

◀ CORBA president Steve Messer pulls the “closed” sign out of the ground to signal the re-opening of the Gabrielino Trail, which had been closed for years due to fire and flood damage.

FEATURE

Rebuilding a Classic Trail

California's Gabrielino Trail is back in business

One of the most historic mountain bike trails in Southern California recently re-opened, nearly nine years after a major fire put it out of commission. We interviewed Steve Messer, president of the Concerned Off-Road Bicyclists Association, to learn the history of the Gabrielino Trail and how mountain bikers led the restoration efforts.

MBA: What can you tell us about the Gabrielino Trail?

Steve: The Gabrielino was the very first National Recreation Trail designated in the U.S. after the passage of the National Trails System Act on October 2nd, 1968, 50 years ago (<https://corbamb.com/news/2018/08/gabrielino-nrt-first-in-the-nation/>). The Act doesn't designate who is allowed to use trails, and The National Trail System includes both multi-use trails and wilderness trails not open to bikes.



The Gabrielino Trail was one of the first designated National Recreation Trails (NRTs). It serves one of the largest population bases in the country, and a goal of the act was to encourage and promote hiking and outdoor recreation to the populace. More than 15 million people have access to the Angeles National Forest, and the Gabrielino trail is one of the most

accessible point-to-point front-country hikes of the Forest.

MBA: Do you know who the earliest mountain bikers were who rode the trail?

Steve: In the late '70s, there were people out riding it and exploring, using hiking maps to navigate since there were no mountain bike maps. Mountain bikers were



According to the act of Congress that created the National Recreation Trail system 50 years ago, the trails were required to be reasonably accessible to urban areas. When the Gabrielino Trail opened nearly 50 years ago, the two ends of the trail were said to be within easy travel distance for more than 7 million Southern Californians.



Checking out a trail blockage in 2016. Photo: Steve Messer/CORBA



While some people carve their initials in trees, one Gabrielino Trail user carved a picture of a bike.



Robin McGuire and her husband, Mike (not shown here), both avid mountain bikers and longtime trail workers, were two of the people who worked the hardest to get the trail opened again.

a rarity and a curiosity. If we go back to the turn of the 20th century, trails like the Mount Wilson Toll Road were being ridden by the bikes of the time. Biking in the San Gabriel Mountains goes back more than 100 years, but only in the 1980s did it really take off as mountain biking developed. There were groups like the Boneheads and a number of intrepid individuals like Vincente of America who were early explor-

ers of the San Gabriels. It was also the first singletrack I rode in 1986 and the last trail I rode a week or so before the Station Fire.

MBA: How many mountain bikers were using the trail before the fire?

Steve: The more popular segments saw upwards of 200 riders per month. It has become much more popular since then. The fires started on August 26, 2009, and

burned for over six weeks. The Gabrielino Trail was closed the day that fire began. We reopened the last section of it on August 24, 2018. That was nine years, almost to the day, a time during which we know mountain biking has grown. The Gabrielino was also the last of more than 15 trails CORBA and Mount Wilson Bicycling Association (MWBA) volunteers helped restore and reopen since the Station

Gabrielino Trail

This was by far our most difficult and ambitious project.

MBA: What did you have to do to reopen the trail?

Steve: The major thing we had to do to reopen the trail was find lost trail segments. There were three or four segments of the trail that had been almost completely washed away by the 2009 El Nino floods [an extremely wet winter weather pattern]. We had to do our best to determine where the trail was using GPS tracks from before the fire and a lot of crawling under brush and ground sleuthing. We found remnants of bench cuts, tread, and some retaining walls from the trail. Much of the trail on the side slope of the canyon was fairly easy to find, though heavily sloughed and choked by brush. Sections where the trail crossed the stream bed or was in the flood plain were the most difficult to reestablish.

We first evaluated the trail in February 2016 with Forest Service staff and a professional contractor. It took over a year of review and planning before we were able to start on-the-ground restoration work in fall 2017. Intrepid hikers ignoring the closed signs had already begun using the trail, but in several sections they were hiking down the stream bed instead of the obstructed and damaged original trail. The few cyclists who tried to pass through inevitably regretted it.

One of the most difficult sections was the mile and a half above Oakwilde Campground (now mostly buried in the floodplain), where for years trail users had abandoned a failed and impassable section of the original trail (as built by the California Conservation Corps in the 1930s) and were instead following the stream bed on a user-created trail that would change with every rainy season.

We were able to locate and restore that original CCC trail alignment, keeping trail users out of the soft, gravelly stream-bed/floodplain all the way to Oakwilde Campground. Trail users and environmentalists both appreciated getting people out of the sensitive stream-bed area. Being clear with the Forest Service about our plan to restore the original trail away from the stream bed also held up the project.

MBA: How did you get people to volunteer after you got permission?



