

Road Cycling in the National

Story and photos by **Chuck Haney**



Parks Part 1



I've been a professional photographer for nearly two decades now. I mostly make my chops by shooting landscape and wildlife images, and some of the best locations to shoot these images are our grand national parks. They were proclaimed national parks for a reason; their unique natural beauty and wildness are second to none and they are considered American treasures. When I visit the parks, I'm usually up well before the sun cracks the horizon. I try to shoot my subjects in the golden light of what we photographers often refer to as the "magic hour." That spectacular lighting can also occur again in the hour before the sun sets. That leaves an awful lot of down time in between photo shoots. I could take a nap or go for a hike, but since I'm an avid cyclist, I'm typically carrying a bicycle or two on my car rooftop. There's no better way to take in the sights, smells, and sounds of breathtaking landscapes than by pedaling in the

open-air cockpit of a bicycle. Pedaling sure beats whizzing by in an automobile. I often perceive things while cycling that I wouldn't ordinarily, and have later returned to those unnoticed locations to photograph many times.

I hope to cover more national parks in future articles, but I'll start with the ones that I'm most familiar with in the western U.S.

seemingly endless mixed-grass prairie that sweeps across the semi-arid American plains. Teddy Roosevelt learned ranching here and claimed his stay was instrumental to him becoming president. Theodore Roosevelt National Park is located near the small town Medora, which is located just south of Interstate 94. Medora is one of those places you come to visit for a day and

GOING TO THE SUN ROAD DOES NOT OFFICIALLY OPEN UNTIL THE FIRST WEEK OF JULY, AND BY SEPTEMBER SNOW CAN CLOSE THE ROAD AGAIN.

THEODORE ROOSEVELT NATIONAL PARK, NORTH DAKOTA

The badlands of western North Dakota are a dynamic landscape of twisted and tortured rock formations, colorful buttes, and hills. This amazing narrow swath of erosion separates the

end up staying a week. The park, due to its rather isolated location, is one of the least visited national parks, making it ideal for road riding. A 36-mile paved loop in the park is an enchanting road experience. The only urban riding experience at Teddy is riding through



Two cyclists ride past the Weeping Wall on Going to the Sun Road in Glacier National Park, Montana.

a town — of prairie dogs. Ride early in the morning and you are guaranteed to see more chirping prairie dogs, grazing buffalo, elk, wild horses, and mule deer than cars. I rode the entire loop early one morning and saw zero cars! Petrified wood lies among wildflowers at vistas that look down on the meandering Little Missouri River. Many people think this is flat country but there are many rolling hills to tackle along the loop. My favorite time to visit is in June when the prairie grasses are greened up, the wildflowers plentiful, and bison calves are kicking their heels with youthful exuberance.

Bring a road and a mountain bike because Medora makes a great base camp with world-class mountain biking on the Maah Daah Hey Trail in the Little Missouri National Grasslands that surrounds the national park. And don't forget the re-routed Northern Tier Route, which now actually goes right past the entrance to the national park.



Road cycling past sky-blue waters in Crater Lake National Park, Oregon.

GLACIER NATIONAL PARK, MONTANA

Because it's in my own backyard, I know Glacier National Park best. The park boasts over one million acres of stunning scenery and is home to elk, bighorn sheep, mountain goats, and grizzly bears. There is also an incredible array of cycling opportunities in Glacier.

Going to the Sun Road is a modern engineering marvel — the road precariously hugs the mountainsides while snaking its way up to 6,640-foot Logan Pass. It's a 32-mile ride from West Glacier to the pass, and there are regulations about what time of day you are allowed to be on certain sections. Getting an early morning start is the way to go to allow for a relaxing and invigorating ride. You will ride against the rushing whitewater in McDonald Creek along a dense forest where the scent of cedar trees accents the cool mountain air. You'll soon ascend the narrow roadway where waterfalls literally pour out of the wildflower-laced mountains. The payoff for all of the climbing is the beauty of Logan Pass where an alpine world of wildflowers, snow-capped mountain peaks, and wildlife abound. There's a good chance you'll be riding alongside mountain goats and bighorn sheep as you chug up the last mile to the pass. The riding season is short in this high alpine world. Sometimes Going to the Sun Road does not officially open until the first week of July, and by September mountain snows can close

the road once again. From the pass, it's an 18-mile descent to the small town of St. Mary. The east side of the park has a decidedly different feel to it as the dense forests of the western segment give way to a more open and grand landscape where the prairies meet the mountains and the views really open up.

