

## HIGHLIGHTS OF THE CHUSKA MOUNTAIN BIKE ROUTE

- The 600,000 acres of the Chuska Mountain range run along the border of Arizona and New Mexico for the length of their 90+ miles
- The entire route is in the Navajo Nation Forest
- Many lakes dot the Chuska Mountains and the routes travel near several of them: Lake Asaayi, Whiskey Lake, Berland Lake, Toadlena Lake, Long Lake and Todacheenie Lake
- Nine of the ten highest spots on the Navajo Nation are found in the Chuska Mountains. The only one of the top ten that is not in the Chuskas is the highest: Naatsisaan (Navajo Mountain) at 10,388 feet
- The route crosses stunning large meadows throughout the range
- Narbona Pass commemorates the legacy of the influential Dine' headman Narbona, who worked for peace with the American government and was killed in a skirmish with troops just north of today's Narbona Pass in 1849
- Riders will see the mark that the 20,000 acre fire in 2015 left on the southern section of the range, as the flames raged from near Asaayi to Naschitti
- Sweeping views from Narbona Pass, Buffalo Pass, Roof Butte and Toadlena Overlook are among the most dramatic in the Southwest
- Forest lookout towers can be spotted from south to north: Tohatchi Lookout, Washington Pass Lookout, Tohnatsa Lookout and Roof Butte Lookout
- The fall colors in the Chuskas put on the most colorful display on the Nation, typically peaking in late September through mid-October
- Riders who travel the length of the route will encounter three passes over the range:

Buffalo Pass between Red Valley and Lukachukai; Narbona Pass from Crystal to Sheepsprings; and Chuska Pass, running between Mexican Springs (Nakaibeto) and Asaayi/Bowl Canyon Recreation Area

## Welcome to the Chuska Mountain Bike Route!

This project has been in the dream state since the 1990's, and we are excited to see it coming to reality. The route is intended to be a one of adventure and reflection, a place of discovery and reverence. The Chuska is a special place to all who visit, as well as those who live there. We are excited to bring this guidebook to residents and travelers alike.

NavajoYES is a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization that was founded on the Navajo Nation in 1995. The mission of NavajoYES is to "promote community wellness, lifelong fitness and family togetherness in communities across the Navajo Nation." NavajoYES spearheads the Dine' Bike Project, the Navajo Trails Task Force, Tour de Rez Cup Series and the Navajo Parks Race Series. In addition, the organization offers outings for youth and promotes health and wellness in schools and communities.



The Chuska Mountain Bike Route would not have been possible without the assistance of so many people, programs and communities. Rygie Bekay, Klara Kelley and NavajoYES have been the driving forces in this project. A hearty "ahe'hee" to Melissa Kelley for helping garner local support for the project in its early days, and Larry Joe of NDOT for his ongoing assistance and encouragement. Christine Sam of Mexican Springs Chapter, graphic artist Anthony Kady, landscape architect Linda Robinson and Louise Tsinijinnie of Navajo Parks all provided instrumental support for the endeavor. Rygie Bekay, Mark Povich, Brad Fitch and Kurt Refsnider rode, ran and charted the route and provided invaluable input on the evolving project. Kurt and Bikepacking Roots have been a key ally in getting the Chuska initiative into the place that it is today. We acknowledge the outstanding work of Klara Kelley and Richard Begay, who provided outstanding support from a cultural and historic perspective.

The Chuska MTB Route project is supported and funded in part by Navajo Division of Transportation, the Catena Foundation, State of Arizona ARPA and Navajo Parks & Recreation.

**Ahe'hee all, and safe travels to you!**

**- Tom Riggendach/NavajoYES**



## CHUSKA MTB ROUTE NARRATIVE

The Chuska Mountain Bike Route is a fascinating and diverse landscape, which can offer some challenging route-finding in spots. This guide – and this section in particular – is designed to make this task easier. This Route Narrative is written south to north. The primary sources of navigation along the whole route are two features: 1.) brown fiberglass posts with a CHUSKA logo decal attached; 2.) brown wooden 1x3 signs with “Chuska MTB Route” engraved on its surface, generally mounted on trees. These will be the key to helping you get to your destination. Below are some additional notes related to route-finding, but nothing will be as helpful as the very simple yet crucial fiberglass posts and the wooden signs.

First, some navigational notes. Both on the ground and in this Guide, you will see Navajo route N30 and Road 7170 used interchangeably. The signs for N30 and steel road signage show the number 30 within an arrowhead. The 7170 signs are small 1x3 wooden signs with the number 7170 routed into its surface. The 7170 signs are fairly dated and some are difficult to read, but both can be helpful in finding route. There are map pedestals situated at key spots along the way.

If you are beginning your journey on N30 at Mexican Springs chapter house, you will undertake a 10-mile climb of almost 2000 vertical feet en route to Squirrel Springs Picnic Area. The route continues with another major climb near the Tohatchi Lookout, which you will see as you ascend the rocky road just northwest of the lookout. After topping out, you have an additional five miles to Whiskey Lake, which is the highest (9240 feet) lake on the Nation.



