

Carrabassett Valley Uprising

By Mark Condon

“That was the most fun on a bike I’ve had since I was a kid,” Matt said, still breathing hard, on a sunny August morning. He’d just navigated Carrabassett Valley’s newest trail, The Real Deal, down two narrow spines of rock, before swooping back and forth over brown buttery single track. “Wow.”

My friend Tony had asked me to lead a ride in Carrabassett Valley area to introduce four friends to the now nearly 100 mile network of single track and double track in western Maine. These trails are the crown jewel of the CRNEMBA chapter, a network that has benefited from a unique partnership between the chapter, the town of Carrabassett Valley, Maine Huts & Trails, and the ski area of Sugarloaf Mountain. But this group ride also evolved into an experiment. As most of this same group rode at Kingdom Trails earlier in the summer in Vermont, it might in some small way answer a question: Has Carrabassett Valley arrived as a peer to Kingdom Trails as a premiere mountain biking hub?

We had started the day on the trail that started it all: Jabba the Hut. The trail starts on a narrow gravel path and then dips into the woods through a ribbon of a single track, over rocks and a few roots, before dumping back onto the gravel path for a short while, then curves back into the single track before another sequence out onto gravel, giving riders quick breaks from the technical challenges.

This was intentional, and a founding principle of the area’s single track, said David Hughes, CRNEMBA’s first president and with Josh Tausas, one of the founders and guiding forces of the trail system. Hughes said Jabba the Hut is a great “gateway” for beginning riders to learn to master single track.

This is not the only trail for beginner riders, as almost all trail construction and improvement for the first couple of years was designed with these riders in mind. In fact, children as young as 4 can be seen riding the single track at the Outdoor Center.

As Ed Gervais of CRNEMBA noted, this design is intended “to reach across generations,” noting that he and his more inexperienced daughter can ride together on much of the trail network.

That there is such a network is amazing considering that just seven years ago, mountain biking in the valley consisted only of rogue single-track trails, old gravel roads, and muddy cross country trails. In fact, the genesis of this trail system came, when, sipping beers on his deck after a gravel road ride, Hughes and Tausas asked each other, “Why isn’t mountain biking happening here?”

This simple question set the pair in motion. They worked with the town to use funds from a forest management project to engage IMBA’s Pete Webber, Jr, a national expert on trail design, to conduct a feasibility study on the area. Webber concluded that, though there were lots of rocks and roots and little soil to work with, there was plenty of potential. The key, he said, was to form a mountain bike club.

So they reserved a small room at the local recreation center, expecting a handful of people. 40 showed up, and 12 of those volunteered to serve on a board. With \$500 in the bank, CRNEMBA was formed in August of 2010. That was the easy part. The hard work was still to come.

“When we suggested building a trail around the bog (at the Outdoor Center),” Tauses recalled recently, “they laughed at us.”

This skepticism wasn’t without merit. The area is a tangled mess of rocks and roots. And it features, like much of the area, a distinct lack of soil to work with. Unlike, say, the Kingdom Trails area, whose Darling Hill trails are basically located on top of a sand pile, Carrabassett Valley is more like a rock pile. As CRNEMBA’s Jon Boehmer said, building trails in the valley is like “mining dirt.”

Realizing the challenge in front of them, the club and the town hired Hardy Avery, a professional trail builder from Vermont, in 2010 to create a three-year plan and help build trails centered around the Outdoor Center (the club eventually added another hub around Campbell Field, across Route 27). It wasn’t easy to build a trail around the bog, Tauses said, but it showed what could be done. In fact, Moose Dip is a testament to what hard work and clever trail building can create.

Later on that August morning, our group rode Moose Dip on our way to the Outdoor Center. You dip down off a gravel path and flow along the bog on a narrow path of dirt, then over rock sequences, passing views of water, finally around a solid rock face, past a waterfall, and again over rocks and dirt until you come out again on a gravel road. It’s a short but thrilling trail.

Gervais said Moose Dip is his favorite trail, because it is a “sampler, a taste of everything” the valley offers a biker.

Though much of the trail building now involves using an excavator, Tauses, now Trail Boss, describes building trail like working on a puzzle: moving rocks to help divert water, or shuffling dirt from one section to another, re-routing a trail to an interesting rock face, until in the end, you have a sustainable, fun trail.

