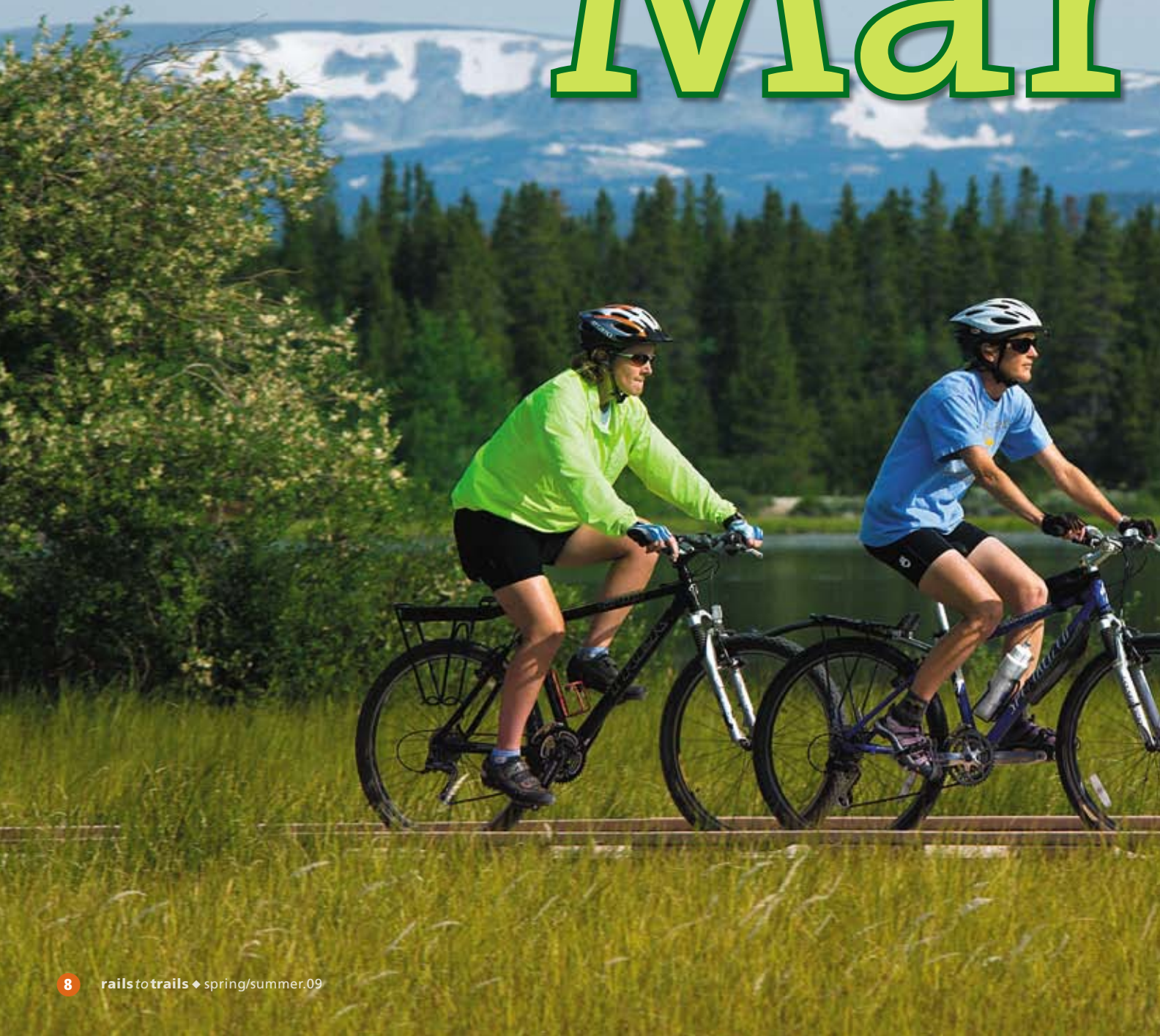


MEDICINE BOW RAIL-TRAIL

# Wyoming's Mar





**By Amber Travsky**

photos by Beth Wald/Aurora Select

# vel

The humongous cow moose—all 600 pounds of her—stands 40 feet ahead of me on the trail. I spot her as I mountain bike down the Medicine Bow Rail-Trail in southeastern Wyoming’s Medicine Bow National Forest. My attempt at silence is marred by the squeak of my brakes. Luckily the noise isn’t enough to send the moose running. Instead, she stands facing me, as if assessing the threat level. After a few seconds, she trots across the trail and into the woods.

In spite of the brevity of the sighting, I’m thrilled. Spotting a moose was one of my hopes when I set out on the rail-trail that morning. Laramie resident Tom Riedel, a frequent Medicine Bow trail user, saw three moose on one outing a few months back.

