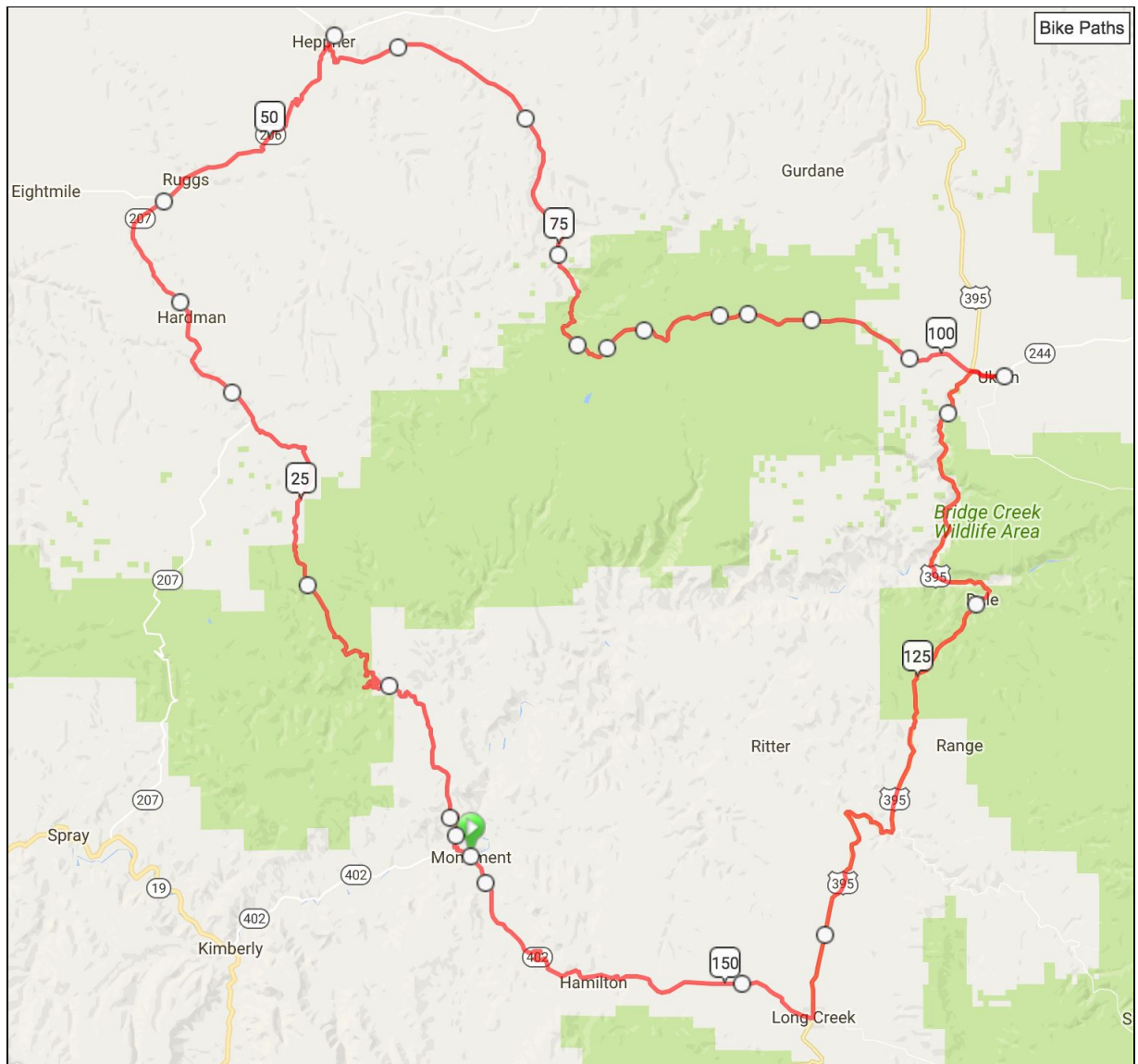


## Old West Blue Mountains Route

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Old West Blue Mountains Route.

