

# Beginner's Mountain Bike Guide

While mountain biking, please remember that you are part of a large community of trail users who must work together to preserve our open spaces. In the Minnesota Area, we are very lucky to have so many trails open to mountain cyclists. We can only maintain and improve on this level of access through continued work with the land owners, other trail users, and in educating all off-road cyclists on the appropriate etiquette required of them.

## Etiquette and Safety

Etiquette and safety rules are important for the well-being and enjoyment of all trail users, but there is another reason you should obey them: If we don't follow these simple guidelines, all cyclists will lose access to our trails. Remember that cyclists share the trails with other users. Impolite, unsafe riding is not only rude and dangerous, it gives mountain biking a bad image and causes us to lose access to trails.

The International Mountain Biking Association (IMBA), the international mountain biking organization that ROMP is affiliated with, has set the following rules of the trail (in bold). We have added descriptions of the rules to make sure they are clear and help explain why they should be followed.

## IMBA Rules of the Trail

**1 Ride on open trails only**  
– Respect trail and road closures (ask if not sure), avoid possible trespass on private land, obtain permits and authorizations as may be required. Federal and state wilderness areas, along with many regional open space lands, are closed to cycling.

**2 Leave no trace** – Be sensitive to the trail beneath you. Studies have shown that mountain cycles, when ridden appropriately, cause no more wear to a trail than other trail users. Two of the times

that cyclist can cause significant trail damage are when they skid their tires and when the trails are muddy. Skidding your tires is not the fastest or safest way to stop, and does cause significant damage. Riding in muddy trails leaves grooves which enhance erosion and dry to form permanent marks. These marks show how bad bikes can be to the environment when ridden foolishly.

**3 Control your bicycle!** – Inattention for even a second can cause problems. Obey all speed laws. Remember that what seems a reasonable speed to you may seem like out of control to a hiker or equestrian. Slow down or stop when approaching other trail users, even if there is “plenty” of room. If another trail user moves out of the trail in fear, they may believe they were “run off” the trail.

**4 Always yield the trail**  
– Make known you approach well in advance. A friendly greeting (or a bell) is considerate and works well; don't startle others. Show your respect when passing others by slowing to a walk or even stopping. Anticipate that other trail users may be around corners or in blind spots. When approaching equestrians, yield means stop and get off! Yield to Uphill Bike Traffic - Your fellow cyclists traveling uphill on a narrow trail have the right of way! Stop and let them go by if you are traveling downhill. You can get going again easily, they can't! □ See also the Guide to Passing for in-depth tips on

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passing hikers and horses on trails.

**5 Never spook animals** – All animals are startled by an unannounced approach, a sudden movement, or a loud noise. This can be dangerous for you, for others, and for the animals. Give animals extra room and time to adjust to you. In passing, use special care and follow the directions of horseback riders (ask if uncertain). Running cattle and disturbing wild animals is a serious offense. Leave gates as you found them, or as marked.

**6 Plan ahead** – Know your equipment, your ability, and the area in which you are riding and prepare accordingly. Be self-sufficient at all times. Wear a helmet, keep your machine in good condition, and carry necessary supplies for changes in weather or other conditions. A well-executed trip is a satisfaction to you and not a burden or offense to others.

## Technique

The following is a brief description of some basic riding techniques. To learn more, try ROMP's Mountain Bike Basic clinic, or read a book on technique for beginners. Always remember to ride within your level. It is better to get off and walk an area that you aren't comfortable with than to risk injury.

- **Balance** – Balance is crucial in mountain biking, not just left-right balance, but front to back balance. Weight over the rear wheel is what gives you traction: if your back tire is slipping, try moving back on the seat, or if you are standing, transfer more of your weight to the rear of the bike. If your front wheel comes off the ground, then you need to transfer more weight to it.
- **Climbing** – Most riders will do at least some of their hardest climbs out of the saddle. It is necessary to rock the bike gently with each pedal stroke in order to keep the bike in a straight line. As your right pedal goes down, rock to the right, as your left pedal goes down, rock to the left, and so on. If you are climbing in the saddle, make sure and use a low enough gear that you are “spinning”. Too high a gear is inefficient, and can cause pain or injury.
- **Descending** – Stay back on the bike. On steep descents, you may have to be behind your seat. Use your brakes before corners, not in them (see braking). Don't descend anything you are not sure of; walk if in doubt.
- **Cornering** – Learn the technique of “counter steering”. Brake before corners, not in them. Look where you want to go, not at what you don't want to hit. Bikes have a way of going wherever you look. Slow down to a safe speed, then accelerate out of corners. Don't skid, it looks fast, but it isn't. Lean into turns; you can “lead” with your inside knee to help with this.
- **Braking** – Most of your braking force is in the front brake. Use both brakes simultaneously, and brake before corners, not in them. Do not lock your back brake to skid! It is destructive to the trail, and not as effective at slowing you down.
- **Shifting** – You should always pick a gear that allows you to “spin” your pedals at between 60 and 90 rpm. (note: racers may spin more). Try counting your revolutions for 10 seconds, then multiply by 6, or get a cyclometer with a cadence (RPM) function. Different shifters work differently, so get the salesperson who sold you your bike to show you how to select gears on your bike. Lower gears are “easier” to spin on hills, while higher gears are “harder”. The smallest chain ring (on the crankset, where the pedals are) is your lowest gear range, while the largest chainring is your highest gear range. The largest cog on the freewheel (on the back wheel) is your lowest gear, while the smallest cog is your highest gear. It is the combination of your chain ring (gear range) and cog (gear) that gives you the overall gear ratio you are in. Try shifting to a lower gear before you are in the middle of a steep hill.
- **Singletrack** – On these narrow trails, don't look off the trail, instead focus on the trail ahead. Slow down around blind curves; other riders, hikers or equestrians may be around the corner.
- **Mud** – Do not ride in mud! It leaves deep groves which water follows, causing erosion. If you hit a small patch of mud on an otherwise dry trail, pull up lightly on the bars, and either maintain speed or pedal through. If the mud is deep, walk your bike around it.

