

# A SEASON IN THE SNAKE

A summer of micro adventures in Missoula's Rattlesnake wilderness

Story and photos by Aaron Teasdale



I shut the back door, jumped on my bike, and headed for the hills. Through Missoula streets, I rode to where Rattlesnake Creek flows from the mountains through the neighborhoods of the lower Rattlesnake Valley. Through a series of forested parks, my front tire traced creek-side trails through the city's outer reaches. 25 minutes after setting out, signs announced the Rattlesnake National Recreation Area, and I pedaled into the backcountry. It was 7:30 at night. Cyclists spun by on their way out, their rides ending. Mine was just getting started.

It was the end of May, Rattlesnake Creek was swollen and charging, the forest brilliant green and radiating life. After an hour of pedaling on an old Jeep road, I met three teenage boys with fishing poles preparing to ride out. They saw my extra gear and asked what I was doing.

"Heading back as far I can get before dark," I said, "then camping for the night."

"Wow," they said, glimmers of possibility sparking in their eyes as they looked again at my lightly-loaded mountain bike, "that's cool."

"Yeah," I said with a chuckle, "it is

pretty cool."

A feeling of giddiness welled in me after I said goodbye and pedaled deeper into the wilds, like the thrill of a child heading into a giant playground. As dusk spread, it occurred to me that I might be the only human back there. A branch snapped in the forest, and my mind quickly cataloged the large carnivores in the area capable of ingesting me. This is a reliably invigorating exercise, and from that point on my awareness was heightened, my primal instincts revived — even if those instincts, being a bit rusty, had me springing into defensive stances at the sound of rustling chipmunks, or jolting my fight-or-flight impulse as grouse winged up next to my wheel.

Just as it became too dark to ride, I arrived at a camp spot on a wooded bench over the creek. Thirty minutes later, with the tent up and a campfire ablaze, I'd made my home for the night in the forest. It was here, while watching the moon rise behind pine-tree silhouettes, that I raised my binoculars and made the joyous discovery that, along its edges where the light throws long shadows, you can actually see the craters on

the moon. This held me rapt — exploring the suddenly visible topography, truly seeing it as a massive orb of rock floating with us through space. As I stood next to the fire, studying the moon and contemplating our place in the Universe, I thought this is so worth it. The rushed, post-work preparations, the being away from the family for the night — it was worth riding back here just for this.

Inspired by that first, grand overnight ride of the year, I made a plan for the summer: head out once a month for an S240 (sub-24-hour overnight; see: [www.adventurecycling.org/s240](http://www.adventurecycling.org/s240)) or similar micro adventure, and bring car-free, overnight bicycle adventures into my busy, family-oriented city life with minimal planning and hassle. After that first ride, I put all the needed gear in a box so it would be ready to go. Make it idiot-proof, I figured, and I might actually pull it off.

It helps that my hometown of Missoula, Montana, is ringed with public land that reaches upward into vast sweeps of mountains and rivers. With trails and dirt roads

radiating out like spokes on a wheel in every direction, it's a great place to be a cyclist, especially if, like me, you favor wilder terrain.

My favorite swath of nearby wild country is the 61,000-acre Rattlesnake National Recreation Area and Wilderness in the Lolo National Forest. Home to bears, wolves, mountain lions, wolverines, and all manner of other untamed creatures, the 'Snake is not only the largest of Missoula's protected areas, it's also the wildest. Fronted by the Recreation Area and a spider's web of trails, its deeper reaches harbor the Rattlesnake Wilderness, the closest federally designated wilderness to a metropolitan area in the country. It's also just the tip of a much larger stretch of wild-country — head north and the 'Snake links with the Mission Mountains and, eventually, Glacier Park and Canada, making it the southern reach of what's known as the Crown of the Continent, one of our planet's greatest remaining wildland complexes. Needless to say, being able to ride there in 25 minutes from my front door is pretty great.

So it was that on the first Friday night of June, my gung-ho 10-year-old son, Silas, and I headed out on our first father-son overnight adventure of the year. It was also the first overnight ride for our mountain-bike tandem, a recent hand-me-down from my father that we'd immediately taken in as a member of the family.

"How far back are we going, Dad?" Silas asked as we reached the edge of the 'Snake and pedaled into the woods.