Only about ten miles to go. . . In the aridness of Eastern Oregon, the sun offers little respite. Every pedal stroke felt a bit harder until the unthinkable for any committed bicyclist began with a nagging persistence—to just stop on the side of the road, to hang-it-up, to call foul on this misguided idea of

riding across long remote stretches of Eastern Oregon. The road ahead disappeared at the hill crest, a winding black path over a uniform brown of drying grass and brush. Another pedal stroke brought cramping, and then I was walking on the edge of the road. Heppner, the small town where we would camp for the night, seemed even further away.



Kevin Briggs Approaching Heppner.

The idea had seemed straight-forward: our three-day route of about 160 miles would combine portions of two established cycling routes, the Old West Scenic Bikeway and the Blue Mountain Century Scenic Bikeway. Both of those routes offered mostly empty roads through a rugged and starkly beautiful landscape. Appealing too were the small towns that were scattered as if an afterthought on the map. Our three days, however, did not permit completing the two routes. Thus, the first day's route would be our creation, linking one day

portions of each of the two established routes. Three years ago we had ridden the Oregon Outback, 360 miles in six days, fully loaded. This trip was planned as a wallet ride, enjoying the free spirit of riding and camping with the benefits of showering and eating breakfast and dinner out. And, lighter bikes.

We began in Monument, an isolated community of little more than a hundred clustered in a hodgepodge collection of wood-frame and mobile homes, on the banks of the North Fork of the John Day River. Our route, about a third being gravel roads, would extend to Heppner, about 50 miles over a harsh terrain punctuated with juniper and rim-rock.



Kevin Briggs on the Monument-Heppner road. Historically a lifeline for the city of Heppner, first to haul goods to the John Day mines, next as a wool route, and finally as a timber road.

Ben and Kevin, my two companions, were nowhere in sight. They had quickly distanced me at the start of the climb. The day had been a hard one with long, energy-sapping climbs on

mostly gravel roads. Underestimating the demands of pedaling a bicycle loaded with gear is easy. The dry, hot air and the unshaded miles had left me dehydrated and spent. After walking a short distance, I remounted and renewed the climb. Finally, the climb abated, and I could see a long stretch of farmland with Heppner in the distance.

I wondered if Ben and Kevin had continued to Heppner. But there they were, sitting on the side of the road and chatting as if out for a jaunt. I was relieved that the uncertainty of the final miles would not be cycled alone, yet there was also an inkling of shame that one had slowed two others. Here was a lesson of road cycling: individuality is often lost in group riding; and the hard effort of getting down the road against distance, wind, and ultimately fatigue spreads across the group, each cyclist shouldering what they can, comrades armed with a peculiar vehicle powered by themselves. We rode together for a short distance before the cramping began again. More walking. Pedaling with expectation of more pain. Repeat. They pedaled slowly behind. Through it all, the remaining road seemed shorter; I had them to thank for that.

The three of us were exhausted from the last climb of our first day, yet still in awe of the suddenly appearing expansive Heppner prairie. Until now, the awesome vistas were always framed in Ponderosa.

After some time a vehicle passed. Instead of a truck it was a revving, low-riding Honda hatchback. It slowed threateningly as a hooded occupant looked back through the open window. Finally standing still and gazing back a friendly young voice called *Are you guys alright, do you need anything?* That was the first of many encounters with accommodating locals going out of their way to ensure us a safe journey. It happened again the next day in downtown Hepner after we had breakfasted. I was taking in the 1900 era historic buildings, looking for the best angle to shoot some photos. Kevin and Kevin must have appeared lost, for a driver in a late 80s model Thunderbird rolled down her window asking what they were looking for. Surprisingly, Kevin said *I'm looking for a sun hat.* The gal responded, *Have you checked the grocery store?* Yes, said Kevin, *they don't carry any.* *Alright, let me drive down and see what I can find for you.* She kept her word and was back within five minutes with two recommendations!



Old and new surviving on a Hepner street block dated 1901.

