has implications for their behavior on public lands. We surveyed 640 backcountry trail users on Antelope Island to investigate their perceptions of the effects of recreation on wildlife. Approximately 50% of recreationists felt that recreation was not having a negative effect on wildlife. In general, survey respondents perceived that it was acceptable to approach wildlife more closely than our empirical data indicated wildlife would allow. Recreationists also tended to blame other user groups for stress to wildlife rather than holding themselves responsible.

The results of both the biological and human-dimensions aspects of our research have implications for the management of public lands where the continued coexistence of wildlife and recreation is a primary goal. Understanding wildlife responses to recreation and the “area of influence” of human activities may help managers judge whether wildlife populations are experiencing stress due to interactions with humans, and may aid in tailoring recreation plans to minimize long-term effects to wildlife from disturbance. Knowledge of recreationists' perceptions and beliefs regarding their effects on wildlife may also assist public lands managers in encouraging positive visitor behaviors around wildlife.

SUSY ELLISON
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CARBONDALE, CO 81623

April 2, 2009

As an avid biker and user of RFTA bike trails throughout the Roaring Fork Valley I feel compelled to comment on the recent proposal. Let me begin by saying how much I enjoy using the Catherine Store trail section. I use the trail during the summer and fall months for recreational bike riding and roller skiing. I enjoy seeing all the families using the trail. At the same time, I fully support the seasonal trail closure and feel that it should be extended to support the wildlife that used to flourish along that stretch of river.

My background is in wildlife biology. I understand and support the need to collect data and to then be willing to develop and follow a plan that is based on that data. My concern at this time is the lack of solid baseline data (pre-trail) that would help us all understand what, if any, changes our recreational use has had on the local wildlife. While the lack of adequate baseline data is a reality, it should not preclude RFTA from starting NOW to collect good data that will help us quantify wildlife species and use patterns for that area. I would urge you to expand current data collection to year-round.

While it sounds great to say that you will collect data for 5 years before taking any further action, I worry that the Heron population might not make it another 5 years if you don't extend the trail closure dates. I would urge you to do the 5-year study and, at the same time, extend the spring trail closure by 1 month.

One last point. Wildlife data collection is meaningless if you, as a board, are unwilling to use that data in creating a management plan. While you may view your mission as creating trails for recreation, it is inappropriate and wrong to place our recreational needs above those of wildlife. We aren't creating any new wildlife habitat in this valley—over-development and inappropriate development has affected much of the valley's wildlife species. RFTA's trail system should place the needs of wildlife above those of lycra-clad bike weenies (that would include me!).

Extend the trail closure. Do the study. Follow the recommendations made by your biologist.

Sincerely,

Susy Ellison