With the Snowy Range on the horizon, Sue Niezgoda and Peggy McCrackin pedal along the shore of Lake Owen in the Medicine Bow National Forest.

Moose aren't the only wildlife that cyclists, runners, hikers and horseback riders see along the 21-mile rail-trail. Add mule deer, elk, pronghorn, even black bear. Mountain lions and bobcats are in the area but rarely seen. Scampering chipmunks and squirrels are most abundant. Then there are the butterflies, scads of them, attracted to the flowers along the trail. Among the blooms are lupine, penstemon, potentilla and even a scattering of Indian paintbrush, Wyoming's state flower.

Occupying the corridor of an early 20th century rail line through quintessential western forest and mountain terrain, the Medicine Bow is Wyoming's newest—and longest—rail-trail; the grand opening was held in late September 2007. Former District Ranger Clint Kyhl saw the project through from its start in 2001. "It began with a feasibility study conducted by a private contractor and funded by the Wyoming Department of Transportation," Kyhl says. Once the study was finalized, U.S. Forest Service personnel stepped up to move the process forward, with Kyhl leading the charge.

"There were two main reasons the Forest Service got involved," he says. "First, the railroad bed structure was in good shape and we wanted to put it to public use. Second, the community support for the project was overwhelming in both enthusiasm and dollars." Working with the Laramie Bicycling Network, Cycle Wyoming, the

Wyoming Department of Transportation, the city of Cheyenne Board of Public Utilities and the Wyoming Institute for Disabilities, Kyhl's team raised more than \$1 million, which was used to resurface the rail-trail, repair culverts and clean up debris along the corridor. In addition, the money funded construction of five trailheads—all with parking lots and four with restrooms—and a mile-long circuit trail at Lake Owen with a handicap-accessible fishing pier.

Since it opened, the trail has seen a steady flow of visitors. But because the pathway is relatively remote (the nearest sizeable town is Laramie, population about 30,000, and 30 miles east), solitude is nearly guaranteed for those wishing to "get away from it all."

### Alone With Nature

On this clear mid-August day, I am taking in the solitude and biking the trail alone. Last time, when I rode it with friends, we shuttled vehicles to start at one end and drive back from the other. Riedel and his wife, Sue, once did the entire trail—out and back—in one day. "It took about five hours with a break for lunch at the restaurant at



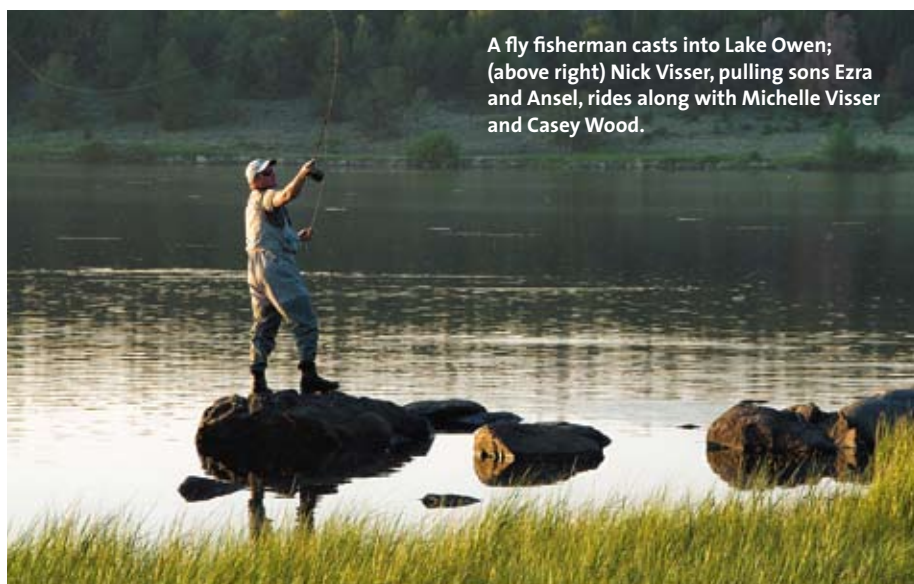
Mountain Home," says Riedel. My plan for the morning is an out-and-back ride totaling 20 miles.

The trail route stays within the mountainous Medicine Bow National Forest except for a brief detour into the small cabin community of Fox Park. Most of the trail has been surfaced with pea-sized gravel. The bulk of the mountain range is federal land, managed by the U.S. Forest Service. It is carpeted with stands of lodgepole, spruce and fir. Open grassland and sagebrush areas are lined with aspens.

I unload my mountain bike at the Pelton Creek trailhead, which, at mile 67 (marking the distance from the old railroad terminus in Laramie), is the lowest point on the rail-trail. I plan to ride to the Woods Creek trailhead for an overall gain of only 360 feet. The climb is gradual, and I'll get a slight downhill ride on the return trip. This rail-trail lacks dramatic grades, but subtle elevation changes such as this make one direction easier to pedal than the other.