Once in Heppner we rode straight to the fairgrounds. Though we were allowed to pitch our tents in the grass, we bivouacked under the shelter once we discovered that the showers were locked. Our concern was that the groundskeeper had forgotten our arrangement and we feared being awoken by sprinklers. We did manage access to the showers and after that rejuvenation riding back into town was a joy in anticipation of dinner. I'm not sure if the juicy, hand kneaded 1" thick burgers were the best I ever had, or if it was the mood I was in. Unexpectedly, the next day I was so hungry for breakfast I felt like I had missed dinner. It's so wonderful to feel this way I thought!

We debriefed shortly after dining, a couple of us with one of those large cans of beer sold individually at the small grocery store. At dusk sleep came quickly. I was on the parking lot facing side, so when a Sheriff's patrol car showed up for a late night visit I ended up engaged in conversation, while extracting myself partially from my down, cycling bag and one-man tent. The deputy began in an aggressive questioning tone *So you are camping here?* The stress was intense but the conversation went quickly, and I convinced him our pre-arranged stay-over was kosher. *I see, so you have permission then.*

I can never forget the next morning riding out of Heppner. The day before, at the onset of the trip we were so excited with the weather forecast being positive, yet rain this morning was now unavoidable. Our route to Ukiah was obvious. Paved with very low traffic density. Follow Willow Creek

Road as it transitions to Forest Road 53 all the way to Ukiah, uphill. Uphill, hopefully not in the rain. It started raining.

As we proceeded upstream alongside the creek we passed, at some distance, two ranch hands, one welding a fence gate with sparks flying, the other standing in jeans and boots, leaning tall and away on the fence gazing up and aside under the rim of a cowboy hat. Was he enjoying the scenery like me? Together with their dually pickup truck generating power it was one of the highlights of the day. I still think it can't be real.

The first 30 miles of today's almost 50 were uphill. As the inclines seemed to lengthen they also became steeper. We were ready to give our legs a break, but the rain showed no sign of stopping. Rather, like the inclines, it went on and on. We were sure that the Cutsforth State Park was just around the corner, at every corner, and finally it was. I remember raising my arms in joy so that the riders behind me could anticipate the upcoming rest. The eaves of the camp host's information office were just large enough for us to take shelter. I had a tasty wrap the cafe kindly made from my breakfast leftovers.

The park host exemplified the general friendliness of the folks we met along the way - he invited us inside. We declined to bring our wet and soiled selves in. What happened next was typical. He came outside to us. In the country where it's quiet and face to face contact is less frequent, many people welcome conversation. And once context has been established, they want to tell you their story. He was from Hardman. We had ridden through Hardman on the way to Heppner. We thought it was a ghost town. His

endearing stories went back to when it had a retail center. I could now envision him as one of those same two cowboys seen earlier in the day, back in time. I believe it now. I don't think change is slow here; I think some of the things we enjoy just don't change.



Smiles for breakfast - Kevin Briggs, and Kevin Branscum and Ben Groeneveld.

The seemingly endless climb from Heppner finally abated with a rewarding descent into Ukiah. If the climb had been prolonged tedium where time and distance passed at a glacial pace, the descent was condensed joy on a bike, miles of open landscape passing effortlessly while the road dropped and curved into a largely treeless basin surrounded by the higher green conifers of the Blue Mountains. At first nearly imperceptible, Ukiah gradually revealed itself as hardly more than a couple of dozen single-story buildings populated by just over two-hundred people. As I rode down its only street of any length, some of the welcomed amenities of cycle-touring appeared, a café-bar and a grocery store. Their rundown appearance contributed to



Ukiah's feel as more outpost than town. The few homes were small and unassuming, wood-frame structures generally painted in browns and greens, more-often-than-not with a pickup parked outside on a dirt driveway. The town appeared neither old nor new, as if time had left it as it sat on the landscape, alone and isolated.



The Thicket Cafe and Bar provided both dinner and breakfast as the sole offering in Ukiah.

We camped that night at a RV park that also had cabins. In such small communities, limited patrons often produce creative combinations of businesses like Ukiah's grocery store, which had hardware as well as scoop ice-cream. We ate that night at the Thicket, the café-bar. The limited menu was largely composed of traditional diner food, but we had no complaints after riding for most of the day. Seated at the bar or at the few surrounding tables were mostly locals or hunters, many dressed in camouflage. At breakfast the next morning, a visitor

traveling back to California would ask if we were hunters despite the Lycra and bright coloration of our clothing. He was no more at home in Ukiah than we were. We were all just strangers passing through a tiny town in the modern West, arriving and departing by bicycle saddle or speeding car and making only a fragile, brief connection to place.

