

Trail Guide For Novice Bikers

The mountain biking experience in Colorado is as good as it gets anywhere in the world! We have an abundance of trails to delight riders of every skill level. Experienced bikers already know about - and doubtless have many favorite - trails in the foothills along the Front Range, in the high country of the Rocky Mountains and among the plateaus and canyons of the Western Slope. People new to the sport, though, may not know where to go to find trails that are at once satisfying but not too challenging. Here, then, are some of the best places for neophyte mountain bikers to discover the thrill of the sport.

These trails are listed from easiest to most difficult, using a rating scale of 1 to 10. All are off-road and most are single track.



Getting Started

If you are brand new to mountain biking, you are looking for trails that are non-threatening, where you can concentrate on learning how your bike operates. You want space to practice getting into and out of the toe clips on your pedals, running through the gears, learning how to shift your balance, and getting a feel for the brakes. These seven locations provide a safe haven where you can become comfortable with your bike and hone your basic skills. Always be aware of and courteous to others you encounter on the trail.

1.0 Highline Canal - Denver

Winding for miles through the cityscape, the Highline Canal offers a wide, smooth gravel path ideal for mountain biking novices. There is virtually no elevation change, so no climbing. You can get on and off the trail at many places around the city, riding as far as you care to go.

1.2 Cherry Creek Reservoir - Denver

There are miles of undulating single track trails in Cherry Creek State Park. Good practice area for those new to mountain biking. Beware of those nasty goat head thorns, though! You are sure to get practice changing flat tires! Not fun, but a necessary skill, nonetheless.



1.2 Waterton Canyon - Denver

The wide gravel road from the trailhead to the base of Strontia Dam is a scenic excursion into a mountain canyon with minimal hassle. It's uphill going in, but on a gentle, constant grade that is not very demanding. 12.2 miles / out & back / smooth hardpack gravel / 350' gain

1.2 Santa Fe Trail - Monument

A "rails to trails" project, this wide, smooth gravel trail runs 14 miles on the old Santa Fe Railroad right of way from Palmer Lake to Colorado Springs. There are several points to get on or off the trail. Very consistent and easy grade. 14 miles one way / smooth hardpack gravel / mainly downhill going south

1.2 East-West Regional Trail - Highlands Ranch

Completed in 2010, the 17-mile East/West Regional trail is the first stage of a 26 mile trail that will eventually connect Chatfield State Park with the Town of Parker. Currently, the soft-packed trail winds through grasslands and oak bluffs, including thousand of acres of the Open Space Conservation Area, from Chatfield Reservoir on the west to Bluffs Regional Park, near I-25 on the east.

1.2 Pineridge Loop - Ft. Collins

The Pineridge area just west of the city is easily accessible and has excellent single track, much of which is rated "easy." As there are multiple trails in the area, you can vary your distance and elevation gain to suit your pleasure and branch out onto more challenging trails as you get better.

1.2 Michigan Ditch - Cameron Pass

Like the Highline Canal, the Michigan Ditch is a wide, smooth trail with very little elevation change - but it starts at 10,276 feet elevation and has awesome mountain vistas! From Ft. Collins, go west thru the Poudre River Valley to Cameron Pass; look for the trail on the south side of highway. There is a half-mile hike to Agnes Lake at the end of the bike trail, too! 13 miles out & back / mainly smooth gravel / 800' gain / option of hike at trail end



Increasing The Challenge

Once you are familiar with the operation of your bike and are comfortable riding on an unpaved surface, you will want to up the ante a bit. These next ten venues offer more challenge in terms of terrain, allowing you to polish your biking skills further, but without putting yourself at risk. Always ride with an awareness of the effect you have on the environment. Don't skid your rear tire, take shortcuts or ride off the trail.

