

Recreationists, hunters a dangerous mix near forest trails

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As hunters search for signs of movement through the dense pines of De Soto National Forest, bicyclists, horseback riders and hikers are frequently on the move nearby.

One area in particular near the Bethel Mountain Biking Trail seems to attract deer hunters with dogs as well as recreational bikers. Many think the mix is a recipe for disaster.

One regular on the trail, John Nix of Biloxi, said there were a couple of days recently when he turned around and went home because there were so many hunters' vehicles lining the road to the trail. He said there were at least 25 vehicles between the trailhead and a nearby road.

Nix said he's never had any problems with the hunters, but would rather be safe than sorry. He wears a reflective orange vest during hunting season.

Others, though, have had negative encounters.

Scott Lee, a mountain biker who lives in Ocean Springs, said having hunting and bicycling on the same land is a big issue.

"It's a very dangerous situation, in my opinion," he said. "It's an accident waiting to happen."

He said hunters like the area because it is easily accessible and because the trails are well-maintained.

Just after Christmas, Lee took his son to the trail where they met a family with four children who were taking their new bikes on a ride. Lee said the family had tried to go down one of the trails, but turned around when they saw several hunters with guns standing on the trail.



JOHN FITZHUGH/SUN HERALD
John Nix of Biloxi starts down one of the Bethel bicycle trails in the De Soto National Forest on Jan. 31.

Web extra

Read the Forest Service's hunting safety brochure at

There were also hunters at the trailhead, so Lee said he went over to let them know there were bikers out on the trails that day when a quarrel ensued.

"I said, 'Look, I know it's hunting season, that's why I'm wearing orange, that's why my son's wearing orange,'" Lee said. "But that family over there had no idea that it's hunting season; they don't know anything about dog hunting."

He said the incident was enough to keep him away from the trail for the rest of hunting season, and for future hunting seasons.

In Mississippi, deer hunting with dogs is permitted for about a week at the end of November and most of January. The cooler months are also ideal for mountain biking, especially during mild winters.

Jae Ewing of Gulfport, who rides the Bethel trails three to four times a week, said he prefers riding on the trails in the winter. He also cycles on roads, but said it can get too cold because of the higher speeds and chilly winds. Mountain biking, especially on the advanced trails, is slower going and the trees break the wind.

Ewing also hunts and said the hunters have every right to be there.

"There was hunting going on here before there were bicycle trails," he said.

Jimmy Hall, who hunts deer with dogs, spoke about the issue at a Harrison County Board of Supervisors meeting last month. He was among several other hunters who were protesting the Forest Service closing roads. The hunters said closing some of the old logging roads pushes them onto public roads, where they don't want to be.

"They're forcing us to get on the public roads by denying us the woods roads," said Morgan Gill, who lives on private property in De Soto National Forest.

Hall said he didn't think there should be bicycling allowed during deer hunting season with dogs. The deer move faster when they're running from dogs, he said, so hunters

tend to shoot faster.

"It's just like playing Russian roulette, every time you pull that trigger there could be a kid or a lady or a man or a bicyclist, anything, through there," he said.

In 2009, a mother and her 10-year-old daughter were riding horses on nearby Big Foot Horse Trail when two shots rang out. Both riders and one of the horses were struck, and the girl was hospitalized with a punctured lung.

The shots came from a hunter who had been standing near his truck. He was ticketed for hunting near a public road.

Open roads

There are approximately 265 miles of hiking, biking, and horseback riding trails in the 378,538-acre De Soto Ranger District.

Ed Moody, wildlife biologist with De Soto Ranger District said hunting is prohibited on the trails, as well as shooting across a trail. But because national forests are open to the public, anyone can walk anywhere.

"Just because someone is walking down a trail and they have a gun over their shoulder or something, that doesn't necessarily mean that they are hunting," he said. "People can walk anywhere here, except for within the impact area near Camp Shelby and the shooting range behind Keesler."

However, carrying a loaded weapon on a trail is also prohibited.

Moody encouraged anyone who sees a violation to call the USDA's hotline, 1-800-BE-SMART (1-800-237-6278), or contact the appropriate law enforcement agency.

"It's unfortunate that people at time do not feel safe on the national forest," he said. "We'd like for everyone to feel safe."

As an agency of the federal government, the Forest Service cannot discriminate against any of the different groups that use federal lands.

"We try to cater to different user groups and hunters are one of the user groups," he said.

Wear blaze orange

Previously, the state wildlife agency prohibited hunting in the area on Sundays. The area around Bethel Mountain Bike Trail was part of Mississippi's Red Creek Wildlife Management Area until the national Forest Service took control in 2007.

Moody said the Forest Service puts up signs during hunting season, as well as brochures on hunting season safety. Sometimes, though, he said the signs end up disappearing.

"We try to have everything posted well but sometimes all the brochures get picked up before we can replace them and sometimes stuff just gets taken down out there," he said.

The most important safety precaution, though, is wearing orange. Moody said Forest Service employees also wear it during hunting season.

"We do encourage for all the trail users during hunting season to wear orange," he said. "Be noticeable out there."