

CROSSING MAGRUDER

by Bill Schneider

Like many of our brilliant ideas, the plan to ride through the Magruder Corridor was born in a taproom after a couple of microbrews. We should know better, eh?

Could we, a gaggle of 60-somethings who used to be fit and fast, do it on our cross bikes? We agreed to do a little research and then decide.

Even though, of course, we'd already decided.

To our surprise, we couldn't find much online, only a few blogs about four-wheeling the remote roadway. We regularly rode our cross bikes on jeep roads, so, we surmised, if guys in four-wheel-drive pickups could do it, we could, too. Seems logical, right?

We made a lot of calls but still couldn't find much information. Instead of dissuading us, the mystery only energized us. How could there be so little information on bicycling the famous Magruder Corridor?

Because, we concluded, not many people had done it on bicycles and far fewer on cross bikes. We didn't ask why. We just started preparing for the trip and gathering our own information.

I distinctly remember my first conversation with the lady answering the phone at the local ranger station. While requesting whatever information she had on the Magruder Corridor (which wasn't much), I asked if she had anything on bicycling the corridor. After a long pause, she said, diplomatically, "Well, that sounds mighty ambitious."

I had the feeling it was the first time she'd ever fielded that question, but as it turned out, she was right — almost. It was more like delightfully ambitious.

Straddling the Idaho-Montana border, the 1,340,587-acre Selway-Bitterroot and the 2,366,827-acre Frank Church River of

Unknown to many, the two wilderness areas aren't exactly contiguous. Our destination, a 100-mile rocky, hilly, dusty jeep road called the Magruder Corridor, separates them.

The Nez Perce traveled this route, long before the Civilian Conservation Corps gouged the road out of the great wilderness in the 1930s, and Congress officially designated the two massive wilderness areas in 1964 and 1980.

The corridor gets its name from Lloyd



Magruder, a well-respected merchant who was in line to represent the Idaho Territory in Congress until a fateful day in 1863. On his way to Elk City, Idaho, from Bannack, Montana, with saddlebags of gold, outlaws robbed and killed him and his companions and were later hanged for it. The site of the attack, now called the Magruder Massacre, can be reached by hiking trails from trailheads in the corridor.

After one of the original group had to drop out because of a family emergency, we ended up with three riders: Wayne Chamberlin, Will Selser, and me, along with one token young person, 46-year-old, John Andersen.

We weren't self-contained types, so we smooth-talked Wayne into signing on as

Riding cyclocross bikes through the largest wilderness in the Continental U.S.

No Return Wilderness combine to form the largest expanse of designated wilderness in the Continental U.S., an overwhelming 3,707,414-acre blank spot on the map, about the size of Delaware and Rhode Island combined.

It's still wilderness. *The Magruder has changed little in the 32 years since Greg and June Siple and John and Donna Briggs made a self-contained crossing in 1981.*

GREG SIPLE

the designated driver of the support vehicle, my trusty Toyota Tacoma. He agreed to do most of the driving and ride short sections along the way with John, Will, and me planning to ride the entire distance.

My Tacoma turned out to be an excellent choice for the support vehicle. It could make it over any road, and it had enough room (barely) for all our camping gear, extra wheels, and more food and water than we needed. We each took two sets of wheels, one with road tires and one with

knobby cross tires, both as bombproof as we could find, which turned out to be one of our best moves. We also took an extra bike, a mountain bike, in case of a major mechanical breakdown.

Although we were mostly interested in the wilderness-lined corridor, we decided to expand the trip into a cycling vacation, a six-day, 352-mile loop starting and ending at Lolo, Montana. That's about 60 miles per day, normally about right for us, but it turned out to be a bit "ambitious," as the lady said. We underestimated how long it would take to cover some of those miles.

So, going in, the bottom line was: We hadn't been over the road before, nor did we have any idea what to expect around the next bend. How could that be a problem?

The first leg of our big loop on U.S. Highway 12 west from Lolo, along Lolo Creek in the shadow of Lolo Peak, past Lolo Hot Springs and up to Lolo Pass, was just plain old scenic road touring. The highway was in great shape but offered little shoulder. Traffic was fairly heavy for the first 32 miles to Lolo Pass, but not bad after that, and we sailed through it on our road wheels.

