



Call it nature deficit disorder, call it small-minded, call it a contrived attempt to fill the empty spaces that inhabit our modern souls. What we do is plan adventures. Back in the depth of winter, slowly driving a whiteout-lashed road in southern Montana, longtime Adventure Cycling Association Cartographer Casey Greene and I were returning from one adventure while planning another. Which is how, six months later, we found ourselves staring down a steep snow chute, ice axes in hand, with mountain bikes on our backs.

The day before we had ridden and hiked our way right up under the lip of the sky, pressed 10,000 feet high up against crystal blue. The views were unalloyed; towns, canyons, and mountains stretching miles in every direction. Our perspective down to the lake was equally unvarnished: steep snow sat between where we stood and where we wanted to go.

Story by Dave Chenault
Photos by Casey Greene

TOBACCO RO



OTS PACKBIKE

The mining road at the foot was plainly visible, an unnaturally straight ribbon amongst the thawing drifts.

There's always a choice, and we certainly could have turned back and spent

ise to expand our ability to see the world. Looking at the art (maps) and science (satellite photos) of others and generalizing from past experience, we traded estimates via email. Would that

detour into the basin below? The knowable ambiguities were resolved in a few days and the rest of our correspondence was less important for relating the concrete particulars than for the process of getting to know each other again.

Our plan revolved around riding, pushing, and carrying our bikes across the high heart of the Tobacco Roots — twice. Whether our first, second, or third choices would go or not didn't seem relevant. We'd never be more than a dozen straight-line miles from a paved road. What was vital was trust in each other's judgment and good spirit.

Not many folks think of planning routes that require carrying a bike for extended periods. Beyond the weight, they're awkward to pack. More significantly, the mindset of a cyclist and hiker are often as far removed from each other as either are from the driver of a car. Especially for the old hand, the strengths and limitations of cycling and walking are both well defined, separate; and their role in planning is instinctual. Taking a bike on a largely unrideable trail is as much an affront to the efficacy of unencumbered human strides as road-walking is to the purity of the wheel. We hoped to blend the two in a coherent fashion. There may be a noble novelty to roller-skating up a mountain, but the lack of efficiency robs such endeavors of style.

Our commitment was soon tested. A languorous early summer drive led to a campground in a ponderosa grove, and immediate miles of steep dirt road led to a fork and a wooden bridge across a small, loud creek. The road was built a century before by miners and later maintained for hunters, fishermen, and gawkers and now maintained only by elk, sheep, and the occasional human on an ATV beyond the mossy bridge. On the first iteration of the mining road — pre-bridge — we had enjoyed the bikes' speed and gone far faster than walking, even with a steep gradient. Now, dodging boulders and powering through wet gravel and around patches of snow, riding and pushing were of equivalent speed. We rode, then walked, then rode more, mostly in accordance with personal preference. Early summer at 9,000 feet is wet and slow, the mountains not yet ready to easily readmit humans, no



Above: The author enjoying a hard-earned descent in the Tobacco Root Mountains.

Below: A bare trail up high leads to the snowy Branham Lakes basin.

the better part of a day retracing our steps. Instead, we went down. Kicking steps in trail shoes is basic, particularly when the snow is softened by morning sun and you have an axe for self-belaying. Carrying a mountain bike makes that a bit more complicated.

Only in Montana could the Tobacco Root Mountains do what they do and hide in plain sight of a major interstate highway. They rise 5,000 sudden feet from the surrounding river valleys, measure 30 miles long by 20 miles wide, and by some counts contain 40 distinct summits higher than 10,000 feet. In their most jagged corners, they reveal twisted, fine-grained rock half the age of the earth itself as well as lush springs wrung from the orographic headlock the peaks place on winter storms. Hundreds of thousands of residents and visitors drive through the northern foothills, going from city to city, national park to national park, famous trout stream to famous trout stream, and never really see them.

