

THE WINTER SPORTS ISSUE: FAT BIKING



PHOTOS BY CHRISTIAN LALONDE

Heavy tread makes light of snowed-over roads

Silly-looking, comfortable and a childhood throwback, wide-tire two-wheelers let you cruise through winter

BY MELANIE D. G. KAPLAN

Snow angels look a little different in Marquette, Mich. One of the snowiest cities in the country, Marquette is also “fat bike” central these days, and it’s not uncommon to find evidence in a snowdrift.

“It’s what we call a snow-bike angel here, when someone falls over on a fat bike,” said Candy Fletcher, recreation marketing director at the Marquette County Convention and Visitors Bureau. “It’s an indentation of a bike and a person.”

If that makes you smile, just try riding a fat bike. Sometimes called a cousin of the mountain bike, the fat bike features wide rims and tires with low air pressure, which provide more surface area and traction. That enables riders to take on snow, sand, loose gravel and climbs that traditional mountain bikes can’t tackle. Generally, tires are 3.7 to 4.8 inches wide, and tire pressure is 10 psi or less — about one-third that of a mountain bike. The ride is steady and slow, like, say, driving a monster truck. And, enthusiasts say, beginners and experts alike can’t help but wear a big grin.

“It’s the type of bike that makes you feel like you’re a kid again,” said Philip Keyes, New England Mountain Bike Association’s executive director. “They’re so silly looking, but they’re so comfortable, and you can run over anything.”

Fat biking originated in Alaska, and nearly a decade ago, Surly Bikes rolled out its Pugsley model, which is considered the granddaddy of the category. Since then, the bikes have gotten lighter, less expensive and more adored. The Midwest, in particular, where lo-



A fat-tire biker, above, rolls over November snow at Gatineau Hills, near Meech Lake, top, in Quebec, Canada. The cycling industry has compared fat biking’s rise in popularity with snowboarding’s.

cal are perpetually looking for new ways to play during the long winters, is going gaga over these cartoonlike bicycles. At the Interbike trade show, in September, nearly every manufacturer had a line of them.

“The fat-bike users are the new kids on the block,” said Travis Brown, a product developer and racer for Trek. “At this point, some Nordic [ski] centers are wholly embracing fat bikes as an extra revenue source, while some are resisting it quite a bit. It’s not that

different from when snowboards arrived on the scene.”

So where do all the new fat-bikers ride? The key is having a packed, or groomed trail, because even with fat tires, a bike won’t go far in powder that’s more than a few inches deep. Fat-bikers often share a wide trail with cross-country skiers and snowshoers, or they get on the narrower, twistier mountain-bike-specific trail called a single-track.

Marquette, in Michigan’s Upper Peninsula, grooms trails espe-

cially for fat biking, and the SBR (snow bike route) of its Noque- manon Trail Network is considered one of the best in the country. This year, the city is designing its own groomer, which will be dragged behind a snowmobile.

Wyoming’s Curt Gowdy State Park is starting to groom 24-inch trails for fat bikes this winter, an example of what Gary Sjoquist, an organizer of the Annual Global Fat Bike Summit and Festival, is trying to promote at other state parks. He said that with the boom

in fat-bike popularity, access to trails is an increasing challenge.

“We want to show land managers that these bikes can be ridden on the trail without degrading it, and that skiers and fat bikes can coexist peacefully,” Sjoquist said. Many resorts that allow fat bikes have minimum tire-width requirements to prevent trail damage.

If you’re headed somewhere snowy this winter, chances are you’ll find fat-bike rentals. Below are a number of fat-bike trails, festivals, races and rental shops:

Vermont: Kingdom Trails (802-626-0737, www.kingdomtrails.org) in East Burke, Vt., has about 20 miles of groomed trails, shared by fat-bikers, snowshoers and dog-sledders. Full- or half-day rentals of Surly Pugsley and Ice Cream Truck fat bikes are available at Village Sports Shop (802-626-8448, www.village-sportshop.com), for \$55/\$40, respectively. Kingdom Trails’ 4th Annual Winterbike is set for Feb. 28; admission includes demos, group rides, races, music and a bonfire. (The cost had not been determined at press time.)

