

Reverse Mountain Recap

TL/DR: For some stupid reason, I rode the Mountain in the reverse direction. 443 miles, 53K feet of elevation, 95 hours and 49 minutes. I stayed hydrated and my stomach remained online the entire ride. Some segments seemed better in reverse, other segments were worse. Kim was right, this was a bad idea. But I'm attracted to bad ideas like a moth to a flame.

Day 1 - Ocoee/Hiwasee State Park to GA game checking station (127 mi)

The Powerhouse Rd and Smith Mountain climbs are nice with fresh legs. The gravel climb up to Chilhowee isn't great, but I much prefer descending the trails and gravel (the wall!) following Chilhowee than the opposite (normal) direction. The day was hot, and although I stayed on top of my hydration and nutrition, I started dragging near the last mile of trail (Hancock?). I picked up some food from the Hiwassee mart and ate, rested and visited with Kim and Chad at Needle Eye Outpost. I rolled out toward Benton with a huge thunderstorm looming in the distance. As I rolled into Benton at the Hwy 411 crossing, the sky let loose and I took refuge in the bay of a DIY car wash. After 30 minutes, the thunderstorm passed, and I rode on to Sylco where a steady rain would begin and continue until the next morning. I caught a brief hour of sleep sitting in a dry spot under a tree on Big Frog, then bivvy'd for another 90 minutes at the GA game checking station at Cowpen Rd. Despite the shelter, the concrete slab seemed to draw the heat from my body and I probably shivered more than I slept.

Day 2 - Cowpen to ~ Jacks River Fields (203 mi)

This is the segment that seemingly dooms the reverse route. Cowpen, I can ride in either direction. I much prefer descending Mill Creek in the reverse-direction. My tiny gear limits how fast I can traverse the paved section from the bottom of Mill Creek to the trailhead at Dennis Mill. I started Dennis Mill with a bit of hike-a-bike until it leveled out, and the remaining section of Dennis Mill was enjoyable until rolling into Rock Creek. Rock Creek gains 1014 ft in 1.8 miles...I did this in 2021, so I knew what I was in for, but this time I wasn't suffering from a locked-up stomach. It took me a bit over an hour to push my bike up this wall. P4 and P3 down into Mulberry Gap are leisurely in the reverse direction. But, in a casual comparison of this effort to my 2019 ride in the normal direction, I'm over an hour slower today in the reverse direction. I drop into Mulberry Gap to freshen up, eat and pack some pre-ordered meals. I enjoyed a couple of beers with some visiting Canadians before catching a 2 hour nap. I head out of MG and push my bike up P2 until it leveled out. Much of P2, the connectors and Bear Creek are enjoyable in the reverse direction. Here I'm thinking that Kim's cautions were for nought, but then I arrive at Mountaintown. Somehow, my pre-ride planning for what pains I'd encounter in Georgia only focused on Rock Creek. Mountaintown gains 1315 ft in 3.6 miles, and while not as steep as Rock Creek, Mountaintown is littered with treefall and creek crossings that prevent riding much more than a few hundred feet at a time. The last 2 miles, however, is where it gains most of its elevation, including steep climbs up a scree field, and a final steep push up to the gravel road. I rode very little of Mountaintown, and as I was nearing the end of this 24-hr segment, this actual 2-hr effort began to feel like 5-hrs of despair. I eventually got up to the gravel, rode to the piped-

spring above Jacks River Fields camp to refill my bottles and eat, then rode maybe 4 miles past the campground to the Benton MacKaye hiking trail where I set up my bivvy in middle of the trail (it's just too cold next to the river at the campground). I changed into a pair of dry socks before slipping into the bivvy sack, and woke up after 90-minutes of shiver-free sleep to begin day 3.

Day 3 - Cohuttas to Skyway (321 mi)

