

One in a series of stories on fitness, recreation and outdoor adventure in the Bluebonnet Electric Cooperative region.

Get Going

— WITH —
Pam LeBlanc

Warm days and budding wildflowers always trigger the same response: My bicycle flexes its gears and spokes and practically points its way out the door.

In Central Texas, we have plenty of terrain to explore on two wheels.

Biking gets you outside and, if you stick with it, can improve your cardiovascular fitness and decrease stress levels. Springtime, before nature cranks up the furnace of summer, is the best time to get rolling. You just need to decide if you prefer spinning down paved streets or gravel roads.

If you like swift and smooth miles, you'll probably prefer traditional road riding, on a built-for-speed bicycle with skinny tires. If you don't mind bumpy, unimproved gravel roads, and care less about going fast, you might like gravel riding.

Road cyclists should note that there's a new twist in the 2020 Texas MS 150 — a two-day, two-wheel fundraising spin May 2-3 through much of Bluebonnet Electric Cooperative's service area. For the first time, cyclists can choose to start either from Austin or the Houston area. The routes merge in La Grange and end at Texas A&M University's Kyle Field in College Station.

Some of the organized events double as recommended training rides for the MS 150, which began in Houston in 1985 and can draw 10,000

Continued on page 21

Whether you prefer biking on a smooth surface or grinding on gravel, here are roads and rides for cyclists in the Bluebonnet area.

to GRIN or not to G

Story by Pam LeBlanc

Photos by Sarah Beal





This Tomasso Siena Shimano Tourney Gravel Adventure Bike is a budget-priced option for beginning gravel grinders. Designed to be comfortable for long stretches of gravel but still fun on paved roads, it sells for \$550 on Amazon.com.

WHAT'S THE DIFF?

You probably recognize the difference between a road bike — which is streamlined, lightweight and built for speed — and its beefie, more rugged cousin, the mountain bike. But where does a gravel bike fit in the picture?

Think of Goldilocks and the Three Bears. Gravel bikes are more durable than road bikes but not as thick-boned as a mountain bike. They have a more comfortable design, with a longer wheelbase and more standover height. That makes them ideal for the jolts and jars of rugged surfaces. You can even buy special seat posts and gel pads that go under the handlebar tape to reduce vibration.

All gravel bikes use disc brakes instead of rim brakes, which accommodate wider tires that smooth out the ride and provide better grip on uneven surfaces. (A standard road bike runs 23 mm tires, while gravel bikes use 40 to 45 mm tires.) Gravel bikes also come with more mounting points, so you can carry more water bottles or attach a rack.

Gravel bikes weigh a little more than road bikes. The average road bike tips the scales at 17 or 18 pounds, while gravel bikes come in between 19 and 22 pounds.

You can pay from \$300 to nearly \$2,000 for a good entry-level road bike. Gravel bikes start at about \$500. The price increases as the quality of the bike's components increases.

You might not need a new bike if you decide to ride gravel. An old mountain bike gathering dust in a garage can be outfitted with thinner tires for the area's gravel roads.

"I'm a big believer in don't go buy a bunch of stuff you don't need, and I love that with gravel you don't have to have the latest and greatest to have fun," Kinsey says.

GRIND

A top biking trend is to travel on gravel roads, where there is less traffic and more back-road scenery. Above, riders on the 'Come and Grind It' event, which starts about 20 miles southwest of Luling. This year's ride was Feb. 29. At left, Pam LeBlanc and Brett Kinsey, head of Capital City Racing in Austin, enjoy a paved-road ride in Bastrop State Park.



IS IT SAFE TO BIKE ON COUNTRY ROADS?

Bicycling down a two-lane country road is entirely different than pedaling through an urban area.

Instead of rumbling city buses and drivers pulling in and out of shopping centers, you'll more likely encounter a pasture of grazing cows and the occasional farm tractor. You'll also find less cycling infrastructure and motorists less accustomed to mingling with two-wheeled vehicles.

Cyclist Brett Kinsey, director of Capital City Racing, offers tips for rural biking:

Attach a red blinking light to the back of your bike, and use it even during daylight to make you more visible.

Wear bright-colored clothing, such as a day-glow yellow cycling vest.

Wave at motorists as you approach. "It humanizes you and captures their attention," Kinsey says.

Don't weave. Set as straight a course as you can, so motorists can predict your moves. "Don't get so distracted looking at



A hint: Pack enough food and drink for distance rides on rural roads, as corner stores are less common.

cows that you swerve out into the road," Kinsey says.