Michigan: The Noque- manon Trail Network (www.noque-trails.org) in the central Upper Peninsula of Michigan is open to all non-motorized bike users. Daily rentals of Salsa fat bikes are available at Sports Rack Marquette (906-225-1766, www.sportsrackmq.com) for \$50. A 20-kilometer fat-bike race will be held as part of the Noque- manon Ski Marathon on Jan. 25.

Great Lakes region: The Great Lakes Fat Bike Series (www.great-lakesfatbikeseries.com) is in its third year; participants earn points across eight events in Wisconsin, Michigan and Minnesota. This year it begins Dec. 20 with the Solstice Chase in St. Croix Falls, Wis., and ends March 7 at the Fat Bike Birkie in Cable, Wis.

Wyoming: Grand Targhee Resort (307-353-2300, www.grand-targhee.com), in Alta, Wyo., 90 miles south of Yellowstone National Park, allows fat biking on its Nordic trails. Purchase an adult/youth day pass (\$15/\$7) and rent a fat bike for the day or half day (\$35/\$25). Fat bike races and demos Dec. 13; 4th Annual Grand Targhee Fat Bike Race is Jan. 17.

Colorado: The three-hour Fat-Bike and Brew Tour offered by BootDoctors (970-728-4525, www.bootdoctors.com) in Tellu-

How to gear up for a subfreezing ride

When you head out for a wintertime pedal, leave your subarctic apparel behind.

“Most people overdress — they show up wearing a parka,” said Karl Mechtenberg, owner of Seward Bike Tours in Alaska. “Once you get moving, you heat up pretty quickly.” He recommends layers such as a thin windbreaker over a non-cotton base layer and a lightweight fleece. Also helpful: gloves, winter boots, wool socks, a thin stocking hat and sunglasses or ski goggles.

Fat-bikers swear by pogies, or bar mitts, which fit over the bike’s handlebar and protect hands from blistering cold. Two companies that offer them are 45NORTH (www.45-north.com; \$125) and Revelate Designs (www.revelate-designs.com; \$95-\$225). Check out 45NORTH’s Wölvhammer cycling boot (\$325), a redesigned mountaineering boot with insulation and breathable waterproof features.

Arctic Innovations’ HydroHeater (www.arctic-innovations.com, \$125) was invented by an Alaska cyclist who couldn’t keep his water from freezing. It combines a battery-powered heating element with a drinking tube so riders can thaw their water and stay hydrated. It’s compatible with CamelBak and most other hydration bladders.

For warming up après cycle: a neoprene-covered steel growler cage (www.growler-cage.com; \$55), which fits in place of any water-bottle cage on a bike and accommodates a 64-ounce glass growler filled with your favorite brew. Remember: Don’t drink and ride, and always wear a helmet.

— Melanie Kaplan



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ride, Colo., starts in town and ends at the Telluride Brewing Company with a tour, tasting and shuttle ride back to town. Call for scheduling; Rates from \$99.

The annual Aspen Winter Festival, called Wintersköl (www.aspenchamber.org), includes a Fat Cycle Challenge on Jan. 10. Participants can compete, test-ride demo bikes, cruise around town and celebrate later at the Lighthouse Hotel (970-925-3025, www.lighthousehotel.com), which has complimentary fat bikes for hotel guests. Daily rentals are available from Ute City Cycles (970-920-3325, www.utecitycycles.com) for \$65.

Alaska: Seward Bike Tours (907-362-7433, www.sewardbike-tours.com) offers a three-hour guided fat-bike tour along Resurrection River to Exit Glacier in Kenai Fjords National Park for \$85 including bike rental.

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