

My Mountain 420 ride

"Ignorance is bliss" would be a good way to summarize my Three Rivers Way Mountain 420 ride. I'd learned of the route while doing some research on existing routes in the region that I could link up to form a loop through southeast TN, western NC, and north GA. After contacting Kim for her thoughts on a draft of my route, she mentioned the grand depart and suggested it as a way to see many of the options in the area. I was able to get a 4 day window in my schedule to attend, so I signed up for the Mountain 420 knowing that it would be a challenge for me to complete the route in that time frame, but convinced myself it would be possible with some long days and some luck. I also knew I could finish with the Vista route option or bail completely if I ran short on time. Besides getting a general idea of the distances between resupply stops, I didn't study the route much and just loaded it into my bike computer and decided to take it as it came. I put 29x2.35" Ikon's on my Tumbleweed Stargazer and knew it would handle just about anything and I could walk the rest.

I got a chance to meet many of the other riders around the fire at Kim's Fireside Outpost the night before the grand depart. I listened to a few descriptions of various sections of the route and didn't hear anything that gave me pause. It sounded like we were in for a fun time in the woods with the typical suffering that always comes with riding a bike in the southern Appalachians.

A severe storm moved through the region the night before the start and it was still on its way out at the 6:30 am start time. We rolled from Hiwassee/Ocoee Scenic River State Park in a downpour with lightning and a strong wind and started climbing Coffee Branch Trail. I ended up at the front of the group with Graham Grant and we started bumping into a few fresh blowdowns across the rough doubletrack. Graham was shooting for a fast time on the Vista route without stopping for sleep and we rode together until I split off to ride Starr Mountain, which the Vista bypasses. Starr Mountain was uneventful with a few more blowdowns. I proceeded on unpaved roads of various condition and some quiet pavement until my bike computer indicated a right turn on Epperson Road, which would lead to Whitt Road and the first water crossings of the route. As soon as I made the turn, I saw Graham headed up the road towards me and knew something had gone wrong as I was not expecting to see him again during the ride. He told me that the heavy rains had the creek crossings at impassable levels and he had already contacted Kim. I took my phone off airplane mode and had a text from Kim about the unsafe crossings, asking me to call her. She told me she didn't have a reroute option at the time and asked what I planned to do. I had my bike and four days off, so I wanted to ride, even if I deviated from the official Mountain 420 route. Kim warned me that given the unknown conditions from the storm, the rest of my ride could be an adventure, which would prove to be accurate foreshadowing. Graham and I studied the map and came up with a possible reroute, but the map showed that road crossing another creek and we didn't know if it was a ford or bridge and whether it would also be flooded. We checked Trackleaders and saw that Kyle Rowe and Jason Vance were not far behind, so we rode back a short distance and caught up with them to go over the options together. We all decided to try the possible reroute that would get us to our first resupply in Tellico Plains while avoiding a busy highway. The reroute ended up being quiet, rolling pavement that crossed the creek over a culvert with no issues. The four of us met back up while resupplying at a convenience store in Tellico Plains. With his Vista FKT hopes dashed, Graham decided to salvage a big day ride out of the situation and head back to Fireside Outpost. I proceeded on the Mountain 420 route down the Cherohala Skyway and grabbed a burger and fries at a riverside drive-in. The afternoon was uneventful besides a short chat with a friendly dual sport motorcycle rider. I got to Indian Boundary Lake and cruised the smooth bike trail

around the lake as the sun set. I stopped to check the map and saw that I had a long paved climb ahead of me. I turned on my headlight and proceeded up the Cherohala Skyway. I took a couple breaks at the overlooks and got some beautiful twilight views with a bright crescent moon. I was scared by something moving on the other side of a steel guard rail, which turned out to be a wild hog that seemed just as scared as I was. After briefly crossing back into my home state of NC, I left the Skyway to descend on North River Road a short distance and then found an old gated forest service road where I hung my hammock and caught a few hours of sleep.

I caught up with Jason Vance, who had passed me while I slept, the next morning. I stopped and talked to a trail runner at Unicoi Gap, discussing the route and some backpacking I'd done in the area a few years ago. Jason caught back up on the Unicoi Gap Trail singletrack, along with Brandon Lee, a Vista rider who smartly waited until after the rain cleared out to begin his ride Thursday afternoon. The three of us took a break on Buck Bald and enjoyed the view and some snacks at the picnic table. On McFarland Road, Brandon rode away out of sight and we encountered dozens of downed trees across the path, which began to take a mental toll on me and really slow down progress. I eventually reached a spot that someone had gotten to with a chainsaw and felt relieved, but the break from the blowdown wouldn't last long. I caught up with Brandon again in Copper Hill, where we resupplied. I left town ahead of him and he passed me while I was filtering water on the Brush Creek singletrack. That was the last I'd see of another rider during the event. The singletrack along the Ocoee River was covered in downed trees and progress was slow again. I reached Thunder Rock Campground, soon after which I'd have to make my choice to either keep heading west following the shorter Vista route, or to head south into GA and the Cohuttas. I was familiar with the route in GA and I knew there was a lot of singletrack ahead that could be slow going if it had blowdowns like I'd just encountered. I really wanted to complete the Mountain 420, though. At the intersection where the routes split, I had service and called my wife, which lifted my spirits and I headed towards the Cohuttas hoping that the storms hadn't been as bad down there. I rode until a little after midnight and found a spot to hang my hammock just off the road not far from Jacks River Fields Campground.

