

MINNESOTA'S GIFT TO MOUNTAIN BIKERS

The Cuyuna Country State Recreation Area

Story by Hansi Johnson and Eric Carter
Photos by Hansi Johnson

The combined efforts of the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, the Minnesota Off-Road Cyclists and the International Mountain Bicycling Association (IMBA) have resulted in the opening of a mountain bike-specific trail network in the Cuyuna Country State Recreation Area, located dead center in Minnesota's 87,000 square miles of land. While the state's highest point is only 2301 feet, the Cuyuna trail network proves once again that you don't need mountains to create a first-class mountain biking destination full of fun and flow.

Abandoned by mining companies more than 30 years ago, the Cuyuna Country State Recreation Area is made up of former mining pits and rock deposit stockpiles that now boast regenerated vegetation and clear lakes. The 5000-acre area includes 25 miles of natural shoreline, with six mine lakes connected to create 267 acres of continuous surface water.

New to the Cuyuna Country State Recreation Area are 25 miles of mountain bike trails covering nearly 800 acres.



An average day: "This is a prime example of the Cuyuna trail network—lush green flow everywhere!" explains Eric Carter about his discovery in the Cuyuna Country State Recreation Area.

Strange condition: Eric Carter (front) was not used to the strange Easy Street trail condition—it's called traction. The tacky soil is the polar opposite of the hardpack adobe that West Coast riders have to contend with. Rori Stumvoll follows E.C.

They span about four miles, from Manuel Mine Lake on the east to Huntington Mine Lake on the west. *Mountain Bike Action* teamed up with mountain bike legend Eric Carter and guide, photographer and IMBA's Midwest regional director Hansi Johnson to explore the new network of trails. Here is what we found and why we think you need to experience the Cuyunas for yourself.

Accessibility: The Cuyuna Country State Recreation Area is close to the center of the state. The closest major airport is Duluth, Minnesota (104 miles away), while the Minneapolis-Saint Paul International



Skills test: "This is local Nick Stutz navigating through the skills center of Cuyuna. I was surprised by the various lines and how much fun they were. The amount of work put in on the ladders and placing of rocks was impressive," says Eric Carter.

Airport (MSP) is serviced by just about every major airline and lies 128 miles to the south. You won't have problems finding a flight from where you live to MSP.

It is likely that most visitors to the Cuyuna Country State Recreation Area will be taking a road trip to get there. The distances from some surrounding cities are:

- 81 miles from St. Cloud, MN
- 104 miles from Duluth, MN
- 128 miles from Minneapolis, MN
- 154 miles from Fargo, ND
- 347 miles from Winnipeg, Canada
- 393 miles from Madison, WI
- 532 miles from Chicago, IL

Maps: The Cuyuna Country State Recreation Area has a brochure sponsored by the Clean Water, Land and Legacy Amendment that you can pick up on your visit to the area or from local bike shops, hotels and restaurants.

The trails: The trails were built for mountain biking and built to be sustainable. They are a bit wider than your average singletrack but are extremely flowy, so you can go fast, carve and really have fun on your bike. Take all your favorite sweet spots from the trails you ride and string them from end to end for 25 miles—that's what riding this trail system is like.

The Cuyuna trails are on old mine spoils, so the soil profile is not natural; it is just how it was the day it was mined. One byproduct of this is called "Cuyuna Gold." It goes from crushed gravel to finely crushed gravel that is

mixed with a bit of sand and clay. That is Cuyuna Gold. It is super fast, super tacky and dries quickly.

Morning ride: The perfect day starts out at the Pennington Mine Access trailhead. This is actually a parking spot at a boat launch. This access point allows you to hit the western half of the system and also gives you a perfect view of the sunrise.



Break time: Can you imagine a better way to take a break during a warm summer ride? We can't.

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There are a myriad of combos you can do, depending on your skill level and motivation. We highly recommend climbing "Crusher" to the top of Miner's Mountain. At that point, you descend the top of Roly Poly and stay left to ascend Hopper Hill. This sets you up for a fun descent on the Screamer.

Screamer is a fun plunge down a

bunch of descending stair steps into a series of in-sloped berms. From Screamer, head over to Sandhog, the next fun descent—again, all rollers and berms. This is perhaps the longest and most fun descent of the system. Once you have descended Sandhog, head to Mucker Mountain for an ascent and descent there. Take Sidewinder back around the base of the system to Endo Alley and over to Easy Street, and then up Trammer to the Ferrous Wheel. Spin that, and then descend Roly Poly to the car.

Once back at Pennington, hit the boat ramp for a refreshing swim. Then, ride over to the Heartland Cafe via the switchback trail. You will cross over the amazing steel and concrete bridge the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources constructed that connects the two systems together (clearly the most expensive mountain biking-specific bridge we have encountered), and then hop off on County Highway 6 and ride into town for your lunch break. Yes, you are only half done for today.