1.5 Lair O' The Bear - Idledale

This short loop trail is a great introduction to riding in a mountain setting. Ride the loop twice, reversing directions if you like, to make it worth the drive from Denver. 2 miles / loop / smooth surface / 750' gain

1.5 Boulder Foothills Trails - Boulder

These single track and gravel road trails in the Boulder Valley Ranch area north of town offer relatively flat terrain that is inviting to those new to mountain biking. 8.9 miles / out & back / smooth surface / 750' gain

1.5 to 3.5 Green Mountain Park - Denver

There are several miles of undulating single track trail around the west and south perimeter of the park. Short, mild climbs and a rocky tread will test your new skills. When you become more proficient on your bike, you can climb to the top of the mountain, using either of two switchback trails on the east side of the park. Ride down the way you came up or take either of two routes down the west side, testing your braking prowess as you go. 5 to 10 miles / loops / loose & rocky tread / up to 1000' gain

1.3 to 3.5 Mt. Falcon Park - Morrison

Mt. Falcon Park has wonderful trails and great scenery. Novice bikers will enjoy riding the Meadows Trail in the upper section of the park. As you gain experience and confidence, you will want to try some of the other trails, such as the Tower, Old Ute and Devil's Elbow trails. 1.0 to 6.5 miles / loops and out & back / somewhat rocky tread / 500' gain

1.5 to 3.5 Horsetooth Mountain Park - Ft. Collins

An impressive network of interconnecting trails runs through the park. The routes vary in physical and technical challenge from easy to difficult. New bikers should stick to the service roads or the Soderburg Trail. 4.0 miles / out & back / somewhat rocky tread / 700' gain

1.5 to 3.5 Lory State Park - Ft. Collins

Lory State Park is a fun place for anyone who pedals. There are a variety of trails that range from easy to hard. Beginners should explore the Shoreline and Valley trails. Distance and elevation gain depend on trails ridden.

1.5 Bear Creek Lake Park - Denver

There are miles of wide, paved bike paths in Bear Creek Lake Park in southwest Denver. Happily for mountain bikers, there is also an extensive network of single track trails in the park. This is a great area to practice flying through the woods, across creeks and over somewhat hilly terrain. Trail surface varies from smooth hardpack to loose scabble, with rocky creek crossings. Can be ridden out & back or in large loops. Elevation gain is very moderate at about 200'. Again, watch out for thorns!

1.5 Marshal Mesa - Boulder

The trails on Marshall Mesa, located south of Boulder to the southeast of the intersection of Hwy 93 and 170, roll across open prairie. Several new trails in this area opened in 2010. Most are wide, have smooth tread and are suitable for novice bikers. You can link the trails in large loops or ride them out and back. The Marshall Valley trail runs gently uphill 0.8 mile from the trailhead parking lot and intersects with Cowdrey Draw (0.8 mi.), mostly level, and Community Ditch (3.6 mi.), double track and mostly level. The Coal Seam trail runs 0.5 mile from the trailhead on a more challenging line and intersects with Community Ditch. The Greenbelt Plateau trail climbs 1.2 mile from the valley to the top of the plateau and connects with the High Plains Trail that runs for nearly 15 miles, looping east into Louisville before turning north and then west back to Marshall Mesa. The Greenbelt Plateau trail also connects with the Doudy Draw trails on the west side of Hwy 93.



1.5 Rolling Creek - Bailey / Lost Creek Wilderness

The Rolling Creek Trail courses through the woods from the Wellington Lake Road to the Lost Creek Wilderness boundary (where bikes are forbidden). The trail is basically smooth and sandy, with minimal elevation change. To lengthen the ride, tack on an additional 4 miles (round trip) by riding the Colorado Trail to where it, too, crosses into the Wilderness. 5.6 miles / out & back / smooth, sandy trail / 380' elevation gain

1.5 Geneva Creek - Grant

Starting at the Geneva Creek Campground just off Guanella Pass Road, this trail rolls through open meadows in a mountain valley on a hardpack trail with some mild rocky sections and a stream crossing to make things interesting. There are other trails in the valley that connect to this one, so you can do some exploring and add to your miles, if you wish. 5.8 miles / out & back / firm hardpack / 300' elevation change

Testing Your Skills

When you have mastered the basic techniques of mountain biking, you will be looking to test your ability. The following locales will help you build strength, increase stamina and refine your skills. Remember to always ride in control. There is no shame in dismounting and walking your bike through tough terrain.

