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Springtime in New York

STORY AND PHOTOS BY SHAWN HAMILTON

When the snow melts here in Ontario, Canada, and the bright colors of spring begin to paint the landscape, all I can think of is hitting the trails. For me, spring means getting my horse back in shape for the long rides ahead.

I especially prepare for my annual spring-camping week at the Otter Creek Horse Trails, just a half-day's drive away. This system of 65 miles of interlocking horse trails is located on both the Independence River Wild Forest Unit of the Adirondack Forest Preserve, and the Independence River and Otter Creek State Forests on the western border of the Adirondack Park in Lewis County, New York.

Careful Preparation

Seemingly small preparations can make or break my spring getaway. First, I thoroughly clean my trailer. This year, the electric brakes were malfunctioning. Thankfully, the problem was simply dirty buildup that corroded the connection. I fixed the problem inexpensively with a new plug.

Getting the kinks out of my trusty steed is next on the list. I'd just purchased an Appaloosa gelding, Bailey. To prep him for our trip, I took him on 20-minute

trailer rides to Ontario's Ganaraska forest, riding with a different group of horses each time.

Even though Bailey is one of the quietest trail horses I've ever owned, I felt more at ease getting him used to the sound of the hook-and-loop fasteners on my saddlebags while on the trails near home.

Bailey's previous owner had warned me of his fear of water, but with the help of the older, more experienced horses to guide us through streams and horse-eating puddles, it didn't take long before we were tromping through water without the snorts of fear and side-stepping up the banks. This proved to be very helpful for what was in store for us in Otter Creek.

An appointment with the veterinarian and Ministry of Agriculture is a must; a current health certificate and Coggins certificate (showing that your horse has tested negative for equine infectious ane-

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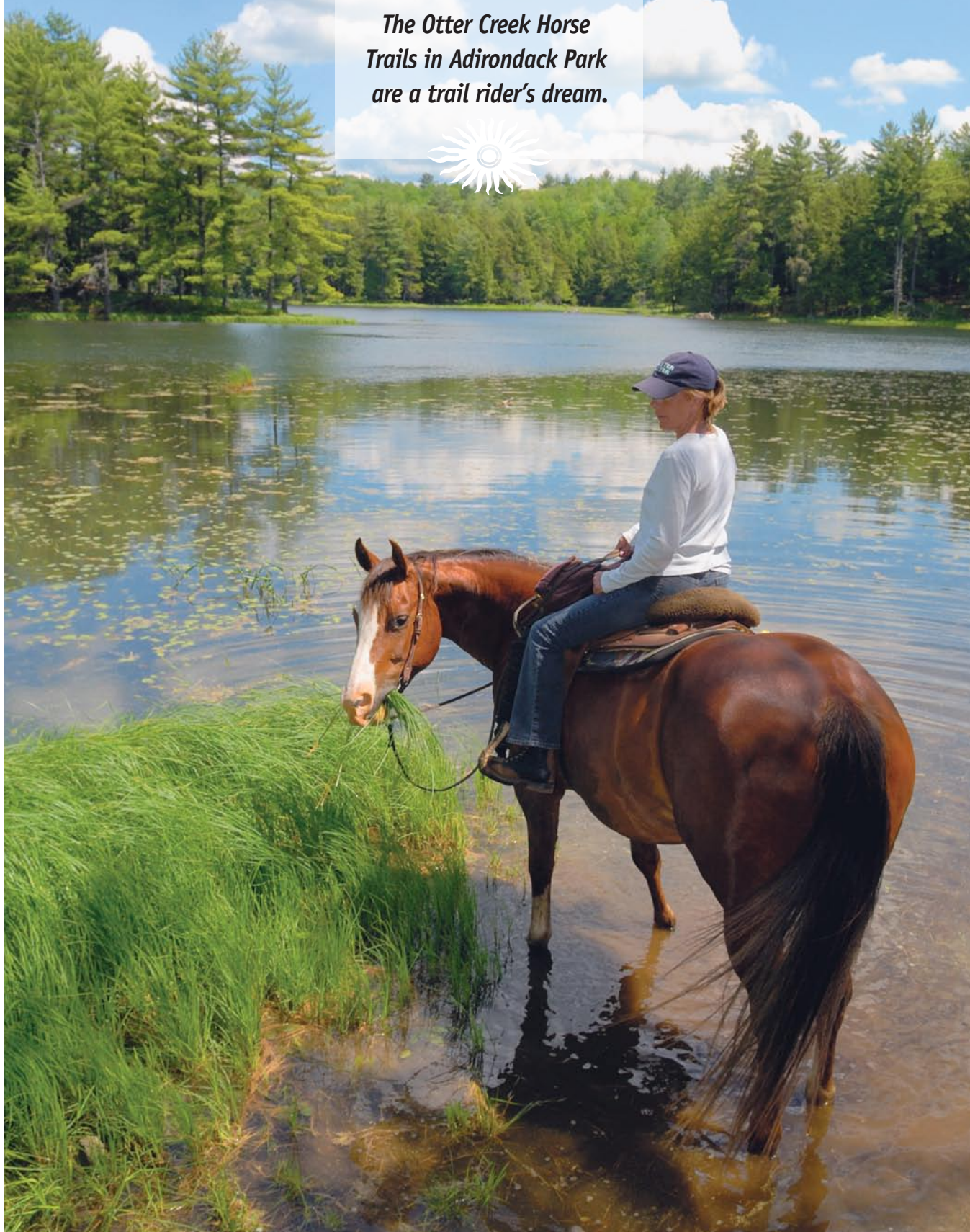
Right: The Otter Creek Horse Trails offers hitching posts conveniently located at each picturesque vista along the trails.

