



MATT SLAGER

Our region boasts three Ride Centers, designations awarded by the International Mountain Bicycling Association to top trail systems. Above, Kati and Mike Pritchett ride the Overflow trail minutes after getting married atop Brockway Mountain in Copper Harbor, Michigan, which earned Ride Center status in 2011.

Big Lake Bike Heaven

Better, Badder Trails Attract World-Class Riders

by Phil Bencomo

Biking may fall under the “silent sports” umbrella alongside cross-country skiing, running and paddling, but cyclists on our shores are anything but quiet about their love for regional riding.

And it’s not just locals. Our trails increasingly draw riders from afar – far afar – for biking vacations.

“We’re starting to see that ... starting to attract people here nationwide,” says Sam Raymond, vice president of the Copper Harbor Trails Club.

“The Lake Superior region will become a mountain biking mecca much like California or British Columbia,” predicts Stacia Lynn, who rides in Marquette County, Michigan. “It’s the most beautiful Lake in the world, and we’re really

fortunate to get to have the terrain that we do.”

Regionally, volunteer groups, tourism organizations and local communities are investing in better bike trails with noteworthy results.

Following here is a sampler of trail options by state and province. So fill up those tires and grab your helmet: We’re going for a ride ...

MICHIGAN

Copper Harbor, the small community of 108 people at the tip of the Keweenaw Peninsula and nestled at the base of 726-foot Brockway Mountain, has birthed a destination-class system of mountain bike trails.

Built by professional trail crews, the trails “rival any place I’ve ever been, all over the country,” says an enthusiastic Sam, who owns

Keweenaw Adventure Company and is a board member of the local trails club.

The Colorado-based International Mountain Bicycling Association (IMBA) awarded Copper Harbor a Ride Center designation – first a bronze in 2011 and now a silver designation since 2012. That puts its trail system among the top 11 in the world, alongside vaunted destinations from British Columbia to New Zealand. Copper Harbor was chosen not merely for its variety and quality of trails – from rolling cross-country jaunts to white-knuckle downhill runs – but also for “a mountain bike friendly community,” Sam says. “You can access the trails from many of the hotels and motels right here in Copper Harbor.”

The area's exposed rock and hard-packed soil form the foundation of the sustainable, well-draining trails.

"Arguably our most popular trail is called The Flow," says Sam. It's an exhilarating 3-mile descent on swooping singletrack from the trailhead near the top of Brockway Mountain. For spectacular views, try On The Edge. Daring riders will love the leaps on Flying Squirrel.

Seven years after Sam helped to co-found the trails club, he says the word on Copper Harbor is most definitely out. "We've seen significant and consistent growth, as far as visitors coming up to see our trails."

Just south, in Lac La Belle, Mount Bohemia has built 12 miles of bike trails and lends bikes to summer guests.

Other parts of the Upper Peninsula have also earned a reputation for bold biking.

Just 150 miles from Copper Harbor, you'll find Michigan's other IMBA Ride Center: Marquette. The U.P.'s largest city received a bronze-level designation in 2014.

"The cool, cool thing about Marquette is just the variety of trails you have all within miles of each other," says Stacia, who volunteers with the Range Area Mountain Bike Association, an IMBA chapter that maintains trails in western Marquette County.

In all, Marquette County boasts more than 50 miles of singletrack trails for mountain bikers, split across three clusters.

On the southern trails, Stacia recommends the Blue Loop around Mount Marquette, especially the Doctors section, for its technical, rocky riding. A short spur connects to a delightful overlook. Gorge-ous is one of the newest additions to the system – and one of the finest. The tight

singletrack trail follows the Carp River Gorge, offering expansive views, technical challenges and that right-on-the-edge feeling that many thrill-seekers crave.

Readers of SingleTracks.com rank Marquette's south trails the second-best system in all of Michigan – bested only by Copper Harbor.

The Epic loop on the Range Area trails west of Marquette is a technical ride on a rocky, hand-built trail. It has tight, twisty turns, outstanding views and a dose of history. The trail snakes through Negaunee's Old Town, also known as the caving grounds. More than 50 years ago, nearly a quarter of Negaunee was abandoned and fenced off after mining activity caused several cave-ins. Mostly reclaimed by

wilderness, the remains of that neighborhood are open to the public. Look for foundations, sidewalks and even a lonely playground as you zip through the hardwood forest.

If you're bringing kids along for a ride, check out the Tourist Park trails north of Marquette. East of the park, try the scenic Collinsville Cut Trail. It follows the Dead River past waterfalls and the historic Collinsville ruins.

Other trails include the paved Marquette Bicycle Path, which connects to Presque Isle Park, and the Iron Ore Heritage Trail, a multiuse path through Marquette County.

"There's just an endless amount of biking year-round," Stacia says. "You can bike trails for days without repeating."