*There is a campsite on the West side of Whiskey Lake, a few hundred feet off the dirt road. The campsite includes a picnic table, signage and outhouse.*

As you continue north from Whiskey Lake, you will pass through the burn area of the 2014 Asaayi Fire. There is a designated lookout, just 100 meters off the route, that offers a dramatic view of the fire site and a sweeping vista east in to New Mexico. Continuing north, you will spot the “golf ball”, which is a powerful and intriguing station of the Federal Aviation Administration. But as you get closer, the question grows: is it a golf ball, volleyball or soccer ball? There is also a BIA forest lookout near the FAA station and – if you don’t mind a two mile out-and-back – some of the best views in the entire range. Even Mt. Taylor – the sacred mountain of the south – is visible on a clear day.



There is a campsite – Caleb’s Camp - about less than a mile south of the FAA road. This campsite, situated in a beautiful meadow of the Denetclaw/Smith families (Caleb is a grandson), this camp includes a ramada, bench, composting toilet and picnic table. This is an active sheep camp, so during the summer and fall months you may see Caleb himself – and other family members – around the camp area and buildings, so please show them all due respect. The family was evacuated during the 2014 fire, which came less than a mile of their place.

After leaving Caleb’s Camp and passing the FAA station road, you will continue on N30. Just beyond the N30/FAA jct., you will pass yet another friendly sheep camp belonging to Richard Begay and family. This site is a beautiful rest area, and includes a compost toilet, picnic table and a ramada, all within a short distance of the family hogan. The route drops off of N30 momentarily as it takes riders on a historic route 1 ½ miles down to Narbona Pass Picnic Area, which offers picnic table, a large ramada, interpretive signage and pit toilets.







The route travels 1½ miles on the pavement of Hwy 143 to the spot where road N30 enters the highway from the north. Heading northbound, this is a left turn onto N30. As you ascend a climb in the first two miles on N30, you will top out, and around mile 6 arrive at Berland Lake. There is designated camping (and good fishing) at Berland Lake, including a ramada, picnic tables, interpretive signage, composting toilet and benches.

Continuing north, past Berland Lake, you will encounter some of the largest, lush meadows in the range. There is a perennial spring about two miles north of Berland Lake in a place quite aptly tagged Big Meadow. It would be advisable to take advantage of this water source, and to treat it (filter, iodine or boil) before drinking or cooking with it. Ten miles past Berland Lake you will encounter Toadlena Lake and ¼-mile past the lake, the most stunning view in the range: Toadlena overlook. Although Toadlena Lake is nestled in the pines and is a minimal source of water after two decades of drought, the lake basin provides a beautiful rustic campsite. There is a bench and picnic table near the lake for your use.



The route is very rocky 1½ miles from Toadlena overlook/camp to the N19 (7172) jct. As you continue northbound on N30, you will veer left/straight. If you head to the right and down N19, you will begin dropping off the mountain in a couple hundred feet. Toadlena, NM is a beautiful community six miles and 2500 feet below you....save that visit for another day.