Afternoon ride: Take Highway 6 and hook back into Switchback. This connector trail will take you all the way to the Yawkey system. Start out hitting the Bobsled Run. Again, fast flow with berms and rollers.

Once you have lapped Bobsled Run a few times, it is time to get to what Yawkey is all about, and that is super-techie rock features, skinnies and tech-

Gold country: Cuyuna Gold, what the locals call the trail surface, goes from crushed gravel to fine-crushed gravel that is mixed with a bit of sand and clay. It is super fast, super tacky and dries extremely fast.



nical trail features. The majority of Cuyuna is fast flow-based trails, but not the Yawkey and the Timbershaft. This is where things get slow, technical and intimidating. The area is rated advanced.

Once done with Yawkey, hit the Yawkey Mine Lake for another swim. If you get the lake to yourself, you feel like you own the place. It drops off fast and is super clear, with a sweet sandy bottom. All the lakes are stocked with trout, so if you have a chance to fish, you will find world-class angling as well.

Either ride back to Serenity Pines or back to town.

The weather: The mountain biking season in the Cuyuna Country State Recreation Area is fairly short. This is a summer/fall destination. To be on the safe side, you will want to plan your visit for between late May and October. Outside of those dates, you may have to contend with Minnesota's long and severe winter. Even riding in October may require a few layers.

Rain can be an issue if you happen to be caught in a major storm, but the Cuyuna Gold soil and well-designed trails dry faster than any trail network in the Midwest.

Travel advisory: You will encounter bugs in late May to early June—ticks for sure. Bring some bug repellent. Poison ivy is plentiful, so wear tall socks and wash often (or better, swim often). Locals will haul a spray bottle of rubbing alcohol and spray down after the ride, including the bike.



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Great start: "This was the first morning and the first trail we dropped in on," remembers Eric Carter. "I knew it was going to be a good day when this was the start."

Finally, the rocks here are really sharp. Many a tire has been shredded, so hauling along a good spare tire and tubes is highly recommended. Locals carry tire boots—cut-up tire pieces that can be booted in behind a blown sidewall.

Bike shops: Cycle Path & Paddle at 115 3rd Avenue SW in Crosby, the town just outside the park's boundary, is not only a great bike shop, the owners were instrumental in the development of the trail net-

work. The shop is open every day during the summer, and in addition to a full-service department, they offer bike rentals. You can reach them at (218) 545-4545.

Eats: The surrounding area has plenty of places to refuel. Our favorites are the Heartland Kitchen & Café on 131 West Main in Crosby and Maucieri's Italian Bistro at 34660 County Road 3 in Crosslake. And, of course, if you are into health food, there is a Dairy Queen in Crosby.



Trail treat: Eric Carter says, "This spot was really beautiful. The red clay ribbon of Cuyuna singletrack contrasting against the green carpeted floor of the woods was a surprising treat." Nick Statz leads Rori Stumvoll, E.C. and Peter Lillesve.

Lodging: Twenty-five campsites are available in the Cuyuna Country State Recreation Area, (866) 857-2757. Serenity in the Pines, (218) 851-2910, is a cabin rental located in Crosby. If you plan ahead, with a little luck, you should be able to snag this great base camp. Ruttger's Bay Lake Lodge, (800) 450-4545, in Deerwood has been in operation since 1898. Sissebagamah RV Resort in Deerwood, (218) 678-3393, offers RV camping options.



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No toll: The switchback trail crosses a bridge constructed by the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources. It may be the most expensive mountain biking-specific bridge in the country and shows Minnesota's commitment to mountain biking.

Perfect day: "Golden light and singletrack at one of the high points to end the day. This also highlights one of the many lakes that are accessed by the trail network for a quick swim on a hot day."

Other attractions:

We went to Cuyuna Country State Recreation Area for mountain biking, but the area offers lots of outdoor activities. There is a paved cycling trail that goes through the area that is great for kids. There is a historical mine. The area can be explored by boat or canoe, and anglers can go after trout (with a trout stamp), northern bass, crappie or sunfish. The clarity and depth of Cuyuna's many lakes are a favorite with scuba divers for recreation and training. The underwater terrain includes sheer walls and flat terraces, characteristic of the mine roads and railroads, as well as remnants of the mining industry.

Twenty miles west is the Brainerd Lakes Area, perhaps one of the most heavily visited resort areas in the state, with all the attractions you could shake a stick at, including Paul Bunyan Land. □



Flow show: "The Bobsled trail was a blast," says E.C. "The long sight lines and following the crew down the flowing turns of the natural half-pipe really lets you share the fun with the group."

