

BRAINERD DISPATCH



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Katie Isebrand (front left), Lia Pearl, Maralee Gazelka and Emma Pearl (back) took their horses for a run on the French Rapids trails in Brainerd Wednesday.

Brainerd Dispatch/Kelly Humphrey

French Rapids epitomizes beauty

By RENEE RICHARDSON
Senior Reporter

The dam down river drowned the rapids years ago, but the recreation area that retains the name is described as a backyard gem.

Instead of being a draw for fur traders along a swift and narrow section of the Mississippi River, French Rapids now offers a wide variety of non-motorized recreational opportunities, from horseback riding to challenging cross country skiing.

This week, volunteers with the Brainerd Nordic Ski Club were busy preparing the trails for upcoming winter use. They mowed down tall vegetation encroaching on the trails, mowed over raspberry vines and cleared out deadfall. The recent warm,

sunny fall weather may make residents wish for a lengthy autumn. The French Rapids trail system, on public land near the Brainerd Lakes Regional Airport, is popular with horseback riders, hikers and mountain bike riders. A footpath, about a half mile, leads from the riverside trail head along a steep bank to join the cross country trails. Those ski trails cover another six miles.

"It's a nice fall hiking opportunity," said Bryan Pike, natural resource manager with Crow Wing County's public land division. "It's just a beautiful stretch of trail there that follows the Mississippi River."

Hikers who follow the footpath rise on the river bluff to join the trail on a glacial ridge with red and white pine and hardwood trees. The river is on one side and an

eight-acre pond on the other.

"It is beautiful this time of year and its close to the urban center of Brainerd and Baxter," Pike said, noting the area is described as "beauty out your backdoor."

Those who take up their bikes or cross country skis need to be confident in their expertise to handle the hills. Years ago the Flag Pole Hill in the southern side of the French Rapids ski trail was home to a downhill ski run and ski jump. Pike said that history dates back to the 1960s and 1970s.

A large parking area provides ample space for horse trailers.

It's also a site with history. Before the

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paper mill's dam, Pike said the site was one of the few if any upper Mississippi River rapids.

The Brainerd Nordic Ski Club has maintained the trail system for 25 years and gets grant-in-aid dollars to help offset the costs for maintenance and grooming. Skiers are required to purchase a cross country ski pass for the trail use, which goes to replenish the grant-in-aid dollars. The club also grooms the ski trails at the

Northland Arboretum.

A detailed map of the French Rapids trails is available online, along with information on other trails in Crow Wing County, at www.co.crowwing.mn.us/land/recreation.html.

RENEE RICHARDSON may be reached at
renee.richardson@brainerddispatch.com
or 855-5852.