"Just a couple miles," I said. With only about 90 minutes of remaining light, I had my sights on a secret, hillside ledge with views over the Missoula Valley that I knew we could reach before dark. The sky was threatening, and the forecast promised storms; I'd even considered cancelling our ride, unsure how Silas would take to camping in the rain. But these family adventures are precious, I figured, and by Jove we weren't going to let a little rain stop us. Besides, if the rain got Biblical, we were only a few miles from home.

Once we entered the 'Snake, however, we were in another world entirely: A world where Rattlesnake Creek was a frothing torrent of spring snowmelt threatening to spill over its banks; where sunburst blooms of yellow wildflowers — arnica, balsamroot, glacier lillies — carpeted the forest floor; where a father and his legs discovered the hard way how much sheer effort it takes to pedal a tandem with a child and a laden



BOB Trailer.

Fortunately, the rain held off (and my legs held up) long enough for us to reach camp and make a dinner of fire-roasted hot dogs and glacier lillies. When it did rain that night and into the next morning, I woke up, stepped out of the tent, and, hoping to lead by fatherly example, said something contrived like, "Ah, rain — invigorating!"

Silas, to my delight, was not fazed by the weather. Donning raingear, he promptly started a fire and nursed it along while I cooked up a breakfast of oatmeal and, as insurance against any encroaching lack of enthusiasm, hot cocoa with marshmallows.

Later that morning, as we packed up our wet gear and prepared to ride home from our secret spot, Silas looked up from the dripping yellow hood of his jacket and said cheerfully, "We have to bring Mom and Jonah here."

I smiled the deeply satisfied smile of a father who's passed something valuable on to his son and said, "Definitely."

A few weeks later, in early July, our opportunity came to try an overnight ride with the whole family. Silas and I were fresh off a bike overnight in Banff, so jumping on our trusty tandem with a BOB was beginning to feel like second nature. My wife, Jacqueline, rode with six-year-old Jonah attached via a trailer-bike.

"Daddy, where are we going to camp?" Jonah asked as the sign announcing the beginning of the 'Snake passed by.

"Wherever we get to," I replied honestly but curtly, still a bit tense from rounding up the gear for our adventure while try-



Like father, like son. Silas and Aaron are all smiles before heading in for another night in the Rattlesnake.

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**Breakfast storytime.** Silas and Aaron start their day in the mountains by reading aloud around the campfire.

ing to corral two young boys whose idea of “helping” involved some combination of playing drums, establishing new couch-jumping height records, and seeing how long they could balance on their head and/or hold their breath. But as we rode along Rattlesnake Creek, still boiling white but down from its peak of weeks previous, my tension floated away with the passing current. Butterflies filled the air, a new wave of wildflowers speckled the forest floor, and sun-warmed air flowed over our bare arms and legs — summer was here, and we were heading into the Rattlesnake once more.

The old Jeep road we followed, called the “main corridor” by locals, provides the easiest access to the ‘Snake’s deeper reaches, paralleling the creek for 16 miles from the main Rattlesnake trailhead before reaching the Wilderness boundary, past which bicycles are forbidden. We made it about five of those, or 11 miles from home, before arriving at a meadow studded with towering cottonwoods. Birds dashed between the trees, filling the air with song, while the sun dipped low over the forested mountains that rose on all sides. Were I alone or with other like-minded (i.e. fool-

hardy) adults, we’d surely press on, but with the kids, and with it being Jonah’s first bike overnight, the focus was fun, not epic-ness. Besides, just getting out of the house, much less riding to that meadow with the boys and camping gear, felt plenty epic right then.

“We’re here,” I called out.  
 “Yaay!” Silas and Jonah yelled before running into the meadow and launching a spirited campaign to capture every living grasshopper there. Later, after the boys had filled several stone grasshopper-detainment pens and roasted hot dogs over the campfire, we lay in our tent, the rainfly off, and read bedtime books aloud under the stars and a boomerang moon. It was exactly the kind of idyllic scene you hope for on a family camping trip, even if the reading was constantly interrupted by the kids yelling “There’s one!” and “There’s another one!” every time one of the meadow’s sun-ending population of bats flew helter-skelter over the tent.

