

WINTER GRAVEL BIKING

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Fall gives way to winter -- slowly but surely. Dry fall trails give way to muddy winter ones and a cyclist wonders what to do. Temperatures are often still nice and it's tempting to go out and ride anyway but riding on wet trails (either cycling or horse-back) can cause significant damage and a lot of trail repair work next spring. Many cyclists in the White Mountains go to gravel bike riding in these conditions. Gravel biking allows you to keep in shape while staying off wet trails and provides the mental escape cycling is known for. Gravel bikes allow you to wander fast and far and give you a new perspective on the winter forest. Animals generally do not view bikes as a threat so gravel biking provides excellent wildlife viewing opportunities.

What kind of bike do you need? There is no specific bike style needed to ride our gravel roads. A mountain bike is comfortable but can be heavy and slower on long rides. A road bike will be fast but not be comfortable/maneuverable on dirt roads. A gravel bike -- somewhat a compromise between a mountain bike and a road bike -- is specifically designed for dirt roads and is built for both comfort and speed.

What is a gravel bike? A gravel bike frame and bars are modeled after the well-known road bike design, with the major difference being that the forks are wider to accommodate wider tires. Gravel bike tires are usually 35-45mm wide and have a more aggressive tread than standard road bike tires. These tires give the rider the stability and traction needed to travel gravel, as well as paved roads. Some gravel bikes have a front suspension to absorb much of the road noise experienced on dirt roads. Gravel bikes usually have disc brakes to maintain stopping power in wet conditions.

What should you take on a gravel bike ride? Winter riding in the White Mountains requires that you be ready for anything. A cool clear morning can give way to a warm afternoon and wet weather can roll in at any time. You should dress in layers including a wind jacket to reduce the wind chill created by the higher speeds achieved on a gravel bike. Gloves are important because you are traveling faster and fingers cool very easily on exposed bars. You will be traveling longer distances on a gravel bike exploration so nutrition is important. You will want to be prepared with high calorie energy bars or chews and be sure to eat as you go. Most gravel bikers like to travel light and without backpacks so cycling jerseys with back pockets come in handy to carry nutrition. Winter coolness can be misleading as to the need for hydration. Make sure you take plenty of water and stay hydrated as you go. Many gravel bikes have extra water bottle cage mounts to accommodate this need for extra water.

What about safety? Since you will be sharing the road, it is extremely important that you equip your bike with front and rear lights. Random flash day-time visible lights are the best for alerting drivers well in advance of approaching you. A rear-facing radar unit is a potentially lifesaving

must-have for any gravel road riding. It is very difficult to hear traffic noise on a gravel road and the unit will alert you to rear-approaching traffic, thus preventing any inadvertent wandering into traffic while swerving to avoid potholes and other gravel road pitfalls.

Ride with friends. If at all possible, cyclists should ride together -- especially in winter conditions. A crash can have the potential side effect of rapid hypothermia if you are unable to keep moving. A cycling partner can provide the support and help you might need in the case of a crash. If you are planning to ride alone, having a crash sensor either on the bike or on your helmet is also an important safety consideration. Crash sensing devices will text significant others in the case of a crash and will provide your exact location for swift help. Before leaving, be sure you let a friend know the approximate route you are planning to take so if something happens, the search area will be limited.

What else might you want to take? You are likely to expand your trip as you enjoy exploring our thousands of miles of gravel roads so you should take a GPS unit with a map so that you can find an efficient route home from your wanderings. You will want a tire changing kit, a fire- starting kit in case of accidents and a multitool for on-the-road minor repairs. Keep your chain lubed and check your tire wear and condition before setting off to avoid unexpected breakdowns.

If you want to get out there and explore our beautiful forest roads, gravel biking might just be the thing for you. Go out prepared to travel fast and far and be prepared to be safe doing it. Plan out your trip; be prepared for whatever the weather might be and be ready to find a new hobby you will love. If you are interested in getting more details on gravel biking, talk to your local bike shop or other gravel biking local cyclists.