If you happen to be in the park before the Going to the Sun Road officially opens, don't despair, as parts of the road are open in the spring to hikers and bikers only. It's great riding without cars on the narrow road. Just be careful, especially on sunny weekends as the road becomes quite popular with less experienced cyclists and landscape-seeking hikers who aren't always on the lookout for fast, downhill traffic.

Going to the Sun Road is not the only option in Glacier. From the park's western side, try the 12-miles from Apgar Village to the North Fork of the Flathead River on the uncrowded Camas Road. From the park's eastern side in St. Mary, you can't go wrong heading out in either direction. To the north, I like to ride Highway 89 to the Chief Mountain Road and climb all the way to the Canadian border and Waterton Lakes National Park. This ride is especially nice around the first of October when the vast stands of quaking aspen trees turn golden. South from St. Mary, climb up six miles on Highway 89 and then roller coaster up and down on the twisting highway where you can really get a feel for the transition

from prairie grasslands to mountain peaks. Turn south at Kiowa Junction and take Highway 49, which can often be in rough condition, but mile for mile is one of the most scenic roads to cycle in the country. Take a side trip into the splendid Two Medicine Valley and gaze at stunning Two Medicine Lake.

Going to the Sun Road has been in a perpetual state of reconstruction for the last five plus years, but the light is at the end of the proverbial tunnel as new

pavement has reached all the way to the pass as of the summer of 2013. The next few years should prove promising for a smooth spin on the fabled highway.

YELLOWSTONE NATIONAL PARK, WYOMING

I have to admit that I wouldn't want to ride my bicycle in many sections of our most beloved national park, especially during the peak summer months when the automobile traffic can

be thicker than in a large city. Traffic jams abound as people stop their cars to watch woodpeckers peck. The park, after all, does receive well over three million visitors per year!

Weather dependent, the absolute best time to ride in Yellowstone is in early spring from mid-March through April when the roads are still closed to cars but open to bicycles. So bundle up and get into the park because this unique road-biking season begins as soon the roads are cleared of snow. Begin in West Yellowstone by checking in at the local bike shop, Freeheel and Wheel, where not only can you get the lowdown on spring riding in the park from owners Kelly and Melissa, but you can also warm up with a great latte. The 28-mile ride from West Yellowstone to Madison Junction and back is very popular. There's a good chance you'll see bald eagles, bison, elk, coyotes, and bears as you pedal along the Madison River. Remember, there are no services open in the park at this time of year and expect changing weather conditions.

Later in the year, my choice would be to ride the park's northern road for 54 miles from Mammoth Hot Springs to the park's northeastern entrance at the isolated town of Cooke City. Get an early start because automobile traffic picks up as the day goes on. There are great opportunities for wildlife viewing along this route and you may even spot one of the park's wolf packs in the Lamar Valley. If you would like a longer ride, you can continue east onto one of the more fabled roads in all of American road-cycling lore, the Beartooth Highway. At nearly 11,000 feet, Beartooth Highway will literally take your breath away, and that doesn't even include the scenery. Often called the most beautiful road in America, riding the Beartooth is an exceptional chance to experience this fragile, high-alpine world. This rocky place contains numerous small ponds and lakes and is home to marmots and pikas. The highway climbs from Cooke City, Montana, and over Colter Pass before continuing through high-alpine tundra into Wyoming. It then re-enters Montana for the 65-mile descent to Red Lodge. The long climb to the pass is a gradual pull from the west, cresting Beartooth Pass at 10,947 feet. Being well



NUTS & BOLTS *Cycling in National Parks*

RESOURCES

- **Crater Lake:** craterlakeinstitute.com/planning-visit/activities/bicycling.htm, crater.lake.national-park.com/visit.htm.
- **Glacier:** nps.gov/glac/planyourvisit/bicycling.htm, hikinginglacier.com/glacier-national-park-cycling.htm.
- **Grand Teton:** nps.gov/grte/planyourvisit/bike.htm, jacksonholewy.net/trails/biking_routes.php, themountainpulse.com/trail-maps-plus/pathways-cycling.
- **Theodore Roosevelt:** nps.gov/thro/planyourvisit/bicycling.htm, parkrec.nd.gov/activities/biking.html.
- **Yellowstone:** nps.gov/yell/planyourvisit/bicycling.htm

