



Riding Stud Mill

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In one of the many far reaches of Maine there's a road called Route 9, running more or less from Bangor to Calais more directly than Rt. 1. To those who travel it with any regularity, though, it is known more familiarly as "the Airline". Having always had family in Calais, I've been down this road countless times. Back in the '80s and '90s, the Airline was a total mess. As a major thoroughfare for logging trucks and the quickest route to get to Maine's easternmost border crossing into Canada, it's a busier road than you might expect considering its desolation. Historically, it has been in varying states of disrepair with infrequent and perilous passing lanes, all contributing to its rather harrowing reputation. But it has since undergone major improvements over the years, and really, I know the road best as it is now — an incredibly beautiful byway that brings you through blueberry fields, up and over mountains, and alongside scenic rivers rich with trout. These days, it's the road to my mother's house and, on my many trips to spend time with her, I have carved out little sections of time here and there to fish and canoe and camp and even do a little bike riding in the area.



An early view of Stud Mill and the ride ahead, looking east

During those explorations, I came to know of a road called Stud Mill, a gravel logging road that runs roughly from the Sunkhaze Meadows National Wildlife Refuge outside of Milford all the way to Princeton. It's remote out there and some people spend their entire lives in Maine never hearing of these places. Stud Mill essentially parallels the Airline, but with zero towns or amenities on the way. Stud Mill itself measures a little less distance, but for all intents and purposes, it's about 60 miles long, which means at some point, you will be at least 30 miles from any services. There's a great Bangor Daily News [article](#) about this guy, Bill Cherry, who, together with a couple other fellas back

in the '70s, essentially walked into the wilderness with an axe and plotted out the course for this road which got its name from an actual stud mill, as in a mill that makes studs, as in the vertical pieces of lumber in most walls in America. Today, it's a gravel highway — very heavily used by the logging industry, and slightly less heavily used by hunters and fishermen and the ATV crowd.



Evidence of logging, the main reason for the road's existence

I got into gravel biking in the spring of 2021 and immediately loved it and started grinding out the miles. After building up some endurance, I eventually got a hankering to see what it might be like to ride this road out in the

middle of Maine's remote wilderness. Many of the logging roads in Maine's northern half are completely closed to bicycles and motorcycles, which I imagine has everything to do with safety as the logging trucks haul serious ass out there, but it's a devastating reality nonetheless for those of us who enjoy long distance pedaling away from the traffic and tarmac. Thankfully, Stud Mill is an exception to that rule and, while there might not be many of them out there, bicycles are allowed.



At the trailhead and ready to ride, Bobby Dombroski and his Bombtrack, left, and Max Koenig and his Trek Mt. Track XC, right

Surprisingly, considering the rise in popularity of gravel biking as of late, there is next to no information online about pedaling Stud Mill. This [MTBR thread](#) from 2012 mentions the idea of riding out there, but with zero fanfare. And this guy, André Breton, shares his account of riding it [here](#). Other than that, there's little else, which piqued my interest even further.

I mentioned the idea to a new riding buddy, Bobby, who immediately was in. And then I floated it to another buddy of mine, Max, who I've already collected a few adventure stories with, and he also was on board without hesitation. We threw some dates on the calendar and started planning.



Catching a glimpse of the miles ahead of us. If you look carefully in the center of the frame, you can see the thin line we're heading towards.

I knew from previously driving on Stud Mill that the conditions of the road could be messy. And I had done shorter trips on other gravel roads in the area that left me nearly concussed from the washboard. The season plays a major role in the conditions, as do weather, road maintenance, and amount of use. All of this was out of our control and we couldn't find any "data", so we packed the bikes hoping for the best, but knowing that it could be a bit more of an adventure than we really wanted.



The plan was to ride all the way out on Saturday and all the way back on Sunday - roughly 60 miles each way. We initially wanted to ride from Sunkhaze to Grand Lake Stream, but we couldn't secure any lodging in GLS, so we rerouted to Princeton, where we booked a one-night stay at the Bellmard Inn. And from the Bellmard the next morning to Grand Lake Stream, linking back up with Stud Mill to head back toward Sunkhaze.



One of the many intersections posted with ATV and snowmobile directions

The conditions could not have been better. I mean that sincerely. I actually feel a little guilty offering this ride report because nobody is ever going to have it so good as we did on this trip. I can't say with much confidence that the first weekend in June is THE time to ride Stud Mill, but it certainly was this year. It rained the night before the ride, but not a lot, so the first 20 miles were on dreamy hard pack. The weather was perfect — 60s and sunny. The bugs were only bad when we weren't pedaling, which was incentivizing. And there was essentially no traffic. I bet we encountered fewer than two handfuls of cars, trucks, and side-by-sides over the course of two full days of riding.



Max Koenig



Bobby Dombroski

The elevation gain wasn't substantial at nearly 3,500' each way, but it did feel like we were climbing most of both days. The hills are long rollers with even longer approaches and many false peaks. And you can see so much of the road ahead of you for most of the ride — sometimes flirting with you, sometimes teasing, and sometimes being downright mean.



