Unlike most Road Tests, in which a company ships us a bike that we ride, review, and then send back, this is my bike. I picked all the bits and bobs, I put it together, and I have to live with it, flaws and all.

Call me Doctor Frankenstein. This is my monster.

The Wednesday is Surly’s slightly-less-fat fat bike, more fleet of foot than the Ice Cream Truck and more geared for trail riding than the touring-oriented Pugsley. Like all Surlys, it’s a versatile machine with braze-ons galore for bottles and racks. And, of course, it’s made of steel, or some combination of pig iron and depleted uranium. In other words, the Wednesday is heavy and stiff, two qualities that are hard to appreciate until the bike is loaded down, at which point it’s still heavy but rides quite nicely.

I bought my Wednesday used, and after riding it for a couple of years primarily as a snow bike, I got a wild hair. I thought, with the right parts, my Wednesday could serve as a great dirt road bikepacking rig. With a rigid steel fork, a couple of racks, a swept-back handlebar, and a new drivetrain, I took my new bikepacking fat bike on an ambitious shakedown ride: a three-day self-contained trip through the mountains north of Missoula.

Its potential as a long-distance dirt road machine was obvious — it felt like the bicycle version of a steam
locomotive. But the fat bike tires were slow and draggy on pavement. In order to complete my Frankenbike, I needed one last piece: new wheels.

Made in Asheville, North Carolina, Industry Nine (I9) wheels have a reputation for durability, making them ideal for bikepacking excursions. I chose Backcountry 450 29er rims laced with I9’s proprietary straight-pull aluminum spokes to Hydra fat bike hubs. (Since I bought my wheels, I9 has discontinued the Backcountry 450 rim in the 29in. size; the narrower Backcountry 360 is still available as a 29er.)

Of particular note is the rear hub’s engagement. Used to be, anything less than 10° engagement was considered quick. I9’s Hydra? Zero point five two degrees, which, if we’re rounding down, is basically zero. It’s so quick that you can hear the freehub buzz in the fraction of a second between upshifts. It’s astounding, and the only downside is it’ll ruin you for any other hub.

The I9 wheels certainly lighten the whole package, but the most noticeable advantage is how quickly and easily they spin up. Even with WTB Ranger 3.0in. tires in the heavier Tough casing, it feels as if there’s no inertia at all to overcome — you pedal, and the bike scoots forward. Companion to this lack of inertia is the incredible roollower and momentum of 29+. Once you gain some speed, the big wheels will want to keep turning, which is a huge boon on hills. Just put your head down and keep pedaling, the wheels will keep going.

(For more information on the practicalities of swapping your fat wheels for 29+, go to adventurecycling.org/29plus.)

When the Surly Wednesday first arrived a handful of years ago, it came from the factory with a 2x drivetrain and mechanical disc brakes. But since its model refresh last year — the Wednesday frame and geometry are unchanged — the factory spec is pretty similar to
what you see on my bike. In fact, the drivetrain and brakes (SRAM SX Eagle 1x12 and Tektro hydros) are the same as the Bridge Club, which I just reviewed in the December 2019/January 2020 issue.

For my bike, I went with SRAM NX Eagle, which, as far as I’m concerned, is the affordable, wide-range 1x drivetrain to rule them all. Note that I don’t have an NX crank; the SRAM X5 crank that came with my bike works just fine with a Race Face narrow-wide chainring, and to boot it’s got a narrower Q-factor.

My Wednesday came with Shimano SLX hydros that I’ve upgraded with 180mm XT Ice-Tech rotors and metallic pads. Powerful, reliable, and easy to bleed, I wish I had these brakes on all my bikes.

The Specialized Command Post dropper is another item that came with the bike. It’s not my favorite dropper. I prefer infinite travel to the Command Post’s 10 preset positions, but the Specialized dropper has one advantage over most others: its air valve is accessible without having to remove the saddle.

On top of the dropper is a Brooks Cambium All-Weather Carved saddle in the middle C17 width. After testing the narrower C15 on my gravel bike last year, I bought this one myself. ‘Nuff said.

The 29+ wheels may be what elevated this bike’s abilities, but the Surly Moloko bar is the rug that really ties the room together. The Moloko is my ideal dirt road touring bar. The width and sweep are nice for cruising and offer just enough control for trail riding, and the mock bullhorn doohickies give you a great perch for quasi-aero pedaling.

As much as I love my Franken-Wednesday, I do have complaints. In designing their bikes to be as backwards-compatible as possible, Surly has had to make compromises. First, the horizontal slotted rear dropout on the Wednesday — which I admit is necessary to adjust for the taller 29+ wheels — allows for the use of quick-release wheels and thru-axles, but it’s finicky. You have to eyeball whether your wheel is straight in the frame. I would prefer a standard thru-axle dropout (with plenty of room for the bigger wheels, of course). And second, you can use thru-axles on your Surly, but only Surly thru-axles, which are fiddly bolt-on units that require two tools, 5mm and 8mm hex keys. Who carries an 8mm hex key around?

Look, I will readily acknowledge that this is a silly bike. I mean, come on — Industry Nine wheels on a Surly frame? I feel a little self-conscious pedaling around town on this thing. It’s like someone bolted a Ferrari V12 into an old Datsun pickup. The rear wheel sounds like an army of pissed-off cicadas, and the frame’s paint is faded and chipping away, revealing the rust underneath.

Silly though it may be, my Wednesday Frankenbike is much more than an experiment. It’s become a mainstay in my stable, a bike I ride year-round on everything from snow-covered singletrack to local overnights and weeklong trips on the Great Divide. I’ve probably gathered more lifelong memories on this bike than any other. Sure, with its gargantuan wheels and mismatched parts, it’s a bit of a monstrosity. But it’s my monstrosity. In fact, it might just be my favorite bike. 

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