We had lunch at Lolo Hot Springs and took a long break on Lolo Pass to visit the information-packed visitor center staffed with friendly interpreters who could answer almost any question on the area or its history. The day we were on the pass, the Traveler's Rest Preservation and Heritage Association had an authentic Lewis and Clark camp set up, so we had to check that out, too.

From the pass, it was 78 miles of magnificent downhill cruising to Lowell, Idaho, aptly referred to as "the long and winding road." Except for the first few miles, it closely follows the spectacular Lochsa River, an wild river officially designated under the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act of 1968. The U.S. Forest Service has also designated this highway as the Northwest Passage Scenic Byway because Lewis and Clark used the route on their way to the West Coast. We knew what to expect after seeing the sign at the top of the pass: Winding road, Next 99 Miles.

After thoroughly enjoying a gradual downhill cruise along the Lochsa River for 63 miles, we spent our first night at the Wilderness Gateway Campground, 85 miles from Lolo. (Next time, we plan to stay at Lochsa Lodge, 46 miles from Lolo, and take three days to cover what we did in our first two days.) Wilderness Gateway is a big, modern campground with everything

Nuts & Bolts: Magaruder Corridor

When to go: A narrow window starting in early to mid-July (depending on winter snowpack) and ending in mid-September. Check with the Forest Service before leaving. The Magaruder Corridor can be closed on short notice because of washouts, downfall, forest fires, or early snowstorms. Also, ask about the smoke; you don't want smoky skies for your trip. Call the West Fork Ranger District, Bitterroot National

Forest, 406-821-3269, or the Red River Ranger District, Nez Perce National Forest, 208-842-2245.

Getting there: Fly or drive to Missoula, Montana, and then drive nine miles south on U.S. Highway 93 to Lolo where you'll need to find a place to leave your vehicle.

Road conditions: The 352-mile route has all types of road conditions — smooth pavement, long stretches of improved gravel roads, and rough, steep, four-wheel-drive roads with some rocky and sandy sections.

Bicycles: A sturdy cyclocross or touring bike with a triple crank or cluster with the largest gear the derailleur can handle.

Support Vehicle: If you take a SAG vehicle, make sure it has four-wheel-drive with high clearance and low-range gears.

Don't forget: Extra bottles or a CamelBak. You'll need to carry lots of water. And load the support vehicle with twice as much water as you think you'll need.

Maps and brochures: Magruder Road Corridor brochure published by the Bitterroot and Nez Perce National Forests and the Nez Perce National Forest Map. You can download a PDF here: fs.usda.gov/Internet/FSE_DOCUMENTS/fsm91_055707.pdf.

Camping: The entire route is lined with campsites, both developed campgrounds and a plethora of undesignated sites for those who can go without a pit toilet.

Shuttle Services: Selway River Shuttles (selwayshuttles.com), All Rivers Shuttles (allriversshuttle.com), Central Idaho Shuttles (centralidahoshuttles.com), or River Shuttles (rivershuttles.com).

Websites: fs.usda.gov/bitterroot, fs.usda.gov/clearwater, fs.usda.gov/nezperce.

Cabin Rentals: To rent the Horse Heaven Cabin or Magruder Station, go to recreation.gov or call 877-444-6777.

The rentals usually book six months in advance. The Flying R: montanaflyingrcabins.com, 406-821-4631.

Self-contained Option: Possible, and *Adventure Cyclist* readers could handle it, but the road conditions require a lot of strength and progress can be slow. Finding enough water supplies could be an issue and a quality water-filtration system would be an absolute must.

Finding Water: The Magruder Corridor is mostly high and dry, but there are a few water sources as follows: Red River Ranger Station; 14-Mile Campground; Granite Springs (well about 50 yards behind stock area, potable); Poet Creek Campground (Bargamin Creek, filter or treat); two intermittent springs on the hill up to Dry Saddle, about a mile west of the Burnt Knob junction; Horse Heaven Cabin (intermittent surface spring), Observation Point; Magruder Crossing; Paradise; Magruder Station (at cabin, potable); and Deep Creek.

