

Hike, bike and swim

You can do it all in Wilmington

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We had just pedaled through 30 feet of flooded trail beside a beaver pond when Bert Yost stopped on a wooden bridge over the pond's outlet. "We call this Bush's Bridge, because he pounded a nail in it when he was here," he said.

That's right, George Bush. The president had been here for a photo op on Earth Day in 2002. He hasn't been back since, but Yost has visited the place too many times to count.

For five years, Yost and a few friends in Wilmington have been clearing old logging roads and cutting trails to create a six-mile network for mountain-bike riding. The owner of Willkommen Hof bed-and-breakfast down the road, Yost rides the trails twice a week in season. In winter, he skis them.

"They're quite scenic, but not too many people know about them," Yost said.

My assignment: Take a spin around the trails with Yost and see for myself. I figured that would take two hours at most. We were at the end of our ride when we came to Bush's Bridge. This is a beautiful spot, right next to a big beaver dam. Looking across the water, I saw a rocky cliff high above us and asked about it.

"That's Bear Den Mountain," Yost said. "You can go to the top on a hiking trail."

I knew at once that I wouldn't leave until I had done the climb. Yost had to return to work, but he explained how to find the hiking trail, and so I set off for Bear Den alone.

That's how my two-hour bike ride stretched into a five-hour adventure. I'm glad it did, for I discovered that not only can you bike and hike here, but at the end of the day, you can jump into a gorgeous swimming hole in the Ausable River to wash off the mud and sweat. All in all, a wonderful day in the Adirondacks.

THE BIKE

The bike network—dubbed the Wilmington Wild Trails—begins near the Flume on the Ausable. If you're driving from Lake Placid on Route 86, the parking lot is on the left just after you pass the Hungry Trout Restaurant and cross over the river. There is a kiosk with a register, but vandals stole the large trail map that had been mounted behind a sheet of clear plastic. Yost suspects that the culprits are local residents who used to ride all-terrain vehicles and camp and party along the trails (which are on state land).

The absence of the map is unfortunate, because the trails lack signs. Unless you're familiar with the network, you won't know which trails are easy and which are difficult. Luckily, you can pick up a trail map at The Whiteface/Wilmington Regional Visitors Bureau. They also are available online. (See box on next page.)

Yost opens the kiosk register and points out that people from as far away as Alabama used the trails this year. Then we hop on our bikes and head up a short hill to the right. I'm following Yost, and Yost's aging dog, Linus, is following me. The trail soon levels, and we're riding through a forest filled with birdsong. Like most of these trails, this is an old logging road—wide and smooth. It's part of the easy loop. Anybody could handle this stretch.

Before I can get too comfortable, Yost turns from the main trail onto a narrow path that winds among the trees. Soon, I'm riding over roots and hopping over small logs. This single-track trail, cut by Yost and his buddies, is designed for intermediates. Most of the single-track routes are of similar



A biker gets his feet wet on a trail in Wilmington.

Photo by Nancie Battaglia



Bert Yost and Linus near Bush's Bridge.

Photo courtesy of Bert Yost

difficulty, but some expert trails are in the works.

One narrow path leads past a bluff that looks down on the beaver pond. We pause to admire the view, then return to the main trail. Heading downhill, we encounter a few muddy stretches that force us to dismount. In a few minutes we reach a trail that runs parallel to the Ausable. We turn right and begin a long, gradual ascent that leads to the Kids Kampus at the Whiteface Mountain Ski Center. Bikers who want to ride the trails at the ski center can continue, but they must pay a fee. (Parts of two Whiteface trails have been incorporated into the Wilmington Wild Trails network and may be used for free.)

Yost and I turn around and coast back down the trail until we come to an opening beside the river. We stop to let Linus take a plunge, and Yost notices an osprey flying up

the river. A pair of these "fish hawks" nested near Wilmington Notch this year.

A bit farther on, we arrive at the beaver pond and the flooded trail. By this time, I've seen most of the network. I don't mountain-bike much, but I was able to handle it. Beginning bikers probably will want to stick to the easy trails and walk their bikes over the rocky and muddy sections.

The trails are a work in progress. In its draft management plan for the Wilmington Wild Forest, the state Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) proposes to upgrade them—by improving drainage, among other things—and to add signs, which would be a big help to those who don't have Bert Yost to lead them. DEC also plans to create 11 miles of biking trails off Hardy Road in another part of the Wild Forest. If it all comes to pass, Wilmington could become a mountain-biking mecca.

THE HIKE

The hike to Bear Den begins off one of the Whiteface Trails. From the kiosk, I rode back up the main trail, but this time, instead of heading down to the Ausable, I bore right and continued climbing. Soon the trail became steep and rocky, and I had to push my bike uphill. About 15 or 20 minutes from the kiosk, I spotted on a tree to the right of the trail a white sign with a pair of yellow feet.

I ditched my bike and started walking. In five minutes, I reached a fork with two signs: "Bear Den 1.0" and "Flume Knob 0.5." I took the left fork toward Bear Den. The trail is marked by red disks, but it had not been maintained and was hard to follow. It also was quite wet. Twenty minutes from the fork, I crossed a brook just below a pretty cascade. I continued to follow the trail through heavy vegetation for several minutes before I lost it. I retraced my steps, but to no avail. So I decided to bushwhack.

As I had hoped, I found the trail again as I neared the top. I then reached another fork. A sign indicated that Bear Den was to the left. In a few minutes, after passing through a field of blueberries, I emerged onto a 2,710-foot ►►