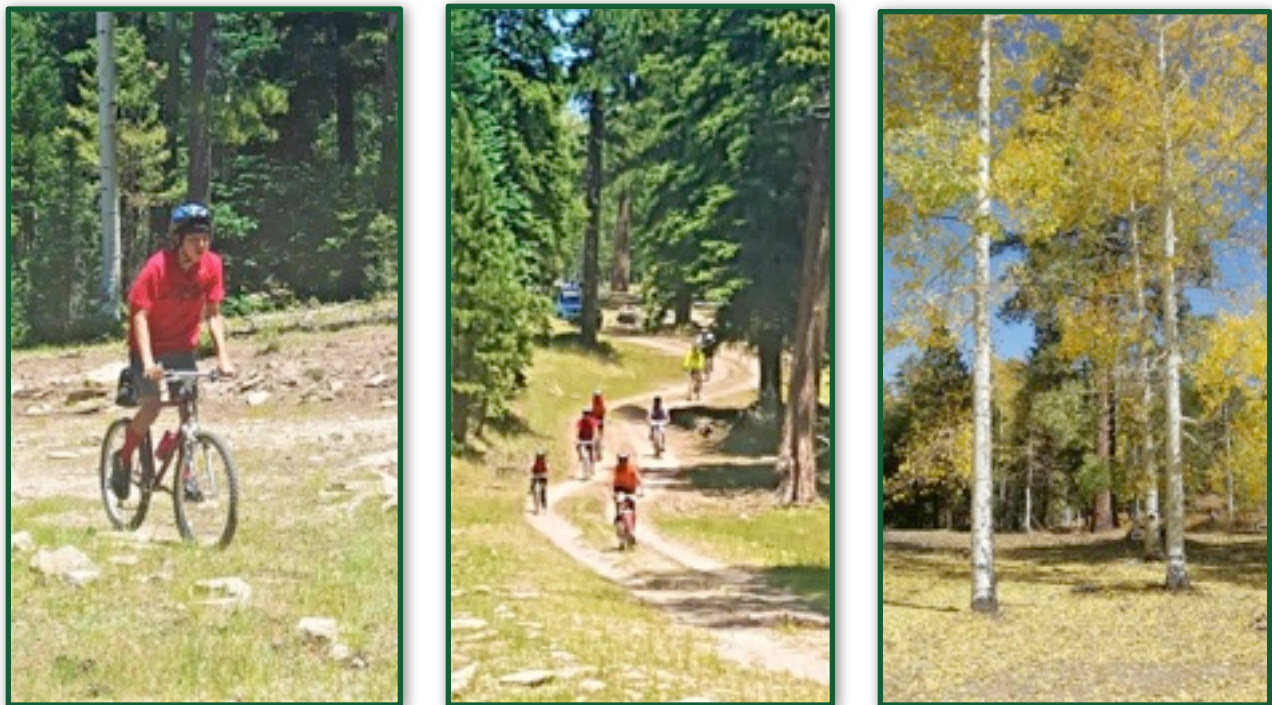


From N19/N30 junction, you will travel 4.0 miles to the junction with Rd 7140 at the site of a yellow cabin. You will veer to the right and head uphill on N30/7170. You have some very rocky road ahead, but it's some real pretty country....enjoy. This writer has seen bears in this area a number of times, so heads up.

You will continue traveling north for another 4+ miles to a large meadow, which is just about 10 miles total from Toadlena overlook. There are several active sheep camps in this area, so be respectful.



You will do a rocky climb out of the meadow and pass various insignias and messages on or near the aspens lining the route – “Operation Game Thief”, “Smith”, Bearymountain, hearts, etc. It is roughly 7 ½ miles from the big meadow to the Gap Springs road, which is not our route today. (It does hit road 7500 in about six miles and it's another eight graded, more-travelled miles beyond that to Tsale in case of emergency.)



Once you pass Gap Springs road, you will come to the Sanostee Springs road. You will see the actual spring on your right (east), but you will continue north on N30. (If you go right and below the spring, you will begin a steep and quick drop toward the Sanostee community. Not today.) On N30, you will quickly come in to “Chicken Coop Meadow” (Can you find the chicken coop?)

About a mile past the Chicken Coop Meadow, you will come to a major junction. You veer to the right on N30; to the left is road 7550, which leads you down toward road 7500 and to Tsale.

*[As we approach the northern end of the route, please note: the names Red Rock and Red Valley are used interchangeably.]*

You will be heading up on N30 through Prairie Dog Meadow and begin a slow, steady and gradually steeper climb. You will see road 7556 to your left; continue to the right on N30/7170 another 4+ miles to road 7500. Head right and you will see Roof Butte, the highest spot in the Chuskas. As you approach Roof Butte, you will be presented with a major route choice: you can either head straight (north) down 7500 two miles to N13, where a right turn will take you a fast ten miles down the pavement to Red Rock Trading Post. Or you can head up “behind” Roof Butte.





Downhill to the pavement and Red Valley is pretty straightforward; so, we will focus on the other option. Heading northbound, you will approach the base of Roof Butte as you ride up road 7500. At the base, you will head west and begin a steep climb up the side of Roof Butte. (If you want a bonus adventure and one more stellar view, keep on climbing an extra  $\frac{1}{2}$  mile to the top of Roof Butte at 9883 feet. Please be respectful of the summit area, as it is a special place to Dine' elders. ) Follow the fiberglass route markers and in less than four miles you will come out on the pavement of N13 just east of Buffalo Pass.

Once arriving on the pavement of N13, you will travel just over one mile on the pavement, you will follow posts onto dirt road heading toward Big Lake. Again, follow the posts and you will begin a descent on the old "Kerr McGee Road", for roughly eight miles down to Red Valley over 2500 vertical feet below. Once you hit the pavement in Red Valley, turn left toward the high school and Red Valley Chapter House.





## Geology of the Chuskas

*By Kurt Refsnider, PhD*

*Executive Director – Bikepacking Roots*

The lakes that dot the crest of the Chuska Mountains are a rarity on the Colorado Plateau, a region characterized by its aridity. The top of the Chuskas is capped by a layer of yellow rock called the Chuska sandstone, and countless depressions in the sandstone hold water for at least parts of most years. But groundwater level is the main factor in determining lake level – spring snowmelt percolates down into the underlying porous sandstone, raising the water table and helping to fill the lakes. Then over the drier summer months, the water level and the corresponding lake levels gradually drop as water is lost to evaporation to streams draining off the mountains. But how did all these depressions form to begin with? Geologists have argued over that exact question and it remains unanswered. As the climate in the region becomes warmer and dryer, these lakes will become less abundant.

The Chuska Mountains are a unique geologic feature sitting upon the vast Colorado Plateau – a tall, linear mountain range dotted with natural lakes. Atop the Chuskas is the soft, yellow Chuska sandstone, the youngest of the Colorado Plateau sedimentary rock layers. Found only in these mountains, the Chuska sandstone was deposited as vast dunes of sand delivered by streams flowing northeast from now-collapsed mountains in southern Arizona. Later, the magma oozed up from below, forming the dark rocks of Roof Butte, Beautiful Mountain, Tsaille Buttes and at Narbona Pass. Most of the magma cooled and solidified below the landscape surface. Erosion has carved away at the landscape surrounding the Chuska, exposing features like Shiprock and leaving the last remnants of the Chuska sandstone stranded atop the mountains high above. In the future, streams will have eaten into the crest of the Chuska, likely creating a series of more isolated mountain remnants from the now-continuous range crest.



*From south to north, some of the lakes that you will encounter on your ride include Asaayi Lake, Whiskey Lake, Long Lake, Todacheenie Lake, Aspen Lake, Berland Lake and Toadlena Lake, along with many small ponds and pools along the route.*

## A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE CHUSKAS

The Chuska Mountains have played a critical role in the history and culture of the Navajo Nation over several centuries.