After the boys were asleep, Jacqueline and I talked about what a treat it was to be sitting around a campfire instead of at home glued to the internet or paying bills or some other devitalizing domestic task. When she

went to sleep with the boys in the tent, I laid my bag down outside and crawled in, back to the earth, bathed in starlight.

Morning dawned with cascades of bird-song, and as I awoke my vision was filled with feathery white cottonwood seeds floating through the air like nature’s confetti against a brilliant blue sky. I called to the family, still asleep in the tent, and within minutes Silas had started the morning fire and Jonah had imprisoned a dozen grasshoppers.

As we rode deeper into the ‘Snake that morning, the trailer-bike now connected to the tandem for a de facto triple, I tried to mentally prepare the boys for the long, rocky climb that awaited us when the old Jeep road left the creek-bottom and launched up a rocky mountainside. If they weren’t charged up and ready to pedal, I knew there was no way we’d make it. In an effort to add some excitement to the prospect, I cried, “The Teasdale Train is going to be on top of the world!”

Thirty minutes later, things were more exciting than I’d hoped as I desperately mashed the pedals in a heroic effort to keep our train moving forward. Sweat

gushed off my brow and I prayed my quads wouldn’t rupture as we crept up the steep talus slope.

“Guys,” I managed to wheeze, “I could really use your help here.”

I wanted to believe that Silas was pedaling, but Jonah, whom I suspected was merrily counting butterflies or looking around for mountain goats, was significantly less reliable.

Soon the battle was lost. I had to stop or explode. While I gasped and attempted to reinsert my lungs into my chest, the boys scampered around and hurled stones down the talus slope, which was apparently much more exciting than pedaling a bicycle up a mountain.

We did make it to the top, though, eventually and with some pushing. We even saw a family of nine mountain goats on the cliffs there, with several kids following their parents along impossible creases in the rock.

“Look, they’re just like us,” I said. “Except those kids aren’t trying to make their father disgorge his lungs.”

I did get my revenge, however — on the downhill. As we hurtled back down the mountain, rattling across the rocks, Silas cried, “Dad, slow down! This is freaky!”

“Can’t slow down!” I yelled back over

my shoulder, with what would have been a disconcertingly wild grin had the boys been able to see it. “We just have to bomb down!”

Everyone was laughing when we reached the bottom, Jacqueline and the boys with a mixture of adrenaline and relief, I with a mixture of adrenaline and we-just-railed-that-descent glee. After crossing Franklin Bridge, where the main corridor crosses the creek at the foot of the hill, we stopped for a snack in a shady campsite tucked into deep forest along the water’s edge.

“Can we camp here tonight?” Jonah said, as we sat back and watched an American dipper bob along the rocks in the creek. I reminded him that we’d left our camping gear back in the meadow and that we were riding back home after our snack.

“Next time we will, okay?” I said, raising my hand for a high five. Jonah smiled and slapped his little hand against mine. I couldn’t help but grab it and pull him in for a hug. We had a new bicycle adventurer in the family.

Somehow, in the maelstrom of life, we then managed to go almost two months without another overnight. This greatly disappointed me, so I decided to make up

for it all at once. After a brief debate with Jacqueline (Her: “It’s his first week of fifth grade!” Me: “This is way more important than a day at school!”), I pulled Silas from school just before Labor Day weekend to head deep into the Rattlesnake Wilderness for three nights of biking, backpacking, and mountain-lake fishing.

We spent our first night at the shady, water’s-edge campsite near Franklin Bridge where Silas was now staring open-mouthed at the place where a toothbrush handle used to be before it was broken off.

“Who did this?” Silas said, the disembodied toothbrush in his hand.

“I did,” I replied, turning away to hide my smile.

“But ... why? Why would you do that?” Silas said, incredulous that his father — who’d seemed so responsible until then — would do something so destructive.

“To save weight,” I said. “When you’re carrying all your stuff like this, you gotta trim weight wherever you can.”