As I set out, I'm surrounded by lodgepole pine and a few spruce trees. In another month the route will be splashed with color when the aspens turn golden yellow. For now, everything is green with the exception of the disappointingly numerous dead pine trees; the pine beetle scourge plaguing many of the forests in the Rocky Mountain West is evident here.

After two miles, I cross under U.S. Highway 230 and pause to open a gate. The



A fly fisherman casts into Lake Owen; (above right) Nick Visser, pulling sons Ezra and Ansel, rides along with Michelle Visser and Casey Wood.

Ansel Visser gets ready to strap on his helmet at the Lake Owen trailhead; (at right) fields of wildflowers in bloom just off the trail.



rule of the backcountry is to leave a gate the way you find it. If it's open when you get there, leave it open once you pass through; if it's closed, always reclose it.

Cattle cluster on the other side. "Shoo!" I shout. The animals lazily wander off the trail and away from the gate. Farther down, the route is pocked with cow tracks. I'm thankful for the full suspension on my mountain bike to ease the bounce.

I pass a couple of private mountain cabins abutting the trail and cross Forest Road 526, or Boswell Road. The one place to buy a meal along the trail is at the WyColo Lodge in Mountain Home, about a half-mile uphill to the north on this gravel road. "If you want hamburgers or something similar, this is a good place to stop for lunch," Riedel reports. "An easier option, though, is to bring your own, since there are plenty of lovely lunch sites along the trail."

I press on. A few hundred yards past the Vienna trailhead, at milepost 61, I come to strikingly different scenery—old clear-cuts that, with outcroppings of new pine trees, look like Christmas tree farms, and expanses of blackened, dead pines left from the 2003 Gramm forest fire. The thick car-

pet of grasses and flowering plants and even some small pine trees testify to how well forests revive after fire.

From the trail, I can see beaver ponds in the drainages below, strung together like pearls on a necklace. Such ponds are numerous along the rail-trail, which is why moose hang out in the area. I pause to watch a couple of mallards on the water, then head off. After a few more easy cruising miles, I reach the Woods Creek trailhead at milepost 56.4, my turnaround point. Were I to continue, I'd cross U.S. Highway 230 and rejoin the rail-trail at a gate on the other side.

### Day Two

The next day is equally cloud-free, and a balmy 70 degrees. I get started early for an out-and-back on the northern half of the trail and encounter nary a breeze. Launching my ride at the Dry Park Road trailhead, I plow through about two miles of pathway pocked by sections of deepish sand. This patch of trail is tough going but beautiful, with rock outcrops and occasional willow and wetland openings.

After about 15 minutes of pedaling gradually uphill, I arrive at Lake Owen, milepost 47.1. An old caboos and information boards give me a taste of the history of the railroad.

The Laramie, Hahn's Peak and Pacific Railroad, between Laramie, Wyo., and Coalmont, Colo., first hauled gold and then expanded to transport livestock, tim-

ber and coal as well. The rail corridor “really was a marvel of engineering when it was constructed in the early 1900s,” says historian James Lowe. “At 9,050 feet, this was the highest elevation standard gauge railroad in the country. There are ‘muleshoe’ loops coming out of the town of Albany that allowed trains to scale the steep grade.” (That section is on private land and not currently part of the rail-trail.) Such engineering achievements are one reason the corridor is listed in the National Register of Historic Places.

The railroad operation was abandoned in 1996, and in 1999 the rails and ties were



Mountain biker Amber Travsky races over wetlands along a boardwalk.

removed. Debris littered the corridor but the route itself was in excellent shape. Now the corridor is cleaned up, although rail stakes and other bits and pieces of the former life of the trail can still be found. Outside the corridor, there is little evidence of the bustling commerce once associated with the railroad. Train depots and other structures are long gone, except for the refurbished depot in Centennial that houses the Nici Self Museum.

The caboose, which was donated by WyColo Railroad, the last railway operator, rests on a short section of track at the Lake Owen trailhead. Eventually the Forest

## TRAVEL FACTS

**GETTING THERE:** The nearest airport is in Laramie, a half-hour drive from the trail on either U.S. Highway 130 or 230. Denver International Airport is 150 miles away. Driving from Denver can be more economical than flying into Wyoming.

To start at the northernmost trailhead on Dry Park Road, head west out of Laramie on U.S. Highway 130. After 22 miles, turn south (left) on Wyoming Highway 11, toward Albany. After 8.5 miles, turn southeast (left) onto Fox Creek Road, following the signs to Lake Owen. After 3.5 miles the road divides; continue straight onto Forest Road 517 and go 3.5 miles to the Dry Park Road trailhead. This trailhead is little more than a wide dirt and gravel spot in the road and is not marked. The rail-trail entrance is on the south (left) side of the road, heading south toward Lake Owen. Another option is to continue on Dry Park

Road about 2.5 miles, following the signs to Lake Owen. This route takes you to the Lake Owen trailhead.