Some moderate climbing and a lot of descending began the day. This was one reason I envisioned the reverse route might suit me better...I don't enjoy these Cohutta climbs in the normal (and DMR) direction. Though, whatever time I gained in the Cohuttas was lost on the trails between Thunder Rock and the Ocoee Whitewater Center. I made it to the Whitewater Center around noon and lunched on the 2nd sandwich Mulberry Gap made for me the previous day. Despite feeling like I was keeping up on my caloric intake, I generally felt all-around fatigue this afternoon. I lazily meandered through Brush Creek, and eventually drug myself up to Ducktown. In Ducktown, I ate half of a Hunt Bros pizza at a gas station, and topped it off with chocolate milk and Dr. Pepper. Though feeling like I overate while riding across the following paved section, I felt a second-wind climbing Kimsey Mt Rd, descending Ditney, then climbing to Buck Bald just as the light and warmth of the sun disappeared. The wind was chilly and picking up intensity at the top of Buck Bald as I layered up for the coming night riding. Descending the Unicoi was enjoyable, and the descent into Coker Creek shielded the growing wind that would later be my challenge for the night. The segment between Coker Creek and Green Cove was another rationalization for attempting the route in the reverse direction: I assumed the Bald River climb out of Coker Creek would be preferable than out of Green Cove (the normal way). However, Bald River Rd is fairly exposed and the wind was severe, contributing to this section into Green Cove taking over an hour longer than the normal direction. Now, if you've ever been to Green Cove at night, you understand that this is the coldest location on earth when normalized for latitude. This is not a good place to catch a nap. So, a few miles up the road -after several zombie rolls nearly off the road- I decided to bivvy against a dirt bank than might shield some of the cold rolling over from the nearby river. It was a moderately-successful strategy, as I didn't hit the violent shivers until about an hour in. Call it '90 minutes of sleep' and I finished the descent into Green Cove, followed by the climb up to the Skyway.

Day 4 - Skyway to Ocoee/Hiwasee State Park (443 mi)

The Skyway climb was another reason encouraging my reverse-direction attempt. I do not enjoy riding the Skyway -at any time of day or night- and would gladly give up time to instead ride up North River Rd. As it stands, it's nearly a draw on time, and -at the start of Day 4- I ran into Matt Mustin near the top of the Skyway, who greeted me with a blazing fire, pizza, and chocolate milk! Matt had car-camped up there around 11pm the night before, without a cell signal to confirm how far along my dot had moved on TrackLeaders. What a treat and a wonderful visit to motivate me at the start of this final day! I quickly dropped into Indian Boundary and made the push towards Jake Best. Again, my logic suggests the climbing out of Indian Boundary in the reverse direction feels shorter and quicker than climbing out of Jake Best (in the normal direction)...it certainly is when I'm riding lighter on the Tellico Highlands route, but not today after 77

hours on a loaded bike. Comparing this section to my 2019 M420 in the normal direction, I'm about 30 minutes slower between Indian Boundary and Jake Best -which might have been due to the nap I took early on the climb. The double-track climb from Jake Best to Miller's Ridge, while 16 minutes slower than the normal direction, is a segment I can grind my loaded one-speed non-stop. I take the psychological victory all the way into Tellico Plains, fuel up on a teriyaki veggie/rice bowl and ice cream bar at the Cherohola Market, and prepare for the final 50 miles of the ride.

The final push is a pleasant trip down Witt Rd at dusk with its refreshing creek crossings; Fingerboard Rd, which -even in the dark- I recognize I'm riding in the reverse direction from the my 2021 Gravel Invitational ride (which I accidentally rode in the reverse direction); Towee Pike to Ivy Trail Rd (weeeeeeee!!!); and Starr Mountain, which I usually enjoy from either direction. As I'm starting up Starr Mountain, I'm hearing this eerie wailing off in the distance, maybe a dog that's baying, or an animal dying? I don't know. I ride up the hill and the howling is coming from a woman outside her house calling for her lost dog. After the woman questions me as to why I'm riding my bike up Starr in the middle of the night (because I want to), she asks if I'll keep a look-out for Tucker, who is blind in one eye and friendly. The Anthony Jeselnik voice in my head says, "Lady, I'm gonna pepper spray your dog", but she concedes Tucker will probably be scared of me and my lights. I tell her that I'll send Tucker down the road if I see him, as if Tucker is some adolescent out in the neighborhood past dinner time. I ride away with the confidence of a dog whisperer as she continues howling, and I never see Tucker on Starr Mountain. I descend Starr in a semi-zombie state and traverse Starr Mt trail, enjoying the overlook of the night lights of Etowah. I approach Coffee Branch with the expectations of bombing down to the finish in a blaze of glory only to realize it's a fully blown-out horse trail with baby-heads indiscriminately strewn about with the logic of a Sunday-school Easter egg hunt. At several points I questioned whether Coffee Branch would thwart my attempt to sneak in under 96 hours, but I plowed through (literally) and rolled out of the trail-head to the welcoming arms of Kim and Chad, who wiped away my tears and reassured me that everything was going to be okay.

Epilogue

Chicken-fried steak and mashed-potatoes at the Ocoee Dam Deli. Isn't this why I came here to begin with?