Observe traffic vs. "If you can't do it in a car, don't do it on a bike," Kinsey says. For example, be sure to stop at stop signs. It's a safe practice, and motorists grow weary of cyclists blowing through intersections.

Look for roads with less traffic Avoid multi-lane highways like Texas 71, U.S. 290 or Texas 95. "Distracted driving due to texting has been a game changer for any athlete who wants to use public roads," Kinsey says.

Remember that country roads don't have bike lanes. Pay attention and make eye contact with passing drivers.

Consider switching to gravel riding. Generally, traffic moves more slowly on gravel roads in rural areas. Park roads are an option, but remember that drivers may be distracted by scenery.

Pay attention to terrain, especially on gravel. You don't want to hit a larger piece of gravel or a rut.

Carry everything you need, including spare bike tubes, tools for quick repairs and a pump or CO2 cartridge to inflate a flat tire.

Hydrate. Drinking a standard-size bike water bottle per hour is a good rule of thumb. Hydration packs worn on your back work, too.

Bring snacks. "City riders get a little spoiled knowing there's a convenience store at every intersection. On gravel you need to be self-sufficient," Kinsey says.

At left, Pam LeBlanc attaches a gravel-tread bike to the back of a vehicle after a ride in Bastrop State Park. The tires of the gravel-grinder style bike are wider, with more nub.

‘It’s always going to be an adventure because crazy things happen on gravel roads.’

—Brett Kinsey,
HEAD OF CAPITAL CITY RACING

Continued from page 18

riders. (Find more information about the MS 150 on page 23.)

If gravel’s more your speed, just remember that even though you’ll travel slower, you’ll work harder.

“Gravel is about 15 percent more strenuous mile for mile, just because the rolling resistance on uneven surface of gravel itself is not the same as asphalt,” says Brett Kinsey, head of Capital City Racing in Austin, which puts on organized bike rides around Central Texas. “A 35-mile gravel ride is going to feel a lot harder than 35 miles on pavement, and you’re probably going to stop and take more selfies with that donkey.”

Gravel riding — or “grinding,” as some call it — is growing in popularity. It appeals to those who want to get out of heavy, fast-moving traffic. Because vehicles don’t drive 65 mph on gravel roads, traffic moves more slowly and beginning cyclists may feel safer. Plus, it’s a different experience.

“It’s always going to be an adventure, because crazy things happen on gravel roads versus paved roads,” Kinsey says. You’ll likely see cattle, horses and the occasional deer. One year, during Capital City Racing’s Come and Grind It ride near Gonzales, about 50 feral hogs ran along a fence line next to the cyclists. “You probably don’t see that on a highway,” Kinsey says.

Whether you decide to get in on the gravel craze, or tune up for the MS 150, we’ve scouted the area to find the best places to log some miles. Now’s the time to pump up your bike tires, fill a water bottle, grab your helmet and pick one of these routes to explore. ■

Pam LeBlanc has written about fitness, adventure and recreation in Central Texas for decades. Her work has appeared in Texas Monthly, Texas Highways, Texas Parks & Wildlife and Real Simple magazines, and the Austin American-Statesman.



The two primary distinctions between a gravel-grinder style bike and road bike are the width of the tires and the bike’s weight. A road bike, above, is built for cruising speed with a lighter frame and skinny tires.

SAFETY TIPS

The Texas MS 150 offers these guidelines to bicycle safety:

Don’t wear headphones or earbuds. (But do wear sunscreen.)

Know and obey all traffic laws so motorists can predict where you’re heading.

Obey all traffic signs and signals Avoid following the leader through traffic signs and signals by checking to make sure it’s still a cyclist’s turn to cross the intersection.

Ride in the right portion of the rightmost lane in the direction you are traveling.

Leave at least 4 feet between your handlebars and parked cars, other hazards or riders.

Ride no more than two abreast and do not impede traffic

Be verbal by communicating to let other riders know about hazards or your movements. Call out “on your left” before passing someone, “slowing” if riders in front of you are slowing down, and “stopping” if a rider ahead stops. “Car back” means a car is approaching from the rear. Alert riders to hazardous road conditions by calling out “gravel,” “pothole,” “sand” or “tracks” and pointing at the hazard.

