



photos and words by colin wiseman

cascade effect

COMMUNITY LIES AT THE HEART OF THE TRAIL SCENE IN BELLINGHAM, WASHINGTON

“SHOULDN'T YOU BE RIDING THOSE THINGS?”

The lady was in her 60s, one of nine pole-equipped hikers winding their way through the upper reaches of Larrabee State Park just south of Bellingham, Washington. It was a Wednesday in February and nearing noon. Overcast skies spat drizzle, and temperatures hovered around 48 degrees. It smelled like spring: wet dirt and decaying ground cover mixed with a hint of premature blossom in an unusually mild winter. With a slight smile, the grey-haired mother figure had called us out.

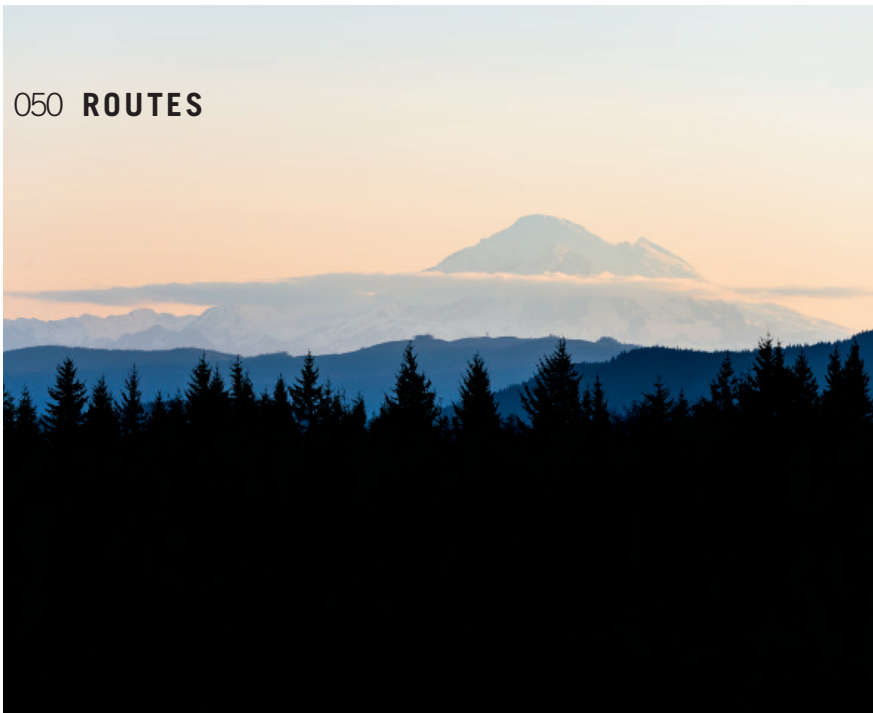
We were still near the top of the descent, around 1,500 feet above sea level, and hugging a ridge due north. To the west, obscured by fog, sat the Puget Sound. To the east, sheer cliffs gave way to evergreen-clad foothills undulating toward the North Cascades, punctuated by the glaciated volcanic cone of Mount Baker. A canopy of western red cedar and moss-clad maple draped overhead. Downhill, a mixture of gnarly roots, flowing benches, slick rock slabs and key-shaped switchbacks wound through 30 shades of green.

I was accompanied by an accomplished trio: Kona's gravity product manager Chris Mandell, pro XC rider Spencer Paxson and college student Mark Allison. Like many others, all three were drawn to Bellingham for the riding.

“My wife Courtney and I moved to Bellingham for the access,” Eric Brown says. “I live a 9-minute ride from the Birch Street trailhead.” Eric, or ‘EB’, is the trail director of the Whatcom Mountain Bike Coalition (WMBC). He and Courtney came from Seattle in 2008. A former online product manager, the energetic 42-year-old has turned trail advocacy into a part-time job and a full-time passion. The trailhead he mentioned is the north side access to Lookout Mountain—commonly known as Galbraith—which is the cornerstone of Bellingham's mountain-bike scene.

People have been riding Galbraith since the mid-1980s. It began with the predecessors of the WMBC, the WHIMPs, led by Jim ‘Sully’ Sullivan. He lived on Galbraith Lane, the south side trailhead, and led group rides and early building efforts from there. With two access points bookending 3,000 acres of land and more than 50

050 ROUTES



miles of trails, getting to Galbraith is an easy pedal for most of Bellingham's 80,000-or-so residents. From my own house on the north side, it's possible to get a quick, 45-minute door-to-door lap before work or head out on a day-long grind without having to cross the same stretch of dirt twice. Although there are a half-dozen XC-oriented options traversing the mountain, riding on Galbraith trends more toward an up-and-down approach—quick and punchy climbs, fast descents, with plenty of optional doubles, drops and woodwork packed in. Trailbuilders have made the most of the available space. But it's not all bike-park-esque berms—the WMBC consciously tries to provide a flavorful mix from fast and flowy to rough and rooty.

