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**COLUMN**

### Biking: Seeking solitude during the busy season

By MELISSA KIM

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Photos courtesy of Melissa Kim  
A few small breaks in the trees reveal a view across Long Pond, Mount Desert Island's largest lake.



Photos courtesy of Melissa Kim  
A view of Hodgdon Pond.

Calling any part of Mount Desert Island "quiet" in August is a little bit of a stretch, but the western, or quiet, side, as it's sometimes called, is still much less explored than its popular eastern half.

This is especially true for bicycling. The eastern half does, after all, include all the great carriage roads for off-road riding and the fabulous Park Loop Road for road rides. But the western half, including Somesville, Southwest Harbor, Bass Harbor and Pretty Marsh, has both road and off-road rides that present excellent alternatives.

For road rides, you can loop the whole area on Route 102 and Route 102A. There are some good ups and downs, and plenty of short steep climbs, but very few sizeable hills. For the most part, you're in pretty countryside with fields of wildflowers, small picturesque villages and the occasional pond or lake to look at. Most of Route 102 has no real shoulder and some uneven pavement, so it's not for families or beginners.

There are also a few excellent places to ride off-road. A network of fire roads extends from Seal Cove Road allowing you to explore the lower slopes of Western Mountain and Bernard Mountain.

Another fire road offers a nice little loop that serves as a perfect introduction to the area. The Long Pond Fire Road takes you into Acadia National Park land, gets you some nice pond views, and gets the lungs and legs going as well.

Another bonus is that you start this route at Pretty Marsh. Pretty Marsh is both a small community as well as a picnic area that's part of Acadia National Park. From Somesville, drive 5.9 miles west on Route 102. The first Pretty Marsh sign you'll see is for the village; the next one is for the picnic area. It's a wooded area, with picnic tables scattered all along the access road. At the end of the road, there's a small parking area and restrooms. If you park here, you'll have a little hill to ride out on. If you want to avoid this, park at one of the picnic areas just in from the main road.

I began at the parking lot and rode back out to Route 102. Turn right onto Route 102 and ride about one tenth of a mile. Look carefully for the gravel fire road on the left; I missed it the first time. There's an Acadia National Park sign and gate posts too. You'll immediately get swallowed up into thick woods. The surface is rough, suitable for mountain bikes or touring bikes with thick knobby tires.

At about 1.7 miles on the fire road, you'll come to the western edge of Long Pond. The view doesn't really give you a sense of the scale and grandeur of this lovely pond, but it's still a very tranquil and secluded spot, worthy of at least a water stop if not a full picnic. I had it all to myself, though there were two cars parked in a tiny parking bay. Cars are allowed on this road, but the speed limit is 15 m.p.h. and I can't really imagine there's ever much traffic.

After leaving the pond behind, there are more hills to bump up and over. The terrain, mostly scrubby pines and rocky outcrops with blueberry bushes here and there, has a wild feel to it that's different from the more tended carriage roads on the eastern side of the island.

After 3.5 miles on the fire road, you'll come to a T junction (just before this, on the left, you'll see the national park hiking signs for the Western Trail and Mansell Mountain). Turn left and you'll soon come to a little bridge at the southern end of Hodgdon Pond.

Soak up the watery view and ride on. In 0.3 miles, you'll come to the end of the gravel road and the edge of the national park land. Turn left onto paved Hodgdon Road; this curves around and takes you immediately back to Route 102. Turn right and ride with care up a long hill and back to the Pretty Marsh picnic area. You've got almost one mile on the road, with no shoulder, before the left turn back to Pretty Marsh.

My total mileage was 6.5 miles and according to Bikely.com, the total climb is 440 feet and total descent is 463 feet. It's a very short ride, but it felt like a little bit of work (though that may have been because it was pouring rain the day I rode). Still, I'd rate this a ride for advanced beginners. Older children who are experienced cyclists should also be fine.

You can use this route as a starting point and explore the other fire roads and fine paved roads on Mount Desert's western half.

Whatever routes you choose, I'd advise you to ride the quiet side before it gets too loud.

### **FREE WHEELING**

There are lots of biking events to choose from this month; don't forget that all the bike shops and clubs hold weekly rides for all levels, and other outdoor clubs like the Maine Outdoor Adventure Club and the Maine chapter of the Appalachian Mountain Club have biking groups and rides too. If you feel like biking for a cause, here are two good ones:

- Tour de Merrymeeting Bay, Topsham, August 9.

On the Web: [click here](#)

Choose from a 25- or a 50-mile ride that starts in Topsham and explores the midcoast area around this lovely bay, looping to Bowdoinham and back. There is a fee (\$40 for the 50-miler, \$25 for the 25-miler) that gets you a fully supported ride, snacks, t-shirts and a barbecue at the end. Proceeds support trail projects in Topsham.

- Tour de la Vallee, Fort Kent, August 17.

On the Web: [click here](#)

This annual ride, a fund raiser for the Guy Paradis Cancer Fund (a service of the Northern Maine Medical Center), takes riders on a tour of the pastoral, serene St. John River Valley, from Fort Kent to Keegan, to Grand Isle, around Long Lake and more. It's potato country here, with primarily long flat stretches, some small hills and a few big climbs. There's a \$20 registration fee and you're encouraged to get pledges as well. Choose a 25- , 50- , 62- or 100-mile-long ride. You'll get a t-shirt, water bottle, fully supported tour of the area, barbecue and the knowledge that you are helping families whose lives have been affected by cancer.

Melissa Kim, a freelance writer in Portland, is the author of "New England Biking: 100 of the Best Road and Trail Rides." She welcomes comments at:

[bikes@melissakim.com](mailto:bikes@melissakim.com)

You can also visit her biking blog at:

[www.outdoors.maintoday.com/biking/melissakim](http://www.outdoors.maintoday.com/biking/melissakim)

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