Mistakes to Avoid:
1) Schedule a longer trip: We did the loop in six days, which wasn't enough. Some sections were very slow going and we ended up getting to camp too late to enjoy it. We definitely needed another day for the



incredible side trip to Paradise plus extra time for taking side trips and day hikes.

2) Camping: Spend extra time planning campsites carefully and pick sites with a nearby backup in case that site is filled.

Suggested Itinerary:

Day One: Lolo to Lochsa Lodge or Whitehouse Campground (46 miles)

Day Two: Lochsa Lodge/Whitehouse Campground to one of campgrounds along Selway River (70-80 miles)

Day Three: Selway River to Elk City Hotel. (37-47 miles).

Day Four: Elk City to Poet Creek Campground. (50 miles)

Day Five: Poet Creek Campground to Magruder Crossing Campground or Magruder Station. (32-35 miles)

Day Six: Keep camp and ride the out-and-back trip to Paradise. (24-30 miles)

Day Seven: Magruder Crossing to Flying R Guest Ranch. (43-46 miles)

Day Eight: Flying R to Lolo (62 miles).

Options: You could also start in Darby, Hamilton, or Stevensville. And of course, you can opt for the clockwise route.

the way to Elk City, the last few miles along the headwaters of the American River.

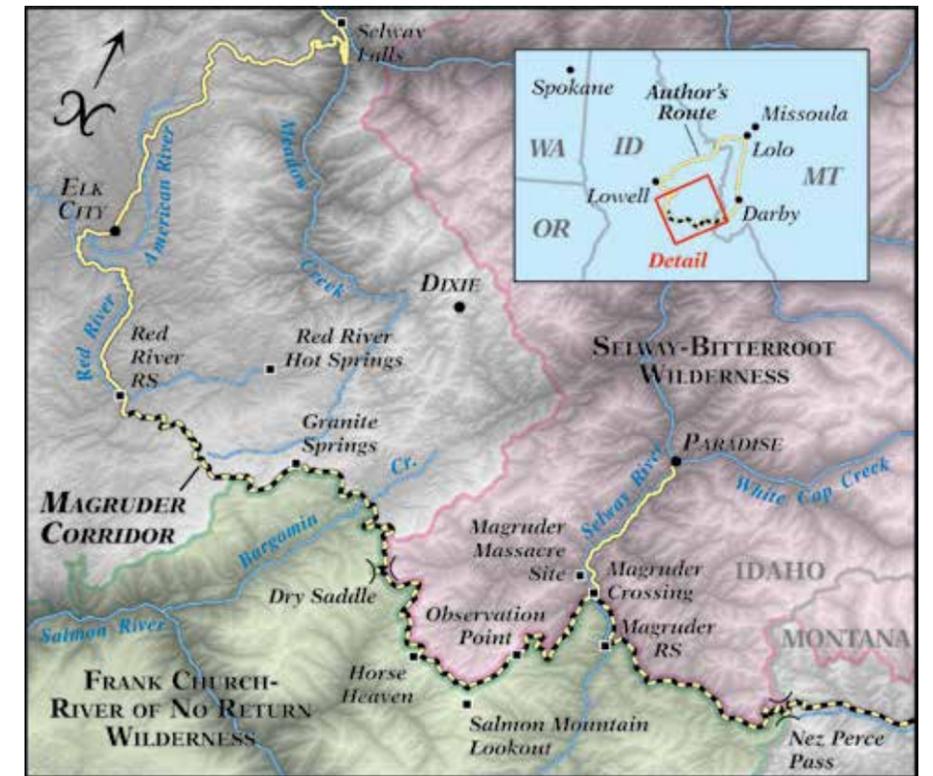
At Elk City, a sleepy little town with a year-round population of about 40 (but five times that in summer), we found a bar, hotel, gas station, and small mercantile. Knowing this was the last remnant of civilization we'd see for three days, we stocked up on ice and beer and topped off the Tacoma's gas tank.

