

Bulldogging the Barranca

A friend told me that some people don't like to ride mountain bikes in Montaña de Oro because of the expansive soil there. I didn't know what that meant so I loaded my bike in the truck and drove to Islay Creek Road. This is one of the entry points that bicyclists are allowed to use in the park. I liked it because it was long and level and gave me plenty of time to warm up before tackling that expansive soil.

At the eastern boundary of Montaña de Oro, there are two trailheads. One is the Eastern Boundary Trail. The other is the Barranca Trail.

About twenty yards up the Barranca Trail I found what might be called expansive soil – loose rocks, sand and rutted switchbacks. I assumed my customary climbing position – hands wide on the handlebars, head down, back bent, both feet on the left side of the bike, on the ground, pushing the bike up the trail.

At the top of the hill, sweating and panting, I sat at the picnic bench and enjoyed the view. Off to the north I could see Estero Bay. On the left was Hazard Peak. The next part of the trail appeared to go to the top of Hazard Peak. I could see that the trail went up and down several shorter hills before getting there.

After I sat for a while and regained my composure, I started pedaling again. After a short level section, the ground dropped away from the front of the bike. I assumed my descending position, fingers on the brake levers, head up, back straight, both feet on the ground as I tried to keep the bicycle from running away. There was a lot of expansive soil here – tiny round rocks, like marbles, as the trail went down and back up again. This continued all the way to the top of the next peak. I stopped several times to enjoy the nice views of Morro Rock, the sand spit and the estuary.

Central Coast Concerned Mountain Bikers have placed a workbench at the top of Hazard Peak. It is one of several that they have installed throughout the park. CCCMB is a local organization dedicated to building and maintaining trails in San Luis Obispo County. Using funds donated by the San Luis Obispo Bicycle Club, they build workbenches and buy tools, then carry them into remote areas. Each work bench has a shovel, a rake and a Macleod and an invitation for travelers to use the tools to repair damaged portions of trail.

From Hazard Peak, the road is downhill and exposed. There are sudden drop-offs beside the trail and on the trail. On the way down, I saw two equestrians coming up. This was an opportunity for me to stop and be courteous – get off to the side of the trail and avoid spooking the horses. I got the bike stopped without going over the handlebars and swung my leg up. My heel caught on the crossbar. On the way down, backward, I had just enough time to wonder if the injury I was about to suffer was going to be permanent. My tailbone hit first. That added whiplash to the rest of the fall. My head rang like a bell as the helmet smashed into the ground. My first thought, of course, was to get up fast so that the horsewomen would not see me lying on the ground. It seemed like a long time before the request to move traveled from my brain to my legs and

arms. The riders approached and inquired if I was okay. They said they didn't see how bicyclists ride these trails.

Farther down I encountered a man and woman hiking up. They moved to the side of the trail. The man said, "Watch, dear, he'll show us the best line to get through that patch of sand." As he said that, my bicycle weaved and lurched and stopped dead. I was able to keep from falling by frantically waving my arms and legs. I don't think that was the best line through the sand.

There were no more people for the rest of the descent, just rocks, roots, ruts, ledges, sand and railroad ties. There are not many places I've gone where it was harder to get down than it was to get up. When I arrived home, Gail asked me how the ride went. I said, "Fine, no problem." She smiled and plucked a piece of sagebrush out of my hair, "That's nice, dear. I'm glad you had fun."

Robert Davis lives in Morro Bay and does not normally ride a mountain bike, for obvious reasons.