

The Montana Bike Odyssey: The Pilgrimage 2026 Trip Report

The Montana Bike Odyssey 2026 was my first bikepacking race, and second time ever bikepacking. It was the first time I rode more than 50 miles or spent more than 6 hours on a bike. It was the first time I had to think through resupply options mid race or fix my bike on the side of the trail. It was probably my 4th or 5th proper gravel ride ever. It was a *first* in many ways, which are becoming harder to come by in my ripening age. Yet despite all the glorious novelty, much of this event was deeply familiar. The sleep deprivation, hyper-minimalist ethos, and complicated nutritional math all have played prominent roles in my experience with fastpacking challenges, specifically The Bob Marhsall Wilderness Open and Alaska Mountain Wilderness Classic. I went into the Odyssey wanting to see if my niche fastpacking background could carry me through a new sport. I relied heavily on that experience, hoping it would compensate for my basic cycling knowledge and skills. Below describes theory colliding with reality.

Quick highlights and observations until the race started to hurt and shit started to go wrong (aka *the real start*) >>> I like who the event attracted, and who it didn't > The group ride is the perfect way to start > Temps were mitigated by some nice cloud cover > I couldn't get my heartrate anywhere close to Zone 2 for the first 5 or 6 hours, which is supposedly important. My elevated heartrate was not matching my RPE, so something else was driving it (heat, altitude, dehydration, adrenaline?) > When I saw riders heading up Flathead Pass for the 500, I vowed to try that next year > I rode an aggressive trail bike, which I neutered by overinflating the fork. This might have been a good idea in the long run, but it hurt screaming down Bremer Ck Road > 16-Mile was unexpectantly pleasant > Filled my 4 liters to capacity to make the ~50 mile gap between 16-Mile and White Sulphur Springs (WSS) > It started to get hot in the remote section west of Ringling. I got off my bike around the 7-hour mark for my first proper sit-down break, which lasted 5 glorious minutes. I sacrificed half a liter to cool my thighs, which I discovered is a legit pro-tip > Called in a pizza at WSS when I hit HWY 12 > I screamed along to Slaughter to Prevail from HWY 12 to WSS, which somehow yielded a tear or 2 around mile 90 > Forced down 1/3 of the pizza and 2 Fairlife chocolate milks from the gas station. Packed the rest for later; this was the only additional food I rolled out of town with > I was in and out of WSS in ~30 minutes, happy to be slow rolling on pavement with a very uncomfortable amount of matter in my stomach. After the 5 or 6 hour mark, these endurance events become eating contests > If you forced me to scrape the bottom of the genetic barrel for raw talent, you wouldn't find speed or strength. Instead, you'd find my true superpowers: a bomber digestive system that seamlessly handles all forms of good and evil, the elite capability to schedule my daily bowel movements like a calendar invite, and a convenient lack of sweat that keeps my electrolyte maintenance almost effortless.

My arrival in White Sulphur Springs at 2:45 was a surprise. I didn't really know how to gauge my pace on a route this big. My mountain biking background has conditioned me to think of my riding pace as not being much different than my running pace. So, I landed on a guess of 8mph, which would put me in WSS at ~6:00. 2:45 was a lot earlier than 6, and probably too early for gorging on an uncomfortable amount of pizza in the midsummer heat. This got me thinking I could maybe push through with no sleep, or a simple dirt nap. I began making unrealistic calculations of how the rest of the race could go, which was a needed distraction as I slow-pedaled east with a bowling ball in my gut.

I was feeling really hot when I made the FS Road that led into The Castles. When the road met up with 4 Mile Creek, I dumped the bike and laid down in the cool water. I didn't move until I started to get cold and then I chugged an extra liter of water to reset myself. This worked wonders on my system, and I was reminded that it can be faster to occasionally stop for some self-care. I also decided to take a break from the sugary powders and gels that had sustained me to WSS. I pedaled on with renewed vigor.