Dine' oral traditions tell how ceremonies originated at places in the Chuskas, which Dine' medicine people still visit today for prayers and offerings.

The range was pivotal in the era preceding the Long Walk, as headsman Narbona sought to bring peace between the tribe and the American government. Narbona feared that the tribe would be overwhelmed if the people opted to confront the newcomers, so he worked tirelessly to foster a sense of co-existence. The leader was killed in a skirmish following a peace discussion with Colonel John G. Washington's military force at a location near Narbona Pass. Following Narbona's death, the road to conflict – and ultimately the Long Walk – was more likely, as his son-in-law Manuelito adopted a more confrontational approach with the Americans.

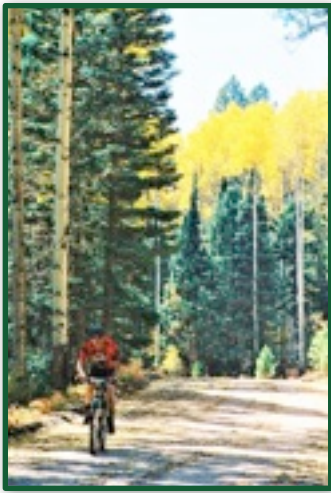
Ironically, the name for the pass on Highway 134 between Crystal and Sheepsprings was referred to as Washington Pass for many years. However, in the 1990's, a group of Dine' College students advocated to the state of New Mexico and the USGS for a name change. In 1993, Washington Pass became Narbona Pass.

There have been numerous fires throughout the modern era, including the 2004



Toadlena Fire, the 2009 Roof Butte fire and the largest of recent fires: the 2014 Asaayi Fire. The summer months have become a high risk season during the ongoing drought, though resources to detect the fires (such as the Forestry Lookout stations) have been significantly reduced over the previous 20 years.

Logging activity in the Chuskas has a long history, dating back to the early-20<sup>th</sup> century. The Chuskas fed the demand for wood at the Navajo Forest Products Industries sawmill in Navajo, New Mexico beginning in the early 1960's. Just as the logging hit its peak in the 1980's and early 90's, opposition began to grow among some Dine'. The combination of Dine' C.A.R.E. protests and the discovery of spotted owl habitat in the northern Chuskas brought the end of commercial logging in the range by the mid-1990's. However, the presence today of old logging roads throughout these mountains are but one of the reminders of logging's legacy.



The Dine' Bikeyah Oilfield is the largest oil field in the state of Arizona, tucked in the east-facing slopes just north of Buffalo Pass. The oil field road (typically still referred to as "Kerr-McGee road") switchbacks its way down to Red Valley on an all-season surface.

The uranium boom of the 1950's and 60's had a major impact on the northern region of the range, specifically the communities of Cove, Oak Springs, Sanostee and Red Valley. The legacy of the uranium boom is still felt in this area. Red Valley-Cove High School has adopted "Miners" as their mascot in honor of their grandfathers and other local men. The Navajo AML-UMTRA Program undertook the first stage of mine closure in the 1990's, while the US EPA continues the clean-up of these sites today. Riders are cautioned not to venture off the trail into these areas.

Recreational activities in the range became more prominent in the 1990's and 2000's, and the development of the Chuska Mountain Bike Route, beginning in 2016, was a major step in that direction. A healthy lifestyle and community wellness continue to be major goals of local families, tribal leaders and many chapter officials.



## OVER THE MOUNTAINS.....

There are three ways to go from East to West over the Chuska Mountains. The three passes that traverse the range are:

- Buffalo Pass (connecting Lukachukai and Red Valley)
- Narbona Pass (between Crystal and Sheep Springs)
- Chuska Pass (a high and rugged route between Squirrel Springs and Asaayi).



Riders encounter Buffalo Pass about 10 miles south of Cove on the Chuska MTB Route. This spectacular pass, which includes grades of 14%, was a rugged historic trail and challenging dirt road until it was paved in 1999. About 10 miles to the west is the community of Lukachukai and the same distance to the east is Red Valley; both communities have a store with basic supplies and could provide assistance in case of an emergency.

The story of Dine' leader Narbona was behind an effort led by Dine' College students in 1993 to change the name of the pass, which was previously named for military leader Colonel John G. Washington, no friend to the Dine'. Today, Narbona Pass is a popular spot for family picnics, camps and events. The annual Narbona Pass Classic is a Dine' running tradition over the 4<sup>th</sup> of July weekend, attracting hundreds of runners each summer. There is also a bike race and other events at the spot.

The name for Narbona Pass is Beesh Lichii'l Bigiizh, which translates to Copper Pass. The Chuska MTB Route passes through the Narbona Pass Picnic Area, with a rest area, compost toilet, signage and a well-marked route following an historic wagon route through the area.

Chuska Pass goes between the Asaayi Lake area in the west to Mexican Springs on the eastern slope of the range. It is a graded dirt road and tops out at just over 8000 feet elevation at Squirrel Springs, a picnic area over which the Chuska MTB Route runs. An alternative, higher route over the range runs from Asaayi to Tohatchi, though this route is not a part of the Route.

