

On the Trails: Fat tire biking pumps up winter fun, even without snow

BY: MIKE TERRELL | Feb 15, 2024 | Traverse City Record Eagle



A new winter sport has been gaining traction (pun intended) in northern Michigan.

Fat tire winter biking trails are now being groomed, when conditions are right, in several locations around the area.

I see more and more fat tire bikes being used on the trails in the warmer months. It makes a lot of sense with our northern winters, extending the

biking season and adding another opportunity to get outside and have some fun.

It offers a new way to explore our forests in winter and at a faster pace than cross-country skiing or snowshoeing for the majority of us.

For older outdoor enthusiasts, like myself at 81, it offers more flexibility to winter outdoor time. I've found it to be a delightful new sport and a way to enjoy winter. Volunteer groomers from the Northern Michigan Mountain Biking Association are doing a good job of keeping trails on state land in shape when we have snow.

There are some trail etiquette rules that you need to adhere to during winter, and the number one priority is do not ride a regular mountain bike on fat tire trails. They will quickly ruin the newly groomed trail because the tires will sink into the track and destroy it. Fat tires need to be at least 3.7 inches wide or more and inflated to no more than 4 psi. That way they spread out over the track instead of digging into it, and actually help groom the trail with a solid base.

It's also best to not try riding the trails when the temperature is much above 30 degrees. The softer snow will create ruts, which are sometimes hard to groom over.

If you are leaving more than a 1-inch trail depth with your tire, conditions are too soft for a groomed trail ride.

It's always a good idea to see if the trail is one-way or a two-way system. On a two-way system, stay to the right to avoid approaching traffic, especially around corners. The trails are not very wide. When I see someone approaching from an opposite direction, I will get off my bike along the side of the trail and let oncoming bikers pass.

Most fat tire trails are separate from cross country ski trails to avoid ruining groomed ski tracks. If you are on a system that offers both, stay off the groomed ski trail.

Here's a list of fat tire winter trails being groomed in our area:

SINGLE TRACK TRAIL from the Supply Road trailhead is one of the most popular systems in our area. They groom around 11 miles of trail for fat tire biking, and it offers a really nice variety of scenery. I consider most of it easy to intermediate terrain. The exceptions are the Strombolis and Yeti's Revenge trails.

Strombolis has a couple of long hills that are doable. Yeti's is what I consider to be the toughest fat tire trail in the area. You have a long steep section down into a beautiful valley and a long steep ride out of the valley that covers a couple of miles.

CADILLAC PATHWAY grooms about 11 miles of fat tire trail separate from the cross-country trail. The section of trail on the east side of Seeley Road is a fairly easy flowing trail. Once you cross Seeley Road that portion of trail offers some longer uphill that require a little more effort. It's a scenic woodlands ride.

It's popular with fat tire bikers in that area.

LEELANAU STATE PARK grooms around 7 miles of trail for fat tire biking in a couple of connecting loops that cascade across the low dunes in the state park and an open meadow. It's a scenic trail through hardwoods and goes by an old farmstead. It's a rolling trail that I don't consider difficult.

GLACIAL HILLS PATHWAY offers around 8 miles of groomed fat tire biking trails that meander up into the tall hills just north of Bellaire. The trails definitely climb into the hills, but the way they are laid out, saddling the hills on their way up, there aren't any large climbs. Very scenic terrain as you can look down into deep valleys on the way up.

HANSON HILLS grooms anywhere from 6 to 9 miles of trail for fat tire biking in the winter. It's a nice, scenic trail that heads up into the hills and is separate from their groomed cross-country trails.

Last year saw a big improvement in trail conditions with a new groomer.

BETSIE RIVER PATHWAY and Crystal Mountain trails offer around 11 miles of groomed fat tire biking trails groomed by Crystal Mountain. You have to access the trails from Crystal's trailhead, which requires a pass to use the trails. They also rent fat tire mountain bikes if you don't have one and want to give it a try.

State land trails both the **LEELANAU TART TRAIL**, grooms about 17 miles, and the **SLEEPING BEAR HERITAGE TRAIL**, grooms around 20 miles, for

winter recreation that are also open to fat tire biking. Most of the bike shops in Traverse City and Suttons Bay also rent fat tire bikes for a winter ride.

Editor's note: This story is reprinted from the latest GT Scene magazine.

Mike Terrell's recent book, "On the Trails" is a Michigan Outdoor Writers Association award-winner. Reach him at mjterrell1@aol.com.