BIKE SHOPS

- **Crater Lake:** If your bike needs a check up, stop in Medford, Oregon: Marty's Cycle and Moore: martyscycleonline.com, (541) 772-9253; Al's Cycle and Hobbies: alcycleand-hobby.com, (541) 772-5880; Medford Cycle Sport (541-857-0819) and Ashland Cycle Sport (541-488-0581), roguecycle.com/storelocator.
- **Glacier:** Glacier Cyclery in nearby Whitefish has maps, local knowledge and the best repair department around. glaciercyclery.com, (406) 862-6446.
- **Grand Teton:** Hoback Sports in Jackson is a full service bike shop and the website has a great listing of additional road-biking options in the area ranging from a 25-mile

easy spin to an epic 100 miler. hoback.sports.com, (307) 733-5335.

- **Theodore Roosevelt:** Dakota Cyclery operates a small shop in Medora. They have trail maps, bike rentals, guided trips and repairs available. Owners Loren and Jennifer Morlock know the trails and the park better than anyone. dakotacyclery.com, (701) 623-4808 or (888) 321-1218.
- **Yellowstone:** Freeheel and Wheel in West Yellowstone. Great local knowledge and they make great coffee drinks. freeheelandwheel.com, (406) 646-7744.

BIKE TOURS

- **Bicycle Adventures** offers up a classic tour loop in southern Oregon featuring Crater Lake. bicycleadventures.com, (800) 443-6060.
- **Cycle America** offers tours of national parks: cycleamerica.com/np-tours.htm, (800) 245-3263.
- **Woman Tours** offers tours of Grand Teton and Yellowstone: womantours.com/wt.yellowstone.html, (800) 247-1444.
- **Adventure Cycling**, adventurecycling.org/guided-tours/self-contained-tours/glacier-waterton-loop, (800) 755-2453.

OTHER

- Cycling Highlights from Our National Parks: adventurecycling.org/resources/blog/some-cycling-highlights-from-our-national-parks.

ADVENTURE CYCLING PARTNERS WITH THE NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

On April 30, 2013, Adventure Cycling Association received the exciting news that National Park Service Director, Jonathan Jarvis, signed a national memorandum of understanding with Adventure Cycling to promote bicycle tourism and to and through national park units. The agreement, which lasts five years, provides the framework for promoting bicycle tourism and allows us to work collaboratively with park units on the U.S. Bicycle Route System, educational campaigns such as "share the road," and safety messaging. In addition, we will provide assistance and support for bicycling projects and programs as requested. We've already jumped in and are working with the Natchez Trace Parkway and their non-profit partner, the Natchez Trace Parkway Association. Stay tuned for more details as these efforts move forward.

above tree line, the view from the top of the world on a clear day is staggering.

CRATER LAKE NATIONAL PARK, OREGON

Crater Lake National Park located in southern Oregon is one of nature's wonders. The lake formed when the volcanic dome of Mount Mazama collapsed over 7,700 years ago. The eruption was so powerful that ash scattered over what is now eight states and three Canadian provinces. To put the blast in perspective, it was 40 times more powerful than the Mount St. Helens eruption in 1980. The powerful forces worked on humans too as shamans forbade Indians to even look at the lake. Cyclists get a constant workout from the 33-mile roller-coaster ride around the rim, which gains a cumulative 3,800 feet. There is nary a flat section of road and this ride features over 7,000 feet of climbing. This is a summertime ride only because, due to the high elevation, the park receives many feet of snow during the long winter. Start at the Crater Lake Lodge and then chart your progress along the circular rim by stopping at one of the many pullovers. High vantage points reveal the electric-blue color of Crater Lake, captivating Wizard Island, and the more secretive Phantom Ship Island.