From Elk City, we rode glass-smooth pavement with almost no traffic for 18 miles, once again along a stunning mountain stream, the slow-moving Red River. At the old Red River Ranger Station (abandoned long ago), the serene streamside cycling we'd had for most of the past three days ended. From here, we had to grind up another big hill (eight miles) to Granite Springs. We named this ascent the "Big Sweat" because water seemed to pour out of our every pore that morning. I had two bottles and a full CamelBak and went through almost all of it on the way to Granite Springs where we could resupply from a water source about 50 yards into the woods on the west side of the road past the stock-loading area.

From Granite Springs, the road slowly worsens as it winds through bone-dry forest for 16 miles, mostly downhill, to Bargamin Creek and Poet Creek Campground, the last 10 miles a nerve-wracking, brake-smoking, hand-cramping descent. Part of this section goes through about three miles of recently burned forest, one of several small burns along the route. Luckily, we had smokeless skies for our trip, but the week after we finished, several fires flared up and covered the entire area with a thick cloud of smoke. Forest fires are an annual occurrence in Magruder country, something we need to avoid again next time by being flexible with our departure date and staying in touch with the Forest Service.

At Bargamin Creek, the road turns skyward again, steep but fairly smooth for about seven miles to Dry Saddle, which marks the beginning of the toughest, rockiest, dustiest section of the Magruder. We took a good break to enjoy the panoramic views from the saddle to prepare for it.

From Dry Saddle to Horse Heaven Cabin, about six rocky and dusty miles with some sections of deep sand that make traction difficult. We rode six days without seeing a cloud, but I suspect that on a wet day, this section might be close to impassable on a cross bike. It also made me think how incredibly hard it would be to go self-contained.



Sunburn, saddle sores, horsefly bites, clogged derailers, multiple layers of biker sweat. So what? Ride on.

After Horse Heaven Cabin, where we stayed, the road started improving ever so slowly as it climbed up a six-mile gradual ascent with a few steep, extra-rocky "walkable" sections to the Salmon Lookout Trailhead at 8,183 feet, the highest point on the Magruder Corridor Road. We could have parked our bikes and hiked a mile up to Salmon Mountain Lookout, but we didn't leave enough time for it. Ditto for several other nice hikes we could have taken along the way.

Another three miles down the road, we stopped at the famous Observation Point with its postcard vista. Actually, it isn't what you observe from Observation Point, but what you can't observe. As we looked out over the millions of acres of land, we had to forget the idea America has conquered it all — no roads, buildings, cell towers, power lines, or anything else that might make you think the landscape has changed since the day the Nez Perce used the corridor to elude the U.S. Army or Lloyd Magruder met his untimely fate.

From Observation Point, the steadily improving road dipped sharply downhill and stayed that way for a seemingly endless 10-mile descent. We wished for disc brakes as we rode to the Selway River

where the road splits off to the left to Paradise and to the right to Nez Perce Pass. Immediately after the bridge, we ducked into the Magruder Crossing Campground. Wayne had driven ahead and claimed one of its five-star campsites along the Selway. The campsite was complete with a nifty rock bathtub, which we all needed to wash off three days of Magruder dust cemented down with hard-won sweat — which probably caused a major fish kill downstream.

The entire corridor is lined with designated and undesignated campsites, but Magruder Crossing is probably the best. On top of its other amenities, it's away from the road and not exactly private. Good thing Wayne got there early because the site fills up every day.

We'd tried to score a reservation at historic Magruder River Ranger Station (now abandoned and rented out by the Forest Service) but we found out a bit too late that we would have had to stay up until midnight six months in advance to reserve it on recreation.gov. Magruder Station rents immediately for virtually every summer night, often minutes after it becomes available.

Next time (we kept using those words), we'd spend at least two nights at Magruder Station, Magruder Crossing, or one of the other excellent campsites in the area.

While we were camped at Magruder

except a shower, which we sort of needed, so we took a pleasurable dip in the Lochsa before dinner.

