



# SNOW COASTER

Fat bikers enjoy the scenery and getting outside via trails designed for their silent, self-powered snow sport.

BY MARLA R. MILLER  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY AARON PETERSON

WINDING THROUGH SNOW-COVERED FORESTS AROUND BERMED CORNERS AND OVER ROLLING TERRAIN, FAT BIKERS SAY WINTER RIDING IS LIKE A SNOW ROLLER COASTER OR A BOBSLED RUN ON WHEELS.

So much fun that some have even traded their cross-country skis for fat-tire bikes due to Michigan's snow-thaw-snow cycle in recent winters.

Snow biking has become so popular that dedicated winter fat-bike trails are being developed at state recreation areas, ski resorts and on urban and forested public lands. Most of the trails average 5 to 10 miles long, but two big systems at Big M near Manistee and the Noquemanon Trail Network in Marquette, run 20 miles or more.

Ken Blakey-Shell helped develop the Big

M winter fat-bike route. He has cycled for 30 years and took up fat biking about eight years ago. He grooms the advanced loop at Big M and is one of those who, in part, switched over from cross-country skiing due to unpredictable winter conditions and sees the trend continuing.

"The good thing about fat biking is even with marginal snow conditions, you can have really good riding," Blakey-Shell said. "Pretty early on, we rode a lot of snowmobile trails, and we were breaking our own trail. It gets you to some beautiful places, but it's a lot of



work. It's a lot of Type 2 fun, not Type 1 fun."

Riding groomed trails makes for a much easier and enjoyable outing, especially for newbies. Packed surfaces are easier to ride. The best conditions for fat-tire snow biking are hard packed trails with a 4-inch base.

Shoreline Cycling Club volunteers groom about 20 miles of the Big M trail system for snow biking. Located in the Manistee National Forest, the trail at Big M runs through a canopy of hardwoods and varying terrain off M-55 between Cadillac and Wellston. A separate 18 miles of trail are groomed for cross-country skiing, plus there is a warming hut, sledding and parking off Udell Hills Road.

"It's a great way to exercise in the winter, and it's just drop-dead gorgeous most of the time," Blakey-Shell said. "This is unique because it gives you that out there wilderness experience, and it's one big monster loop."

Fellow Big M grooming volunteer, Andy Amstutz, has logged around 20,000 miles on the Big M trail system since 1998. He too has been fat biking for about eight years.

"It's pretty amazing what kind of conditions you can ride these fat-tire bikes in, and it just gets you outside," he said. "It's kind of a passion for the three of us who (groom trails). We've taken a liking to trying to make a really nice groomed trail for fat biking. It's an art."

Newbies can ride the 5-mile beginner loop that's flatter and a lot wider, and more advanced riders can use it as a warm up to dial in their tire pressure and adjust to the conditions before taking on the outer single-



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track loop. There's also a Great Lakes Fat Bike Series for competitive riders, and Big M hosts a race every year in January. The club updates weather conditions and grooming reports on [shorelinecyclingclub.org](http://shorelinecyclingclub.org).

Shoreline Cycling Club also grooms 5 miles of trail in Manistee's city park and several miles of Ludington School Forest Trails for winter riding. With nearby Crystal Mountain's 12-mile system, and other fat-bike trails in Cadillac and Traverse City, the Manistee area makes for a nice weekend outing and gives snow bikers several places to ride.

Dave Maclean, owner of Spindrift Cycle-sports in Ludington, founded Shoreline Cycling Club. He started fat biking six years ago as supplemental training to cross-country skiing.

"Sometimes, the snow conditions can be kind of spotty, so if there's not enough snow to ski, I ride my bike and then I kind of got hooked on the biking end of it," he said. "I just like being out in the winter, in the snow and the woods, and it's also a little challeng-

ing because it's similar to riding in the mud."

Spindrift expanded to year-round hours due to the interest in winter fat biking, and his shop has trail maps available. Last winter, Maclean and his wife visited the Upper Peninsula to snow bike in Marquette, Houghton, Hancock and northern Wisconsin.

"I think it's the fun factor," he said. "I can't pinpoint what it is about them, but they're fun to ride."

Marquette's extensive Noquemanon Trail Network has the Big M beat in terms of mileage. Riders can purchase a \$35 snow bike membership and ride 30 miles of groomed singletrack between the NTN north and south snow bike routes, said Lori Hauswirth, NTN's executive director.

"Even though you're super close to town, you feel like you've escaped and you're in this remote area," she said. "You've got this beautiful forested canopy and combine it with falling snow, it's such a unique experience."

Averaging 200 inches of snow every season, groomers continue to develop new ways

to maintain a smooth, hard surface, pack deep snow and reach remote terrain that's difficult to groom with a snowmobile and roller.

