

Darnell Creek Road Trek

February 28, 2021

On February 28, 2021 Melanie Vickers and I hiked the length of Darnell Creek Road in Dillard GA to the public rifle range for the purpose of:

- observing road conditions from a safety perspective,
- documenting water runoff conditions from deteriorated road surface to adjacent creeks,
- road use by vehicles (jeeps and motorcycles) and
- Observing conditions at the Darnell Creek Rifle Range.

Darnell Creek Rd. starts at it's intersection with Kelly's Creek Road, becomes FS 151 shortly after pavement ends, traversing steeply up three miles to a public rifle range (on USFS property), then continues another three miles to a FS gate. The road runs above Darnell Creek for about two miles and continues to run along Thomas Creek for perhaps another two miles. Thomas Creek and nearby Ramey Creek are considered native brook trout habitat and run into Darnell Creek.

The Darnell Creek Rd/FS 151 is in extremely poor condition beginning about mile 1 to mile 1.5 and requires a 4x4 vehicle with high clearance. There are some sections where the road is seriously washed away and gullies run from road down toward creek. Road gravel was observed near creek. The road is eroded down to rock and to bare metal in some sections. Metal pipe that was under the road is uncovered and busted. Several deeply cut illegal ATV rutted roads were observed leading off Darnell Creek Rd. at miles 1.7 and mile 2.

We walked two road cuts from the main road lead down to the creek and observed beautiful waterfall areas.

Illegal dumping was also observed at several locations off the side of Darnell Creek Rd.

At about mile 2 we found Forest Road 171 veering off to the left from Darnell Creek Rd. The FS has created mounds and ditches to prevent ATV activity on 171. However there was some evidence that 171 is still used as a playground for ATVs.

As we came near the rifle range at mile 3 we again observed very poor road conditions with significant water pools and some runoff to nearby stream.

There was also an illegal vehicle road cut from the road to the range shooting area just before a spacious parking area and nice walkway to the range

At the rifle range we observed a great many cartridges and trash strewn throughout the area. Clearly no one picks up and there is no signage to discourage nor is there a place to dispose of these materials. There is a bare embankment at the far end of the range to shoot at and only one makeshift target was observed.

It was Sunday afternoon when we visited. Only two people from Fulton County were using the range, but there was lots of road activity—6 motorcycles, a 6 jeep caravan and a few additional jeeps and land rover were enjoying the challenge.

Just past the rifle range we observed several locations where sediment from road washed down to stream.

Part 2 March 2, 2021

Two days later Richard Irving and I drove the entire Darnell Creek Rd in his Rubicon Jeep. I did not have confidence that my Ford F150 4x4 would be capable of making the 6 mile drive. Even with Richard's vehicle we were challenged at several locations where the vehicle had to straddle deep ditches and maneuver over jutting rocks.

At the rifle range we observed two people and one vehicle, a Range Rover. Beyond the rifle range we observed three areas used for primitive camping and numerous user created illegal roads through forest. At mile 6 the road is gated but there was evidence of vehicles creating their own access around the gate.

Conclusion

Darnell Creek Road/FS 151 has become a playground for jeeps and motorized dirt bikes and the road conditions have deteriorated to the point that no other vehicles can access. It is an environmental hazard to nearby streams and it is a public safety hazard. For persons wishing to

use the rifle range (the only public range in Rabun County) the facility is no longer accessible. The road is getting a reputation with jeep clubs and drivers of these vehicles will continue to tear this road up and enjoy the challenge of doing so.

The rifle range is in deplorable condition but it has potential to serve as an important recreational spot for our county residents and visitors who wish to sight their guns, train and practice.

Recommendations

- Repair FS 151 up to the rifle range so that users can access the facility.
- Close FS 151 at about the one mile point, until repairs can be made.
- Consider permanently closing FS 151 beyond the rifle range to vehicle traffic in order to deter illegal off-roading through the forest

The only way to prevent this road from becoming a major jeep playground and to prevent use and creation of illegal roads within this area of Forest is to repair the road so that it does not afford such a fun challenge to jeepsters.

These steps seem reasonable and important given that the region we live in is so clearly committed to 2nd Amendment rights, hunting and clean streams for fishing.

Next Steps

- Discuss recommendations with District Forest Ranger
- Share report with Forward Rabun because they have an interest in ensuring and supporting outdoor recreational opportunities of Rabun County and enhancing the county's reputation as a place for safe, clean outdoor opportunities for all.
- Contact Congressman Andrew Cline regarding National Forest road conditions and implications.