The next morning, at Lowell, we had a lunch much tastier than the Hammer Gel and CLIF Shot Bloks we carried, and then turned off Highway 12 onto the Selway River Road. We left the Lochsa behind but actually had an upgrade in the scenery. We rode along the Selway River, also an official wild river, on perfect pavement for

nine miles and then on a major gravel road for another nine miles to Selway Falls and Selway Bridge. We rode this gravel section on our road tires with no punctures. The Selway River Road has a campground every few miles, so there's no problem finding a place to camp.

After crossing the bridge, we followed the river for about a mile before turning off on FR 443 to Elk City and starting a grueling nine-mile climb with grades north

of 10 percent. The road surface is what the Forest Service calls "native," which means the surface consists of whatever was there when they built it with no gravel added. On a dry day, that's good news, but on a rainy day, this could be an epic ascent. This narrow, switchbacked road also has some of the blindest corners I've ever seen, but fortunately, there is very little traffic.

After this big climb, we had idyllic cross riding, mostly downhill, for 25 miles, all



Up the creek. A cyclist follows the Upper Selway River through the Magruder.

Crossing, we realized one of our mistakes. We hadn't planned on an extra day for a side trip to Paradise. We couldn't leave without seeing Paradise so we came up with an alternate plan.

The next morning, Wayne and Will stayed behind to break camp and rode to

Paradise and back (24 miles round trip) before jumping in the Tacoma to catch up with John and me. We headed out early for Nez Perce Pass and the Flying R Guest Ranch where we had reservations that night.

The road to Paradise, as reported secondhand, was fantastic. "You missed the

best part of the trip," Will said. "They named it Paradise for a reason." And, predictably, the camp host greets visitors with a hearty "Welcome to Paradise."

The spur road closely follows the upper Selway River all the way to Paradise where White Cap Creek joins the Selway. There, the river becomes big enough to be the launching point for a wild, and ultra-popular, rafting adventure through the Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness.

As it turned out, John and I didn't have much cause for complaining. The unpaved road from Magruder Crossing ascends gradually along the Selway River, the fifth river we'd ridden along so far, and then goes several more miles along a smaller but no less scenic Deep Creek.

After riding 10 miles, the excellent gravel road turned into an excellent paved road for the last eight-mile pitch up to Nez Perce Pass, not a bad climb compared to the three hills we'd just endured, but harder than the relatively easy trip up Lolo Pass. Perhaps the highlight of the morning was seeing a SHARE THE ROAD sign along Deep Creek with an image of a horse instead of a bicycle, just a reminder that this is horse country, as witnessed by the overpopulation of pesky horseflies that seem especially attracted to me.

After marveling at the expansiveness of wild nature surrounding the pass and checking out the terrific interpretive displays, we raced downhill into the West Fork of the Bitterroot Valley, all easy riding and paved except for one six-mile stretch of gravel with some washboarding, the bane of cross riders.

John and I cranked harder than usual that day because we'd gone four nights without a shower. We'd survived with a couple of icy dips in the Lochsa and Selway, but we were more than ready for a real shower.

That night, we were going upscale and staying at the Flying R Guest Cabins and Lodge, owned by Deb and Mark Rogala. We could have camped at one of the campgrounds along the West Fork but decided we deserved a little luxury on the last night of our trip. I knew we had picked the right place when I saw a rusty old Ashtabula (one-piece) crankset hanging by the front door.

After taking a long shower and short nap, we headed for the main house where Deb and Mark fixed us a fabulous steak dinner. The Rogalas have owned the Flying R for 23 years, and they often cater to groups of cyclists, river rats, and other outdoor types. They have two spiffy guest cabins without TV, telephones, or wifi, and they have lots

of space to pitch tents for larger groups who don't mind taking turns in the shower and sharing a kitchen. Maximum group size would be in the 15-20 range.

The Rogalas are very outdoorsy people who like to "share what we have here with others," Deb emphasized. "When we built this place, we built it for people like us. We especially like people who like to design their own outdoor experience."

I'm sure she meant people like us, baby boomers heading blindly off into the wilderness without knowing what awaits them.

The following morning, we rolled down to Darby for a big breakfast at Deb's Café. Then we had a quick chat with the innovative folks at Lightfoot Cycles (see profile in the June 2012 issue of *Adventure Cyclist*), a small business specializing in engineering recumbents and custom bicycles for people with special needs, before heading north to Lolo — and, of course, our route took us along another river, our seventh, the main stem of the Bitterroot.

