

WHERE DO YOU RIDE?

Part IV

The purpose of this series of articles is to acquaint our riders with background information on agencies where equestrian trails can be found and how their missions differ from one another.

MARK TWAIN NATIONAL FOREST

The Mark Twain National Forest (MTNF) is one of three federally managed lands within Missouri along with the U.S. Army Corp of Engineers (COE) and the National Park Service (NPS). Our nation's national forests are under the jurisdiction of the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Missouri's MTNF consists of around 1.5 million acres mostly in 29 southern and central counties. MTNF came into existence due to the WEEKS ACT signed into law by President Howard Taft in 1938. This "organic act" permitted the federal government to purchase private land to reestablish forests and protect watersheds. It began with a crisis to restore a devastated and exhausted land left behind by timber overharvesting and poor farming techniques of the 1920' and 30's. At this time in our history, it was known as "The Land Nobody Wanted."

Today the four geographically divided districts of MTNF reflect the restored forest that began in the 1930's. Eroded areas were planted to stop erosion, wildlife preserves were built and wildlife such as deer and turkey were imported from other states. Management is a constantly evolving practice based on fulfilling its **law required mission** to provide ecological sustainability. This requires an integrated management approach. Part of this integrated approach includes recreational trails. Yeah, we are finally getting to the horse part!

MTNF within its four districts provides more miles of riding trails than any other land management agency and has always been very open to horse use. There are ten designated horse camps providing multiple amenities within the state. There are too many designated trails to list here but you can find them listed along with location and detailed information on the MTNF website. (www.fs.usda.gov/mtnf). If internet access is not possible, information is available at the MTNF Supervisor's Office in Rolla – (573) 364-4621.

MTNF is Missouri's only public land management agency that allows cross country riding anywhere within the forest boundary except near caves or developed areas where safety is an issue. Also camping anywhere in the forest is allowed including along forest roads as long as traffic is not blocked. While you can ride cross country, one cannot create new trails. The forest service is under the obligation of law to follow certain guidelines and parameters when trails are created and must meet a criterion of trail use standards. This is not to say new trails are not possible; however, there is a protocol to follow and trail standards that must be met. There are some restrictions when riding in Wilderness Areas within the forest boundary. Horseback riding is an acceptable and acknowledged use within wilderness; however, due to the unique nature of wilderness, riders are limited to a maximum of ten to protect wilderness values.

While Missouri's national forest does not have the large land mass of our western states, we do have some of the best and most scenic riding trails east of the Rocky Mountains. We are also fortunate to have MTNF management that acknowledges horseback riding as an equal in recreational trail usage.