2.0 Switzerland Trail - Boulder

The Switzerland Trail follows the route of a narrow gauge railroad that once ran from Ward to Eldora. The trail never has more than a 4% grade. The rail bed is quite rocky in places. This is a good test of your ability to pick a line through the rubble - and of your bike's suspension. For the easiest ride, go west from the Sugarloaf Road trailhead to the intersection with Colo. Hwy 72, then retrace your route.

12.0 mile / out & back / sometimes smooth, often rocky / 644' gain



2.0 Doudy Draw - Boulder

Doudy Draw, just outside Eldorado Canyon, features several interconnecting trails situated in very scenic terrain on rolling hills just south of Boulder. The mainly single track trails sweep over grasslands and through thick ponderosa forest. The trails are easy to moderate, with somewhat rocky tread but no steep pitches or technical challenges. Doudy Draw runs 1.9 miles and connects with the Community Ditch (3.6 mi.), Spring Brook Loop (2.6 mi.), Flatirons Vista (3.1 mi.) and Prairie Vista (.9 mi.) trails. These trails also connect with the Marshall Mesa trail system on the east side of Colo. Hwy. 93.

2.0 Rampart Reservoir - Woodland Park

Enjoy a scenic ride on the 14.6 mile loop trail around Rampart Reservoir near Woodland Park west of Colorado Springs. Serious fun! The trail can be ridden in either direction, but clockwise is recommended. Rather high altitude. 14.6 miles / loop / mainly smooth; some steep gullies / 600' gain

2.0 Rabbit Mountain - Lyons

Located a few miles east of Lyons north of Colo. Hwy 66 (look for signs), Rabbit Mountain offers 5.5 miles of trails that wander through grassland and ridge top pine forest. Trails are rocky in spots with gentle inclines. 5.5 miles / O&B and loop / somewhat rocky tread / 600' gain

2.2 Hewlett Gulch - Poudre River Canyon west of Ft. Collins

This is a good trail with some rocky sections and numerous stream crossings (great on a hot summer day!). The ride in is a steady climb with a few steep sections, but is generally easy. You can do a loop at the top, but the descent is challenging. Better to turn around at the high point and retrace your course. 10.0 miles / out & back / mildly rocky with many stream crossings / 620' gain

2.2 Betasso Preserve - Boulder

The Canyon Loop Trail takes you through forests and across meadows and streams. The ride is moderately challenging, if short. Ride the trail in each direction for a good workout. 2.75 miles / loop / mildly rocky / 440' gain

2.5 to 3.5 Fraser Valley - Winter Park & Fraser

There are 600 miles of inviting trails in the Fraser Valley around the towns of Winter Park and Fraser. Many of them are geared to beginning riders. Especially recommended are the Flume, Creekside, Chainsaw and Northwest Passage trails, which swoop through the woods and across open terrain on a smooth surface with a minimum of roots and rocks. Highly recommended! 2 to 30 miles / loops and O&B / generally smooth trails / 100' to 1000'+ gain



2.5 to 7.0 Lake Pueblo State Park - Pueblo

The maze of interconnecting trails on the south shore of Lake Pueblo covers a variety of terrain from mellow novice trails that meander far across the prairie to steep and rocky black diamond defiles in the many arroyos that drain down to the lake. A great playground in early spring and late fall. Pleasant, if barren, campgrounds. Entrance fee required. 2 to 30+ miles / loops and O & B / smooth to very loose & rocky / 100'+ gain

