

# Turkey Day Gravel Biking

## ...and being thankful for the simple things.

By Carol Godwin, Cycle Mania

Every year, on the third Thursday of November, a diehard group of White Mountains' friends and acquaintances gather together to celebrate life and the passage of time. The third Thursday of November is often cold, sometimes windy and usually there is a tempting warm fire crackling in the fireplace at home, but still we come. There is a turkey to prep and pies to bake, family to entertain and tables to set, but first, there is a ride. We all recognize this date as being Thanksgiving, and the last thing most people would be thinking about is riding 30+ miles on dirt, loose gravel and sometimes muddy or icy roads, but here we are. Riding early miles on a cold late-fall morning builds the appetite like nothing else and as we ride, we talk about the past year, accomplishments and worries, families and friends, pets and home repairs, but most of all, what we are all thankful for. At the moment, what we are thankful for is the crisp fresh air, the present company, the breeze on our faces as we ride, the feeling of muscles contracting and relaxing as we pedal and the sun dappled road in front of us. There is a feeling of camaraderie and a building feeling of expectation, excitement and appreciation for the remainder of the day to come, spent with family and friends.

Every year, fall gives way to winter, slowly but surely. Dry fall trails give way to muddy winter ones and cyclists wonders what to do. Temperatures are often still nice and its 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, and our Thanksgiving riders are no different. Gravel biking allows you to keep in shape while staying off wet trails and provide the mental escape cycling is known for. Group gravel rides are nice, because unlike single-track riding, riders can ride next to each other close enough to carry on conversations. Gravel bikes allow you to wander fast and far and give you a new perspective on the winter forest. The late fall forest has lost most of its deciduous leaves and our eyes reach further from the road, giving us a different viewpoint of the topography we pass. Animals generally do not view bikes as a threat and gravel biking provides excellent wildlife viewing opportunities.

What kind of bikes are our Thanksgiving riders using? There is no specific bike style needed to ride our gravel roads and there is an assortment of bikes beginning our journey. Some riders are on mountain bikes, which are comfortable but can be heavy and slower on long rides. Those on road bikes are fast but may not be as comfortable or maneuverable on dirt roads. Most riders are on gravel bikes, and a gravel bike is 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. 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 farther 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 with other drivers, 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, preventing any inadvertent wandering into traffic while swerving to avoid potholes and other gravel road pitfalls.

Riding in a group provides a measure of safety because more riders are more visible to drivers and more eyes on the road are more likely to see potential danger. 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, make 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 to 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, or want to find out about local group rides, or join a White Mountain Thanksgiving ride, talk to your local bike shop or other local gravel biking cyclists.

Now, back to that crackling fire, that turkey and pies, and those family and friends we cherish.