

Randy Larson's fat-tire biking has ranged from the southern border of the state to the tip of the Bayfield peninsula. This section of Lake Superior beach is a favorite, with sounds of gentle waves breaking along the shoreline.

One man's Wisconsin Odyssey

COURTESY OF RANDY LARSON

THIS CYCLIST PREFERS FAT TIRES AND BACK ROADS.

Lee Fahrney

Randy Larson has traversed the highways and byways of Wisconsin like few others. In 2015, he clocked more than 5,000 miles while peering over the handlebars of his trustworthy, fat-tired carriage. Many of those outings were shared with his wife, Karla, who travelled more than 2,000 miles during the same time period.

All 5,000 miles were in the state of Wisconsin, including three bike-camping trips: an overnight ride across the Baraboo Hills of Sauk County (110 miles); three days following the Kickapoo River from its headwaters to the Wisconsin River and home again (185 miles); and an overnight to Tower Hill State Park in Iowa County (125 miles).

"I have ridden most of the state trails in southwestern Wisconsin, including the Cheese Country Trail in Green County, and the Military Ridge in Iowa and Dane counties," he recounted. Others include Elroy-Sparta (Juneau and Monroe counties), La Crosse River (La Crosse County), Great River (La Crosse and Trempealeau counties), Chippewa River

(Eau Claire, Dunn and Pepin counties) and Old Abe (Chippewa County).

It had been 20 years since Larson had straddled a bicycle when, in 2010, he crafted a plan to ride across Wisconsin.

"Around Labor Day, I bought a decent bike and rode about 600 miles that fall," Larson said. "I rode a trainer over the winter and started my training for the Wisconsin trip in the spring."

The 2011 trip with Karla spanned 550 miles from the Point of Beginning, a historical marker on the Illinois border south of Hazel Green, to Cornucopia (population 98) on the northern end of the Bayfield Peninsula.

A ride across Iowa followed in 2012, extending from the Nebraska border

north of Sioux City and ending at the Mississippi River town of Guttenberg.

"We traveled mostly gravel roads and visited small towns," noted Larson, "seeing 24 towns with a population of under 1,000."

Larson began his 2015, 5,000-mile Wisconsin odyssey from his rural Iowa County home in early January on what he refers to as his "fat bike." He has two — a Salsa Fargo drop-bar adventure bike with mountain bike tires, and a Salsa Mukluk fat bike with 4-inch-wide tires that can accommodate snow, sand and mountain bike trails.

"I ride year-round, so the 5,000 miles started from home in early January on the fat bike," Larson relates. "I didn't have a specific goal for the year, but as I checked mileage in the fall I realized that 5,000 was doable and then made an effort to do that."

"I reached that in November, although the goal itself was not nearly as important as the places I rode and the experiences I had. I did not make a conscious effort to ride longer rides. It was more a natural progression. I enjoyed the fitness and ability to cover more ground efficiently."

Winter bicycling (including fat-biking) is allowed on all Wisconsin Depart-

ment of Natural Resources trails otherwise open to cycling, unless the trail is a groomed cross-country ski trail or if the local unit of government operating the trail has made a decision, reflected in the property's master plan, to not allow winter cycling. There are other nonstate bicycle trails where winter cycling is prohibited. Cyclists must check with local authorities about access. Some snowmobile trails on private land also are not open to cycling.

Wisconsin offers a vast number of well-maintained and diverse state bike trails. Boasting more than 1,000 miles of trails, the Badger State ranks high among biking destinations.

There are three kinds of opportunities for cyclists on Wisconsin's state trails:

- **Bicycle touring trails** — these are low-impact trails that are paved or limestone-surfaced former railroad corridors. There are 37 rails-to-trails options appropriate for all ability levels.
- **Off-road bicycle trails** — intermediate-level trails often in the woods with a variety of surfaces from native soil to wood chips. These are appropriate for more adventurous individuals or families using hybrid or mountain bikes.
- **Constructed mountain bike trails** — specially constructed, challenging, narrow-width trails built to the trail standards of the International Mountain Bicycling Association.

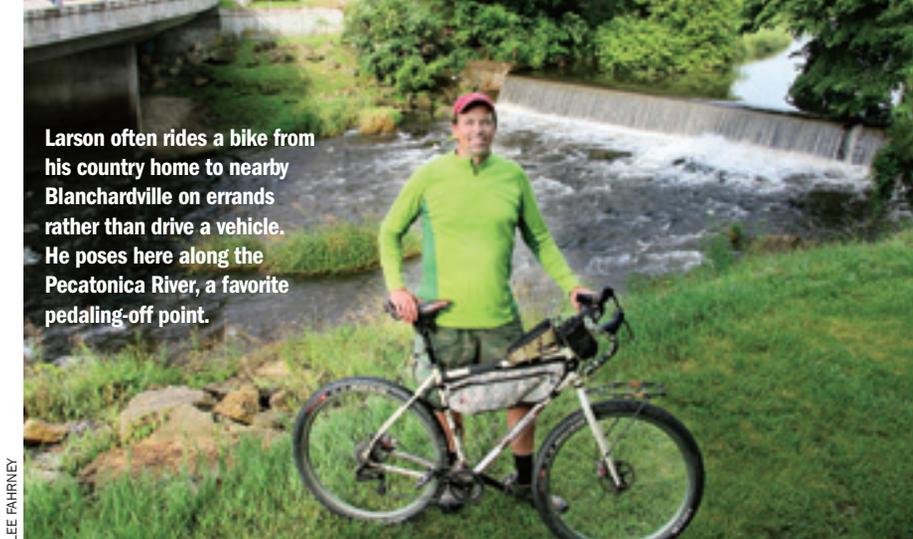
Larson has sampled them all, especially those offering a challenge in the most remote regions of the state.