One of the many roads off Stud Mill leading into the deeper wilderness

There are many (so many!) offshoots from Stud Mill that will bring you to lakes and mountains and rivers. I fully intend to get back out there for more exploring, but for this ride we stuck to the plan as we really didn't know what was in store for us. The first day we ended up with about 5 hours of ride time, averaged 12.5mph, and logged about 3,400 feet of elevation gain with lots of super nice gravel conditions: some hard pack, some hard pack with a softer pebbly surface, some deeper gnarly stuff that felt a bit like it wanted to suck you right off your bike and smash your

face into the ground, and just a little section of grapefruit- to volleyball-sized chunks that required a bit of white-knuckled determination to get through.



Crossing into Princeton, nearing the end of the first day of riding

We pulled over here and there to regroup and chat and snarf down some snacks. And we stopped for a packed lunch at First Machias Lake, which was about 35 miles in. Day one ended with a few miles of lovely paved roads into the sleepy town of Princeton where we were able to take a dip at the local boat launch just down the way and grab some beers from the convenience store across the street. My mother picked us up a smorgasbord of fried seafood and

burgers from S'huckins, a seasonal seafood place in Baileyville, and we all ended up eating in the grass at the boat launch as the sun went down over Lewy Lake.



Joshua's Kona Sutra LTD, just after arriving at the Bellmard

After grabbing some shut-eye, we obliterated a massive breakfast at the Bellmard: \$12 got us a home-cooked feast of 3 eggs, 3 pieces of bacon, 3 sausage links, and 3 pieces of French toast with coffee and orange juice. The proprietors suggested we could save a little money by grabbing breakfast at the gas station across the street, but I'm delighted we

chose to be “big spenders”. At the time of filling my face, I wondered if I was playing the fool, but every calorie ended up proving essential for the ride back.



A flowage from Big Lake, between Princeton and Grand Lake Stream

Previous to this trip, I had done a couple 50-mile rides, a century, and a 100k. That was pretty much it for my bigger rides. As an enthusiastic rider, I get out for 20+ mile rides on a fairly regular basis, but I am by no means a pro or a racer and I had never carried a load on my bike. Max has a similar riding resume. And Bobby had a stint of cyclocross racing, but that was years ago. We all have jobs and manage to carve out time to ride because we love it,

but we're regular guys. Anyway, I had never ridden back-to-back big days, so I was a little concerned with whether or not I'd even be able to get on my saddle at the start of day two.



The Pine Tree Store in Grand Lake Stream, which has a little bit of everything

We had about 13 miles of very nice pavement from the Bellmard to the Pine Tree Store in Grand Lake Stream where we had the chance to grab a coffee before heading back into the wilds. We spotted a few huge trout from the bridge right there in town and then remounted and, within minutes of the store, we were back onto gravel. The section of gravel from GLS to Stud Mill was my favorite section. It's called the Little River Road and it is tighter and narrower

than Stud Mill and has a more remote feeling to it. In contrast, a huge set of power lines runs alongside nearly every mile of Stud Mill, which takes away just a little of the feeling of wilderness, but even so, there is no mistaking that you are far away from it all.



Bobby in the foreground and Max up ahead on the Little River Road

We kept our eyes peeled for moose and bears, but didn't catch any glimpses of the bigger critters. Bobby and Max spotted a deer and we saw a ground hog, a few big boy snapping turtles, a painted box turtle, a grouse, and a mink. And maybe some turkeys. As I mentioned, traffic was a non-issue and the few folks we ran into were pleasant enough.

Nobody seemed too impressed with what we were doing but nobody yelled at us or threw garbage on us as they sped by, either. I'd call that a win.



One of a few big snapping turtles we encountered

The road back was a lot of fun. It rained a bit in the middle of the night, making for another day of perfect riding conditions, with the main difference being the shape my ass was in. It felt a little raw, but it wasn't intolerable. I don't really understand what happened to me on day two, but I had all kinds of pep in my step and had it in me to go ahead and smash all the climbs, which was really encouraging as I often don't feel like I progress much from ride to ride. It

started to get pretty warm in the afternoon (still just low 70s), but a windy rainstorm came charging through with about an hour left of our ride and gave us a welcomed cool down. One challenge of riding Stud Mill later in the season may be the heat as the road is cut so wide to accommodate the power lines that there really is no shade throughout its course. The ride back was 62 miles with about 3,300 feet of elevation. We averaged 12mph, with just a touch over 5 hours of pedaling.



We rode a little over 120 miles over the two days and I'd happily do it again, for sure. While pedaling, I kept dreaming about organizing a big ride out there. Maybe trying to do a mostly self-supported 100-mile out-and-back with an aid station at the halfway mark? I don't know. As a start, I wanted to share our story to hopefully attract a

few more riders to the area. If you do head out there, I suggest being self-sufficient and bringing what you need to take care of bigger issues like punctures and chain breaks. Also, be kinder than necessary to the other folks out there. In this case, they were definitely there first.



A section of stream between Brandy Pond and Great Pond right after a big downpour



Bobby Dombroski & Max Koenig

