

High Desert riding at its best: Snowflake Secret Trails

By Carol Godwin, Cycle Mania

The White Mountains of Arizona is known for its tall pines, quaking aspens, and snowy mountain peaks. It is also home to Pinion-Juniper stands and beautiful high desert vistas. One of the best places to enjoy the high desert landscape is on a mountain bike, traveling unique and varying MTB trails on the Snowflake Secret Trails system.

In true White Mountains fashion, the instructions to reach these trails are not on any map, you can't just "Google it", at least not just yet. There are many entrances to the Show Low Secret trail system, but the easiest to find is to turn west on 7th Street South in Snowflake and go past the house with the white-painted tree trunks, past the High School, and to Cottonwood Wash. The entrance to the trail is off the south east side of the wash, behind the guard rail, into the east side of the wash. It looks nothing like an entrance to one of the best trail systems in the White Mountains.

Entering the trail system is like dipping into another world. In summer, shimmering green cottonwoods welcome you and the winter, the leafless trees provide interesting silhouettes against the cutbank wash. The trail leads past awesome scrapped antique vehicles and gives you a taste of the roller-coaster style of the trail. Be ready for anything; sloping downs and punchy ups, sandy to rocky, and fast travels to technical switchbacks. After exiting the wash, you will come up on a double-track road leading southwest. There are several choices to take and it is suggested that you try taking the outside loops clockwise by taking lefts and counter-clockwise by taking rights on different visits for completely different experiences. Because these trails were created by local cyclists with a love for the area and a passion for mountain biking, they flow naturally over the landscape and fit organically into what cyclists want from a top-notch trail system.

You could spend days traveling alternate routes through the gullies and over the hills and have new experiences each time. Trail builders are working the trails actively and would be more than happy to have help. It is common to see a new segment appear between one visit and the next. Note to Stravaholics: there are

plenty of Strava segments to challenge you and new KOMs/QOMs to be had on every visit.

Upon reaching the highest plateaus of the trail, you will experience sweeping vistas of the White Mountains high desert. The freedom you feel on the top of the plateau is like no other. No trees or hills to block your view and the wind on your face is exhilarating. Take a break and breathe before heading down past rugged limestone features and well-designed switchbacks. This is no time to be complacent though, downhill quickly turn to climbs at the turn of a corner. These trails feature great climbs. You can see the top so you know you will achieve it. It will challenge your endurance while rewarding you with long fast downhill.

These trails are reminiscent of the famous Phill's World trail system not only in the fun roller coaster segments, but also due to the fact that they were user-created and embraced by the local community as well as approved and supported by the local government. The Snowflake-Taylor community has shown exceptional support for cycling and the local city council understands the value that cycling can bring to a community. Recently, the city council approved over \$400,000 to build a professional-level bike park and entrance to these trails including parking, restrooms and ramadas. There are opportunities for nearly endless miles of trail development through washes and up onto plateaus in the adjacent area.

Small town America is learning that cyclists bring more than bikes to an area. Cyclists bring families to stay in motels, eat at restaurants, buy souvenirs, and visit local attractions. This trail system is well worth the visit and gives the White Mountains excellent all-season cycling opportunities. Ride in shady pines in a stunning high desert when it is hot or when it is cold and there are over 200 miles of clear single-track trails and thousands of miles of two-track road for the year.

The Apache Sitgreaves National Forest contains excellent Spring-Fall riding trails including the Buena Vista System (Show Low Secret Trails), Panorama trail, Los Burros trail, Land of Pioneers trail and over 200 miles of connecting single track. The forest roads provide nearly perfect all-season gravel grinding. The addition of the Snowflake Secret Trails is perfect for fall to spring riding and excellent summer riding make the White Mountains an exciting cycling destination. The added bonus is when there are multiple users of a trail, you will feel the freedom of being out

there riding alone or in your small group. These trails never feel crowded even on the highest user-day.

*Warning: these trails basically require tubeless set-up or tire armor. There are many goatheads and you will get punctures. Bring flat repair, water and snacks and dress in layers. Cool mornings develop into warm afternoons and then back to cool evenings in this nearly treeless high desert landscape.

Keep your sealant fresh and your bike rubber-side down. Enjoy these trails and be ready to be part of a new cycling destination phenomenon.

Significant kudos to Rick Brimhall and Brandon Hatch for their passion and dedication to these trails. Thank you to everyone who has helped develop this system and appreciation to the towns of Snowflake/Taylor for embracing and encouraging cycling in their communities.