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Sunday, July 17, 2005

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Fill a beautiful day with activities in Range Ponds area

By MELISSA KIM

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Summer is so short in Maine. On those precious few warm, dry, sunny days, it's such a tough choice. Should you bike, canoe, swim, hike, kayak, play with the kids or just lie in a hammock? Here's a destination where you could conceivably do all those things in one day: Range Ponds State Park.

Just southwest of Lewiston, the 750-acre park makes a great base for rides around the whole Poland Spring

region. There are plenty of long ridges as well as short, steep hills here (try climbing Range Hill Road between Upper and Middle Range Ponds, for example), and this is a great place to anchor some long rides. But if you've only got an hour, here's a short, simple loop that should get your heart and legs pumping.

With a few hills to climb and one very steep one to descend, this route is not designed for absolute beginners, but it's fine for advanced beginners and up. At 12.7 miles total, it's an easy hour's ride with the promise of a refreshing swim in the pond afterward.

Traffic is fairly light on these backcountry roads. It's also worth noting that no supplies are available along the route, so bring plenty of water and snacks. As always, wear a helmet.

From the main parking area, ride out on the long straight access road back to the park gate. Turn left onto Empire Road, a smooth road with a nice wide shoulder. At Mile 1.5, turn right onto Lewiston Junction Road, and climb gently past rolling fields. Take your first left onto Dunn Road, where you'll have lovely views from this small ridge.

MORE INFORMATION

RANGE PONDS STATE PARK, POLAND SPRING

DIRECTIONS: Route 26 to Route 122, or Route 202 to Route 122. From Route 122, take Empire Road to the park access road.

HOURS: 9 a.m. to sunset

HOW MUCH: \$4.50/adult

INFORMATION: Call 998-4104, or go online to www.state.me.us/doc/parks

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At the end of Dunn Road, take a dogleg turn to return to Empire Road (a left on Torrey and an immediate right onto Empire). There's no shoulder now, and the pavement is a little uneven, but it's a nice fast shady road.

At Mile 4, turn left onto Harris Hill Road. A very gradual incline takes you past a lightly settled area and a horse farm before you have a sharp, steep climb for about three-quarters of a mile.

At Mile 6.3, turn left onto Poland Corner Road. You'll have two very small hills to climb before you come to a long, extremely steep and curvy downhill. Check your brakes first. The speed limit down the hill is 30 miles per hour and, I confess, I deserved a speeding ticket. There's a sharp left turn at the bottom of the hill onto Plains Road (at Mile 8.3), so you'll need to rein yourself in at the end to make the turn.

Plains Road is a straight shot all the way back to Empire Road, with lovely glimpses on your right of the river that feeds into Range Pond. There's some uneven pavement at the beginning on this backcountry road, but it smoothes out quickly enough. At the end of Plains Road (Mile 11.5) turn right onto Empire, then right at the park gates to return to the parking lot.

Trade your bike shorts for swimming suits in the large changing area and head for the pond. The warm waters of Range Pond make swimming appealing to all ages, so it's often crowded with kids. The wide sandy beach is bordered by a grassy promenade area, so if you hate sand between your toes you can set up camp on the grass or at one of the many picnic tables hidden in the pines. There's also a boat launch (for non-motorized boats or boats with a maximum of 10 horsepower engines), a group shelter, barbecue grills, toilets, a playground, a ballfield, and two miles of easy walking trails.

Bring a hammock and string it between some of the pine trees in the back, and call it a day well spent.

FREE-WHEELING

Did you see an extremely large group of young cyclists cruise through Maine last week? With their crisp pace line, red, white and blue spandex jerseys and bright flags, they were hard to miss. Sixty riders were finishing a 20-day, 1,500-mile ride from Fishers, Ind., to Portland via Ohio, Pennsylvania, Niagara Falls, Ottawa, Montreal and Quebec City. I spotted the pack of bikers last Friday as they were heading to their final destination, Woodfords Congregational Church in Portland.

Turns out it was a group called the deCycles, which, according to its Web site, is a "nonprofit ecumenical youth development program offering high spirited summer bicycle trips for teenagers and young adults." They wanted to dip a toe in the Atlantic at the end of the ride, so their route went from Quebec City into Maine via Jackman and Waterville, with a finish in Portland.

I couldn't get in touch with tour director Norm Houze before deadline, as the group was en route back to Indiana, but his online journal is full of enthusiasm for the route in Maine.

The ride from Quebec City to Jackman, he says, was the prettiest day of riding yet, and "a couple of groups saw moose near Moose River in Jackman." From Jackman to Waterville, he

says, "The scenery was gorgeous . . . lush valleys and river streams surrounded by mountains." Kudos to all the high school and college kids who completed this long-distance trek.

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

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