And there's plenty more excellent



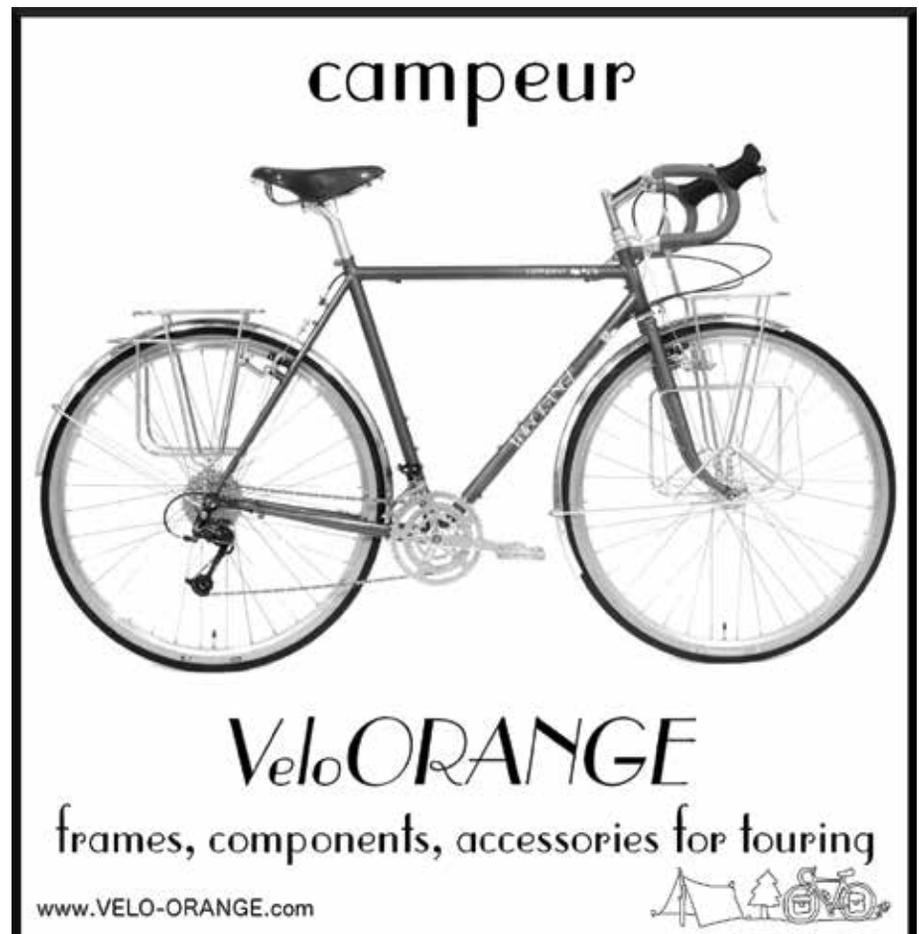
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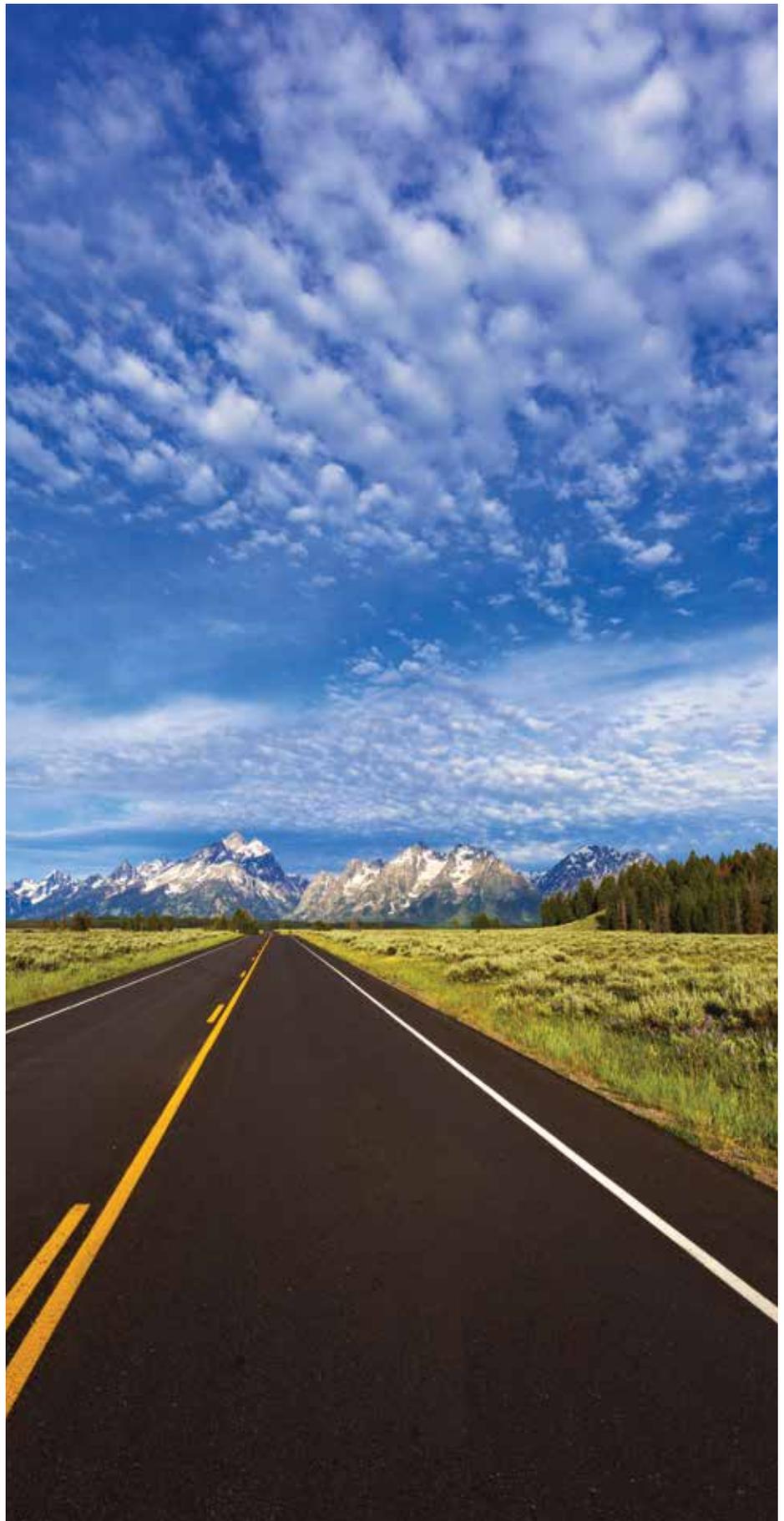
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road biking in the area. Do yourself a favor and head up north to Highway 138 and the town of Oakridge and ride the 65 miles of smooth pavement on the Aufderheide segment of the West Cascade's Scenic Byway north to Highway 242. Start at the covered bridge in Westfir and then glide through the lush old-growth forest with massive trees and very little automobile traffic. The Aufderheide should be on every cyclist's must-do list. Hope for the best but prepare for the worst because there are no services along this ride in the heart of the Cascade Range.

