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Sunday, July 9, 2006

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Maquoit Bay offers smooth, fun ride

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By Melissa Kim,

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Serendipity: I'd already planned this week's ride along Brunswick's Maquoit Bay when I read in this newspaper that the bay had just received major attention from a federal conservation group, noting its importance as prime habitat for eider, brant, Canada goose, eelgrass, common loon, horseshoe crab and black duck.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's Coastal and Estuarine Land Conservation Program ranked the bay first on its priority list for federal aid. This is a huge shot in the arm for the Trust for Public Land, a land conservation organization that has been negotiating with local landowners to purchase land or easements along the northern edges of the beautiful bay.

The trust needs a lot more money, and now it's looking more likely that the government will help. If the plan succeeds, the trust will transfer the property to the town of Brunswick. That may lead to a shoreline hiking trail, giving the public access to a special area that you can really only experience by boat.

BICYCLING MAQUOIT BAY

However, you can get some sense of Maquoit Bay on a bicycle. Though you're not likely to see any horseshoe crabs as you pedal along, you might see a flock of black ducks on the wing. The bay marks the home stretch on this 18-mile loop that's popular with local riders who appreciate rolling hills and farmlands with an occasional water view. There are no supplies available along the way, so bring water. I'd rate this an advanced beginner to intermediate ride.

The route starts in Brunswick, a great destination in and of itself. All in arm's reach: coffee shops, ice cream stands, hot dog carts, convenience stores and much more (I recommend the Bohemian Coffee Roasters to kickstart your ride and Cotes Ice Cream to reward your finish).

There's a lively farmers' market from 8 a.m. to 3 p.m. Tuesdays and Fridays, great if you want locally grown produce, but not so great if you want a good parking spot. You can park in one of

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the public parking lots just off Maine Street (look for the signs), at the vast Hannaford supermarket parking lot off Maine Street, or at a two-hour spot along either side of the common (called the Mall).

HEAD SOUTH ALONG MAINE STREET

From anywhere near the Mall, head south out of town on Maine Street, riding straight through a busy intersection marking the end of the downtown area. There can be moderate traffic, but drivers here seem to be very pedestrian- and biker-friendly.

After passing Bowdoin College on the left, you'll ride in an official bike lane for a small stretch and then have an ample shoulder along the road. Pass Parkview Hospital and, at Mile 1.3, take a right onto Pleasant Hill Road.

The yellow streets signs tell the story here: the first one says "Watch for joggers," the next is a "Share the Road" cyclist sign, and then there's a Tractor Crossing sign.

Residential gives way to pastoral, yards turn to fields and farmland. At Mile 2.6, the fields of Crystal Spring Farm are host to a farmers' market from 8:30 a.m. to 1 p.m. every Saturday.

Go straight through the four-way intersection with Woodside Street. Some gradual ups and downs and one good-sized hill punctuate this bucolic stretch. At Mile 4.8, you'll cross Highland Road. To cut about four miles off your total (resulting in a 13.8 mile ride), turn left here and then left again at the end at Bunganuc Landing. Otherwise, carry on straight past a vast, rambling farm. You'll have a short but steep hill before some nice downhill S-curves. The scenery gets a bit more ramshackle but the road is wide, smooth and fun to ride. You'll cross into Freeport and come downhill to a stop, where you'll take a sharp left onto Flying Point Road.

More farms and fields and belted Galloways line the road. Two roller-coaster-style dips here present hills that look much worse than they are. If you get up enough speed going down, you can coast a long way up the other side. At Mile 8.5 you'll pass Wolf Neck Road; turn right if you're in the mood for a nice two-mile side trip to Wolfe's Neck Woods State Park and its five miles of hiking trails (including a lovely coastal path with unparalleled views of ospreys nesting on Googins Island).

The road meanders around Flying Point. It's got a nice backcountry feel to it. I rode during a light rain and somehow it seemed like dozens of lovely scents were being tossed in the air like a complex salad; the smell of beach roses mixed with manure as I rode by meadows of wildflowers and fields of cows. You'll pass a few interesting old cemeteries and intriguing dirt driveways that just disappear into the woods - I peered down one only to surprise a deer that was snacking along the edge of the road.

At Mile 12.4, you'll come downhill to Bunganuc Landing. Highland Road comes in on the left and there's room for a few cars to park on the right over a small bridge. You can scramble down to see ledges and a small waterfall and get your first glimpse of Maquoit Bay. Now you're on Casco Road; bear right at Mile 12.6 onto Bunganuc Road.

At Mile 13.9, turn right at the stop sign onto the unmarked Woodside Road. The bay opens up in front of you and, depending on the time and tide, you'll see (and smell) either mud flats or sparkling seas. In half a mile you can turn right into a small dirt parking lot and boat launch area. At dead low tide it seems like you could walk all the way across the bay to Mere Point; you'll probably see clambers out in the flats. The bay supports some 70 commercial diggers, another reason folks want to see it protected.

Leave the parking area, and you're on Maquoit Road; in a mile or so you'll pass Brunswick High School. Trailer parks, houses and yards start to reclaim open fields. At Mile 16.4, turn left at the stop sign onto Maine Street (unmarked). You'll soon pass Parkview Hospital and get back to busy Brunswick. Make your way through the crazy intersection to get back to the Mall and that double dip mint chocolate chip at Cotes.

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:

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