## WATER ALONG THE CHUSKA MTB ROUTE

Water is scarce along the entire route. There are several factors to consider when looking at the limited water supply.

The first consideration is the season. Obviously, the warmer summer months create a greater need for water than the cooler spring or fall months. For multi-day journeys, you may want to consider carrying as much as you can, making pre-trip water caches along the route, planning water drops or having a support vehicle.

**Water sources are limited:** There are only a few ponds and occasional springs/pumps along the route.



*Many lakes and large ponds throughout the Chuskas have become less reliable sources of water or are simply damp, marshy spots in the forest.*

The primary natural water sources are Whiskey Lake, Todacheenie Lake and Berland Lake, which are all perennial water sources along the route. Toadlena Lake is a less reliable source of water, while Big Lake (aka Wide Lake) and other small ponds north of Buffalo Pass, are weaker sources of water. You should treat water from these sources before drinking.

There is reliable, potable water from a pump near the FAA station (the “golf ball”), just south of Narbona Pass. There is a pump, just east of N30, in the large meadow about two miles north of Berland Lake. Any water from windmills should be treated.



*The FAA station south of Narbona Pass has a reliable public-access water pump. Other pumps – as well as lakes/ponds – are limited and less reliable.*

# MINIMAL IMPACT TRAVEL ON THE CHUSKA MOUNTAIN BIKE ROUTE

The **Center for Outdoor Ethics** has developed the *Seven Principles of Leave No Trace* as guidelines for outdoor recreation. We encourage you to follow these principles throughout your Chuska ride.

## PLAN AHEAD AND PREPARE

- Know the regulations and special concerns for the area.
- Schedule your trip to avoid times of high use
- Visit in small groups
- Prepare for extreme weather, hazards and emergencies

## TRAVEL AND CAMP ON DURABLE SURFACES

- Durable surfaces include established trails and campsites, rock, gravel, dry grasses and snow
- Camp at least 200 feet from lakes and streams
- Good campsites are found, not made
- Concentrate on existing trails and campsites

## DISPOSE OF WASTE PROPERLY

- Pack it in, pack it out.
- Deposit human waste in catholes dug 6 to 8 inches deep, at least 200 feet from water, camp and trails.
- Pack out toilet paper and hygiene products
- To wash yourself or dishes, carry water 200 feet away from stream or lakes and use small amounts of biodegradable soap. Scatter strained dishwater

## LEAVE WHAT YOU FIND

- Do not build structures or dig trenches
- Examine but do not touch cultural or historic structures and artifacts
- Leave rocks, plants and other natural objects as you find them

## MINIMIZE CAMPFIRE IMPACTS

- Use a lightweight stove for cooking and enjoy a lantern for light
- Only have campfires if permitted, keep fires small and use established fire rings. Burn all wood and coals to ash, and scatter cool ashes before leaving



## RESPECT WILDLIFE

- Observe wildlife from a distance. Do not follow or approach them
- Protect wildlife and your food by storing rations and trash securely
- Control pets at all times, or leave them at home

## BE CONSIDERATE OF OTHER VISITORS

- Respect other visitors and protect the quality of their experience
- Be courteous. Yield to other users on the trail
- Let nature's sound prevail. Avoid loud voices and noises.



## SAFETY ON THE TRAIL

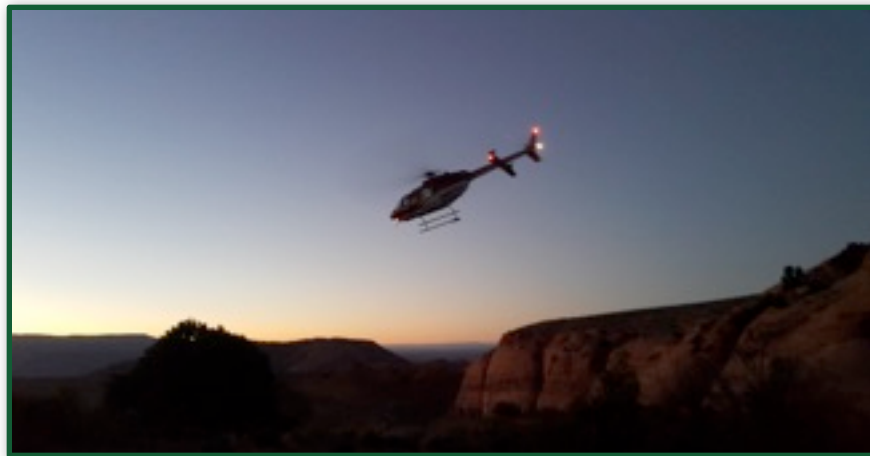
There are a few topics in terms of “safety” to address on the Chuska MTB Route.

The most critical safety consideration is the remoteness of the route. Depending upon the season of the year and the section of the route, you are likely to be alone for many hours. That, naturally, is part of the beauty of the Chuska; however, it is also the challenge. For some sections – between Toadlena Lake and Roof Butte, for example, you may not encounter another person all day. You will likely see a few more folks between Berland Lake and Narbona Pass, while Narbona Pass to Whiskey Lake is likely to be the most active segment. But for the entire route, be prepared.

