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ALL PHOTOS BY POLLY SCOTLAND.

BAM 2024 —

PROVIDING REASONS TO BAM IN 2025

Polly Scotland

Bicycling Around Minnesota (BAM) was first conceived in 2006 by members of the Minnesota State Bike Advisory Committee. The inaugural invitation-only event with 30 riders was so successful that the tour continued every year with much larger participation except during the pandemic years.

BAM transitioned last year to partner with the **Bicycle Alliance of Minnesota (Bike MN / bikemn.org)**, which now owns the ride while retaining **Mary Derks** as its director.

Michael Wojcik, the executive director of Bike MN, said that his mission is “[To build] a more bicycle-and-pedestrian-friendly Minnesota for all ages and all abilities, which will be strengthened with the addition of BAM.”

BAM 2024: August 15 through 18

BAM began in the small town of Hoyt Lakes on Minnesota’s Iron Range, where **320 cyclists** registered at the Community Building. They then set up their tent, rented a tent, or cabin on wheels from a



Alex Pennie and Searra Hetherington of Minneapolis thought it would be nice to have their photo taken at Mile 0 of the Mesabi Trail in Grand Rapids, Minnesota.

charter service, or checked into a nearby hotel. Some utilized the talents of the mechanics from **Freewheel Bike Service**, but most got something to eat locally, including a spaghetti dinner at the Hoyt Lakes

VFW.

Director Derks hosted an informational and pre-ride safety meeting at 7:00 p.m. the day before the start of the ride. And then ...

BAM: Day 1

Hoyt Lakes to Chisholm — 63 Miles, 1900 Feet of Climb

On the first day, the sounds of unzipped tents and slammed port-a-potty doors started at 6 a.m. Entrants packed up before going to the breakfast line. Afterward, they took their gear to the transportation truck; each person was permitted to bring two bags maximum (waterproof-suggested) and they were weighed by officials at the truck to make sure they were less than the 35-pound per bag allowed.

The rolling start time period went from 7:00 a.m. to 8:30 a.m. Downloadable maps were available on the **Ride with GPS app**, or riders could follow the yellow “B” symbols spray-painted on the pavement at all turns or intersections. The trail meandered past lakes, small communities, and parts of the famous Mesabi Trail. Rain fell most of the first day as riders headed

toward Gilbert, home of Lake Ore-Be-Gone, an abandoned mining pit turned fishing hole.

At Minnesota's highest bridge in the city of Virginia, riders crossed the trench created by the Rouchleau Mine. A stop on the bridge offered a jaw-dropping view of the 3-mile-long lake 200 feet below that fills the remains of the open-pit mine abandoned in 1977. The various red hues of rocky cliffs, topped with the multiple green shades of trees, accentuated the silver-blue color of the lake.

In the town of Mountain Iron, the "Taconite Capital of the World," an employee of a mining company stopped the incoming wave of bikers at a bridge overpass and explained that blasting was taking place. (There's still an active United Taconite mine.) The volume of chitchat increased until, as if on cue — *Boom!* — changing the chitchat into varying gasps of Wows!

At the Minnesota Mining Museum in Chisholm, people collected their bags from the transportation truck. Tents were set up around bygone mining trucks, trains, steam shovels, and drilling rigs. With rain threatening, some opted to sleep inside a building. With the day's end, riders plugged in their devices, phones, and batteries at a charging station. Clean, hot showers were a welcome antidote from the chill of the day-long rain.



After Doug Parr got his fourth flat of the trip, Pete Keith determined that Doug had a brake pad that was touching the tire.



These are some of the many BAM volunteers. Michael Wojcik, executive director of Bike MN, is at upper left and Mary Derks, BAM director, is at lower right.

A local band played as a dinner choice of pulled pork or chicken was served, with gluten-free options offered. A continuous mist drove diners under two red-and-white-striped tents. The museum stayed open late and offered coffee, information, and a dry place to gather before heading into a soggy tent.

Day 2

Chisholm to Grand Rapids — 71 Miles, 1700 Feet of Climb

The morning ride, under mostly cloudy skies, was weather-pleasant — until an afternoon microburst pelted some riders with heavy rain forcing many to take shelter under a gas station awning in **Cohasset**. When the rain stopped, bikers pedaled about 5 miles to the **Forest History Center** in Grand Rapids for tales of lumberjacks or to ride on a trolley pulled by draft horses.