A SAMPLING OF RIDES TO CONSIDER, next page

A SAMPLING OF RIDES TO CONSIDER



head4hills.org photo

Head for the Hills

TYPE OF RIDE: Organized, on paved roads
DISTANCE: 22-, 40- or 66-mile circuits
LOCATION: Brenham area
WHEN: 8 a.m.-3 p.m. March 28
COST: \$35-\$50 (early registration costs less)
INFORMATION: head4hills.org

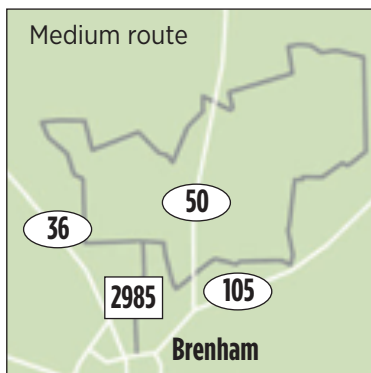
If hills and paved roads are your thing, consider the Head for the Hills Ride that starts in Brenham and unfurls through the rolling terrain of northeast Washington County.

The Rotary Club of Washington County hosts the annual group fundraising ride there — March 28

this year — but you can pedal its 22-, 40- or 66-mile circuits any time. All three routes start and finish at the Washington County Fairgrounds, 1305 East Blue Bell Road in Brenham.

The 22-miler takes cyclists past the Antique Rose Emporium north of Brenham, which should be in full bloom at ride time. The longest route goes all the way to the Washington-on-the-Brazos State Historic Site, where the Texas Declaration of Independence was signed on March 2, 1836.

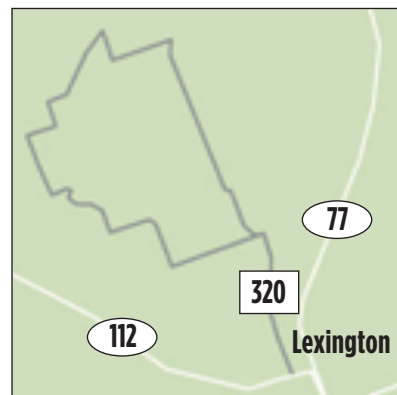
“All three routes are hilly,” says Roger Ross, facilitator of the organized ride, which benefits local charities, including Boys & Girls Clubs, Child Protective Services, the Brenham Heritage Museum and Miracle Farm. “The scenery is phenomenal. During the spring, the bluebonnets and Indian paintbrushes are out. It’s just a beautiful ride.”



Lexi’s Midnight Runners

TYPE OF RIDE: Organized, on paved and gravel roads; night
DISTANCE: 21-, 31- or 51-mile circuits
LOCATION: Lexington
WHEN: Sunset-midnight July 11
COST: \$30
INFORMATION: capitalcityracingtexas.com

Capital City Racing puts on a slate of mostly gravel rides in Central Texas, and this one unfolds after dark. All routes begin in Lexington in Lee County. Make sure you’ve got a good headlight and a blinking taillight before the organized ride on July 11. Or try the 21-, 31- or 51-mile routes on your own anytime.



On event day, rides will start an hour before sunset at the town square. Cyclists will follow roads through rural areas northwest of Lexington before returning to town. At the finish line, riders can find music, food and beer.

Bastrop Gravel Grinder

TYPE OF RIDE: Self-guided, paved and gravel
DISTANCE: 35 miles
LOCATION: Bastrop State Park to Paige and back
WHEN: Any time
COST: \$5 state park entry fee
INFORMATION: tinyurl.com/u46lcne

If you like to mix up your ride with a little bit of pavement and a little bit of gravel, try this easy-going loop. Park at Bastrop State Park, where you’ll find restrooms, campgrounds and a swimming pool. Head north on Park Road 1C, but instead of going toward Buescher State Park, take the left fork at County Road 146.

You’ll hit gravel in a few miles. Notice the sign on a pasture on the left, warning cyclists to not raise the ire of the resident stallion. Stop and check out Antioch Cemetery, where some of Bastrop’s earliest pioneers, including veterans of the Civil War, are buried.

Continue toward the town of Paige, past the pump jack and cows. Brace your abdominals for the last section because stretches of gravel in the “lollipop” (or loop) part of this route are rough as a washboard. You can shorten the ride 10 miles by parking at Antioch Cemetery and riding to Paige from there.



explorebastropcounty.com photo

Bastrop State Park to Buescher State Park

TYPE OF RIDE: Self-guided, paved

DISTANCE: 12 miles each way

LOCATION: Park Road 1C

WHEN: During park hours, 6 a.m.-10 p.m.

