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- > MAINEJOBS
- > REAL ESTATE
- > WHEELS
- > MARKETPLACE
- > Place an Ad

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- Local and State
- Midday/4PM Reports
- AP Wire
- Week in Photos

WEATHER

- 5-day Forecast
- On the Ocean

SPORTS

- High Schools
- Red Sox
- Sea Dogs

BUSINESS

- News
- Blogs
- Maine News Direct
- Classifieds

ENTERTAINMENT

- Calendar
- Movies
- Dining
- Music
- Theater
- Art

TRAVEL

- Maine Regions
- From Away
- Vacation Rentals
- Lodging Guide

OUTDOORS

- Hiking
- Fishing
- Trail Head
- Campground Guide

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- Late Hits
- Kid Tracks
- A Dog's Life
- More blogs

20 BELOW

- Teen Blogs
- One-Minute Wonders
- Reindeer Rock-off

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- Search Jobs
- Post a Job
- News and Resources
- Employer Profiles



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Sunday, July 3, 2005

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Wheel your bike into Waldo County for ride with a view

By MELISSA KIM

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Where's Waldo? If you haven't already discovered the pleasures of cycling in Waldo County, then next weekend's Maine Bike Rally in Belfast is a perfect introduction to this region. In between the tourist magnets of Camden and Acadia, this under-appreciated area has a beautiful coastline with views of the island-studded Penobscot Bay. Inland, cyclists can ride around smooth lakes and over jagged ridges.

MORE INFORMATION

What: Maine Bike Rally

When: July 8 to 10

Where: Belfast

How much: All 3 days: \$105 adults, \$30 children (children 5 and under free). Saturday only: \$75. Includes camping, meals, guided rides, ice cream social, demos, evening slide shows, a bike expo, parade, and more.

More details: www.mainebikerally.org or call 623-4511

[To top of story](#)

The Maine Bike Rally, hosted annually by the Bicycle Coalition of Maine, packs in 30 rides over three days for you to choose from. According to BCM Executive Director Jeff Miller, "it's a bicycle buffet. You can just wake up in the morning and decide what you feel like doing that day. Is it a 40-mile ride? Or 20 miles? There's so much choice, with this menu of rides, that everyone can find one ride that is just right for them."

The guided rides range from 4 to 100 miles long, and include both road rides and mountain bike rides. Each ride has a leader and a sweep (someone who rides toward the back of the pack), maps and cue sheets (mile-by-mile directions) and support vehicles on rides greater than 50 miles. The rides are not competitions. "It's a very laid back, friendly, inclusive atmosphere," said Miller. "You'd be hard-pressed to come and not make new friends."

This is the second year that the rally has been held in Belfast. The Lighthouse Ride was one of the most popular rides last year, and it's easy to see why. The 37-mile loop offers outstanding coastal views, an interesting loop around Cape Jellison and Fort



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Point State Park, and some long open ridges.

Peter Maruhnic, a BCM volunteer who helps produce the maps and cue sheets for the rally, shared the route for the Lighthouse Ride with me. If you can't make it to the rally next weekend, try it out on your own to get a flavor of this area. By the way, the cue sheets for this and all of the rides will be available online after the rally, thanks in part to support from the Healthy Living Project (www.healthylivingproject.org). That's great news, as it means we can try out all the 30 road-tested rides at any time.

For the Lighthouse Ride, start in downtown Belfast and take High Street to Routes 1 and 3. Ride carefully over the bridge across the Passagassawakeag River (and say the river name over and over as you ride across). The first few miles on Route 1 go through a commercial area with moderate to heavy traffic, but there is a smooth wide shoulder. You'll need to be mindful of cars entering and exiting all the restaurants, hotels and tourist shops. The road soon opens into fields and pastures, and you'll pass by the lovely Moose Point State Park. If you need an early rest break, this is a great spot overlooking Penobscot Bay.

Follow Route 1 through Searsport into the center of Stockton Springs. Take a right on School Street, left on East Main Street, and right onto Cape Jellison Road. After about one mile, bear left at the fork to make a clockwise loop around Cape Jellison. Take a left onto State Park Road for the mile out-and-back trip to delightful Fort Point State Park, where you can break for lunch and explore the remains of Fort Pownall, a bell tower and Fort Point Light. There is a small fee to enter the state park, which is open from Memorial Day to Labor Day.

Continue to loop around the scenic peninsula and retrace your route to East Main Street. Turn left onto East Main and right onto Harris Road, taking care as you cross Route 1 to head inland on Harris Road.

After about a mile, bear left at the fork onto Green Valley Road. Ride about 1.5 miles (you'll cross Old County Road) and at the T junction, turn left onto George Road, which becomes the unmarked Dickey Hill Road. At the T junction, turn left onto Black Road, which becomes the unmarked Savery Road. This ends at yet another T junction, where you'll turn left onto Mt. Ephraim Road. Ride about one mile and turn right onto Old County Road. In about one more mile, bear left, then take an immediate right onto Back Searsport Road. Take this all the way to Route 141 (Swan Lake Avenue) and turn left. A short stretch here brings you back to Routes 1 and 3, where you'll turn right to cross the bridge back into Belfast. Take the first exit across the bridge to get back onto High Street, which will bring you back into downtown Belfast.

With a total elevation gain of approximately 2,400 feet, the Lighthouse Ride is not for beginners. The coastal section has lots of short, steep ups and downs, and the inland section has some long, tiring hill climbs. Advanced beginners will do fine if they take plenty of time and adjust their pace to the distance. Intermediate riders may zip around in two hours. If it all seems like too much traffic and too many hills, or if you have young kids, head straight to Fort Point State Park and ride a seven-mile loop around Cape Jellison.

Make sure you bring a map with you. DeLorme's Maine Atlas and Gazetteer isn't entirely accurate for the inland section of this route; I found a very accurate map online at maps.google.com.

If you're not comfortable riding in traffic, then joining the ride at the Maine Bike Rally might be just the ticket. Riding in a group makes you more visible to cars; there can be strength — and fun — in numbers. And of course, the Lighthouse Ride is just one of the many options. Feel like a hilly inland ride? A day trip to Islesboro? A four-mile family ride? A killer century ride? What a menu.

Melissa Kim, a free-lance 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

[To top of page](#)



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