We’d enjoyed some of those trails earlier in the day, climbing up T.O.A.D. and Buckshot, two trails that blend into one long climb, a fantastic, flowy ascent, around tight twisty mounds of dirt, up and over faces of rock, switch backing through narrow corridors of trees. As you glide over the smooth trails, take on the rocky technical challenges, it’s easy to get lost in that magic feeling of flow.

It’s not easy to build high-end trails like this and it’s expensive. It’s also important to have a lot of friends to help.

At the top of Oak Knoll, already one of New England’s best trails, lies Stratton Brook Hut, one of four backcountry huts operated by Maine Huts & Trails. We arrived here after exploring the fast and sandy trails along the Carrabassett River, like Meade and Mike’s Mile 59, and after checking out another new trail, Jerusalem Town (built by volunteers at last year’s NEMBA Trailfest), an interesting lollipop loop along a woody ridge, and after climbing up Oak Knoll, an exhilarating three mile trail that winds up the

hill switchback after switchback, alternating between smooth packed dirt and short technical rock gardens, through broad avenues of hardwoods and up and over rock faces.

Stratton Brook Hut is a beautiful place, more a lodge than a hut, and we enjoyed a well-earned cookie and coffee before continuing on our journey, soaking in the views of the Bigelow Range. As Hughes said, "The huts are what make our trails unique."

And the partnerships with the town of Carrabassett Valley, Maine Huts & Trails, and Sugarloaf Mountain, along with volunteers and club members, make the trail network so successful.

From the beginning, the town has supported CRNEMBA, matching grants such as from Bikes Belong (which helped build Moose Dip) and L.L. Bean, and from the Carrabassett Back Country Challenge, the annual endurance bike race the club holds each July. This support has allowed the club and the town to spend roughly \$500,000 creating and maintaining trails. Maine Huts & Trails helps with trail development and hosts the annual NEMBA Trailfest in August. Sugarloaf Mountain is now taking on a more active role, and is planning to hold a three-day mountain bike festival on September 23-25 this year.

There's a clear symbiotic relationship between the trail network and these groups. The groups support trail building and, in turn, the trails draw people to Carrabassett Valley.

And how has the trail system impacted the local economy? In years past, the parking lot at the Outdoor Center had a few cars; but now on the weekends, it's brimming. John Beaupre, a local selectman and businessman, has said that he's been amazed by the "cars pulling into my stores with bikes on them."

Bob Ash, the enthusiastic trail ambassador who runs Carrabassett Valley Bike at the Outdoor Center, said in 2014, he rented 130 bikes, and roughly 2000 visitors came into the center. In 2015, he rented 330 bikes, and 3800 people visited his shop.

And there are more trails planned to meet this growing demand. This year, the club will finish Hurricane Knoll, begin and complete a new climbing trail to Stratton Brook Hut, build a bridge on Grassy Loops, and are looking to spending another \$30,000 trail design and build plan for next three to five years.

"There's always going to be fringe issues" like building a campground or creating a hub for the trails, Tauses said. "My goal is to put trails on the ground. If we make them for everyone and make them sustainable, then everything else will work out."

When our day was done, sipping IPAs and eating leftover pizza, I asked the group how Carrabassett Valley compared to Kingdom Trails. Tony said it was hard to compare because of the different "topography and geology in each area." KT got kudos for its well-established hub in East Burke, the longer "flowy" trails, while Carrabassett was lauded for superior technical riding and the "artistry" of how rocks are incorporated into the smooth single track.

"I think KT and CV are very different trail networks," said another friend Dave Hatch, who has ridden extensively at Kingdom Trails and Carrabassett Valley. "CV feels bigger, but it's also not quite as tied together as Kingdom Trails. But there is nothing like Oak Knoll (at Kingdom Trails), and Hurricane Knoll is another step in that direction."

Earlier on that hot August afternoon, as we prepared to descend Oak Knoll, Tony said, impishly, “no smiling out there.”

I clicked into my pedals and led out the group. I don’t know about smiles, but as we careened down the steep slope, winding down the smooth, flowy single track, over the glaciated rock, through the canopy of trees, I heard laughing and whooping echo through the Maine woods.

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