This is why Casey and I obsess over maps. Even though paper always lies about the dirt on the ground, contours and the lines of roads and trails prom-

road be rideable, at that grade and that altitude, given the bedrock base and probable lack of use? Would that slope be snow-free in June? Would that ridge stay passable along the top or require a



Tobacco Root Divide



Even without the snow faced on this trip there is still a logistical catch, which prevents traditional mountain bike touring through the Tobacco Roots — no road or trail was ever built across the steep divide.

Nupotosi Hot Springs



One of the last remaining undeveloped hot springs in Montana, Nupotosi was discovered and is maintained by the campground host at the nearby Potosi Campground. It has seen a rise in use — and unfortunately, abuse — since 2008, when the Potosi Hot Spring Resort was closed to the public. The Forest Service is currently considering making this a pay-for-use site.

Twin Bridges



- North
- 0 2 Kilometers
- 0 2 Miles
- State/Federal Hwy
- Main Dirt Road
- Secondary Dirt Road
- Singletrack Trail
- Diff Trail/Bushwacking
- Adventure Cycling Bicycle Route

Corniced Out



A massive snow cornice at this point blocked the intended route to South Meadow Creek Lake, forcing a detour into the Mill Gulch Basin.

CASEY GREENE

matter how they choose to travel.

Snow rules Montana and ties the sparsely populated state to the rest of the U.S., creating the Missouri and Columbia rivers that suckle cities and feed the country. It's hard to grasp just what mountain weather does and how different snow above 7,000 feet is from snow at 3,000 feet. By June, Casey and I had both been riding dry trails and roads for months down in the valleys near town during a warm spring, but high in the mountains spring is another matter. We found that out at 9,000 feet as our rocky mining track disappeared into continuous snow. Pushing our bikes between granite benches had worked up to this point, but now that we were faced with continuous post-holing, we broke down our bikes and tied them to our packs.

A few stretches of post-holing took us up to a ridge at 10,000 feet with massive views south and east. The sky was so blue it hurt. Contouring around

a ridge melted clear of snow, our awkward loads felt light — until I saw the cornice.

Most mountains don't get as much snowfall as the uninitiated might expect. The epic depths of spring — the 30-foot drifts, which take until September to melt clear — are born of wind. The couloir we had intended to take down off the ridge ran east and not unexpectedly was filled in 50 feet deep at the top with a 10-foot vertical wall at the very tip, dropping the 2,000 feet to the lake in a single geometric swoop. We had aluminum ice axes and walking crampons in tow, and the warm day had softened the snow well, but the awkward, spiny loads on our backs made down-climbing steep snow intimidating and arresting a slip unlikely. A foot wrong and we'd be riding toward the rocks and pines like a crab dropped down a playground slide.

The pleasure of any backpacking trip, be it via foot, bike, or both, is

being able to take your portable home and detour as whimsy or necessity mandate. So we headed farther south, poking along the jagged ridge for a route down to the lake. We did not find one. Instead, the ridge pinched out between that basin and the one farther south, riven into 200-foot pinnacles, playthings of greater forces, stacked out of drunken granite blocks and left to decay. Mountain goat trails wended between them, and if it hadn't been for our loads, the way would have been easy enough, but the threat of a saddle or chainstay whacked unseeing against a wall kept us looking for more cautious options.

We found one. Steep dirt between cliff bands bottomed out in the southern basin. Its bottom was drenched and spongy with days-old snowmelt. A twilight glance suggested that the route up the other side would go the next day, and the nose-curling fresh air of alpine summer mingled with the sweet sensa-



Crashing through a cold creek on the way toward Porphyry Mountain.

tion of having dodged a bullet with our route selection. Some searching found a dry, flat place to pitch our pyramid tarp, and we built a fire as the long June day sunk into darkness around 11:00 PM. We would have had to think very hard to come up with a way to be happier.

The night was crisp — as most nights above 9,000 feet are — and the soil crackled when at dawn I waddled away from the tent. My legs felt the effects of the steep dirt-road climb as well as the delicate 45 pounds we packed down to our camp. The morning sky was cerulean and on such occasions you can't help but be optimistic.