To start at the southern end at the Woods Creek or Pelton Creek trailheads, head out of Laramie on U.S. Highway 230. After 25 miles you’ll enter Medicine Bow National Forest. Continue on the highway another 6.5 miles to the Woods Creek trailhead, located on the south (left) side of the highway. If you prefer to start at the southernmost end point, continue another 7.5 miles down the highway to the Pelton Creek trailhead. Just after crossing the Wyoming-Colorado state line, turn north (right) on Forest Road 898. The trailhead is one mile down this gravel road.

A daily fee (\$5) or season pass (\$30) is required for parking at the five developed trailheads; parking at the Dry Park Road trailhead is free.

**TRAIL INFORMATION:** The rail-trail is marked with mileage posts every mile, but the miles are the distances of the entire historical railway that started in Laramie. All trailheads have parking areas; Lake Owen is the only site with potable water.

In the snowy months, the ungroomed rail-trail attracts skiers and snowshoers. With an elevation ranging from 8,770 feet to 9,030 feet, the trail stays wintry well into the spring. Cyclists and horseback riders should wait until mid-June to use the trail, while runners and hikers willing to dodge the occasional snowdrift can get on sooner. Some of the best cycling is in the fall, but trail users should wear orange vests during hunting season—normally the month of October. Full-suspension and hybrid mountain bikes work well on this trail. Motorized vehicles are not permitted.

For more information and a map of the area, check the Cycle Wyoming Web site ([www.cyclewyoming.org](http://www.cyclewyoming.org)).

Morning in the Snowy Range, where the granite peaks look snow-covered all year.



(Clockwise from top) Pronghorn antelope in the foothills of the Snowy Range, near the northern end of the trail; Peggy McCrackin runs along the crushed-gravel surface; in the town of Centennial, an old outpost of Wells Fargo & Co., first made famous for its overland stagecoach mail service in the 1860s; Columbine flowers blooming among pine branches.



Service hopes to open the caboose for overnight stays. Today, picnic tables at the trailhead invite visitors to stop and enjoy the mountain setting.

I decide to explore and pedal the pathway around Lake Owen. This popular trout fishing and boating reservoir is surrounded by mixed evergreen and aspen woodlands and some open meadows. After crossing a boardwalk over some wetlands, I pause at a pullout to relish the magnificent view of Medicine Bow Peak. At 12,013 feet, it's the high point of the Snowy Range—so named because the granite peaks look snow-covered even in the dog days of summer.

As I circle the lake, I pass several groups of anglers. “How’s the fishing?” I ask. A young boy tells me he’s caught one fish so far. A grin spreads ear to ear as he lifts a stringer holding a 12-inch rainbow trout.

Back at the caboose, I pick up the rail-trail again and push on. Before long I meet a group of hikers hunting for mushrooms,

a popular hobby here in late summer.

Just beyond the Lincoln Gulch trailhead at milepost 52.4, I meet several cyclists. With its proximity to Lake Owen and the campgrounds there, this section of trail is the most popular and sees the most use. The trail flattens and straightens from this point, running parallel to Forest Road 517. Soon I reach the edge of Fox Park, a once-thriving railroad community that today is home to a handful of cabin owners. The trail leaves the railbed for a one-mile detour due to unresolved ownership issues.

Beyond the detour, I push my bike up a steep embankment to rejoin the rail-trail. From here, the trail turns rough. It’s a ride on grass, gravel and railroad-vintage cinder for two miles. As new District Ranger Larry Sandoval explains, the trail is still a “work in progress.” Unimproved sections of the trail will be upgraded as soon as economically possible. Even this bumpy section is worth the challenge, though, because I ride

through a tranquil forest gleaming with beaver ponds.

When I reach the gate before Highway 230 at milepost 56.1, it’s time to turn around and head back. The reward for retracing my route is revisiting a scenic part of the trail and cruising down a gradual slope. I zip along, the ease of pedaling giving me plenty of leisure to look around.

“My” cow moose appears about a mile shy of Lake Owen on this leg of the ride. While the ideal weather, beautiful scenery and nice workout make for a wonderful morning, seeing the moose really completes my day.

**Outdoor writer Amber Travskey is a wildlife biologist, cyclist and all-around outdoorswoman. Based in Laramie, she was in on the grassroots effort to make the Medicine Bow Rail-Trail a reality. Author of *Mountain Biking Wyoming* and *Mountain Biking Jackson Hole*, she is tour director for the Tour de Wyoming bicycle tour that crosses the state every July.**