Somewhere around the midpoint, there was a short and steep decent over chunky ground that broke up the extended climbing. It didn't strike me as anything to worry about, but midway down and at max speed I hit the perfect rock in the perfect place and got a puncture in the center of my rear tire's tread. At home I ride on thick, aggressive tires that have never given me puncture in all my years mountain biking. I had spent some time on recent training rides pretending to get a puncture, and went through the motions of fixing the problem, but I've never had to do it in a real situation. When I heard the blast of air, I pulled over as fast as

possible, located my dynaplug tool on my should strap, discovered the leak's origin, plugged the hole, and celebrated my genius. I then realized the leak was continuing and the tire eventually went flat. I couldn't immediately find any additional punctures and leaks and felt a wave of vulnerability wash through me. I am no skilled mechanic and was now immobile in a super remote section of the course. I pushed the panic down and tried to solve the problem. I then noticed a small dent in my wheel near the puncture. I figured I must have struck a rock as the tire lost pressure, and this was the additional leak point. But this was not something that could be repaired with a simple plug. I decided to add all the sealant I was carrying to the rear tire and distributed it throughout the wheel. I gave the tire a quick blast of CO2 and saw some sealant bubbling near the wheel dent. I then rotated the wheel down so that gravity would pool the sealant around the leak and the sealant started to bubble out aggressively. Then it started to slow. Eventually it stopped bubbling altogether and I began adding air with my pump. The tire was holding pressure! I briefly re-celebrated my genius, kissed my newly acquired high volume pump, and proceeded to walk my bike down the remainder of the steep pitch. The tire would go on to operate fine the rest of the race. I am not sure what the textbook move would be in this situation, but I survived my first mechanical.

The long descent out of the Castles was excellent. Big views and cooling clouds kept me company en route to HWY 294. The pavement section was also really nice; I didn't get passed by a single car until the very end. It was around 8:00 when I turned onto Cottonwood Creek Rd. With a second wind building alongside some unearned confidence, I decided to push through until Wilsall and see what happens. I loaded up on water at the base of the climb and slowly began spinning towards the crux of the route and the coming night.

When it got dark enough that I needed my lights, I downed a 5hr energy, thus committing me to pushing through the Crazies in the dark. As the grade steepened, but before the hike-a-bike section kicked-in properly, I thought the darkness made the riding easier as I was never disheartened at the sight of an endless steep pitch. I slowly rode the steeps, focusing on each section at a time, and regularly rang my bell to ward off any curious bears. I was keeping an eye out for other riders as I figured some may opt to bed down instead of continuing to push on. I passed Brad without realizing it and I swear I saw the occasional flicker of light behind me. When I watched the replay later, I saw that Mason was right on my tail in this section. In a few hours, I would be chasing his tail but would never get close enough to grab it.

The hiking wasn't so bad. I've pushed my bike up some terrible shit before. I actually liked the opportunity to push as it gave me a chance to use some different muscle groups. When I did the Alaska Classic last year, the 8-day-soul-crushing-meat-grinder was characterized by almost constant coastal bushwhacking. While this was undoubtedly terrible, it was a full body effort that never allowed you to settle into a mechanical rhythm. A rhythm can be efficient, but it allows hot spots to fester and isolates your fatigue. I finished The Classic realizing that raw fitness can only get you so far. The unforgiving terrain turned athleticism into a secondary asset, revealing that the real keys to finishing are navigational know-how, a high tolerance for exhaustion, and a refusal to break mentally. A biking event like this has similar mental gauntlets, but the action of pedaling over largely non-technical terrain creates a mechanical rhythm that stresses specific parts of your body to the failure point. As I type this, my hands are still numb, and my grip strength has not returned. So please include more HAB in future routes Graham.

The rain that started around midnight didn't lift my spirits, but it was warm and didn't seem to slow me down. When the grade finally went negative, I kept coasting along, assuming I'd eventually need to walk some more. The rock here was particularly sharp, and I did not want another mechanical. However, the trail never deteriorated into unrideable conditions, at least for my mountain bike, and I was able roll the whole thing without any issues. I am not sure I would recommend sending the crux in the dark and rain with a sleepy head, but it's possible.