See for yourself June 12-14, when the IMBA Great Midwest Summit comes to town. It's a weekend of learning, mingling and, of course, riding.

Other picks: For more Keweenaw riding, hop on the Michigan Tech mountain bike trails in Houghton. Road riders must try the stretch of U.S. Highway 41 out of Copper Harbor and M-26 between Eagle Harbor and Copper Harbor. The bike route of Michigan's new Iron Belle trail, from Ironwood to Detroit, will take riders in our region on a scenic tour of the southern Upper Peninsula.

WISCONSIN

Towering northern hardwoods and pines. Remote, tranquil lakes. Roller-coaster hills left behind by ancient glaciers. Welcome to the woods of northern Wisconsin.

"For a person who likes to escape into the woods, we're the place to go," says Ron Bergin, executive director of the Chequamegon Area Mountain Bike Association (CAMBA).

Just 1½ hours from Duluth, three hours from Minneapolis or less than five from Green Bay and Madison, the CAMBA trails wind through Chequamegon National Forest and the communities in the corridor from Hayward to Delta.

The system is one of IMBA's



CHRIS GUIBERT

The mile-long Flying Squirrel trail in Copper Harbor lives up to its name with expert-level jumps.

newest Ride Centers, a bronze designee since 2014.

“We’re quite excited about it,” says Ron, “People will go shopping around, looking for mountain bike vacations and look to IMBA to find out more about the CAMBA trails and then come here and experience them. People might take a couple of weeks and hit all of them in the Upper Midwest.”

Originally, the CAMBA system was overlaid on forest roads and ski trails. Over the last decade, CAMBA has focused on developing the goat path-style singletrack demanded by riders. The system now has more than 300 miles of off-road trails for mountain bikers.

Beyond sheer mileage, what else do the CAMBA trails offer?

“The connectivity of everything and the ability to just do long uninterrupted rides,” says Ron. “You’re in heavily wooded areas with very few road crossings, you’re out there just in the deep, able to immerse yourself in the trails.

“We have a lot of variety. Each of our main loops was designed by a different person, so there’s different views on how to build a trail, what sort of character you see on the trail.”

Ron recommends the Seeley Pass Trail for “a leisurely cruise that’s fast and fun. It connects to one of our newer flow trails, Flow Mama.” The Patsy Lake Trail is an excellent 15-mile loop among bogs, lakes and wooded hills.

Experienced riders looking for a rugged, technical challenge will enjoy the unyielding Rock Lake Trail.

According to an impact study by Scott Chapin of RJF Agencies, regional trail building has boosted land values and local economies as enthusiasts buy or build homes and cabins near trail systems.

Moreover, a University of Wisconsin-Madison/Extension study of silent sports events in northern Wisconsin – biking, cross-country skiing and running – found that races are huge economic drivers for the region, generating an estimated annual impact of \$16.7 million.

An original CAMBA board member, Gary Crandall has been

Bike Lingo

Flow trail: These roller-coasterlike trails feature banked turns, smooth surfaces and sometimes jumps. They typically require little pedaling or braking as you “flow” through the ride.

Singletrack: A narrow trail just wide enough for a single rider.

Technical riding: Biking over rocks, roots, logs and other obstacles, sometimes on a steep slope (as pictured here near Copper Harbor). Technical trail sections can also include objects like narrow bridges.



MATT SLAGER

involved with the Chequamegon Fat Tire Festival since its beginnings as a 27-person race in 1983. He took over as festival director the second year and has helped the signature event, the Chequamegon 40 on the American Birkebeiner trails, grow to a sold-out field of 2,100 competitors that pairs with another 1,000 in the 16-mile race.

In 1991, the year Tour de France winner Greg LeMond repeated as Chequamegon champ, organizers had to cap weekend participation at 2,500 racers because interest in the event had ballooned beyond what the trails and volunteers could handle.

After the race, many riders remain the rest of the weekend to explore the CAMBA trails.

“The impact of the festival is not how many people come to town for the event weekend,” says Gary, “it’s how many people come back to ride in the area.”

This year’s race is September 19.

Other picks: The Bayfield Peninsula features some of the most scenic back roads in the state. Highway 13, part of the Lake Superior Circle Tour route, was designated the Wisconsin Lake Superior Scenic Byway in 2013. Also on the peninsula, Brinks Road is a spectacular paved ride through the northern tip of Chequamegon National Forest. And from Red Cliff, take Old County Highway K to Little

Sand Bay Road and the lakefront. In Superior, road options include the Millennium and Osaugie trails, while mountain bikers can ride singletrack at Mont du Lac and on Superior Municipal Forest’s Pokegama Trail.