From Darby to Hamilton, U.S. Highway 93 had a good shoulder the entire way, but there was heavy traffic. In Hamilton, after a cappuccino stop, we jumped on the longest

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"Listen to the words. Move together. Stay strong. Don't ever give up."

During the class, I share some stories from the road to help connect with this group of 25 to 30 strangers. From Vancouver there is Gino's advice about digging down to find the strength inside, and Alex's thoughts on pain versus suffering.

At the close of class, I leave the students with a parting thought or idea. I tell everyone about the epiphany that I had a few days earlier in Monterey, California.

"I can save myself a lot of suffering by not being so set in my ways — being flexible to change, in general — and to changing my plans, more specifically."

I end the class as I always do. I simply say, "Nothing without joy," and then I quietly leave the room. **AC**

* *Bicycling the Pacific Coast* and the Pacific Coast Bicycle Route maps can be found at adventurecycling.org/store.

Dan Schwartzman is a freelance journalist and Bikram yoga teacher living in San Francisco. After writing for newspapers on both coasts, he founded Café Abroad InPRINT (cafeabroadinprint.com).

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paved bikeway in Montana, extending 36 miles from Hamilton to Lolo.

Although we were anxious to be done, we weren't anxious enough to make it to the finish line without one final moment of weakness, a brief break at Blacksmith Brewing in downtown Stevensville for a celebratory microbrew. It tasted amazingly good and made the last 18 miles seem easier than the first 18 miles.

We spent our taproom break chatting about why the Magruder Corridor loop was so well suited to cross bikes; how the drivers of the few vehicles (jeeps and ATVs) we had met all seemed friendly and courteous; how lucky we had been to have six rainless, smokeless days, and to have no mechanical issues (six days with only one puncture among us); and wondering why we hadn't seen another bicyclist in the entire Magruder Corridor. Mainly, though, we talked about "next time." **AC**

Bill Schneider of Helena, Montana, retired in 2000 after a long career as a book publisher with Falcon Publishing. Now, in addition to riding his bicycles a lot, he works part-time as an outdoor writer, book author, and online columnist.

Open Road Gallery

SACRIFICING NORTH DAKOTA

by Madeline McKiddy Photograph by Greg Siple



KYM AND CHRISTINE'S DAUGHTERS, WENSDAY AND CARLY, AND THEIR NEPHEW JORDAN HAD GROWN UP SEEING a wall of photos memorializing a cross-country journey the couple had taken in 1984 (inset photo).

"As our children grew and looked at those pictures every day, we would tell them stories of our bicycle adventure and kid them that we would be doing that same journey with them some day. The years sped by and suddenly we realized our oldest daughter would be leaving home in two short years, embarking on a life of her own. We decided it was now or never," Christine said.

Planning a three-month bike tour becomes much more difficult when you have a house, jobs, pets, and school to worry about. Training was hampered by school and social commitments. Denied their requests leaves of absence, both adults had to quit their jobs and hope for the best upon their return, plus they had to be home in time for band and soccer camps.

"The diminished time made for more stress and less flexibility on this trip, often making me feel like a Roman 'coxswain,' yelling, whipping, and pushing the group to make time, get up earlier, take shorter breaks, and take fewer rest days," said Kym. As hard as they tried, the family realized in Montana that they'd never make it in time, so they hopped on Amtrak and sacrificed the ride across North Dakota.

Between tough hills, long nights, and improvised camping spots, says Wensday, "There were some nights that we found ourselves sleeping behind a Kohl's, McDonald's, or Dollar Tree. Those were some of my favorite nights because it felt so spontaneous!" Then there were the bizarre finds on the side of the road. "One time, we stopped to see what it was and it happened to be two semi-automatic rifles. We looked at them for awhile before throwing them back in case they were part of a crime scene," remembers Jordan. The end of the journey was hard-won but all the sweeter for it. Upon reaching the end, Kym remembers, "I had been fairly certain I would be justified in driving us so intensely to this point, and was incredibly grateful that I was not wrong."

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