The weather turned blustery and threatening. When we left the Thicket, the rain fell in heavy, persistent drops. Concern for the next day's route increased as the rain continued. The route was long, over sixty miles, had substantial climbs, and a portion was on gravel roads. Combined with the poor weather, the route had the groundwork for a day of suffering on the bike. The rain fell intermittently throughout the night. Morning arrived with only hints of sunshine. We decided to alter our route to avoid the gravel roads, which were likely to be mud-covered. The new route would extend our time on a relatively busy highway. The dread of traffic replaced that of punishing terrain. I was at another low point, unsure what the miles ahead would bring other than hardship. We were glad to start during a break in the rain.



Kevin and Kevin riding through The Bridge Creek Wilderness.

The miles passed quickly over a gradual downhill through thick green forests. The occasional brighter colors of Fall added to the beauty. Infrequent vehicles alleviated our concern over traffic. The sun even peaked through the grey clouds. The legs felt good, the route was stunning, and the completion of the tour was within grasp. Climbs were ahead, but they were followed by descents. Just as sure of the turning of pedals and wheels, my place on the spectrum of emotion from despair to joy had changed abruptly. The thrill of cycling had broken through uncertainty and discomfort. How different this was from the emotional monotone typical of everyday living. How good it was to be on a bike that morning.

We were not surprised to find more traffic on the pavement of the Pendleton-John Day Highway than the originally planned gravel of Forest Roads

52 and 55. But what did surprise us: pickup trucks comprised much of the traffic giving us exaggerated wide berths on passing. A sense of safety sank in comparable to that of my work commutes over Bend bike lanes.

It was our second climb of the day and the rain breaks were becoming more frequent with more blue sky appearing. Feeling well hydrated in nearly perfect riding temperatures we passed our first water stop at the Dale Store. Meadow Brook Summit was exhausting, yet the absence of rain with a



The Dale Store.

view into the valley north of the Long Creek Mountains felt relieving. It was a positive turning point for the remainder of our last day with fast riding on sparsely travelled roads.



Long Creek Exit.

Fueled from lunch and a coffee milkshake at the Long Creek General Store, we rode out the Kimberly-Long Creek Highway (402). Each of us knew what was coming. These were not the thoughts of that last healthy climb. That had become almost ritual and there was even conversation on this uphill. Nor was the focus on the most exhilarating part of this day's ride: a never ending sunny descent into Monument with unique views. Descending fast we caught glimpses of the North Fork eroding its way through the rugged landscape. And on return to Monument we even saw those goatheads again, luckily never anywhere else. What we anticipated was that anxious feeling upon arrival at the end of a great ride. The sensation knowing you can stand more to wanting more, and then figuring out how to express that to your comrades - hoping they feel the same. A personal and glorious feeling of accomplishment. Personal because we were not competing with anyone else but

ourselves for fulfillment. It wasn't long before we were iterating on plans for the next tour . . .

### Mixed Surface Touring Logistics - Old West Blue Mountains Route - 168 miles

1. Day 1. Monument to Heppner. 56 miles.
  - 1.1. Water Break: Anson Wright State Park.
  - 1.2. Dinner: Gateway Cafe.
  - 1.3. Lodging: Camped at Morrow County Fairgrounds, with showers.
  
2. Day 2. Heppner to Ukiah. 48 miles.
  - 2.1. Breakfast: The Cornerstone Gallery & Cafe.
  - 2.2. Water Break: Cutsforth State Park.
  - 2.3. Dinner: The Thicket Cafe & Bar
  - 2.4. Lodging: Camped at Stage Stop Motel & RV, with showers.
  
3. Day 3. Ukiah to Monument. 64 miles.
  - 3.1. Breakfast: The Thicket Cafe & Bar
  - 3.2. Water Breaks: Dale Store and Rock Creek.
  - 3.3. Lunch: Long Creek General Store.