

Railroad Crossing Closure FAQ

by Matt Windsor, Pilot Mountain State Park Superintendent

Due to a legal agreement with the railroad, the railroad crossing on the north (Surry County) side of the Yadkin River is closed to crossing and riding by horses. This property is owned by the railroad and not the park. Please respect the landowner's wishes, failure to do so is considered trespassing. Riders can still ride out and back to the islands from the south (Yadkin County) side of the river, but must stop at the northernmost big island. We are going to close the river ford at the bottom of the big island and stop the horse trail on the Surry side before it reaches the tracks to deter people from inadvertently riding on the railroad.

Why is it closed?:

-The park met with the railroad to ask permission for a new hiking trail crossing and to make repairs on existing trail crossings, which required updating a legal crossing agreement.

-It was discovered that whenever the trails were put in 30+ years ago, after the park's establishment, no legal agreement (required by law) was ever signed between the state and the railroad. Someone just did it. There was never any legal permission given by the landowner (railroad) to allow a horse trail crossing in this area. The railroad property is private property and the railroad considers people walking, riding, etc. across or down the railroad trespassing. In the good old days this probably didn't seem like a big deal, but this puts both the park, the railroad, and the user in a bad legal situation should something go wrong and horse riding accidents have occurred in this area.

-The railroad had safety, liability, and property damage concerns of continued horse use of the crossing into the river:

1. The railroad has had several close calls with riders riding the tracks, resulting in 1 horse having to be euthanized.
2. Due to their weight and size horses were eroding the ballast under the rails going down to the river which can cause a derailment.
3. The railroad agreed to allow continued hiker only crossing provided we install "stop and look" signage at the crossings, kept the crossings clear of visual obstructions, sign a legal crossing agreement, and repair the erosion damage to the ballast under the tracks caused by horses.

The park investigated several alternatives to closing the crossing, if the railroad would agree to keeping them open. Keeping the crossing would have required building an engineered concrete structure with drainage culverts, since the current horse traffic is causing erosion

of ballast. This structure would have had to have been torn up every 15 years to allow maintenance to the railroad ties. This structure would also have to be constructed at a remote location and at times the train was not operating, so as to not stop train traffic, further raising the expense.

The cost alone made us realize it was more cost effective to build new trail elsewhere rather than spend this amount of money continuously in this location. The park's budget is 30% less than it was 10 years ago, and we do not have an unlimited amount of money to spend on a crossing that a few horseback riders use. All improvements to park horse trails have been made with Parks and Recreation Trust Fund allocations, which is like a 1 time grant. We have to be good public stewards of a limited amount of money and put it to its best use. Spending this amount of money here would be like pouring it into the river. The concrete road panels required by the railroad alone were 650.00 a square foot. The crossing would have to be at least 6x6 feet wide to allow a UTV to cross in case of accidents and contain two drainage culverts on either side of the railroad.

The park budget is not even sufficient to provide all of the required routine maintenance to horse trails, so much of the grant money has been spent fixing existing problems on the horse trails, mostly where trails were put in in the past where it is too steep or the soil won't support horse traffic. This was already an issue in this location, separate from the railroad erosion.

Finally, even if we were able to financially afford constructing a crossing that would have to be destroyed every 15 years for railroad tie replacement, the state could also not provide the amount of liability coverage required by the railroad to do construction in the railroad right of way.

We do have plans to replace the lost horse trail mileage elsewhere as money becomes available and as we finish other existing trail improvement projects that are already underway and that other visitors are already waiting for. The park still has Around 12 of it's 26 total miles of trails devoted to bridle trail use, the state park system is also getting ready to build 6 miles of horse trail at Stone Mountain and 5 miles at Hanging Rock, in addition to the 20 miles available already in the Sauratown trail that connects to Pilot Mtn's bridle trails. We regret any inconvenience this has caused people, and we encourage them to check out these and other local trails open for riding.

Thanks,

Matt Windsor

Park Superintendent