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COLUMN

Bradbury Mountain opens new trails

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Photo courtesy Melissa Kim

Max Watson, 10, left, from Yarmouth, his cousin Jackson Watson, 10, from Vermont; and Max's father, Bret Watson, hose off one of their bikes at Bradbury Mountain.

I leaned slightly to the left and then to the right to navigate around a few curves in the skinny trail. I ducked my head under a branch, then pedaled hard to get up and over a big boulder. A mud puddle proved to be shallow and easy; a narrow slot through a stone wall was trickier for me.

It was exhilarating. Morning sun broke through the trees, catching bits of dew on the leaves. Birds sang, and I was alone in the woods, except for a red squirrel who was hanging upside down on a slender limb, staring at me wondering what I was doing.

I'd dusted off my mountain bike to ride some of the relatively new trails at Bradbury Mountain State Park in Pownal. It seems like everything at the park is multiplying: the park's reputation as a mountain biker's mecca; amenities at the park and at the campsite; the community involved with the park; the number of people using the park; and even the park itself.



A bridge on the Ragan Trail presents a heady challenge as well as a convenient bypass.

What's the most exciting thing happening at Bradbury? Mick Rogers, the park manager, doesn't hesitate for a second: "The expansion of the park."

The park has already expanded to the east, most recently by about 120 acres, and trails are already there for visitors to explore. That makes for 22 miles of trails, including an impressive 11 miles of singletrack. On the western side, new trails are being created as I write, as part of an exciting project to connect Bradbury Mountain and the Pineland Public Land unit in New Gloucester, across Tryon Mountain and along Chandler and Thoits Brooks.

The Pineland unit (not to be confused with Pineland Farms, the campus and farmland owned by the Libra Foundation) is a state-owned parcel of forest land and agricultural fields. There's an existing three-mile trail network with a trail head and small parking lot on Depot Road in New Gloucester. Linking these trails to Bradbury's will create a seven-mile multi-use "green" corridor that will benefit both recreational users and wildlife. It will also mean the park has almost tripled in size in just over a decade.

Whose idea was it? "The Pownal Land Trust had a vision for the park," says Rogers. "The whole plan and the impetus behind it came from the land trust. The trust did the proposal and took it to the Land for Maine's Future board; the trust is facilitating all the land acquisition and easements."

Now, that vision is almost fully realized. There is just one more 12-acre parcel to buy, one more 600-foot right-of-way to finalize and an agreement with Central Maine Power for land access to complete the whole deal. Rogers hopes it will all be done in September. "It's a done deal," he says, "but there are still papers to sign."

Trails are already open on Tryon Mountain, which you can access from Lawrence Road in Pownal. There's a small parking area and sign. Look for a big rock with a plaque honoring the people who sold the land to the state. From there, the riding is challenging, as it's basically all climbing, with a main doubletrack trail to the top and singletrack trails off of that. According to Rogers, "it's about five miles of climbing."

If that's your thing, look for a peak where there's an historic feldspar mine with a derrick and remains of a quarry. The views are to the west and the White Mountains; exactly the opposite of the views from the summit of Bradbury Mountain, which give you ocean views to the east. When the ink is dry, the Boundary Trail at Bradbury will connect to the Tryon trails.

I was there to explore the singletrack on the east, not the mountain on the west, so I started by riding along the Lanzo trail (your first left off the Link Trail). I admired the log rails lining narrow trails, drainage along wetter spots, crushed gravel before and after stream crossings and trail markers and maps at key intersections. I've been lost on plenty of mountain biking trails before, so this was the most impressive feature to me. Rogers says the maps and numbers were all done by Brian Stearns, a volunteer who has put in "hundreds of hours," says Rogers, to design and make the maps.

Rogers does put the mountain biking trail maps in the booth at the park entrance but they go fast (there were none when I visited) so it's a good idea to download one before you go. The trail maps are available online at the park's new unofficial Web site (www.bradburymountain.com). The park had the Web site donated by the Southern Maine Cycling Club and it's maintained and updated on a volunteer basis.

If you want more than just a map, try riding with a group here. The Maine Outdoor Adventure Club (MOAC) always does a Tuesday night mountain bike ride, and it's often held at Bradbury. The group also occasionally has multi-level rides which are good for new riders or those who are more recreational and less aggressive. Check out the club's Web site, www.moac.org, for more information. Rides are always posted on the mountain biking e-mail list and non-members are welcome to check it out.

A MOACer friend had given me pointers on where to ride, so I skipped the more challenging twisty side loop that shoots off the Lanzo Trail at marker 83 and rode directly to marker 77. I turned left and then right onto the Ragan Trail. Adventurous riders can try the tall bridge (over my head, in more ways than one); there's an alternate route for the more faint of heart.

From there, you can take Ginn for more sweet singletrack. For a breather, take the wide snowmobile trail back to the Monument and try some other singletrack trails. Even this doubletrack is lovely; and total beginners can have a nice introduction to riding in the woods here by riding solely on the doubletrack.

I'd heard that beginners should also avoid the "O" trail, so I headed for the Fox East trail instead. This had some nice ups and downs, a fun log skinny, and some steeper hills and slicker rocks as I came to the end. I took a quick peek at the narrow, twisty loop between marker 66 and 67, which looked fun. Out of time, I headed back to the Link Trail. On the way, I passed three cyclists who were just heading out. They were the first people I'd seen on the trails that morning.

Bradbury State Park is the only state park in southern Maine that permits mountain biking and so far, says Rogers, making bikers part of the mix is working well. The mountain biking clubs, associations and bike shops contribute hundreds of hours of volunteer time, creating and maintaining trails, making trail markers and trail maps, building a bike wash station, donating the unofficial Web site, donating mountain bikes to Rogers and his staff, and taking part in a successful Adopt-A-Trail program, new this year, that requires 80 hours of service.

So far, Rogers says there have been virtually no conflicts between users and no major trail degradation from mountain biking. What's the secret to Bradbury's success? Rogers says he's not sure, but thinks mountain bikers know that lands are being closed to them, know they have a great thing going, and so don't want to screw it up here. Personally, I think it's due in large part to Rogers and his crew, and their affable, let's-find-a-solution approach.

I wondered if Rogers had always been an avid mountain biker, if that had been part of the motivation for all his efforts. I was a little surprised by his answer. "I wasn't before," he says, "but I am now." I felt the same way after my ride. Maybe biking the trails at Bradbury just has that effect on people.

Melissa Kim, a freelance writer in Portland, is the author of "New England Biking: 100 of the Best Road and Trail Rides" (Foghorn Outdoors/Avalon Travel Publishing). She welcomes comments at bikes@melissakim.com.

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