The rain slowly increased as the route transitioned from rocky double track to primitive dirt road. At first this transition was welcomed as it meant an end to sketchy and steep technical riding, but I quickly realized the hard work was not over. The top few inches of road saturated enough to produce a sticky mud that began coating all parts of my bike. The more I rolled through the mud, the more mud clung to the bike. Eventually the bike seized up completely and would not roll. This was a first for me. My mountain bike had a fancy front fender mounted to the fork that served as a collection point for mud. The mud would accumulate so thick

under the fender that it completely locked up the tire. Yet the gap between tire and fender was slim enough that I couldn't slide my fingers in there to clean it properly. I was forced to remove my front tire to access the belly of the fender to swipe out all the muck. With the bike mobile-ish, I navigated through the grassy road shoulder to avoid recreating another mud monster. This worked well enough, and I eventually started riding through the grass, despite the horrific levels of mud being spun through my brand-new drivetrain. Just as the ATV track ended at a more established road with better drainage, the road crossed a creek. I dragged the bike down into the water and gave both myself and the bike a rushed cleaning, which somehow didn't get me shivering. Life proceeded to improve slowly after that.

I hit the pavement around 2:00 am, just as the clouds cleared and the stars came out. I stopped for water around 2:30 and then rode until I was half a mile east of Wilsall. Remembering Graham's tip that the road right-of-way is fair game, I decided to roll off the road and bivy on a nice natural bench just inside the fenceline. The only extra layer I decided to carry for the whole trip was a rain jacket, so I was happy I didn't go full psycho-minimalist and leave my 8oz quilt at home. I settled in for a glorious dirt nap, setting a 1-hr timer that would preempt any shivering.

At 5:00 am, 1.5 hrs after leaving the pavement, I was again spinning on my bike. The ride through Wilsall was efficient and I was feeling alert once the caffeinated tailwind and ibuprofen kicked in. However, the road transitioned back to primitive dirt west of town and remained saturated from the previous night's rain. The sun was up enough to not warrant lights, but it had not yet peaked above the mountains to dry out the dirt. Before I knew what was happening, I rolled through more peanut butter mud and eventually the bike seized. Just as I grinded to a stop, I reached the top of small rise and saw 2 riders pedaling along, seemingly having just pulled over to clean their rigs (Kale and Jeff?). So close yet so far. I could see their tracks in the road so I knew they weren't being forced onto the shoulder for prolonged periods. I assumed they must be having an easier time with the mud because of their skinny tires and fender-less forks, but they were probably grinding just as bad as me. I tried to remove the fender, but my bike tool was too short to reach the 3 hidden bolts. So, I removed the front tire again, cleaned out the muck, and rode the shoulder until the sun came out and baked the road dry.

The remaining ~40 miles went well enough. I had to lay down for 5 minutes near Flathead pass to settle a wave of exhaustion, but the pedaling was efficient enough after that. I enjoyed the technical decent down Flathead pass and managed to avoid crashing or adding more dents to my rear wheel. That descent is no joke; I am not sure how other riders can do that on gravel bikes. I filled up on water at the bottom and settled in for 25 miles of fast pedaling to the finish, hoping to finish before noon. Shortly after turning south, I noticed Kale slowly riding with 2 other non-racers. I figured these were people he knew and had slowed to chit chat. I later learned that Kale had gotten a flat coming down Flathead Pass Road and broke his pump while trying to fix it, thus being reduced to the folklore-ish method of filling his tire with grass to keep rolling. Supposedly he rode this way for 15 miles before meeting some trail angels that set him up properly.

I was paranoid the rest of the race. I kept looking over my shoulder waiting to see Kale or Brad rounding the corner to overtake me. Yet the miles ticked by and no phantom cyclist appeared. I eventually rolled into outer Bozeman, cursed my way up the Sypes Canyon Road as I got passed by e-bikers, and arrived at the library 1 minute before noon, barely securing a sub-30-hour finish.

I am left blown away by The MBO. Immense gratitude to Graham for the flawless scouting and organization; his professionalism sets a massive benchmark for underground bikepack racing. To my fellow racers: thank you. You brought out the best in me and made this a peak experience. It's rare to find a top 5 moving at such a similar pace. It gave me a phenomenal playground to test my limits and maintain a semi-delusional hope for the podium. I am profoundly grateful. Cheers to all who toe the line.

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