A few recommendations:

- Carry a **first aid kit**
- If you are in a group, be aware of other members' **medical history**. If any members have extreme allergies or have suffered from anaphylaxis, be sure that someone is carrying an epi-pen for such emergencies
- Insure that some or all members of the group have medical training in **wilderness first aid** or wilderness first responder training
- Have a cell phone, satellite phone, a GPS tracker or InReach device to improve your **communication**. Many cell phones will have limited to no service throughout much of the route, so be prepared for that.

- Be sure that someone knows your whereabouts – your **schedule and route** – and will be able to contact authorities if you do not return home by your scheduled return date.
- Wear a **helmet** when riding at all times
- Know the **nearest medical facilities** - the northern section of the trail is Northern Navajo Medical Center in Shiprock, and Tsaile Health Clinic in Tsaile. For the middle and southern segments, the closest facilities would be Fort Defiance Indian Medical Center or Tsaile Clinic. Non-native folks may be seen at these facilities in an emergency situation. In a non-emergency scenario, the closest facilities are Farmington and Gallup, New Mexico.
- 911 service is available in most segments of the route.



*Medi-vac by helicopter is sometimes the best options in remote sections of the reservation or backcountry*

## **SPECIAL CONCERNS ABOUT BEARS, MOUNTAIN LIONS & RATTTLERS**

\*\*\*\* Black bears in the Chuska Mountains are typically less aggressive than grizzlies; however, an angry 300-500 black bear could still pose a threat. Be smart. Be alert for bears both on the trails and in camp. Make noise while riding on narrow tracks. Keep bear spray handy at all times. Avoid bringing smelly foods into the backcountry. Sleep at least 100 yards from where you cook, eat, and hang your food. Secure all foods and other smelly items (trash, sunscreen, etc.) by hanging them, ideally **10 feet above ground and four feet away from tree trunks**. Keep your sleeping gear clean and free of odors.



\*\*\*\* There are cougars, bobcats and other predatory animals in the Chuskas. Many of the same safety principles for bears apply to cats and other wildlife. If threatened by a mountain lion, it is best to be aggressive, loud and threatening in response and let the cat know that you are not his prey.

\*\*\*\* There are snakes in the Chuskas. Rattlesnakes are active in this elevation, typically from April through October. Use some common sense practices in camp and when taking breaks. If a person is bitten by a rattlesnake, monitor and provide basic life support (BLS), and evacuate as quickly as possible.

**NOTE:** During summer months, sheep camps are often occupied and local residents will be glad to assist in an emergency such as a snake bite or other medical emergency. Getting a rattlesnake victim to a medical facility and anti-venom is crucial, and folks at a sheep camp might have a vehicle that could make that happen.



## LIFE ON THE TRAIL.....REST AREAS, TOILETS, BENCHES & MORE

There are a variety of amenities along the Chuska route. These features will help to make your ride exceptional and safe. Here are some of what you can expect to see out on the route:

There are fiberglass trail posts and “Chuska MTB Route” wooden signs posted throughout the route. These – along with map pedestals mounted at key locations along the way – will help keep you on the right route.



There are also rest areas at the many spots. The rest areas generally include a bench, ramada or shade structures, map pedestals and interpretive signage. These rest areas are located at the following locations:

- Squirrel Springs Picnic Area
- 2014 fire site/overlook
- Richard Begay sheep camp
- Narbona Pass Picnic Area
- Top of climb (major first hill on south of hwy 134)
- Big Meadow Spring
- Twin Pines climb and/or 10-mile meadow

- Deerhead Spring
- Prairie Dog Meadow
- Buffalo Pass
- Big Lake/Dry Lake
- Top of “Kerr-McGee Road”

## CAMPsites, GATEWAY COMMUNITIES & RE-SUPPLY POINTS

There are six designated campsites along the Chuska route. At-large camping is not allowed, so please use one of these eight designated sites. There will be campsites at the following locations:

- Red Valley is the northernmost access point on the route. Parking and camping may be available in the parking lot (near a shade structure) at the Red Valley Chapter House or at the **Red Rock Trading Post**. The trading post has long store hours and a nice assortment of drinks and snack foods. A more permanent campsite may be established here in the future. Red Valley is located 22 miles from Hwy 491, and 28 miles from Shiprock.



- The **first campsite** is the **George family sheepcamp** is located about three miles from Roof Butte on road N30 (previously called road 7170). The site has a ramada, picnic table, composting toilet, bench and water. The family maintains an active sheep camp, so expect to see folks around the area during the summer and earl fall months. This is a beautiful spot, set among towering pines, and could serve as a final camp for northbound bikers, or a first night for southbound travelers.
- **Toadlena Lake** is a **remote campsite** roughly 26 miles from the George family camp, which makes for a long and challenging day, particularly if you are coming from the north. Toadlena is a rustic campsite, with only a bench located a few hundred yards from

the shrinking lake. There is no toilet here, so please use Leave No Trace principles and bury human waste in a 6-8 inch cathole, and pack out used toilet paper with your trash.



