

Fat Bikes on the Prairie

VisitNebraska.com/media/press/fat-bikes-on-the-prairie

I immediately noticed a familiar sound turning onto Whooping Crane Drive toward Crane Trust. The chirp of crickets and cicadas, the whispery rustle tall bluestem in the wind. It's the sound of a living prairie.

I met with Ben Dumas, a recent addition to the Crane Trust team. Ben was hired to run a new initiative that offers VIP excursions through their historic tall grass prairie of Mormon Island and kayaking tours of the Platte River. Guests get the opportunity to experience this rare and complex ecosystem, equally enjoyed by the sandhill cranes and a herd of genetically pure bison.

It's no secret I like riding bicycles, so when Ben offered to ride Crane Trust's fat bikes around the prairie, I couldn't say no. Ben and I saddled up on our trusty steeds: a Surly Ice Cream Truck and Surly Moonlander. We headed south so he could show me some of the work they've been doing on their blinds to prepare for crane season. They also work on landscape management on the Platte River to maintain it as prime habitat for cranes. During lower flows they till the sandbars to rid them of vegetation, keeping a nice landing pad for cranes to roost. During higher flows the river naturally erodes this vegetation.

Next we headed North. The Trust maintains a set of trails in their prairie for these excursions that take you from the headquarters to the Nature center. Fat bikes are the perfect vehicle for this kind of terrain and ecotourism experience. It leaves very little footprint, is extremely capable off-road and without the noisy, erosive side effects of ATVs. To prove this Ben and I were startled when a doe jumped out of the tall grass just feet from us. Continuing on, we aimlessly rode around and shared our ideas on ecotourism.

I left the Trust that day with greater assurance that fat bikes are a perfect fit for experiencing the prairie. And a great guide like Ben makes the experience even better. It's amazing how ecotourism continues to evolve as more people grow their interest in the prairie.

□