3.0 to 4.0 Rustler's Loop and Mary's Loop - Fruita

There are many miles of scenic loop trails along the rim of the Colorado River just west of Fruita, Colorado. The easiest are Rustler's and Mary's loops. The best views, though, are found on Horsethief Bench and Steve's Loop, which are well worth a visit. These last can be ridden by novice bikers willing to walk around the steeper drops and more intimidating rock gardens. All the loops are relatively level, without large elevation gains. It can be awfully hot in summer, so this is a great destination in late spring and early fall. Rustler's: 3.6 miles / Mary's: 6.5 miles / loops / somewhat rocky / 800' gain

3.5 West Rim of Rabbit Valley - Fruita

As long as you are in Fruita, you might want to ride the West Rim Trail, as well. As with Mary's and Rustler's, you will find yourself skirting the cliffs overlooking the Colorado River and be enthralled by the scenery. There will be fewer bike riders in this lesser known area, but there may well be motorbikes on the trail. Some sections have deep sand and steep pitches. Route finding can be difficult at times. You can park at the trailhead just off I-70 or drive several miles inland on jeep roads to shorten your ride time. 8-15 miles / out & back (or loop, if using Kokopelli's Trail) / mainly hardpack, with some deep sand and ledges / 300' gain



3.5 Hall Ranch - Lyons

The 10.5 mile combined Bitterbrush and Nelson Loop trail is somewhat steep in the first two miles and has several rock gardens to negotiate. It will test your bike handling skills. The loop at the top is a delight, and many bikers choose to ride it in both directions before heading back down. The trailhead can be found one mile west of Lyons on Colo. Hwy 7. 10.5 miles / out & back / mostly smooth single track, but with some serious rock scrambling / 1100' gain

3.0 to 5.0 Centennial Cone Park - Golden

There are three major trails in the park. The Elk Range Trail is a gravel road that runs 3.2 miles along the northern perimeter of the park and flows gently over some rolling hills. It traverses lots of open space with great vistas and is well suited to novice riders. The Travois Trail is newly constructed single track that runs almost 10 miles along the eastern and southern boundaries of the park. The grade is moderate over the entire course and the only technical challenges are the couple of dozen very sharp switchback turns and three sets of stone

stair-steps. The Travois Trail is a great ride for more experienced riders. The two trails, taken together, form a loop around the park, and can be ridden equally well in either direction. The Mayhem Gulch Trail, new in 2007, runs from Colo. Hwy 6 along Clear Creek to the upper portion of the park, where it intersects with the Travois Trail, and is recommended for strong intermediate riders. The addition of this trail affords the biker a chance for a really awesome out & back ride of 16.5 miles with huge elevation gain to match the incredible scenery.

Note: the trails in the park are restricted on weekends. Mountain bikers are allowed only on the even-numbered days, while hikers are permitted only on the odd-numbered days.

3.5 Buffalo Creek Recreation Area

The incredible maze of single track trails that weave through the woods and across open meadows in Buffalo Creek and Pine Valley is a paradise for mountain bikers! None of the trails are particularly steep, most have a loose gravel tread, and - except for the new (in 2011) Black Jack black diamond trail - none have any serious technical challenges. The lure of the area is that a biker can ride for over 50 miles on swoopy trails without retracing his route. Sweet! The area also includes a plush section of the Colorado Trail, running 9 miles from Colo. Hwy 126 west to the Meadows Campground, which is a perennial favorite and well suited to novice mountain bikers. The biking experience at Buffalo Creek is highly recommended! Mileage will vary with trails chosen / 600' to 2000' gain / rated intermediate

3.5 Hartmann Rocks - Gunnison

The Hartmann Rocks Recreation Area covers many square miles of open range just south of Gunnison, and boasts an assortment of trails that range in difficulty from easy rollers to highly technical. Home to the "Rage in the Sage" mountain bike race each year, this is a great area for late spring and early fall rides, when the more famous trails in Crested Butte or near Monarch Pass are not open. Most trails are short, averaging just under two miles. The maze of trails is poorly marked, so its easy to lose your way, but lots of fun, nevertheless. The most interesting trails are located in the southwest portion of the park. Mix of single and double track / not a lot of elevation change / as many miles as you care to ride