COST: \$5 state park entry fee

INFORMATION: tinyurl.com/tcgsn2x

Prefer to stick to pavement? Try pedaling the beginner-friendly 12-mile paved road that connects Bastrop State Park with its Lost Pines neighbor, Buescher State Park just north of Smithville.

Pay the entrance fee at one of the parks and enjoy the route, which features plenty of rolling hills and not much motor vehicle traffic. Keep an eye open for birds along the way — besides the usual assortment of red-tailed hawks, cardinals and turkey vultures, you're likely to spot a woodpecker or two hammering away. Keep an eye out for snakes on this ride.



Texas MS 150

TYPE OF RIDE: Organized, on paved roads

DISTANCE: 155-177 miles over two days

LOCATION: Austin to College Station via La Grange, or Houston to College Station via La Grange

WHEN: May 2-3

COST: Requires minimum of \$400 in pledges plus \$100-\$140 entry fee (early registration costs less)

INFORMATION: tinyurl.com/uuzqt8y

The champion of all organized group road rides in Texas kicks off May 2 this year, with new routes that allow cyclists to begin in Austin, Houston, Katy or Waller. All routes — which range from 155 miles to 177 miles over two days — cut through Bluebonnet's service area,



nationalmssociety.org photo

merge in La Grange for the first night, and finish at Kyle Field in College Station on May 3.

Cyclists stop at Lake Somerville on the second day for lunch before heading to Texas A&M University. Cyclists must raise a minimum of \$400 for the National Multiple Sclerosis Society to ride. Proceeds fund research aimed at ending the disease.

Holey Roller

TYPE OF RIDE: Organized, on paved and gravel roads

DISTANCE: 30- or 50-mile circuits

LOCATION: Rocky Hill Ranch, north of Smithville

WHEN: 7:30 a.m.-2:30 p.m. March 7

COST: \$40

INFORMATION: bicyclesportshop.com/holey-roller

On March 7, Bicycle Sport Shop in Austin hosts the Holey Roller ride, a 30- or 50-mile journey over a combination of paved and gravel roads north of Smithville in Bastrop County. That's "holey," as in "potholes" and other obstacles (ruts, cow pies and the occasional rattlesnake, according to race organizers).

The self-supported annual cruise starts and finishes at Rocky Hill Ranch (an excellent place for mountain biking, too). The ranch is two miles east of Buescher State Park. After the event, riders get beer, lunch and a T-shirt.

The main route is tweaked every year as organizers try to incorporate as much gravel riding as possible. The current route is about 75 percent pavement and



bicyclesportshop.com photo

25 percent gravel.

"It's more of a 'groad' ride instead of a gravel ride," says Laura Neighbors, community engagement coordinator for Bicycle Sport Shop. Still, the laid-back vibe of the ride stays true to the gravel riding spirit. "On a gravel road, you pull over and let people pass and maybe stop and have a conversation."

As you ride, keep an eye out for a ranch gate painted like a Texas flag, plenty of cows, and some long stretches of gravel road lined by pine trees. "It's gorgeous — I love it," Neighbors said.

If you ride the route on your own, try starting at Buescher State Park instead, because traffic whizzes by in front of Rocky Hill Ranch.

Everyone counts!

Why it's essential to participate in the 2020 census

By Melissa Segrest

At the start of every decade, all people living in the United States and its territories are counted. A request for you to participate in the 2020 census could arrive in your mailbox by the middle of March. The U.S. census began in 1790 — 230 years ago — and has happened every decade since. There are lots of reasons for everyone to participate. Here are just five

1. The Constitution mandates that everyone in the country be counted every 10 years.
2. The results of the census are used to determine how many seats Texas — and our Central Texas region — has in the U.S. House of Representatives. That ensures fair representation in Congress.
3. Schools, hospitals, infrastructure like

roads and bridges, senior centers, public works and other important programs receive federal money based, in part, on census data. Nationally, that totals about \$675 billion and means support for Texas, our counties and communities.

4. The population has changed in Texas and our region in the last 10 years. As a result, new census data are used to redraw the boundaries of the U.S. congressional and state legislative districts for the next decade.

5. It is your civic duty! Completing the census is mandatory and a fundamental way to participate in our nation's democracy.