- **Berland Lake** is an *idyllic campsite* that is just over 10 miles south of Toadlena Lake or eight miles north of Caleb's Camp, a half day or less for most riders. It is an established campsite with a ramada, picnic table, composting toilet and interpretive signage. Berland Lake is a scenic and popular fishing spot, maintained by Navajo Fish & Wildlife, and located just 6 ½ miles from Narbona Pass.
- A more ideal *re-supply point* than **Narbona Pass Picnic Area** would be hard to find. Located at a beautiful day-use area, Narbona Pass is a perfect re-supply and meeting spot for bikers looking to connect with friends or family. The Picnic Area is on Hwy 134, about 1 ½ miles below (west) of the highest spot on the Pass. Richard Begay's sheepcamp is a quieter and higher location, tucked in the scrub oak at just over 9000 feet elevation. Richard's place is a good spot for a break for day-users (Narbona Pass to Whiskey Lake, for example) or thru-riders who have just climbed up from the highway below.
- **Caleb's Camp** is a *campsite* less than three miles from Narbona Pass and has the perfect setting in a large, lush meadow surrounding by massive ponderosa pines. The camp includes a ramada, picnic table, compost toilet, local spring water and benches. This is an active summer sheepcamp, so expect to see livestock, sheep dogs and various family members throughout your stay.





- Some of the most level and stunning country in the range is along the ten miles from Caleb's Camp to the **Whiskey Lake**, where you will find a stunning **campsite** on the western edge of the lake, just off the road. There is a picnic table, bench and an outhouse.



- Lake Asaayi offers the most formal campground of the route, nestled in Bowl Canyon near Crystal, NM in the southern part of the range. The campground is generally open in the summer months (and part of the late spring and early fall), offering large ramadas, pit toilets and picnic tables, all on the banks of one of the most beautiful lakes in the Chuskas. Lake Asaayi is four miles off the main Chuska MTB Route, and could make for a scenic alternative ending or beginning of your ride. It is six miles from Lake Asaayi to Squirrel Springs, and 16 miles to Mexican Springs, while Lake Asaayi to Whiskey Lake is just under 10 miles.



- Mexican Springs Chapter House** is a **southern gateway** to the Route. The chapter house is a good place to begin or end your ride. There are restrooms and trash disposal available during regular business hours.



## CHUSKA AREA TRADING POSTS

Toadlena, Two Grey Hills, Sheep Springs, Crystal, Round Rock, Tolican, Lukachukai, Mexican Springs and Red Rock.....these are among the trading posts that have served the Chuska Mountain communities and the mountain camps in the range over the past century and a half. Today, Toadlena Trading Post, Totsoh Trading Post in Lukachukai and Red Rock Trading Post in Red Valley continue to serve their communities, and the families and travelers passing through.



The Toadlena Trading Post today is an active center of Navajo weaving, bringing together weavers and buyers at this scenic post at the base of the Chuskas. Toadlena Trading Post, nestled in the Chuska foothills, is six miles off the main Chuska MTB route on route N19.

If you begin or end in the community of Red Valley, you will be close to the Red Rock Trading Post, which has long hours and is just a few hundred yards from the Red Rock Day School and the chapter house, where you may opt to park.



*Bikers heading for the Chuskas, just west of Red Rock Trading Post; taking a break on the front porch of Red Rock Trading Post.*

## Chuska MTB Route

### Frequently Asked Questions

**What kind of bike should I ride?** The Chuska Mountain Bike Route is a mountain bike route. It would not be advisable to bring any other type of bike, and trailers are not recommended. Much of the route is a very rocky surface.

**What is the ideal time to ride the route?** Spring and fall are the best seasons to undertake the Chuska. Summer (particularly mid-June through late August) can be hot and dry, and water sources may be limited. The route is typically snow-covered from December through early-mid spring.

**How long will it take to ride the Chuska MTB Route?** If you are riding the full length of the route, the ride may be 3-6 days.

**Is there much water available along the route?** See “**Water**” section of the Chuska Guide. Water is scarce along the entire route and it is essential that you read this section before undertaking any major journey along the Chuskas.

**What should I expect for weather?** Naturally, the weather will vary greatly with the seasons. With most of the route at 8000-9000 feet elevation, springs comes late in the Chuskas. Nighttime temps may approach freezing even in June, but be prepared for cool and occasionally cold nights in the highcountry. Fall weather can be ideal, but can also quickly turn harsh. Snowfalls typically arrive in November, and spring snowpack may linger until May or even June.

**Are the dogs mean?** You may see dogs along the ride. Most are working dogs – sheep dogs who tend to the livestock. You can easily shoo most of them away and they will lose interest if you just keep on pedaling off their turf. And in the worst case scenario, you can always put that bike between you and the canines.

**How do I follow the route?** There are a variety of ways to insure that you are still on the Chuska MTB Route. There are over 100 brown fiberglass posts along the route and wooden “Chuska” signs mounted on trees and fenceposts in key locales.

**How does camping work?** There will be several designated campsites spread along the way. Some are at family sheepcamps, while others are at lakes and two are at chapter houses. Lake Asaayi is the only site that is a formally established campground. Check out the “Camping” section of this Guide.



**Where do I get a permit?** Navajo Parks issues permits for overnight use on the Chuska Route. You can reach Parks at 928-871-6647.

**Will there be bears?** The Chuskas are bear country. These black bears range from 200-500 pounds and typically are not aggressive toward humans. However, you will still want to read the "Safety" section.

**Will I see anyone along the route?** Depending upon the time of the year, you may see sheepherders (generally May or June through August or September), adventurers like you, and folks gathering firewood in the fall. You may see families celebrating holidays, birthdays and reunions and an occasional medicine man collecting herbs.