Volunteer Burt McMinnar rides to the trail-work site. Photo: Steve Messer/CORBA

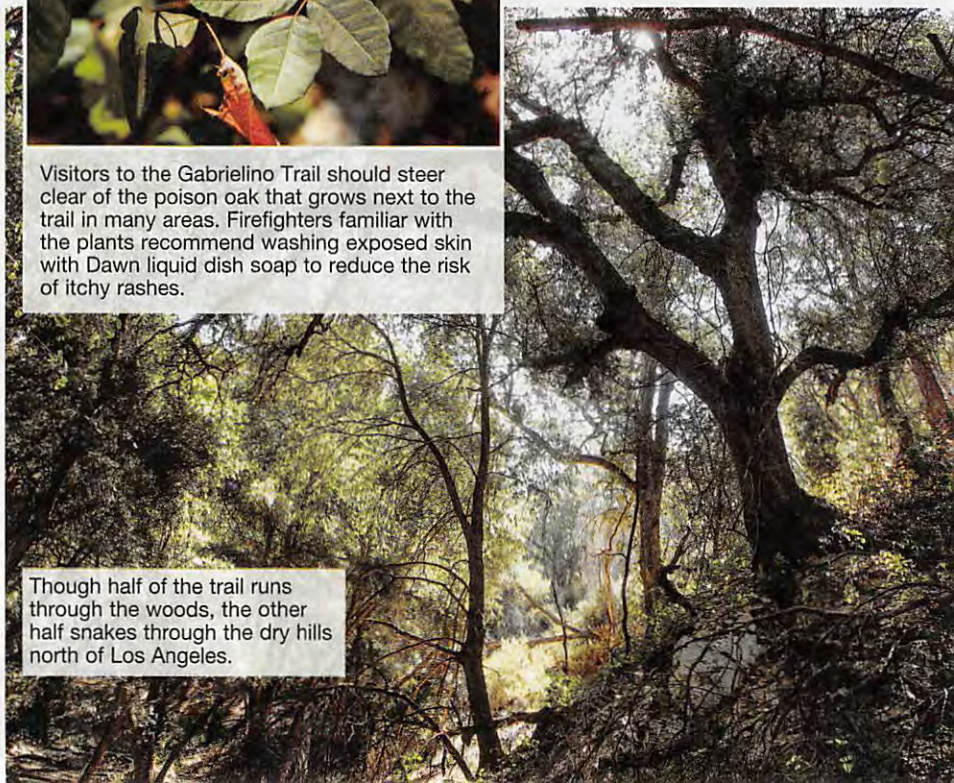


Matt Baffert bikepacks in for some trail-work and a camp-out.

Photo: Steve Messer/CORBA



Visitors to the Gabrielino Trail should steer clear of the poison oak that grows next to the trail in many areas. Firefighters familiar with the plants recommend washing exposed skin with Dawn liquid dish soap to reduce the risk of itchy rashes.



Though half of the trail runs through the woods, the other half snakes through the dry hills north of Los Angeles.

Gabrielino Trail

Steve: After we were given the go-ahead and had a project agreement in place, trail bosses from the Mount Wilson Bicycling Association, the Angeles Mountain Bike Patrol and I spent several days hiking/riding (hike-a-biking mostly) and assessing the trail. We spent days chainsawing downed trees off a one-mile section in Long Canyon with six people. We reflagged the original trail and determined what materials and tools would be needed. We subsequently towed tools and supplies in on Bob trailers, getting ready for the public volunteer days.

MWBA began scheduling monthly volunteer days as soon as we were able in fall 2017. They have an outstanding active and local base of trail work volunteers who come through with flying colors on their monthly volunteer work days. Each work day required volunteers to ride (and some hiked or ran) at least 6 to 8 miles to and from the worksite. Several towed Bob trailers with tools or supplies. That's dedication!

The MWBA crews began working on sections that needed straightforward brushing, clearing tread and rock slides, re-cutting trail bench, and clearing downed trees. Some sections went relatively quickly. Other sections, requiring extensive rock work, chainsaw work and specialized expertise, took more focused effort.

The project resulted in 1900 logged volunteer hours from 102 individual volunteers over 238 volunteer days.

Early on, we realized that several sections were beyond the scope of our



CORBA president Steve Messer. Photo: CORBA

dedicated volunteers' work. CORBA had previously raised \$10,000 through an REI Grant, which was used to open the lower Gabrielino from Paul Little to Ken Burton/Oakwilde. For this segment, we received an additional \$15,000 from REI, \$10,000 from Edison, and thousands of dollars in volunteer support from local bike shops.

We spent almost \$35,000 on professional services to supplement the volunteer work thanks to REI and Edison, plus thousands to feed and support volunteers.

With these funds, we hired Bellfree Contractors to build some technical rock and basket retaining walls to improve the sustainability and durability of the volunteer work. We want it to hold up for years.

There will be many more volunteer work days on the trail in the coming years. Sections through the Arroyo Seco Canyon and Dark Canyon are likely to change after heavy rains. We expect trees to continue to fall in the coming years.

One encouraging piece of news for the

future is that the Forest Service has committed funding for the maintenance of the Gabrielino and connecting trails over the next five years. This includes funding for trail-training workshops, professional services and improved signage. It's a result of the National Trail Stewardship Act of 2016, for which we successfully nominated the Angeles National Forest as a priority area.

The trail has already become a go-to destination for mountain bikers, hikers and trail runners. It's on the technical side for equestrians and has a number of very exposed spots, tight switchbacks, difficult rock gardens and creek crossings. Couple that with exceptional views, shuttle options, and a variety of challenging terrain within easy reach of the City, and you have one very popular National Recreation Trail, back in service, just in time for the 50th Anniversary of the National Trails Act. □



Brad Benam heads out on the Ken Burton Trail, which connects to the Gabrielino Trail. Photo: Steve Messer/CORBA