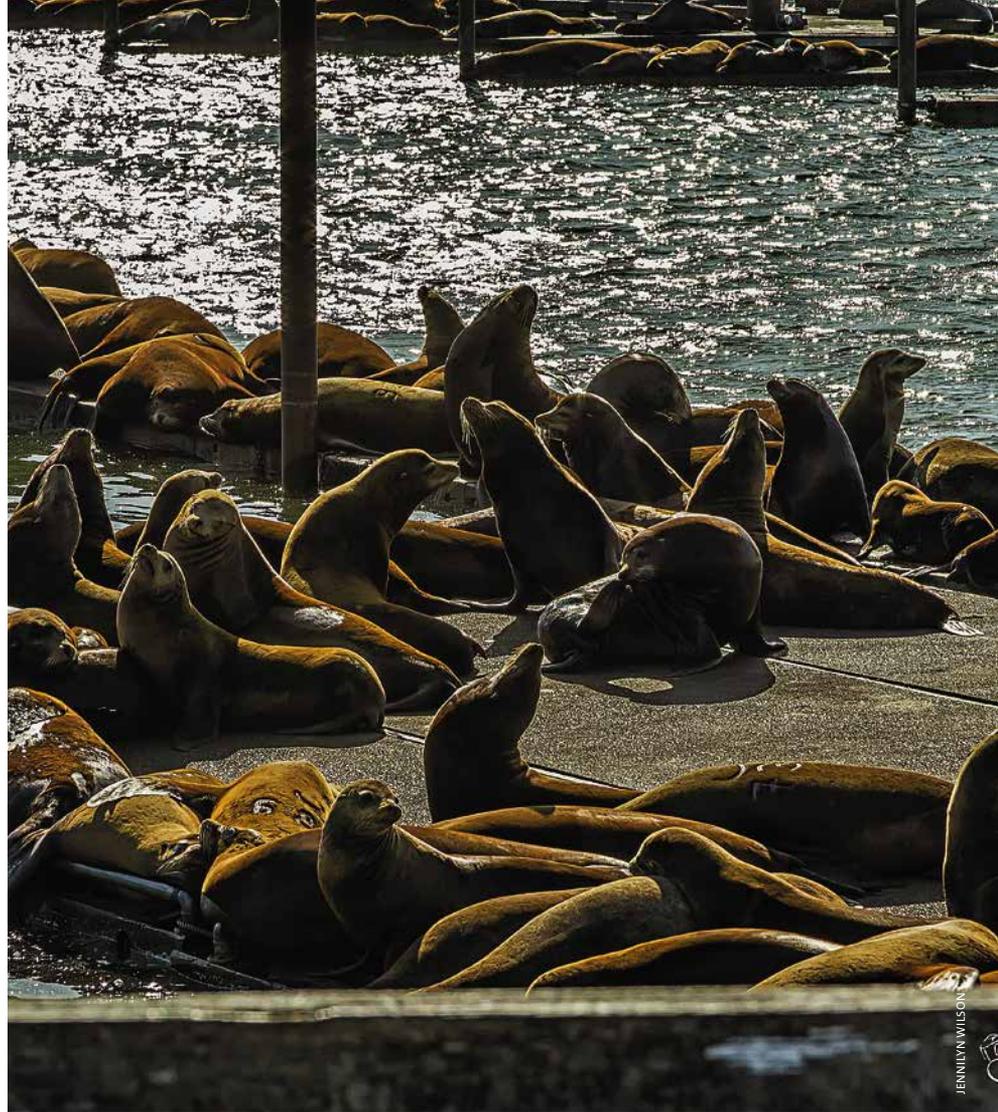


Astoria Riverwalk, Oregon ▶ ▼

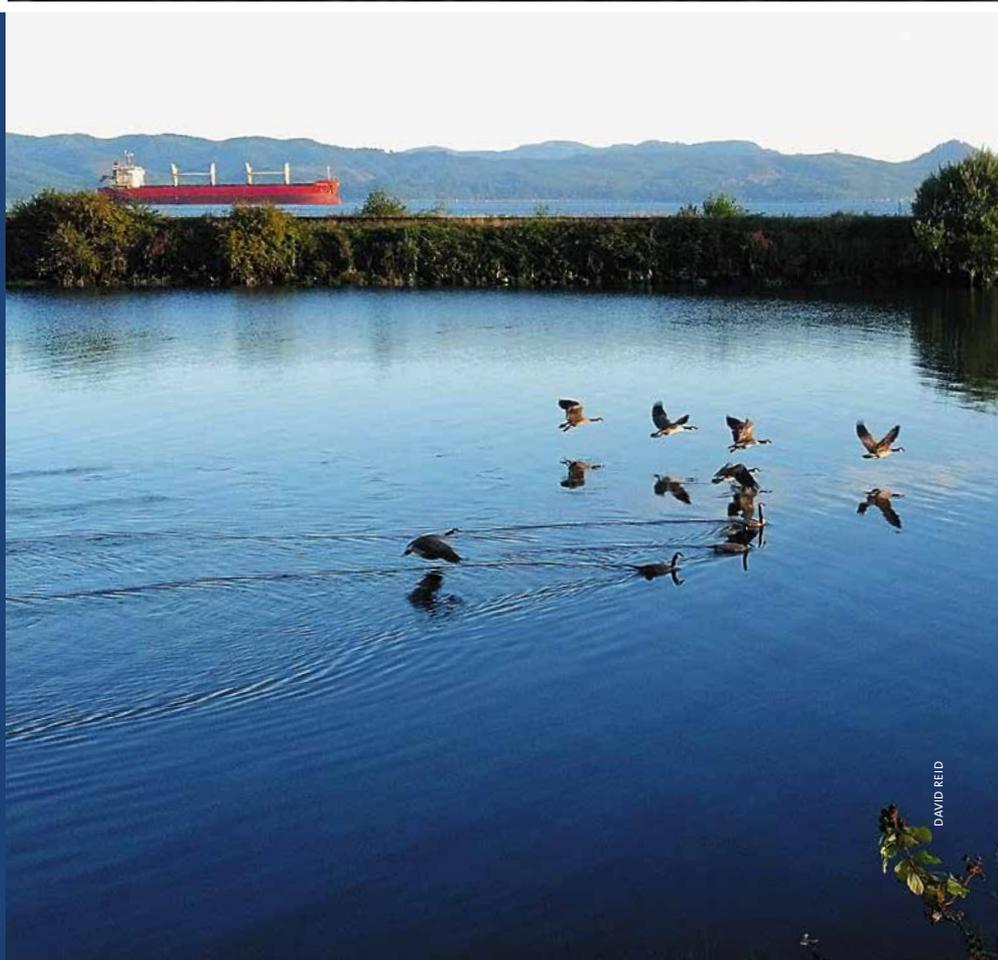
Situated just feet from the coastline of the Pacific Northwest, Oregon's 6.4-mile Astoria Riverwalk is an urban trail with an unusual wildlife attraction. More than 2,000 barking sea lions announce their presence even before trail users reach the Port of Astoria's East Mooring Basin, where the pinnipeds spectacularly congregate on the docks. However, the 800-pound sea lions cause significant damage to property along the docks and to the boats moored there. Marine mammal experts also note that the animals' takeover of the docks and frequent interactions with humans are detrimental to the sea lions' health.

The port is exploring nuisance strategies—including an unsuccessful attempt with a fake orca last spring—to encourage the sea lions to relocate to the nearby rock breakwaters, also visible from the riverwalk. Despite the problems, the large colony of sleek mammals attracts attention from tourists and locals alike. Bald eagles, pelicans and Canada geese also frequent the coastline and give trail users wildlife viewing options both in the skies and on the sea.



JENNIFER WILSON

As railroad companies of the past laid track across the American landscape, they created pathways through portions of the country that would otherwise remain unseen by human eyes. Today, trail users traveling along the footprints of these former rail lines find the unique access offers rare opportunities to view wildlife in its native habitat. From moose in Maine and alligators in Alabama to cormorants along the California coast, animals seen from rail-trails give their human visitors incentive to sustain these habitats and conserve resources to help them thrive. These four trails showcase some of the diverse wildlife you may see on your next visit.



DAVID REID



By Danielle Taylor

THE WILD

COURTESY FERMILAB



CARTON HOLLS

Illinois Prairie Path, Illinois ▲◀

Clocking in at 61 miles, the Illinois Prairie Path (IPP) was established in the mid-1960s and quickly became one of America's first successful rail-trail conversions. Along its route, people can view deer, squirrels, rabbits, voles, groundhogs, toads, birds and other woodland and grassland creatures, many of which use the trail and its surroundings as a sheltered refuge amidst the Chicago suburbs. Since the trail's creation 50 years ago, a major focus of the Illinois Prairie Path Corp. has been to preserve, restore and reestablish the prairies located along the trail. These have been critical in providing needed natural habitats for many species displaced by urban sprawl. The trail

also serves as a Monarch Waystation for migrating butterflies.