Top: Consult a trail map before you leave on your ride.

Opposite: Area creeks and lakes offer water for horses, as well as tempting forage.



The Otter Creek Horse Trails in Adirondack Park are a trail rider's dream.



DESTINATIONS

Springtime in New York

CONTINUED

mia) are necessary when entering the U.S. border from Canada.

Soon, the day to leave was upon us and the trailer-packing was to commence. The Assembly Area at Otter Creek features small, covered tie stalls that house up to a hundred horses. The wide stalls are open in the back; bumper bars help contain the horses.

I've learned to cut waste and keep things neat by hanging the hay nets, and feed and water buckets. So begins the list: feed and water buckets; hang ties; everyday tack; extra tack; extra lead ropes; halters; girths; reins; and even an extra stirrup leather.

Why a stirrup leather? While riding at Otter Creek, bees once attacked my mare. She dumped me and ran off into the wilderness. I managed to salvage all the tack with the exception of one stirrup leather. You can't be too prepared.

Of course, I also bring food, first-aid equipment, and fly spray. Then I throw in lots of fly wipes to use on rides when my horse sweats off the spray applied earlier.

As I'm not lucky enough to have a living-quarters trailer, a tent and cooking facilities round out my list.

Getting There

The humid weather on shipping day made the five-hour drive a hot and sweaty one for the horses. It helped to have familiar water from home easily accessible for our brief-but-frequent breaks.

Laurel, one of our convoy companions, put a layer of shavings soaked in cold water on the trailer floor just before loading her gelding, Stormy, and her traveling companion Laurie's mare, Dee. The moisture seemed to keep the horses' temperatures down and the two appeared quite comfortable.

Arriving at the Canadian/United States border at noon, the hottest part of the day, was poor planning on our part. The border veterinarian favored the large truckloads of cattle that never

"Although I love my tent and two-horse bumper pull, I resolved to search for a new trailer with small living quarters," reports Shawn Hamilton. "A shower, a toilet, and a place to hide from falling trees (during storms) somehow have become priorities."



The Assembly Area at Otter Creek features small, covered tie stalls that house up to a hundred horses. "I've learned to cut waste and keep things neat by hanging the hay nets, and feed and water buckets," says experienced horse camper Shawn Hamilton.

get to drink when hauled. We waited in the parking lot for almost an hour, keeping our horses happy with treats and water.

A few hours later, we arrived at the Otter Creek Assembly Area. There are three parking areas with campsites from which to choose. Each site offers a picnic table, a fire pit, and ample parking spots for your rig. You can camp as near as 20 feet from your horse, if you wish.

The public washrooms are clean — with flush toilets! As we unloaded our sweaty horses, I decided that next time, I'd leave earlier, for a cooler journey.

Settling In

First, we gave our horses a nice stretch and walked around the parking area. We were greeted by several of our trail buddies

from home who'd arrived the day before. Complaints about the heat and bugs were abundant, but everyone had enjoyed their rides that day.

After settling the horses in their stalls, my traveling companion, Cinette, helped me set up the tent on a sandy patch close to the horses. Then I was ready for a swim!

We headed down to the lake for a quick dip. We weren't prepared for the mosquitoes and black flies waiting for us to exit the water. I swear, I could hear them laughing as we raced back to the truck. Next time, we'll take bug spray to the lake.

Clean and cool, we started cooking dinner. As I sifted through the cookware, I realized that a test run at home with the camp cooking box would've saved the disappointment of a missing cast-iron frying



pan. No worries; precooked, frozen spaghetti sauce was a breeze to boil up.

During my younger days of ice climbing and camping in the wintertime, I discovered that precooking sauces and stews, then freezing them in zip-close bags, saves time, fuel, and water when preparing meals.

With our bellies full and the sounds of the horses munching away on their hay, we eased into our chairs by the fire and took in the calmness of the night. As the sky started to light up with stars, we planned our first day on the trails. As it was early in the year, our horses weren't as fit as they'd be in the fall. Therefore, a three- to four-hour loop with a bridge-crossing and lunch stop seemed ample for Day 1.

A Relaxing Ride

The next morning, I awoke to the smells of the forest as the sun began to peek through the branches of the towering trees. I could see my breath as I started a fire and put on the coffee. The camp percolator was at full gurgle when everyone began to stir.