3.5 Snodgrass Mtn, Strand Hill & Farris Creek - Crested Butte

Crested Butte is justly famous as a mountain biking destination because of its stellar expert trails. But there are a number of easier trails in the Slate River Valley that will appeal to novice and intermediate riders, as well. Perhaps the most scenic of these are the three named above. All are accessible by bike from downtown, though most would probably prefer to car pool to the trailheads. Snodgrass: 13 mile loop or 6 mile O&B from trailhead / 1300' gain
Strand Hill: 16.3 mile loop or 6 mile O&B from trailhead / 1550' gain
Farris Creek: 21 mile loop or 10 mile O&B from trailhead / 1650' gain. In early summer some stream crossings may be impassable.

3.5 Sedona Trails - Sedona

Sedona, Arizona is not only a charming city set in a breathtaking locale, but it is exceptionally biker-friendly. Mountain bike trails weave in and around the city, accessible from numerous streets and parks. The trails are usually short (but interconnect with others), generally have a surface of loose sandstone cobbles, and cross moderate, rolling terrain. There are also many trails that wander out into the desert countryside surrounding the city, some of which require sharp handling skills and strong legs. Whatever the nature of the trail, be it a gentle bike path or a gnarly demon, the scenery along the way will be exceptional. You will want to carry a camera with you. Just don't become so distracted by the grandeur that you fail to notice all the prickly plants that line the trail, ready to shred your tires or skin with equal ease!





Riding To The Top

With practice, patience and perseverance, the time will come when you are ready to tackle any trail, even the most formidable. It may be scary at times, but it is also incredibly exhilarating to meet and master some truly gnarly single track! Pushing your limits will make you a better rider, but do so with appropriate caution.

Always ride with a helmet and gloves and carry basic tools, a spare inner tube and a first aid kit.

It is also a good idea to have photocopies of your driver's license and health insurance card in your kit, as well as a Colorado Outdoor Recreation Search And Rescue (COR-SAR) card.

4.0 Klondike Bluffs, Gemini Bridges & Sovereign Trails - Moab

The trails around Moab can be as intimidating as they are spectacularly beautiful! Most are jeep roads rather than single track. Some of the best for those new to the sport are the Klondike Bluffs, Gemini Bridges and Sovereign Trails.

On the Klondike Bluffs trail you will ride vast expanses of slickrock (exposed sandstone) which, despite the name, can be quite rough. Watch for the dinosaur tracks in the rock below your wheels. On the way back from the spectacular viewpoint looking into Arches National Park you can ride the new Baby Steps trail.

There are several different routes to Gemini Bridges, so carry a map or you may get lost. Always ride in a group and carry lots of water when riding in the desert.

The Sovereign Trails are a recent addition to the trail network in Moab. They were developed by motorcyclists, but make great single track for mountain bike riders, who are the dominant users. You will find some deep sand and steep climbs on these trails.

Klondike Bluffs: 15.4 miles / out & back / sand & slickrock / 900' gain

Gemini Bridges: mileage depends on route / out & back, loop or one-way with shuttle / 600' to 1200' gain

Sovereign Trails: several loop trails of up to 30 miles / can be accessed from several points east of US Hwy 191 north of Moab / gain of 200' to 800'.

