

Conservation Corner

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Last week we challenged everyone to “Find Your Adventure” at a national park in 2016 as America celebrates the 100th Birthday of the National Park Service (NPS). Here in Iowa, we have four places that you could check out – Effigy Mounds National Monument, Herbert Hoover’s Birthplace, the Mormon Pioneer Trail, and the Lewis & Clark Trail, which at 3,700 miles is the second longest historic trail, at least according to the NPS website. And so I naively thought I’d simply share the longest trail’s story this week.

But, as many of you know, nothing in life is simple, especially if the federal government is involved. First, there is no universal legal definition of a trail, although the most commonly accepted one is a travel-way established either through construction or use which is passable by foot, stock, watercraft, bicycles, etc. Second, trails may be classified into three types: scenic, historic, or recreational. Third, the length depends on how you measure the trail, single point-to-point or including cut-offs and alternate routes. So while no one really agrees on which trail is the longest, here are several that usually enter the conversation:

The American Discovery Trail, which at 6,800 miles is the longest trail. However, it isn’t an official national trail yet as the National Discovery Trails Act is currently pending in Congress. As the nation’s first coast-to-coast non-motorized recreation trail, it crosses 15 states, including 512 miles of trails from rails right here in Iowa.

The California National Historic Trail, while covering 5,665 miles across ten states, is actually a series of separate trails that retrace the wagon train routes of the 1840s and 1850s. In places you can still see the ruts left by the prairie schooners as pioneers crossed America in search of gold and opportunity.

The Trail of Tears, which at 5,045 miles is the longest trail if you include the river portions. Perhaps you know someone whose ancestors were loaded onto boats and force-marched across the country from Georgia to Indian Territory in 1838-39 after the passing of the Indian Removal Act. The trail retells a dark chapter in our nation’s history while honoring the cultural memory of Native Americans and the “trail where they cried.”

The North Country National Scenic Trail, which at over 4,600 miles is America’s longest point-to-point continuous hiking trail – or will be when it’s finally completed. As its name suggests, this trail links scenic, natural, historic, and cultural sites across the Great Lakes Region from New York to North Dakota.

Since the passage of the National Trails System Act in 1968, over 8 scenic, 12 historic, and 800 recreational trails have been established, including one right here in Pocahontas County. On June 8, 2007, the Three Rivers Trail was designated a National Recreation Trail. Even if it’s not a candidate for the longest trail, I encourage everyone to walk, bike, snowshoe, or ski “A Corridor Through Space and Time” as we celebrate the 100th Birthday of the National Park Service.