GRAND TETON NATIONAL PARK, WYOMING

With its sheer mountain relief, it's hard to imagine a more stunning place to pedal than Grand Teton National Park. The snow-capped mountain peaks abruptly rise more than 7,000 feet above the valley floor with 12 peaks rising higher than 12,000 feet above sea level. Featuring a newly constructed bike path leading all the way from the town of Jackson, Wyoming, to Jenny Lake, Grand Teton is the most road-bike friendly park that I've ridden lately. My favorite ride is contained within the park's boundaries. You can start anywhere and ride a remarkable 44-mile loop. For instance, take the bike path from the visitor center in Moose to Jenny Lake and then hop on the park road and turn east on Highways 89/191. Be sure to stop and take in the view at Ox-bow Bend before proceeding to Moran Junction, where you then head south on Highway 26/89 back to Moose. If you would like a longer ride, start in Jackson and ride the 12-mile bike path to Moose, begin the park loop tour that I just described but take a detour and climb the five miles and 800 feet in elevation to the summit of Signal Mountain. From the top, it's a sweeping viewpoint of the Teton Range and Snake River as the next closest high summit is more than 10 miles away. Descend back to the park road and head out to Moran Junction and then turn south following the Snake River passing by Moose all the way back to Jackson for a total of approximately 78 miles. The best time to ride in Grand Teton is early in the morning when there is less automobile traffic on the



The empty road beckons cyclists in Grand Teton National Park, Wyoming.

road and the possibility of more wildlife sightings. In late June, there is a profusion of wildflowers to brighten your perimeter view. I enjoyed three fantastic days of riding in the park in July of 2012, much of it on the spanking new smooth pavement. I would have to rank Grand Teton as one of the top cycling destinations in the country right now.

Many of America's national parks are interested in expanding cycling opportunities within their borders and the National Park Service has signed a Memorandum of Understanding with Adventure Cycling Association, so start making plans to include these wondrous places in your next cycling vacation. 📍📷

Chuck Haney is an avid cyclist and photographer who lives in Whitefish, Montana. You can learn more about him at chuckhaney.com.



St. Mary Lake and Wild Goose Island at sunrise in Glacier National Park, Montana.



A road cyclist climbs a smooth road in Theodore Roosevelt National Park, North Dakota.