Despite a relatively long day, some cyclists climbed the historic Fire Tower's 100 feet of switchback staircases (126 steps) to get to the tower's cab. There, they were rewarded with an unobstructed 360-degree view of lakes and to-the-horizon forests.

The option of a century ride was available to anyone wanting to add an additional 29-mile loop. Others "followed the yellow-brick road" to the **Judy Garland Museum** in Grand Rapids, the birthplace of the actress from *The Wizard of Oz*.

The evening campsite, west of the

county fairgrounds (where the fair was in full swing), was on a football field. Campers along the field's sidelines were surprised when automatic sprinklers went off at 2 a.m., thwacking them with "rain-flies" every few minutes.

Day 3

Grand Rapids to Hibbing — 60 Miles, 2900 Feet of Climb

Leaving Grand Rapids, cyclists pedaled the route that curved them to the Itasca County Fairgrounds and Milepost 0, the west trailhead of the 160-mile paved Mesabi Trail. Heading east, the trail weaved past a chain of small mining towns with rusty red landscapes, including Coleraine, Marble, Calumet, and the Hill Annex Mine Pit.

Nashauk, the first mining town in the county, had an observation platform over the Hawkins Mine and LaRue Pit. Turquoise-colored pit lakes were bordered by bluffs of orange-red vermillion stone and clay. Next was the city of Keewatin (Ojibwe for "North Wind"), home of a large United States Steel plant, a taconite steel pellet mining operation.

In Hibbing, the route threaded past the Greyhound Bus Museum (birthplace of the busing industry), the Hill-Rust Mahoning Open Pit Iron Mine (where docents were on hand to explain the mine's history), and the boyhood home of singer/songwriter **Bob Dylan**.

On a guided tour of Hibbing High School,



Breathtaking! At Minnesota's highest bridge in Virginia, bikers crossed the trench created by the Rouchleau Mine.

Bob Kernay explained that in 1918, the original City of Hibbing sat on the richest iron ore vein. The Oliver Mining Company (a subsidiary of U.S. Steel) negotiated a deal with Hibbing mayor Victor Power (representing mine workers from 46 different ethnic groups), to move the entire town two miles south from the Hull-Rust-Mahoning Mine, the world's largest open pit mine.

The playground equipment at an elementary school provided a great place to dry wet clothing at the evening's camp. **Andrew Chaffe** of Freewheel Bike was busy fixing more than thirty flat tires in one day.

Following dinner, at the 7:00 p.m. gathering, Director Derks gave some fun statistics about the 2024 event — *about us*: 60% were first-timers; 20% had done five or more BAMS; our group was 60% male, 40% female; riders came from twenty-seven states, Canada, and Australia; and we ranged in age from 22 to 85.

Gerry Johnson of Bemidji, Minnesota, had been on every BAM except the first one. Johnson said, "I've done tours in many other states. This is a great way to see the state of Minnesota."

Day 4

Hibbing to Hoyt Lakes — 55 Miles, 1500 Feet of Climb

The last day's ride took us to the **Laurentian Divide**, the split where water on the north side flows to the Arctic Ocean and water on the south side flows

to the Atlantic Ocean. The route continued into Eveleth, home of the U.S. Hockey Hall of Fame, before bicyclists completed the loop back to Hoyt Lakes. Showers were available as well as a taco lunch topped off with root beer floats.

As director, Mary Derks wore many hats and ensured the ride went smoothly with the aid of 26 volunteers. BAM is a fully supported tour with the safety net of a sag wagon, bike repairmen on hand, and great food. Riders enjoyed the scenery, attractions, route, and camaraderie of the journey. Derks said, "What sets BAM apart from other tours is its focus on tourism. BAM brings an awareness of small

communities and businesses, allowing each locale to showcase their uniqueness while providing an economic boost for their attractions."

Each year, BAM's location moves around the state to one of more than a dozen different regions. When asked which BAM ride was Derks's favorite, she responded, "The one I am currently on."

That means in 2025, her favorite will be...?"

Well, you'll just have to contact Mary Derks at bam@bikemn.org to begin your cycling journey through the beauty of Minnesota among friends. ☺



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