The next day started with Mountaintown Creek Trail, a fun descent followed by numerous creek crossings. Mountaintown is notorious for blowdowns, but I only encountered one small one. I began to think my hopes of better conditions on the southern portion of the route had been answered. I quickly found out they had not when I headed up the Pinhoti Trail hike-a-bike from Mountaintown to Bear Creek Trail. There were numerous blowdowns across the trail and the terrain was too steep to go around them. The only options were over or under. One in particular had me on the brink of removing the wheels and rack from the bike in order to get it through. Instead, I decided to try and climb over it with the bike and before long the bike and I were 10 ft off the ground on top of the downed poplar. Before I started descending Bear Creek, I emailed Mulberry Gap to order a to-go lunch. Bear Creek and Pinhoti 1 and 2 had minimal downed trees and were as fun as they always are, but spiced up a bit by being on the rigid dropbar bike. I rolled into the oasis that is Mulberry Gap with a huge smile. I took a break and ate and tried to dry my socks and feet from the Mountaintown crossings. After a quick chat with Kate, I rolled out and settled in for the grind up Pinhoti 3. Things went surprisingly smooth until I ran into heavy blowdowns again just before reaching Dennis Mill on the Pinhoti singletrack. The time off the bike navigating the blowdowns actually seemed to rest my legs, though, because I felt strong on the pavement up past Chatsworth to the Mill Creek gravel. I stopped at the viewpoint at the Mill Creek and Cowpen Road intersection for a spectacular sunset and to check my progress. I knew I'd need to make it a pretty late night to get within striking distance of finishing the next day, so I mounted my helmet light and pushed on. I started to feel the effects of the sleep deprivation on the Big Frog climb. There was on-going logging along the sides of the road

and it was a warm evening, so I stopped and sat against a log and slept for a few minutes. That seemed to be enough and I rode on to Pace Gap and proceeded up Hogback Mountain. The ridge looked like it had been completely stripped by the winds a few nights before and there were countless trees across the road, but they were much easier to navigate on the wide gravel as opposed to on tight singletrack. I scared up numerous wild hogs before finally reaching the start of Sylco Trail a little after 2 am. I hung my hammock and set an alarm for 5:30 am and slept hard.

I started down Sylco at first light and was glad that my timing had worked out that I didn't have to navigate it in the dark. Again, blowdowns slowed progress to a crawl. I lost the trail at small creek crossing, but eventually got back on track. Progress was slow as I was constantly stopping to remove sticks from my spokes and derailleur. I eventually made it out of Sylco and onto smooth gravel and eventually pavement. I took a break to check my mileage and thought I could finish that night, but I knew there was no way I was going to be in any shape to drive home. I texted Kim to make sure I could stay at Fireside that night and hang around to work remotely on Monday and she assured me I could stay as long as I needed. Now that I had a solid plan to wrap the ride up and still fulfill my work duties, I proceeded to Ocoee Dam Deli & Diner for breakfast and then on to Needle Eye Outpost, where Kim, Michael Rasch, and Chase Blanton were waiting to greet me. I refilled my water and dried my feet briefly, but the best part of this break was the encouragement I got from them. It was a huge mental help, which I'd be thankful for it when I got to the Chilhowee Recreation Area singletrack, which was strewn with even more blowdown. After more crawling, climbing, and cursing, I made it to the beach area parking lot. It was a jolt to emerge from all that suffering among a crowd of people enjoying a beautiful Sunday afternoon at the lake. I had enough food to finish the route, but it was going to be a stretch. I had forgotten there was one more resupply stop on the route, The Store in Greasy Creek, but I smelled it before I saw it. I had a sandwich, two scoops of ice cream, and a Yoo-Hoo and chatted with some friendly locals who were interested in the remainder of my route for the night. I proceeded up Kimsey Highway feeling refreshed. I was glad to see someone had been up there with a chainsaw, but I reached the point where they stopped before long. After navigating a few dozen blowdowns, I reached a spot up to which someone from the opposite direction had cleared. Smith Mountain Road was chunky and my hands were really feeling fatigued from all the chatter. Smith Mountain Trail had more blowdown, but the motos had already been through since the storm and had some bypasses established. Crossing the Hiwassee suspension bridge in the dark was surreal. By the time I got to Reliance, I was having some left knee pain that had me one-legging it on the flats. The Spring Creek crossing was about knee deep and the cold water felt amazing on my sore feet. I wandered around Gee Creek Campground for several minutes searching for the entrance to the singletrack, but eventually found it. Fittingly, I crossed a few more blowdowns before finally emerging in the Hiwassee/Ocoee State Park parking lot at 12:45 am to find Kim there to welcome me.

This was my first bikepacking grand depart and I set out to challenge myself with a tight schedule and to see as much of the region from a bike as possible. The Mountain 420 is a challenging route even without the blowdowns, but it seems to really display all the region has to offer: gravel of every variety, old FSRs, OHV trails, and singletrack. The Mountain and the Vista would both be fantastic to ride at a touring pace to take in all the beauty of the area and I hope to revisit the route with that approach, but I think I'll give the sawyers some time to work on those blowdowns first. I can't thank Kim enough for developing the route and putting on this event.