"It's got to be hard enough that you don't sink into the surface," Hauswirth said. "The unique thing about snow biking is we have this packed surface in between these fluffy snowbanks. It's really a super unique feeling and experience."

The trails connect from Marquette and pass scenic overlooks and areas that follow along the Dead River up to a waterfall on the north route. The south trails run along the Carp River with a lot of unique trail features that make it enjoyable, Hauswirth said.

Since Yoopers often experience sixth months of winter, snow biking is a popular pastime among mountain bikers who want to keep active, but it's also fun for recreational riders to get outdoors and fend off dark and dismal days. Hauswirth moved from the Houghton area to Marquette last winter and spent more time on her fat bike than her Nordic skis.

"The more mechanisms you have to get outside, people are happier," she said. "They have found the snow bike gets them outside



in an enjoyable way and a healthy way."

Winter fat biking also is a source of camaraderie and fellowship during what can be brutal months. Deb Leaf, who lives in Ishpeming, can ride right out of her door and connect to the Range Area Mountain Bike Association's (RAMBA) groomed snow bike trails. She took up mountain biking at 45 years old and enjoys the fellowship as much as the actual biking. Five years ago, she bought a fat-tire bike to keep at it year-round.

"The winters can be so harsh and grueling, it helps to have something fun to look forward to make the winter go by," she said.

Leaf serves on RAMBA's board of directors, and while the guys talk about machinery and grooming, she focuses on bringing people together. RAMBA grooms more than 20 miles of trails for snow biking near the NTN system and organizes group rides on Wednesdays and Sundays in the winter. ≈

*Marla R. Miller is an award-winning journalist who lives in Norton Shores and enjoys the lakeshore lifestyle.*



Snow biking is growing in popularity with nearly 30 groomed trail systems and competitive races in the state. Some trails have specific bike tire width and pounds per square inch requirements, typically tires wider than 3.7 inches and 5 to 10 psi. Here are some of the groomed winter bike trails in Michigan. For a complete list visit [mountainbike michigan.com](http://mountainbike michigan.com).

**LOWER PENINSULA**  
**Addison Oaks/River Bends**, Leonard/Shelby Charter Township, [cramba.org](http://cramba.org)

**Cadillac Pathway Winter Sports Trail**, [cadillacpathway.org](http://cadillacpathway.org)

**Cannonsburg Ski Area**, Belmont, [cannonsburg.com](http://cannonsburg.com) or [wmmba.org](http://wmmba.org)

**Big M**, Manistee, [shorelinecyclingclub.org](http://shorelinecyclingclub.org) or [skibigm.org](http://skibigm.org)

**Boyne Mountain**, Boyne Falls, [boynemountain.com](http://boynemountain.com)

**Boyne Highlands**, Harbor Springs, [boynehighlands.com](http://boynehighlands.com)

**Crystal Mountain**, Thompsonville, [crystalmountain.com](http://crystalmountain.com)

**Deerfield Nature Park**, Mount Pleasant, [isabellacounty.org](http://isabellacounty.org)

**DTE Energy Foundation Trail**, Chelsea, [facebook.com/dtetrail](http://facebook.com/dtetrail)

**Glacial Hills**, Bellaire, [glacialhillstrails.org](http://glacialhillstrails.org)

**Hanson Hills Recreation Area**, Grayling, [hansonhills.org](http://hansonhills.org)

**Ludington School Forest**, Ludington, [shorelinecyclingclub.org](http://shorelinecyclingclub.org)

**Manistee Non-Motorized Trail Park**, Manistee, [shorelinecyclingclub.org](http://shorelinecyclingclub.org) or [skimanistee.org](http://skimanistee.org)

**Merrell Trail**, Rockford, [facebook.com/merrelltrails](http://facebook.com/merrelltrails)

**Owasippe Trails**, Whitehall, [ooc.org/trails](http://ooc.org/trails)

**VASA Winter Sports Singletrack**, Traverse City, [nmmba.net](http://nmmba.net)

**UPPER PENINSULA**  
**Churning Rapids Snow Bike Trail**, Hancock, [keweenawtrails.com](http://keweenawtrails.com)

**Michigan Tech Trails**, Houghton, [michigantechrecreation.com/trails](http://michigantechrecreation.com/trails)

**Noquemanon Trail Network Snow Bike Route**, Marquette, [noquetrails.org](http://noquetrails.org) or [bit.ly/NTNSingletrack](http://bit.ly/NTNSingletrack)

**RAMBA Snow Bike Trail**, Ishpeming, [rambatrails.org](http://rambatrails.org) or [facebook.com/range mountainbikeclub](http://facebook.com/range mountainbikeclub)