The Canadian riders enjoyed picture-perfect weather (shown), before a wild storm struck soon after they left camp on Day 2. Although the group made it back before rain fell, other campers weren't so lucky.

After breakfast, we tacked up and headed off in the early, cool part of the day. The bugs were bad, but tolerable. The sandy footing was excellent for our horses. We took in the colors of spring and the harmonious sounds of the birds.

Feeling my horse relax underneath me,

I remembered why we return here every year. Just the four of us today, Laurel and Cinette with their trusty Morgans, Stormy and Blaze; Laurie with her Quarter Horse, Dee; and me with my new guy, Bailey.

My doubts about the bridge crossing

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DESTINATIONS

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ahead were quickly relieved when our trail leader (who we call "Go Anywhere Dee") proudly paraded across with my Bailey boy close behind.

We untacked the horses and tied them to the hitching posts conveniently located at each picturesque vista along the trails. We picnicked to the sound of the rushing creek beside us and chatted with passers-by.

We took the horses to the creek for a drink before tacking up again. I hopped on Bailey bareback and was happy to get him into the water up to his belly. On our re-

laxing ride home, we cantered in the wonderful loamy parts of the trail.

Back at the campsite, we celebrated our first successful day on the trails with strawberry daiquiris.

Storm!

Day 2 was a whole different scenario. We rose early, as we'd planned a long day. We'd hit the highlands, stop at Upper Chase Lake for lunch, then make the descent home in the afternoon.

Soon after we headed off, I noticed the sky darkening around us. After an hour in the saddle, my arthritic joints told me it

was about to rain. I looked up and could sense something was in the air. The sky was ominous; the fresh breeze had suddenly stopped dead. Our horses became agitated. Without too much hesitation, we made a collective decision to turn back for home.

The minute we arrived back at camp and dismounted, rain began to fall. We quickly covered and put away our belongings, then sat under a tarp in fear of what was to come.

The sky darkened to black, the rain strengthened, and the wind blew so hard, the trees were swayed above us. Hearing the crash of a falling tree nearby, we headed for the truck, worrying about those who still might be on the trails.

We drove around the lot to each site to see which horses weren't yet in their stalls. A friend, Anne, and her troop had just returned and were quickly untacking. She was shaking with fear. "Trees were literally falling around us," she exclaimed. "One fell right in front of us, blocking the trail. We just headed our horses for home and ran."

After the first storm, the park ranger

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advised us not to stay in a tent, but to find cover in a vehicle or camper, as more severe storms were on their way. Word of a logger being crushed to death by a falling tree got around. We headed for our friends' three-horse trailer with living quarters.

The power had gone out, which meant no water. When the rangers were kind enough to turn on the generator for an hour, we scurried around filling up everything we could find. We were thankful for the extra buckets we'd packed.

By early evening, the weather had calmed. We ate dinner in a covered picnic area, then warmed ourselves by the fire. Storm tales were endless. Even though no one was hurt, I decided that next time I'd bring a small, battery-operated radio to check the weather each day before heading out on the trails.

A Sloshy Finish

The next morning greeted us with clear blue skies. We decided to take the trail to Catspaw Lake and enjoy our last full day. Wild turkeys flew out from underneath

us; I was so proud of Bailey when he didn't flinch. Birds chattered, and the breeze was just strong and cool enough to keep the bugs away. Catspaw Lake revealed wonderful reflections.

The trail showed signs of the previous day's storm. Trees had blocked the path, forcing us to bushwhack them out of the way. I could picture Anne and her friends in the thick of it, the wind howling around them.


Completely relaxed and a bit sad knowing that this was our last day, I hardly noticed the ground getting squishy. Bailey snorted, and I knew instantly water was ahead. What we thought was a small creek turned out to be a river that completely flooded the trail.

We consulted the map and decided that if we wanted to get back before nightfall, crossing the river would be our best option. We put Laurie and Dee in the lead. I lifted my feet onto the front of the saddle, and urged Bailey on with my voice. Dee expertly led the way.

The next thing I knew, I was holding onto Bailey's mane and we were literally swimming across to reach the other

side. We laughed in surprise and shock as our horses finally made their way to dry ground. I couldn't wait to tell Bailey's former owner what the Appy had accomplished on his first trip away.

That night, as I crawled into my sleeping bag, tired from the day's adventures, I knew we'd never forget this trip. I also reached a decision. Although I love my tent and two-horse bumper pull, I resolved to search for a new trailer with small living quarters. A shower, a toilet, and a place to hide from falling trees somehow have become priorities.

I guess I'm just getting soft in my old age! 

For more information on the Otter Creek Horse Trails, call (315) 376-3521, or visit www.dec.ny.gov/outdoor/8088.html.

As the owner of Clix Photography (www.clixphoto.com), Shawn Hamilton travels worldwide to cover equestrian events and capture images that appear in top magazines, including *The Trail Rider*. She lives with her husband, four children, and five horses on a farm in Ontario, Canada.

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