Our good spirits were rewarded. We had a steep ascent immediately out of camp on dry talus and crusty drifted snow, but the chief obstacle was keeping the rear triangle from snagging on pine branches. I crested the ridge east of Casey's route, and as he walked toward me, the flawless air made it seem as if he were floating from rock to rock. The slope between us and the lake — yesterday's target — was still steep, but

we could just about see the line top to bottom. Crampons on and ice axe at the ready, I headed down a likely 45-degree slope.

Picking a partner for any trip is important, and selecting a companion for one as absurd as this was vital. It was Casey's idea, and when I saw the trepidation behind his eyes, I felt my duty was paying him back for his vision by blazing a route down to the road at the foot of the lake. I couldn't take away his fear of heights, but I could give him a good set of footprints to follow. A few hundred yards off the crest, plunging steps between steep, spaced trees, I cut a fresh trail following mountain-goat tracks traversing left into a chute. The way looked unlikely, with cliffs above and below, but I was certain the goat knew what it was doing and I followed. When I had wrapped out of sight and could see the moderate, snowy ledge leading into the couloir, Casey yelled something. I didn't need to distinguish words to know what he meant. "Trust the goat!" I yelled back. The goat chute,

hidden from above, angled through the cliffs and led right to a patch of bare dirt above the lake, marking the end of the first phase of the trip.

I waded across the outlet stream and dumped my pack on the road. A couple who had ridden a quad up to catch stocked trout didn't know what to think and mostly ignored us. Bikes went back together and soon enough, after almost 24 hours of moving between one and two miles an hour, we were flying down a rocky mining road at 25. In less than an hour, we were all the way out from the foothills, a vertical mile below the ridge top, coasting past driveways. Descending the chute, snow had soaked our shoes and socks and numbed our feet. Now we were broiling in the sun in search of a tailwind. Without bikes we would probably have made it down to that first lake a half-day faster, and every minute of that difference would have been erased in the long descent we had just completed. The incongruity of going from backpacking to packbiking (not bikepacking, which is carrying

packs — like framebags — on a bike) felt like having grown a second set of eyes.

We turned to head up a fall-line road, newly widened and graveled for the subdivision plots laid out in the sagebrush. Whoever buys those lots and builds those houses had better have chains to get to their driveway when it snows because that road is steep. Casey and I were both riding singlespeeds because they're fun, have less stuff to snag on branches when packed, and (in case you hadn't noticed) we both trend toward the eccentric and ideologically driven when it comes to moving through the lesser-peopled parts of the world. It was three in the afternoon and hot, with no wind and no shade. I summoned the zen from my endurance racing days and tacked back and forth across the road, milking patches free of gravel to make steeper turns and never putting down more effort than was required to keep traction in the rear wheel and the cranks turning over. Casey walked. The summit arrived, as it always eventually does, and I coasted downhill a ways before finding a tree to hide under. I put my bike in the ditch in an obvious location and tried not to fall asleep on the cool pine needles.

I was awakened soon enough, not by Casey's arrival, but by Norris Hot Springs. Cars! 100-degree water! Pizza! Beer! We hadn't yet been gone from the car for 36 hours, but the variety and intensity of the trip to that point made every hour feel like a day. Sitting at a table in shorts, drinking a beer, hair wet and surrounded by couples and families, I felt like an alien. Too much hot water and too many beers reinforced that soon enough. Dehydration caught up, and as the sun got low, I retreated to the tent with full water bottles to battle a splitting headache. Eventually, myriad aches aside, I fell asleep.

We woke up early the next morning, broke down the dew-soaked tent, and pedaled down the road to the cultural center of Norris, Montana — the only gas station around. We loaded up on coffee and microwave burritos, sat back, and listened to the parade of longtime residents who came through to check in on local news. With enough food on board for the last two days, we headed back the way we had come down

NUTS & BOLTS *Tobacco Roots*

LOGISTICS

The Tobacco Root Mountains rise in southwest Montana, about 30 miles west of Bozeman just south of Interstate 90. Paved secondary roads and highways circle the range, and a number of dirt roads go up into its various canyons. Most of these roads start out graded and accessible to any vehicle, but most of them require at least high clearance, if not a serious 4x4 truck or ATV, to reach their end. It makes sense to drive into the foothills, leave your vehicle on Forest Service land, and ride from there.