"We have challenging jump trails like Evolution and Unemployment Line off the south side of the mountain," EB says, "but we also have options for a wide variety of riders. It helps to spread things out. You can go to the mountain on a busy day and not see a ton of people."

The people you do encounter fit the life-style-oriented-professional demographic. You might see a few kids humping DH rigs up the south-side fire road, but a more typical Galbraith user is somewhere between their late 20s and late 50s aboard an all-mountain ride. They might be your doctor or lawyer, an employee of one of the multiple tech firms populating the bucolic city by the bay, or work at the oil refinery north of town, all brought together by the trails that may not exist if it weren't for the WMBC. As a privately owned chunk of land, Galbraith has been a working forest for as long as people have been riding bikes up there. Occasional glimpses of Bellingham Bay and Mount Baker notwithstanding, ongoing timber harvesting makes Galbraith a more utilitarian trail network than one of overt beauty. Despite a few moments of tension over the past decade, the WMBC has been able to work with the land owners and political leaders to retain not only access, but also to allow for ongoing rebuilding of logged sections and updates to existing trails. And the local community also puts in work: The WMBC hosts bi-monthly trail days that regu-

larly draw upwards of 50 volunteers, while smaller work parties can be found on the mountain three or four days per week. This ensures that the Galbraith trail network is truly rippable 12 months per year.

But the natural grandeur of Whatcom County mountain biking lies in the classically Northwest environs south of town in Larrabee State Park. Established in 1915 and encompassing a good chunk of the Chuckanut Mountains, the park is the oldest in Washington. From a handful of access points east and west, one can either ascend through the mature forest, or shuttle to the top then find their way back to the North Chuckanut parking lot in a kind of gravity-fueled cross-country approach.

In the Chuckanuts, most of the bike-friendly trails are shared with hikers and, save for the occasional boardwalk to skirt swampy sections, the only woodwork is natural. It was there that we found ourselves on that overcast day in mid-February. With the hikers now

wading through chest-high ferns behind us, we started rolling. Up first was a steep root-and-rock-roll, then a few minutes of high-speed, low-angle cruising, then more steep sections and sandstone slabs. Further along, an optional right turn would offer a 20-minute climb up Raptor Ridge and connecting options for extended saddle time on all points of the compass. Choosing a left would deliver us to the waterfall-infused lower mountain and the meandering, root-strewn trail known as Hush Hush. Indeed, between the preserved natural beauty of the Chuckanuts and the ever-evolving Galbraith trail network, it seems there are enough options to keep any rider thoroughly entertained. Yet EB sees room for so much more.

"We have an insane amount of untapped potential," he says, "both on the north shore of Lake Whatcom, where we've been working on a land reconveyance to allow trailbuilding, and stuff east of town where we could have shuttle-able downhill trails. Even though it's already a great place to ride I feel like we have the ability to rival any trail network in North America. We have so much opportunity ahead of us." ▮

RIDE BELLINGHAM

KNOW BEFORE YOU GO | A Discover Pass is required to park at the trailheads in Larrabee State Park and is available for \$11/day or \$33/year from the Washington State Department of Fish & Wildlife and numerous sporting goods and big-box stores in Bellingham. Detailed trail maps can be purchased at any of Bellingham's 10 bike shops as well as at wmbcmthb.org.

CAMPING | Larrabee State Park offers year-round camping in a beautiful location close to the water on Samish Bay.

WHERE TO STAY | Take your pick of low- and mid-range chain hotels at the north end of town, or stay by the water near downtown at the upscale Hotel Bellwether.

WHERE TO CELEBRATE | Bellingham is home to a growing craft beer scene, with five distinct breweries now operating downtown. A favorite for mountain bikers is the Kulshan Brewing Company at 2238 James Street. Kulshan has adopted a trail on Galbraith, and is the perfect jumping off point for a bike-friendly downtown tasting tour as Wander Brewery, Aslan Brewing, Boundary Bay Brewing and Chuckanut Brewery are all within a 5-10 minute ride and also feature tasty pub fare in one form or another.