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Scouts get a bike's-eye view of Wisconsin

MATT MILNER
Leader-Telegram staff

CHIPPEWA FALLS — Plenty of students spend the summer seeing their neighborhoods from the seat of a bike, zipping around to see friends or for the pure joy of being responsibility free for a few weeks.

Most don't decide to bike some 320 miles while carrying 70 pounds or so of gear on their backs. The scouts from Troop 72 in Chippewa Falls aren't most teens.

Six scouts and two adults set out to spend the week on the road, working their way toward Madison. The plan was to arrive Wednesday for a meeting with Sen. Jesse James and Reps. Karen Hurd and Rob Summerfield. The idea for the trip began when the elected officials invited the scouts to visit, though it's easy to think they probably thought the scouts would just drive down.

Long-distance bike trips are nothing new for the troop. Dubbed the SWIS-BIRD (self-contained Wisconsin bike ride for Boy Scout Troop 72), annual trips of at least 72 miles are part of the troop's usual plans. Prior years used a trailer to carry the camping gear, but this time the group raised the bar and decided to carry everything with them.

This year's ride wasn't a straight line. Plans changed with the forecast. And there were some unconventional stops along the way, including the world's first Culver's restaurant and a peek at the Mississippi River. Tom Arneberg's posts to Facebook track the journey. His photos show the scouts biking down a combination of back roads and trails as they make their way south, along with more than a few shots of the scouts checking maps to make sure they were heading the right way.

The challenge is clear from the route schedule. Most days aimed for at least 40 miles of biking. Over the course of the week the group pedaled what amounts to four of the 72-mile annual trips the troop aims for.

Four of the scouts — Cole Gilles, Henry



PHOTO COURTESY OF TOM ARNEBERG

Scouts from Troop 72 spent the week biking from the Chippewa Valley to Madison for a meeting with legislators. It's not the first long-distance ride for the troop, but it is among the more ambitious.

Fish, Micah Uttecht and Lucius Kemmet — took time Tuesday afternoon for an interview while on a break. They all said the ride was a challenge, but worth it.

"It's a long ride and you have to stay in the seat for hours at a time," said Gilles. The addition of the packs with gear made days a real test of endurance.

Uttecht was clear on why it was worth doing.

"Because it's fun!" he said. "This has been one of the most enjoyable trips I've done."

It was a learning experience as well.

Uttecht said he would "bring extra bags to carry stuff in" on a similar ride in the future.

Gilles said he would probably trade a hammock for a tent, even though it means a bit more weight.

For Kemmet, the payoff is significant: "It's the sense of accomplishment." Starting in the Chippewa Valley and ending in Madison is the kind of ride few can claim to have done.

"It's kind of hard to explain," Uttecht said. "I could say I biked to Madison, but it's so much more than that."

And the scouts may be aiming higher. A major ride could be on the table for next year.

RAGBRAI is a massive, one-week bike

ride in Iowa. Over the course of the week tens of thousands of people participate, officially and unofficially, beginning their trek by dipping their rear wheels in the Missouri River and ending it dipping the front into the Mississippi River on the other side of the state.

The scouts' eyes lit up when asked if they had heard of RAGBRAI. The answer was an emphatic yes, with several excitedly saying they wanted to give it a try in 2024.

Arneberg isn't betting against the scouts pulling it off, either.

"They could do it," he said.

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