The Tobacco Roots are a tall mountain range and hold a lot of snow. Reliable snow-free access to the highest lakes and trails happens mid-July at the earliest. Significant snow accumulation can be expected to begin sometime in late September or early October.

AMENITIES

A number of small towns are found around the flanks of the Tobacco Roots, making for appealing destinations before, after, or during a trip.



These towns are small by Montana standards, which means few if any traffic lights, limited groceries, and friendly chat at the few restaurants and bars.

Ennis is the largest town close by, and stays busy during the summer with fly

fishermen and tourists going to and from Yellowstone National Park. The Sportsman's Lodge (**theennis sportsmanslodge.com**) is on the north end of town right off the highway and serves one of the best burgers in Montana. Ennis is also the best place to get groceries or anything else which may have been forgotten.

Norris, north of Ennis, is one of the smaller towns in the shadow of the Tobacco Roots. Aside from Norris Hot Springs (**norrishotsprings.com**) and their café, Norris has little more than a post office and gas station.

Pony, on the north end of the range, is even smaller than Norris. The Pony Bar (**ponybarmontana.com**) is the attraction here, one the increasingly rare Montana bars largely unchanged by the last half-century. Hours are irregular, but they're open noon to midnight or later most days during the summer.

Twin Bridges, on the southwest side of the mountains, is a quiet town famous for

fly fishing with a number of hotels and restaurants. Twin Bridges also has a nice bicycle campground, with showers and other amenities, just on the west side of the river near downtown.

GEAR

Packbiking adventures

require only subtle variations on the normal mountain bike touring equipment. Being able to transfer your gear weight between bike and back is one requirement, and



being able to carry your bike on your pack is another. To achieve the first objective, my choice is a seatbag like the Terrapin from Revelate Designs (**revelatedesigns.com**). When riding dirt roads, put your heavier stuff in the seatbag. When riding technical trails, put lighter stuff in your seatbag. When pushing or carrying your bike, put the seatbag in your pack.

Recently, a number of packs have emerged on the market which are both less than two pounds and have a sturdy enough frame to carry big loads. For our trip I used a Gossamer Gear Gorilla (**gossamergear.com**). It took a little practice to strap the bike on, but once I sorted out my system it was quite stable.

Even the best carry system won't hide how heavy a bike is when you have it on your back, so it's a good idea to make the rest of your gear as light as possible. A floorless pyramid shelter that pitches with trekking poles is a great way to do this. The Seek Outside Little Bugout (**seekoutside.com**) provides lots of space for 2 or 3 people, sheds strong winds easily, and weighs less than 1.5 pounds.

the day before, which meant a lot of climbing. On decent dirt roads and with sweeping scenery, that felt just fine. And on yet another clear and hot day, the sweat poured down as we gained elevation. Our legs were acclimated to the work, and the next passes came quickly.

Pace of travel shapes how you see the land. On dirt roads, no matter how steep, cycling goes quicker than walking, even if only just. On trails, it can be a toss-up, with angle the most significant factor. Along a flat or rolling trail, being on a bike focuses your attention on intimate details due to the need not to crash. Downhill this is even more the case, and the rough ATV track we took into the next valley brought the big world around us down to a tiny tunnel of swooping curves, big ledges, and loose gravel. You may lose the forest for the trees in these moments, but you get a very sharp view of those trees. Soon enough, we got the opposite treatment as the road in the next valley turned up, and we mostly pushed our bikes three miles up a steep, eroded trail to the final camp of the trip, perched on a narrow irrigation dam at the foot of another alpine lake.

A steady breeze flowed off the crest



The author enjoying a section of fast riding on smooth dirt road.

of the cirque, down the jagged chutes and across the lake, fanning our fire and blowing stray bits of gear. We layered up and, backs to the wind, looked down the valley we had ascended. With no interfering mountains or ridge lines for 50 miles or more the sunset took a very long time. This far into the trip, falling asleep on the hard ground inside our wind-beaten tent was as simple as flicking the light switch.