"I really enjoy riding the forest roads in the Chequamegon National Forest in Bayfield County. It's remote, sandy with wolf and bear tracks," he relates. Another favorite is a section of beach near Bayfield offering sounds of gentle waves breaking along the shoreline.

Larson lists several elements that influence his motivation to ride, such as the health benefits involved — weight management, fitness and mental health.

"I thrive on the joy of movement and the ability to feel like a kid again and meeting one's neighbors one bike ride at a time," says Larson. "We are much more likely to stop and visit when on the bike, as opposed to just waving on the

Larson often rides a bike from his country home to nearby Blanchardville on errands rather than drive a vehicle. He poses here along the Pecatonica River, a favorite pedaling-off point.



LEE FAHRNEY

way by in a car."

Combining recreation, a healthy lifestyle and the pursuit of Wisconsin's history and culture, the Larsons in 2014 biked a 175-mile loop that followed the grisly trail of Chief Blackhawk and his people as they narrowly escaped extirpation in the 1832 Battle of Wisconsin Heights near Sauk City, to the Mississippi River.

Larson credits his father, a lifelong farmer, for an acute awareness of the flora and fauna he encounters along the many backroads and trails he has followed.

"My dad was an amateur naturalist," he says. "He would incorporate studying nature into routine chores — walking along the fence lines in the spring before we put cattle on pasture."

He recalls a memorable experience while riding in southwestern Wisconsin.

"While riding down a hill near the Kickapoo Valley Reserve something yellow caught my eye in the woods," said Larson. "I turned around and found a hundred or more yellow lady's-slipper orchids in full bloom."

A photographer by profession, Larson's motivation includes experiencing the landscape and its people through "sights, sounds and smells — nothing else allows me to travel so deeply.

I love hearing the seasonal sounds — spring peepers, sandhill cranes, bluebirds, meadowlarks..."

While there are people who ride more miles each year, Larson notes, they are

mostly riding road bikes while training for competitive events.

"My cycling motivations are very different, and I have no interest in riding competitively," he says. For example, each year on his birthday Larson rides his age; last year it was 53 miles.

Larson rides frequently in partnership with Karla.

"We ride together and our vacation plans often include riding our bikes and exploring the landscape," he says. "Most of our trips have a theme, often regional history, and I usually photograph during these rides to produce small portfolios of work."

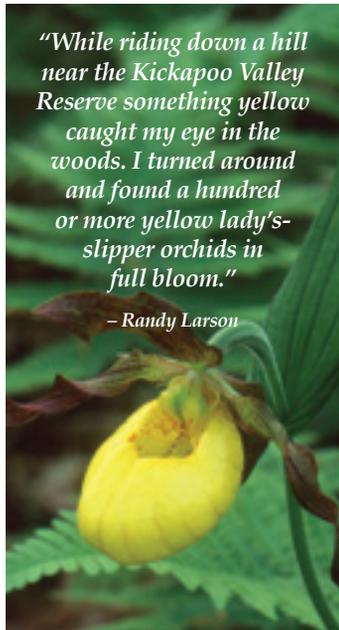
At the same time, Larson finds the solitude of riding alone uplifting, an opportunity, he says, to immerse himself in a landscape and to get away from the phone and electronics.

"I no longer use a bike computer and like a map for navigation — no GPS! Time for thought and reflection shapes my everyday outlook on life and helps me to be patient and positive."

Larson's future biking goals are immense. He envisions riding across the Upper Peninsula of Michigan on gravel roads and trails with very little pavement. He wants to tour the northern range of Minnesota from Fargo to Duluth, explore the Black Hills of South Dakota and ride some jeep trails in southwestern Colorado. His ultimate goal: ride Alaska, especially the Denali Highway and the Park Road.

With an already impressive record of accomplishments, who would argue against success for this man of endless dreams and ever-broadening horizons?

"It's almost impossible to ride a bike and not feel better than before you rode," says Larson.



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— Randy Larson

SCOTT NIELSEN

Lee Fahrney is a free-lance outdoors writer from Iowa County. He also serves as Outreach and Public Affairs Chair on the Executive Committee of the Wisconsin Conservation Congress.