The most popular wildlife attraction is slightly off the path. The campus of Fermilab, a physics laboratory adjacent to the trail in Batavia, features a private herd of bison that visitors can see following a short detour off the IPP. The lab's first director established the initial herd in 1969 as part of a program to help preserve the prairie history of the state. Since then, the lab has continued to maintain a herd of 30 to 70 animals. The bison habitat also attracts some beautiful birds and has been at least the temporary home of snow buntings, eastern bluebirds, great horned owls, greater white-fronted geese and Ross's geese.

Weiser River Trail, Idaho ▶

In southwestern Idaho, the Weiser River Trail meanders through an 84-mile cross section of the state's variable landscape. Shifting from mountain meadows and evergreen forests along its northern end to open desert canyons in the south, the trail intersects more than 1,400 acres of wildlife habitats and gives its users something new to see around every bend. Birds spotted include burrowing owls, sandhill cranes, northern harriers, peregrine falcons, wild turkeys and violet-green swallows—a range of species that illustrates the diversity of environments found on the path. Larger animals include bear, coyotes, mountain lions, elk and wolves. The Weiser River adjacent to the trail is a popular destination for fishermen looking to catch wild rainbow trout.

Friends of the Weiser River Trail established and maintains the pathway with limited municipal support. Part of the group's mission statement is “to protect and enhance the riparian and other natural habitats within the corridor.”



Methuen Rail Trail, Massachusetts ◀▶

This unassuming trail on the Massachusetts/New Hampshire border packs a lot of wildlife into a mere 2.4 miles. Trail walkers and riders can expect to see deer, turtles, rabbits, snakes, otters and more, but the trail is best known for its wide variety of birds. The 18-acre Nevins Bird Sanctuary sits along the pathway and provides a protected habitat for hundreds of birds, giving visitors plenty to see. Two counts in the summer of 2010 yielded observations of 39 avian species, ranging from song sparrows and red-winged blackbirds to great blue herons, red-tailed hawks and even one immature bald eagle.

The endangered Blanding's turtle, recognizable by its yellow-speckled shell, makes its home here and finds the sandy soil alongside the railbed to be ideal for nesting. The Methuen Rail Trail Alliance brings attention to the reptile's conservation status and encourages the public to look but not disturb the animals, and to learn about the factors threatening this turtle's survival.

Danielle Taylor is a freelance writer currently traveling across the United States in search of adventure and intriguing stories. A former executive editor for the National Recreation and Park Association's *Parks & Recreation* magazine, she focuses her work on outdoor recreation, public lands and travel. Follow her journey at danielle-taylor.com.



PAT TRAINOR (2)



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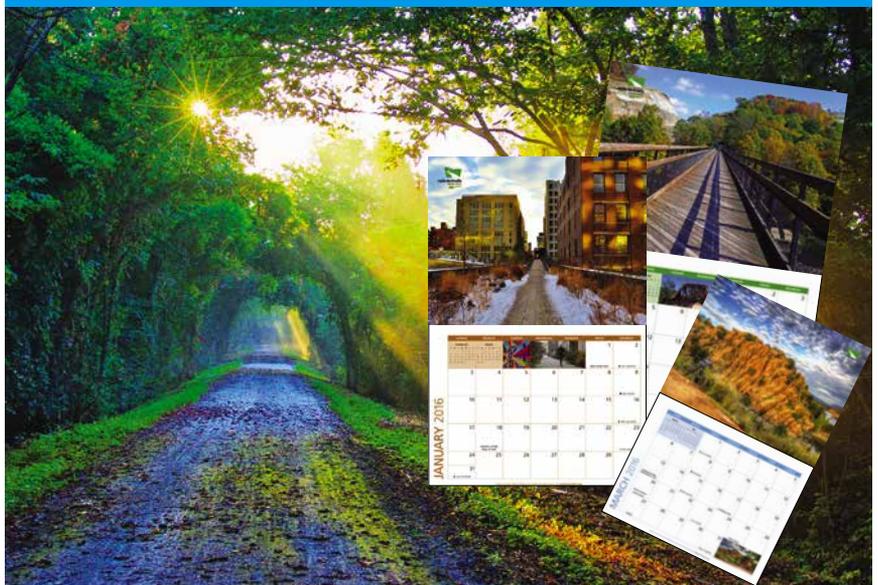


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