Do not try to ride around – this causes the trails to get widened beyond what they were originally intended.

- Sand – Similar to mud, but try a slightly higher gear than you would normally ride in.
- Rocks, holes, and bumps – When going over rocks, holes, or bumps that may trap your front wheel, you need to move your weight back so that the wheel can “float” over the obstacle. Sometimes you will need to pick up the front wheel (called “lofting”) to get it over the obstacle. Your rear wheel will often just roll through the obstacle.
- Water and water crossings – Avoid riding through streams where possible; a tire’s passage causes sedimentation of the stream. If you must cross, maintain momentum in a low gear, and use a light touch on the handlebars. Let rocks deflect your tire gently.

## Required Equipment

The following equipment is required for safety. Don’t ride without them!

- Bicycle – For off-road riding, it is recommended that you buy a true mountain bike, not a hybrid (one way to tell is that true mountain bikes should come with fat, knobby tires). Usually, an appropriately sized mountain bike will have at least 2 to 4 inches of room between the top of the frame and your crotch when you stand above the bike.

You should be able to reach the handlebars such that you can bend over at a 45 degree angle without feeling cramped. The height of the stem should be adjusted to put the handlebars slightly below the saddle, allowing some of your weight to shift to the front of the bike for a more balanced position. The saddle should be set at a height so that your legs reach almost full extension when you place your heel on a pedal in its lowest position. Bikes with front or front and rear suspension are becoming more popular and more affordable. Suspension smoothes the bumps in the trail, increasing comfort and decreasing fatigue. You may want to consider a bike that comes with suspension, or one that can have suspension added at a future time. If you are unsure about the way your bike fits you, talk to the experts at your local bike shop. They should be able to help you properly adjust your bike. When buying a bicycle, it is best to try several different bikes before settling on one. Colorado Cyclist, a catalog retailer, has a good article on bike fit at <http://www.coloradocyclist.com/bikefit.htm> which you may want to refer to.

- HELMET – Buy one that fits right and wear it. Not only is a helmet required in many local parks, but it will save your life.
- Water – Carry two water bottles and cages, or one of the alternative water systems (such as a CamelBak). You will lose a lot of water as you ride. Drink water to prevent dehydration.

- Appropriate clothing – Dress for the weather and riding conditions. The weather on the trail is often much different than where you live. Be prepared.

## Recommended Equipment

It is recommended that you carry the following equipment. The clothing listed will significantly improve the comfort and enjoyment of your ride. The tools (along with the knowledge of how to use them) will let you keep riding should something go wrong. If you always ride in a group, only one set of the tools would be needed for the whole group, but it is still recommended that each person carry their own tool set.

- Pump – get one to fit your valve type (Schraeder or Presta). Compact pumps are light, popular, and fairly efficient. Many adapt to either style of valve.
- Gloves – these will keep you from compressing nerves in your hand, getting blisters, and in the event of a fall, save your skin.
- Padded bicycling shorts – these are not only more practical on a bike than loose fitting shorts, the chamois prevents (ouch!) chaffing.
- Windbreaker or light jacket – for spring, fall or winter riding.
- Mountain bike shoes – you can ride in tennis shoes, but the soles are not stiff enough to provide enough comfort (pedals dig into soles) or power transfer. Try

cycling shoes.

- Spare tube(s) – for when you get a flat on the trail, it's easier to replace the tube, then patch the flat one at home where it's cool and there aren't any flies.
- Patch kit – carry this for when you use your spare tube and later get another flat!
- Tire irons – you'll need these to help take your tire off in order to change your tube.
- Small screwdriver – for adjusting derailleurs.
- Small crescent wrench – for removing wheels without quick-release.
- Small metric wrenches 8, 10mm – For a number of uses.
- Allen wrenches – same as above. Get a good selection, and check them against the bolts on your bike.
- Rag – for wiping the grease off your hands.
- Chain tool – for fixing a broken chain. If you don't have it and you break your chain, you'll be walking.
- Spoke Wrench – for tightening loose spokes, or removing broken ones.
- First aid kit – to fix damage to riders.

- Sunglasses – to protect your eyes from both the sun and dust.
- Seat bag, fanny pack, or backpack – to keep all this stuff in.

### Basic Repair

What good is carrying all these tools if you don't know how to use them? Your bike will break down at some point, and it is much more convenient to fix it and ride out than it is to have to walk out. You should know how to perform basic repairs, such as:

- Fixing a flat tire
- Derailed chain
- Broken chain
- Loose or broken spoke

Get a good book, or take a class from a local bike shop.

### Maintenance

You may prefer to have a shop do all your major maintenance, but there are certain maintenance tasks that need to be done often. You should learn how to do these.

- Clean chain
- Lubricate chain and wipe off excess lubricant
- Check and adjust tire pressure
- Check headset for play

- Adjust brakes
- Tighten bolts
- Check wheels for alignment
- Clean bike
- Lubricate cables and derailleurs

These are things that need to be done often. Again, get a book or take a class at a local bike shop.

### Reading/Reference Materials

There are many books, videos, CD-ROMS, and web sites out about mountain biking, from regional ride descriptions to maintenance guides to advanced technique. And, as mountain biking becomes more popular, the number of reference materials will increase. If you would like to find a good book on a particular subject, it is best to get recommendations from other riders or bike shops.