5.0 Colorado Trail - Kenosha Pass to Georgia Pass

The CT north from Kenosha Pass is a high altitude trail beloved by bikers and hikers alike. With few exceptions, the trail is hardpack

gravel and has moderate incline. There are gorgeous panoramic views from several places. There is a lot of foot traffic and considerable roots in the first mile or so north from Kenosha Pass. The distance can be cut in half and most hikers avoided by starting the ride from the Jefferson Campground rather than at Kenosha Pass. This ride is a Colorado classic. 24 miles / out & back / very high altitude / good tread with some roots & rocks / 2000'+ gain

6.0 Ribbon Trail & Gunny Loop - Grand Junction

There is nothing quite like the Ribbon Trail, which screams downhill on a truly immense slab of tilted slickrock toward Grand Junction from a trailhead high in the hills south of town. This ride is not for the faint of heart or weak of knee. Bring your camera to capture the stunning views. And make sure your brakes are in good working condition. At the end of the Ribbon, you will find yourself in a dry wash at the southern terminus of the various Lunch Loops. From this point you have a choice of several trails to get you back to the main trailhead. The easiest and most direct is to follow Andy's on down the wash all the way to the Tabeguache Trail and the parking lot on Monument Road. If you have the time and energy, the preferred route is a long, steep hike-a-bike up the hill and across the highway to catch the Gunny Loop, which will test your mettle on a rambling trail that rolls over rocky terrain through several valleys, eventually intersecting with a number of the other Lunch Loops, any of which will lead you back to Monument Road.

Ribbon Trail: 13.5 miles / shuttle required / 2000'+ elevation loss / lethal cliff drops

Gunny Loop: begins with quarter-mile hike-a-bike up steep hillside to Little Park Road / 10 miles / rocky & steep in places / 1000'+ gain and loss along the way

7.0 Monarch Crest Trail - Salida

The Monarch Crest Trail is perhaps Colorado's premier high-country epic ride. From the top of Monarch Pass, the trail winds up another 800 feet to intersect with the Continental Divide and Colorado trails, then sails for miles at nearly 12,000' along a ridge well above timberline, with exquisite vistas in all directions. After dropping on a fire road to Marshall Pass, it gains altitude again on the Colorado Trail, before sweeping deep into the valley on the Silver Creek Trail. The last 11 miles are on the roller-coaster Rainbow Trail that will deposit the rider on US Hwy 285 a few miles south of Poncha Springs. While the various trails have few technical obstacles, the high altitude and long distance make this a very demanding, if supremely rewarding ride. 31 miles / 3000'+ gain & 8000'+ loss / shuttle required





Other Recommended Trails:

Rating	Trail Name	Location
2.5	Young's Gulch	Poudre River Canyon
3.5	Matthews-Winters Park	Denver
3.5 to 8.0	White Ranch Park	Golden
3.5 to 7.0	Golden Gate Canyon State Park	Golden
3.5	Peaks Trail	Breckenridge to Frisco
4.5	Deer Creek Canyon Park	Denver
4.5	Walker Ranch	Boulder
4.5	Indian Creek Loop	Sedalia
5.0	Apex Park	Golden
5.0 to 7.0	Sourdough Trail	Nederland
5.0	Blue Dot Trail	Nederland
5.0	Dyke Trail	Crested Butte
5.0	Stoopid Trail	Monument
5.0 to 7.0	Lion's, Troy Built, Mack Ridge	Fruita
6.0	CT - Hwy 126 to Waterton Canyon	Buffalo Creek
6.0	Hermosa Creek	Durango
6.0	Captain Jack's Loop	Colorado Springs
7.0	Dakota Hogback	Denver
7.0	Wapiti-Baptiste	Peaceful Valley
7.0	Waldrop / Little Raven	Brainard Lake
7.0	CT - Molas Pass to Bolem Pass	Durango
7.0	Porcupine Rim, Amasa Back	Moab
7.0	Poison Spider, Flat Pass	Moab
7.0	Commando Run & Two Elks	Vail
7.0	Reno - Flag - Bear - Deadman	Crested Butte
8.0	Lenawee Trail	Montezuma
8.0	401, 409 and Teocalli Ridge	Crested Butte
9.0	CT - Camp Hale to Copper Mtn	Leadville
9.0	Moore Fun Trail	Fruita
10.0	Wings of Icarus	Fruita



Get out and ride!

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