The previous day had been a perfect showcase for mountain biking. The long dirt road climbs had suited us perfectly, letting us go slow enough

to count the biscuitroot and quick enough to fish a few lakes and enjoy the backcountry hot spring we found along the way. The route had felt in tune with the peaks and canyons, but today did not look so good. The trail ended at our tent, and the snow sweeping down from the ridge crest ended at the edge of the lake. Good thing it was cold that morning. We were motivated to move quickly, breaking down the tent and bikes, and donning crampons for the snow, which thankfully was frozen just hard enough. We were able to kick steps with modest effort, only occasionally post-holing to our knees. Not only did the 1,000-foot snow climb go smoothly, we found dry singletrack right on the ridge crest. I wasn't able to ride more than a few hundred yards at a stretch without having to dismount and drag my bike across a snowfield, but if you have a bike along, you might as well ride it.

That didn't last, and when the terrain flattened out into pine groves and meadows, the snow was continuous. I was absorbed in the process of picking which snow patches I thought would hold weight — shoving, dragging, and carrying my bike away from trees, which suck up solar radiation and melt the snow at the ground, and traveling along exposed slopes, which freeze more compactly. I lost Casey without really meaning to but I figured he was unlikely to get into trouble while unsupervised and I pushed on, finding a rideable beach along a lake and, as seemed to be the case often in the Tobacco Roots, an eroding irrigation

HELLBIKING AND PACKBIKING

This is not the first time someone has carried their bicycles over a mountain range. In the 1990s, Alaskan legend Roman Dial pioneered a style of pulling and carrying his mountain bike by hand over vast wild trailless areas. He dubbed it "hellbiking." The longest of his trips was the first east-to-west traverse of the Alaska Range. On this outing Dial, Carl Tobin, and former Adventure Cycling Graphic Designer Paul Adkins used bikes, packrafts, and their own feet as means of travel (the trip is documented in the January/February 2001 issue of *Adventure Cyclist*, available free online at adventurecycling.org/default/assets/resources/talkeetna_traverse.pdf).

The method used on this trip — packbiking — uses a backpack to carry the disassembled bike instead of carrying the full bike by hand. This makes the load more bearable and leaves fingers free to use trekking

poles or an ice axe and allows travelers to cross areas where bicycles aren't allowed, such as the mandatory 24-mile portage through the Grand Canyon in the unofficial and punishing Arizona Trail Race.



dam at the foot with a road dead-ending atop it.

After a short nap in the sun, Casey appeared around the other side of the lake, and we had one last posthole in a 100-yard drift through the trees and down to the clear dirt road below. We were perhaps six miles from the car. It had taken us all morning to go two or three miles from lake to lake. Descending the mining road at 25 MPH, it took us 15 minutes to get back to where we had started. Putting gritty bikes on the roof rack and exchanging wet shoes for dry sandals was just the latest in a train of stark transitions that had been yanking us around all trip. While backpacking on foot, you tend to get into a rhythm in which the daily routine is mostly the same and the rate of progress is largely predictable. The mind can reach out and prepare itself, processing the day at a constant rate. The same thing happens on a bike tour with hills and, to a lesser extent, wind that is quantifiable and thus comprehensible beforehand.

On this trip we'd cycled between different modes of travel and different degrees of civilization and wilderness with dizzying speed. The packbiking sections hadn't been long, perhaps six or seven miles total, nor were they as difficult or hazardous as they could have been. Our overall trip mileage had been exceedingly modest for a four-day excursion, and the whole area of operations could have been encircled in less than a 20-mile diameter. The novelty and challenge of the trip, which the disorientation at being back in the car told us had been plenty, had been grounded in looking at and traveling over a new place in a new way. In a world shrunk down by population growth and the information age, our trip was a soothing kiss from the unknown. For the rest of our lives, vision, not terrain, would be the only thing circumscribing our adventures. **AG**

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