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Radars gets fat tires to slow down

Mountain bikers face \$200 fine for speeding on Mt. Tam trails

By Michael Dougan
OF THE EXAMINER STAFF

MOUNT TAMALPAIS — Rob Fordyce acted a little stunned when the uniformed guys with a radar gun gave him a ticket for exceeding the speed limit by 10 mph.

The 23-year-old Kentfield resident set his bike aside, as ordered, and stammered out an apology. "I was just cruising. I wasn't thinking about anything," he said. "I guess I should have been going slower."

Then he stuffed the ticket into a jacket pocket and peddled on down the secluded path on the north slope of Mount Tamalpais.

Fordyce was the 12th bicyclist this year to face a \$200 fine for speeding on the scenic Tam trails, where two-wheeled speeders can take heart in the knowledge that there are only seven rangers — and one radar gun — to control 90 miles of backwoods roadways open to cyclers.

Marin Municipal Water District officials in charge of Mount Tam say the phenomenal popularity of mountain bikes — rugged, light-weight, fat-tired cruisers with low gear ratios — has spawned an invasion of riders and altered the Mount Tam experience for hikers, equestrians and park rangers.

And it has led to a record number of injuries on the mountain's intricate network of trails, fire roads and old railroad grades, forcing the district to spend more time and money enforcing strict bicycle rules.

"There have been a lot of single-bike injuries," said Chief Ranger Casey May. "We're seeing a considerable amount of head injuries."

Collisions between bicyclists and others who use



EXAMINER/JOHN STOREY

[See BIKES, B-3]

Rob Fordyce gets ready to take his medicine, a speeding ticket from ranger Gordon Hasler.

Radar nabs the fat-tire crowd

the trails are reaching epidemic proportions, judging from mail the district has received, he added. "Even equestrians have said they've been thrown from their horses," May said.

The radar unit, purchased three years ago for around \$900, has provided one weapon in the rangers' often futile efforts to maintain a safe mountain environment.

Only 342 tickets for speeding or for riding on off-limit hiking paths have been issued since 1990, but many more bikers received warning citations, said May. "One Sunday we tracked 30 bicyclists in three hours, and 28 of them were speeding," he noted. "We only gave out eight tickets. The rest got warnings. Our intent is not to nail everyone within the letter of the law, but to educate people and gain compliance."

The speed limit is 15 mph on straightaways, 5 mph on switch-back curves and when passing pedestrians.

Reactions from bikers stopped for speeding range from meek acceptance to outrage, said Ranger Jim Long. "You should hear the comments we get," he said. "We had a fellow from Australia here. He couldn't believe we were using

radar out in the woods. He didn't think it was an appropriate use of technology, I guess."

As he assembled the radar unit alongside Shaver Grade, an old stagecoach trail, Senior Ranger Gordon Hasler complained that he didn't get into the business to be a traffic cop.

"It's not the same job anymore," said the 22-year district veteran.

Hasler said the boom in mountain bikes has completely changed the demographics of visitors to the Tam watershed. "The number of them has doubled in the last four years," he said. "Seven or eight years ago, 90 percent of the people who used the land were Marin County residents. Now it's about 50 percent."

When the MMWD board recently considered expanding the number of trails available to bikers, more than 370 letters poured in opposing the move, said May.

Board members left current rules intact and voted to boost the fine for riding on forbidden single-track trails from \$75 to \$200 for a first offense.

The problem is not unique to Mount Tamalpais. East Bay Regional Parks District rangers have also been aiming radar guns at bicyclists on the paved trails circling Lake Chabot near Oakland.

"There are a lot of people who are walking with families or kids and people who are fishing along the shoreline," said parks spokesman Ned Mackay. "What we're really trying to do is just encourage people to use the parks in a courteous and safe manner."

May said even his rangers, who sometimes use a departmental mountain bike to chase down speedsters, understand the urge to hurtle down their mountain. "I've ridden our mountain bike, and it does bring out the kid in you."

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