Silas considered this for a minute in silence. Our equipment may have been the state of the art in ultralight camping gear, but given that we were also carrying a backgammon set, two bedtime books, fishing poles, and an obscenely heavy amount

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of camera equipment, my answer may have seemed dubious. I reminded Silas that we faced a big challenge right away that morning: the big talus climb that had defeated us last time. But whether he was contemplating the weight of whatever young-boy trinkets he had squirreled away in his pack (Matchbox cars? Cool rocks from the creek?) or considering the new reality of life with a toothbrush-destroying father, he

pikas; we weathered hail, winds, and cold. We read stories by the campfire, listened to bull elk bugle from the mountainsides, and caught fish after fish after fish.

When we made it home two hours after dark on the fourth day, after a monumental six-mile hike and a 22-mile ride out, Jacqueline gave Silas a hug and asked, "How was it?"

"Awesome!" came his immediate reply. I



Creek-side camp. Silas tends the fire at the campsite by Franklin Bridge.

stayed quiet as we packed up camp.

"We're going to have to work together here," I said as we began the climb, fully expecting to be off the bike in minutes and reinserting my lungs again. After all, there were only two of us, and we had a fully-loaded trailer now. But something amazing happened. Silas really gave it his all this time, and we worked together, father and son, to pedal that rig up the mountain without stopping. It was like he was suddenly growing up, like our summer of riding was transforming him. There was some high-fiving at the top, but we didn't waste a lot of time with celebrations. Silas was driven to reach the depths of the wilderness and see the lakes that rested in the high peaks.

"I can do it," he said whenever I suggested we aim for one of the lower, easier-to-reach lakes instead of the high, distant lake he'd identified as our goal.

And, to my surprise, and fueled by huckleberries and a desire to see, he did. We left the bike at the Wilderness boundary and hiked high into the Rattlesnake Mountains. We saw bears, eagles, and

couldn't have felt a deeper sense of satisfaction if I'd just ensured permanent world peace. My son loved the mountains just like me.

For the last overnight adventure of the season, I set my sights high — literally. The trail up and over Sheep Mountain, on the eastern edge of the Rattlesnake, is renowned as Missoula's most epic mountain bike ride. Climbing a cumulative 5,000 vertical feet from the valley floor, it's a rough, narrow trail that ascends ridges along the eastern edge of the Rattlesnake before topping out on an open-aired summit with 100-mile views. From there, it plummets off Sheep Mountain's backside in a switchbacking, 4,000-foot plunge to Rattlesnake Creek and the main corridor below. Typically undertaken by experts on mountain bikes, I'd decided it would be fun to ride as an overnight on a Salsa Fargo (essentially a touring bike on steroids) with ultralight camping gear.

A questionable plan, yes, but I craved a challenge. As much as I love bringing my

family into the mountains, I needed to do something more adventurous, maybe even risky, to shake up my comfortable workday life. Something I could look back on when my days of high-mountain riding are behind me and say, I did that.

As usual, I couldn't find anyone to come along, so I pedaled out of town as a lone rider one evening in mid-September. The shrubs were turning scarlet and the summer's butterflies were gone as I climbed the Woods Gulch trail into the hills overlooking Missoula. Lights began winking in the valley below as the sunset's painted sky settled into a crimson band over the blue silhouettes of distant mountain ranges. When true darkness crept from the forest, I turned on my light and the quest began, as it does every night I sleep out, for the perfect campsite. At 9:00 pm and 2,500-feet above Missoula — wind swaying the tree branches, stars piercing the blackness above — I found it: a wide, grassy clearing in the forest overlooking the city far below. An owl hooted in the distance while I pitched my tent near the matted-down grass of an elk bed, silently thanking it for sharing its bedroom with me.

The chattering of red squirrels and gray jays woke me the next morning, and I packed up and pedaled away at 8:30, intending to eat my oatmeal breakfast on Sheep Mountain's summit. Muscling up the trail was tough, and I walked more than one steep section, but the golden morning light slanting through the trees and the increasingly vast views pulled me onward. Then, after taking an hour to fill a water bottle with spectacularly delicious huckleberries for the family, I came upon a glistening pile of mountain lion scat not 30 yards up the trail. My mouth dropped. Had it been watching me? There was no way to know, and nothing to do but continue on.