The census is used to make a lot of other decisions, too. Businesses study it to decide where to build, which creates jobs. Real estate developers look at the census to decide where they should add homes. Regional and community governments use the data for public safety and emergency preparedness. Residents use the census results to support community initiatives.

The Census Bureau will ask how many

people were living or staying in your house, apartment or mobile home on April 1, 2020. It also will ask for some information about each of the residents.

There are three ways to respond: by mail, online (for the first time) or by calling a toll-free number. Residents of remote areas or those who don't submit a census form may get a visit by a door-knocking representative.

Your privacy is protected, and your answers to the questions cannot be used against you in any way. It is against the law for the Census Bureau to release responses in any way that could identify you or your household to the public or government agencies. Your anonymous responses are only used to create statistics.

The results will begin to be made public by Dec. 31, 2020.

Get more information and answers to frequently asked questions online at census.gov or by calling 800-923-8282 (toll free).

— *Information courtesy of U.S. Census Bureau and census.gov.*

Update your phone number and speed up power restoration.

When you report an outage from the phone number tied to your address on file, technicians can quickly confirm the location of the outage.

Ways to update your info:

Online

Log in to your online account at bluebonnet.coop or via our mobile app and go to the Preferences tab

By phone

Call member services at 800-842-7708 from 7:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. Monday through Friday

By mail

Check the box on the front of your bill's payment stub, fill in changes on the back and mail in with your payment

Ways to report an outage:

By text

If you have a cell phone on file, you're automatically enrolled in Bluebonnet's Outage Alerts text service. Text BBOUTAGE to 85700 to enroll or confirm enrollment, then text to that number:

- OUT to report an outage
- STATUS for an outage update
- HELP for more information
- STOP to opt out

By phone

800-949-4414

Online

At bluebonnet.coop, click Report Outage at the top of any page

By mobile app

Download the Bluebonnet app on your smartphone and log in, or report an outage online or by phone from the login screen

SAVE THE DATE

Annual Meeting, Board election set for May 12

Bluebonnet Electric Cooperative's Annual Meeting will be May 12 at The Silos, formerly the Sons of Hermann Hall, in Giddings. Four of nine seats on the Board of Directors will be up for election that day, and co-op official will present members with the annual State of the Cooperative report.

Board members serve staggered three-year terms. The four seats up for election this year are from District 3, Bastrop County; District 4, Lee, Milam and Williamson counties; District 6, Austin, Colorado and Fayette counties; and District 7, Washington County.

The deadline to declare candidacy and file required documentation and fees in order to seek a seat on the Board was Feb. 12. Look for information about all candi-

dates and more details about this year's Annual Meeting in Bluebonnet's pages of the April edition of Texas Co-op Power magazine or on our website.

The Silos is at 1031 County Road 223, Giddings. Registration will begin at 1:30 p.m. May 12, and the meeting will begin at 2:30 p.m.

If you are unable to attend, you can vote by proxy. Proxy forms will be mailed to Bluebonnet members this month and must be postmarked by, or dropped off at any of Bluebonnet's member service centers in Bastrop, Brenham, Giddings, Lockhart or Manor by 5:30 p.m. May 5.

If you have questions about the meeting, call 800-842-7708 from 7:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m., Monday through Friday, or email memberservices@bluebonnet.coop.



Bluebonnet's Annual Meeting gives members a chance to vote for Board members, meet Bluebonnet leaders and get the latest news about the cooperative. Entertainment includes a live band, information tables, kolaches and door prizes. *Sarah Beal photo*

REMINDER

Have you changed your Bluebonnet username?

If you have an online account and haven't already changed your username to your email address, please make this update by May 1.

Making the change in advance will simplify your login process when Bluebonnet implements website changes this summer in an effort to provide better online member service.

Any member who hasn't made the change yet will receive an email this month. When you log in at bluebonnet.coop, you will be prompted through the change.

Once you've submitted the change, you will automatically be logged out and taken to a new login screen confirming that your username was successfully changed. You may then log in with the new username to access your account.

Questions? Please contact a member service representative at 800-842-7708 or memberservices@bluebonnet.coop.

Hurry!
Deadline
March 6

SCHOLARSHIPS TO POWER YOUR EDUCATION



Bluebonnet will award
\$2,500 scholarships to
60 area high school seniors
who plan to pursue a
trade or technical program
or **bachelor's degree.**

**Application deadline:
5 p.m. March 6**

Apply now!
bluebonnetelectric.coop/Community/Scholarships