**Are there any events along the route?** There are several. The Chuska Challenge mountain bike festival has taken place throughout the range each fall since 1995. The Narbona Pass Classic is a footrace held during the Fourth of July weekend each summer. There are several events staged in the warm months at Camp Asaayi.



### Youth Empowerment Services for Dine' Bikeyah

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## DAY TRIPS ALONG THE CHUSKA MTB ROUTE

There are several good options for shorter trips along the Chuska MTB Route. Depending if you have an hour or two, closer to half a day or a full day to play with, here are a few outings to consider.

- **Whiskey Lake to Narbona Pass** This one is a classic! We recommend riding south to north, ending at the Narbona Pass Picnic Area. The ending point will be about 800 feet lower than Whiskey Lake, though most of the route is relatively flat and the big descent is in the final couple miles. From Whiskey Lake, you will find three rest areas before you get to Narbona Pass: the 2014 Fire Rest Area, Meadowview Rest Area and Begay Sheepcamp Rest Area.

Whiskey Lake is the highest lake on the Navajo Nation, perched atop the range at an elevation of over 9000 feet. Though water levels have been down in recent years, the lake is historically popular for its fine finishing and beautiful camping. The site includes a picnic table, bench, compost toilet and interpretive panels. Depending upon your specific starting point, Whiskey Lake to Narbona Pass is right around a 10-mile ride.



A massive forest fire roared through the area in 2014, torching over 20,000 acres of forest from near Camp Asaayi to the east side of the range near Naschitti. The 2014 Fire Rest Area is one of the stunning spots to see the effects of fire in the Chuskas. You will see remnants of the fire along the ride, but the 2014 Fire Rest Area, nestled on the rim just a few hundred feet off the



route, is the most stunning viewpoint of the blaze. The view includes the eastern flank of the Chuskas, which was severely burned. The site includes benches and interpretive panels.



The second rest area is positioned directly along the route, and is appropriately called Meadowview Rest Area. This beautiful spot offers big views of the broad meadows and stellar fall colors during the autumn months. The site includes a bench, Chuska route map and several interpretive panels.

The third, final and rather tranquil rest area is set upon the grounds of the Begay family's sheep camp and is thus called Begay Sheepcamp Rest Area. This site includes a shade ramada, benches, picnic table, route map, interpretive panels and compost toilet. It is situated less than three miles from the Narbona Pass Picnic Area.

The Narbona Pass Picnic Area is a popular spot tucked onto the hillside just west of Narbona Pass. The area is a perfect spot for a picnic or outdoor party, with grills, picnic tables, shade ramadas, compost toilets, interpretive signage, benches, trash barrels and large fields for outdoor games. This site is the venue for the Narbona Pass Classic each summer, and host family gatherings, events and picnics all through the year. Though winter can be pretty severe at 8200 feet, the picnic area is definitely open to use three+ season of the year: spring is bright green and cool, summer offers a respite from the summer heat and fall provides a calidescope of colors.



- **Buffalo Pass/Roof Butte Area** The northern part of the Chuskas have many options that offer a fun but shorter ride than the multi-day trips that some are doing along the route. Here are a few of our favorites.

One challenging and super scenic option begins at Buffalo Pass and travels one mile east (and uphill) on the pavement of N13 to a turn-off to the south. We call this one the *Roof Butte Loop*. The turn-off and the route are marked with Chuska MTB decals on brown fiberglass posts (though occasionally posts are vandalized or removed, so be prepared to use your internal directional judgement). This route leads steeply up hill to behind The Bear and Roof Butte on some of the most stunning views in the range, beneath the two highest spots in the range. The route drops down on the east side of Roof Butte, where it intersects road 7500. To create a loop, ride down road 7500 to the left and head two miles down a rocky, steep descent to N13. When you hit the pavement, turn left and head back up to Buffalo Pass.

Another cool loop is called *Big Lake Loop*. Here is how it goes: from Buffalo Pass Picnic Area you begin with a 1/10<sup>th</sup> mile drop from the Picnic Area (toward Lukachukai), but turns sharply north on the dirt road heading beneath the powerlines and on toward (the now dry) Big Lake. After a challenging but not extreme climb, you will end up at the Big Lake Rest Area, where there are a few amenities – some shade, a bench, interp panel and picnic table. If you want to get to Cove, you can follow an unmarked route that will lead you to the dramatic overlook, peering over the edge of the range toward Cove, six miles and nearly 2,500 feet below. A loop ride that takes you back to Buffalo Pass arcs around the surrounding hills and will drop you onto the Kerr-McGee Road and back to the route you just came out. NOTE: Once you hit Kerr-McGee, be sure to turn right and head back toward Buffalo Pass and your car. If you turn left, you will be on your way to the community Red Valley. It's a cool spot but not on your agenda today (and it's no where near your car!)



- **Mexican Springs to Asaayi** Ride from Lake Asaayi to Mexican Springs, or reverse the route from the Lake to Mexican Springs, with the Squirrel Springs picnic area roughly halfway between the lake and the community. Either way offers some climbing challenges, and some major downhill fun, along with stellar views the entire way. This is a graded and surprisingly well-travelled dirt road, so don't expect to have it all to yourself, especially on weekends when lake traffic is pretty significant.