MINNESOTA

In 2011, Duluth Mayor Don Ness made a bold challenge to the

Lake Superior Recreation Guide

Cover by Leslie Kehmeier, Chequamegon Area Mountain Bike Association

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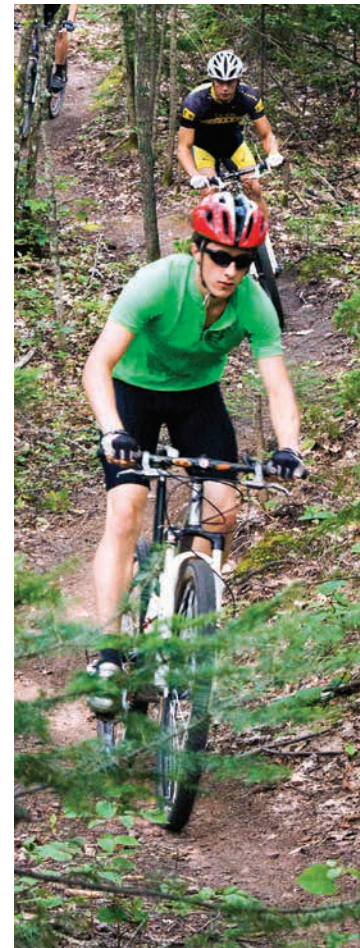
COURTESY CHEQUAMEGON AREA MOUNTAIN BIKE ASSOCIATION



COURTESY CHEQUAMEGON FAT TIRE FESTIVAL

The bike trails (top and right) in and around northern Wisconsin's Chequamegon National Forest total more than 300 miles, with enough variety for riders of all ability levels. Maintained by the Chequamegon Area Mountain Bike Association, the trails have received international acclaim.

The Chequamegon Fat Tire Festival (center), founded in 1983, takes over downtown Hayward, Wisconsin, for the start of the Chequamegon 40 mountain bike race to Cable. More than 3,000 riders participate in the festival's off-road races each September.



city: "We should be the premier trail city in North America."

Four years later, behind a strong commitment to bike trails, that goal is well on its way to reality.

Duluth, which has already earned an IMBA Model Trail award for Spirit Mountain's Candyland downhill run as well as *Outside* magazine's Best Outdoor City title, is on the cusp of becoming the Lake's fourth IMBA Ride Center, says Hansi Johnson. He worked as IMBA's Upper Midwest regional director for nearly six years before becoming director of recreational lands for Minnesota Land Trust. One of the final tasks is to connect Duluth's trails, creating a true citywide network.

That's where the Duluth Traverse Trail fits in. Led by the Cyclists of Gitchee Gumee Shores (COGGS) and the city, fundraising and construction have been under way since 2011. When completed, the Traverse will link existing trail hubs – Hartley Park, Lester Park, Mission Creek, Piedmont-Brewer Park and Spirit Mountain – to create a 100-mile-long network of singletrack trails. COGGS says it will be the longest urban trail in the world. The city currently has about 46 miles of trails for mountain bikes.

Because hilly Duluth is so long and narrow, spanning 25 miles along the Lake Superior shore, even the wildest portions of trail are never far from home, lodging or a place to grab a local microbrew. You might call it trails to pale ales.

"It's very rare that you have the amount of open space in such an urban environment," Hansi says. "A lot of times, trail systems that big are very rural. We have a real opportunity to tie our recreational infrastructure to communities."

Novices looking to sample Duluth's trails should start with the Mission Creek and Lester River trails. "They're low-angle, low-grade, wide, smooth trails for entry-level mountain bikes," says Hansi. Advanced riders will want to try Brewer Park and the aforementioned downhill trails at Spirit Mountain, serviced by ski lift.

The Minnesota Big Lake riding only starts in Duluth. Cook County claims more than 2,000 miles of



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COURTESY SPIRIT MOUNTAIN

Spirit Mountain maintains more than 4 miles of lift-accessed downhill trails with some challenging terrain and spectacular views of Duluth and the St. Louis River.

rides on paved trails, on singletrack (as found at Pincushion Mountain) and on winding backcountry roads. Organizers of the Lutsen 99er Mountain Bike Race in June expect 1,500 competitors this year, up from 80 in 2011's inaugural race.

Lake County's 122 miles of trail include a 15-mile portion of the

Gitchi-Gami State Trail, between Gooseberry Falls State Park and Beaver Bay. It will eventually connect Two Harbors to Grand Marais.

Other picks: Duluth's multiuse Lakewalk path extends more than 7 miles from Canal Park northeast to Brighton Beach. From there, you can

continue along the lakeshore on Scenic Highway 61 to Two Harbors. The Cross City Trail will eventually link the Lakewalk to the 70-mile Willard Munger State Trail that begins on Duluth's western edge. The first segment, west to the Lincoln Park neighborhood, opened last year. On the Iron Range, the scenic, paved Mesabi Trail connects 28 communities from Ely to Grand Rapids. On Duluth streets, London Road has bike lanes, and additional bike lanes are being considered.