I finally reached Sheep Mountain's summit in the early afternoon. Sitting on my throne in the sky, a lone man on a wild mountaintop, I breathed clean, pure air from the blue above. Resting under a warm afternoon sun, I scanned the cliffs below for goats or sheep and gazed across a landscape of mountains without end. Sprawling out beneath me was the Rattlesnake itself — the wide, glacially carved valley of the creek and the main corridor 4,000 feet below, where the descent would soon deliver me. Beyond that was a distant jumble of the wilderness's loftiest peaks,

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Wilderness view. Looking over the upper Rattlesnake Valley from atop Sheep Mountain.

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and beyond those more peaks still.

I'd been saving my oatmeal to eat here, since there's nothing quite like cooking a meal on a mountaintop. But because I'd camped high and ridden ridgelines all day, I'd come across no water sources and was still drinking from the same supply I'd left home with the day before. Though I'd packed extra and rationed, there wasn't enough left. The oatmeal would have to wait.

Fortunately, the descent wouldn't, and it was as magnificent as I'd hoped. With every ounce of skill I've accumulated over two decades of mountain riding, I piloted that bike down mountainside switchbacks and onto a virtual game trail that plunged and weaved through a deep forest of emerald ferns and tumbling brooks for hours. I finally emerged, thoroughly spent, hungry, and out of water, at the side of Rattlesnake Creek and just below the big talus climb.

I rode the half-mile down to the campsite by Franklin Bridge, filled my water bottles, and drank. This is where I'd camped with Silas, and where Jonah had wanted to stay, and where I'd talked to the boys with fishing poles on my first overnight of the year back in May. The creek's autumn flow was now just a trickle, but I finally had the water to cook my oatmeal — the last of my food — and brew an invigorating mug of Earl Grey tea.

Though I was still eight miles from

the main trailhead, then another six miles from home, it would be a cruise compared to what I'd just done. In one of the finest adventures in a season of fine adventures, I'd completed the first-ever descent of Sheep Mountain on a loaded touring bike (even if it wasn't your typical loaded touring bike). Leaning back against a smooth, angled stone, I dropped a handful of huckleberries into my hot oatmeal and found I couldn't stop smiling.

Riding down the old Jeep road in the darkening night a short while later — passing a bear in a meadow, feeling a bat's wing graze my face, which made me yell and then laugh out loud — I was enveloped in a weary euphoria. As on every one of the season's Rattlesnake rambles, I'd spent the last 24 hours checking zero emails, receiving zero phone calls, and driving zero miles, and I couldn't have been happier about it. Better still, my love of wild places was passing on to my boys, who were turning into bicycle adventurers themselves. I brightened at the thought of them waiting for me back home, but couldn't bring myself to rush. It had been a great summer in the Rattlesnake, for me and for our family, and I wanted to savor the final ride out. **AC**

By the time you read this, Aaron Teasdale should be exploring the 'Snake on skis — while concocting plans for bigger family bike adventures in the future. Follow his misadventures at [www.aaronteasdale.blogspot.com](http://www.aaronteasdale.blogspot.com).

## Open Road Gallery

# 26 YEARS & A BIKER'S DOZEN

by Sarah Raz Photographs by Greg Siple



FORGET ABOUT "CARPE DIEM," BILLY MONTIGNY'S DICTUM IS "SEIZE THE SECOND!" He visited our office this August, during his 12th solo transcontinental cycling trip in 26 years. In 1983, having rapidly progressed from commuting 15 miles a day to riding more than 400 miles a week, he decided to ride across the country. He set out with little knowledge and too much stuff, but was "fueled by a sense of wonder and intensity and curiosity, a huge heart, and tireless legs."

Billy finished his first crossing in just 27 days and was hungry for more. Over the next quarter century, he found himself packing up his bicycle and making the cross-country journey whenever he needed to reach a place of mental transcendence and clarity. He chose different routes each time yet was never disappointed despite the multitude of challenges presented. Billy has pedaled through 600 miles of continuous forest fires, been pelted by golf-ball-sized hail, battled debilitating illness and injury, and camped in boxcars and city parks. He wouldn't trade any of it.

Bicycle touring makes the world less complicated, breaks it down to the basics. According to Billy, "Traveling through America, on a narrow line that's 15 feet wide and 3,000 miles long, you feel every nuance of landscape, every variation of wind and weather." Billy sets out on each journey hoping to find love, adventure, and poetry — and is never let down.

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