ONTARIO

Last year, our readers chose Sault Ste. Marie's 25-kilometre-long John Rowswell Hub Trail as Ontario's top In-Town Hike in the annual Best of the Lake voting. But worry not, cyclists. This award-winning trail is open to bipedal and "by-pedal" users.

The mostly level, paved trail loops from the downtown waterfront to Fort Creek Conservation Area, Algoma University, Bellevue Park and other oft-visited spots in the community.

For a tougher road ride and some wilderness flavor, head north out of Sault Ste. Marie on the Trans-Canada Highway to Highway 556, the Searchmont Highway. Offering scenic views of the Goulais River, plenty of hills and frequent twists and turns, it's 100 kilometres (62 miles) round-trip from Sault Ste. Marie to Searchmont. Southeast of the Sault, St. Joseph Island's Highway 548 is a delightful and rarely busy route.

On the western side of Lake Superior, Thunder Bay is quickly developing into a destination for mountain bikers.

"We're definitely going to become a place to go ride," says Mark Maranzan, past president of the Black Sheep Mountain Biking Club. Thunder Bay has all of the visitors' amenities you'd expect from Lake Superior's largest city, but "we still have a frontier town feel to us," he adds.

"Our trails are very rugged, lots of rocks, lots of streams and rivers you're riding around – a very scenic ride."

The Black Sheep club, founded in 1998 to organize races, also works with the city to build bike trails and

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From the snow bike playground that is Marquette's Little Presque Isle to the Fat Bike National Championship on the American Birkebeiner trails, there's winter riding available all around the Big Lake. Nearly every trail system mentioned in this story has opened at least a few groomed trails to winter fat-tire riders. In Bayfield, you can even ride across the Madeline Island ice road during the North Coast Cycling Association's weekly group outing.

"You're seeing a lot of people crossing over and saying, if it's a bad snow season, I can hop on the bike and ride on just some amazing singletrack in the city," says Duluth-based Hansi Johnson, formerly an IMBA regional director and now director of recreational lands for the Minnesota Land Trust.

"Two seasons ago, there were two guys in town



COURTESY RANGE AREA MOUNTAIN BIKE ASSOCIATION

A fat-tire rider celebrates at the top of a trail along the system that winds through Marquette County in Michigan.

with them," says Mark Maranzan, past president of Thunder Bay's Black Sheep Mountain Biking Club. "Now, bike shops can't keep them on the shelves. We have 50 to 60 riders now."

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Authentic Duluth seal, collage of local activities (hiking, bar, garden), and scenic view of Duluth, MN.

Good to Know

Here are biking resources in specific regions.

Michigan

Copper Harbor Trails Club, www.copperharbortrails.org
Noquemanon Trails, www.noquetrails.org
Range Area Mountain Bike Association,
www.facebook.com/rangemountainbikeclub
TrailGenius.com, by a Copper Harbor Trails Club staffer

Minnesota

Cyclists of Gitchee Gumees Shores, www.wp.coggs.com
Gitchi-Gami State Trail, www.ggta.org

Mesabi Trail, www.mesabitrail.com
Visit Cook County, www.visitcookcounty.com

Ontario

Black Sheep Mountain Biking Club,
www.blacksheepmtb.com
Sault Cycling Club, www.saultcyclingclub.ca
Thunder Bay Cycling Club, www.tbaycc.ca

Wisconsin

Chequamegon Area Mountain Bike Association,
www.cambatrails.org
Bayfield Chamber & Visitor Bureau, www.bayfield.org
Superior-Douglas County CVB, www.superiorchamber.org

upgrade existing routes to IMBA standards. Thunder Bay has nearly 30 kilometres of trails, an assortment of singletrack and double-track.

The main areas for mountain biking are Centennial Park and Shuniah Mines, straddling the Trans-Canada Highway on the north side of town. The Centennial trails were originally built for cross-country skiing, while Shuniah's rooty, rocky, hand-cut trails demand much more of the rider.

Loch Lomond, a local ski area, added to its mountain bike trails last year, and the new ownership is looking into additional downhill runs.

"The local scene is definitely growing," says Mark. "You used to go out on those trails and not see anybody. Now you definitely will."

Club members plan to build additional beginner-level trails to bring still more people into the sport. Already, the Black Sheep Mountain Biking Club and road-focused Thunder Bay Cycling Club together account for 10 percent of the Ontario Cycling Association's membership.

Other picks: Mountain biking in the Sault is available at Hiawatha Highlands and the expert-level Bellevue Valley trails. In Nipigon, Mike Elliott and his Epic Adventures has led the development of the northern town into what IMBA calls "a budding trails destination."

For additional links to biking information around the Lake Superior region, go to www.LakeSuperior.com.



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