ROCKY MOUNTAIN
OUTLOOK
LAKE LOUISE BANFF CANMORE EXSHAW KANANASKIS STONEY NAKODA

VOLUME 21 • ISSUE 49 WWW.RMOTODAY.COM THURSDAY, DECEMBER 9, 2021

LIGHTNING QUICK Federica Brignone of Italy skis down the course during the women's FIS downhill world cup race in Lake Louise on Friday (Dec. 3). For more pictures from the alpine event, see page A33.
EVAN BUHLER RMO PHOTO

Expansion of e-bike trails in Banff National Park draws controversy

CATHY ELLIS

BANFF – The number of trails where pedal-assisted electric bikes are permitted in Banff National Park has been expanded, including a controversial move to allow them on some backcountry trails.

While members of the cycling and mountain biking community are pleased with the decision, conservationists are calling on Parks Canada to rescind the policy change for backcountry trails like Healy/Brewster Creek trail to Sundance Lodge and Redearth Creek trail to Shadow Lake Lodge.

The Bow Valley Naturalists (BVN) and the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society (CPAWS) say they strongly support e-bikes in urban areas and on hardened local trails, noting they are unquestionably part of the solution to Bow Valley traffic congestion and provide a low impact way to access road-based trailheads and facilities in the park.

But Reg Bunyan, vice-president of BVN, said e-bike use on backcountry trails is essentially a form of motorized transport that gets users into the wilderness faster and easier, potentially resulting in more user conflicts, greater crowding and increased wildlife conflicts.

"It functionally moves the trailhead from the highway to the heart of the backcountry, resulting in an overall degradation of wilderness character that extends beyond the end of the e-bike trail," said Bunyan, a retired resource conservation officer with Banff National Park.

"Many municipalities are already struggling with how to manage ever increasingly more powerful e-bikes on urban bike trails; how this will be done in a backcountry setting with a chronically understaffed warden service defies logic."

Only class 1 pedal-assist e-bikes are allowed on permitted trails in Banff National Park. That means power assistance is only provided when the e-bike is being pedalled, the motor must not generate more than 500W, and the power assistance must stop when the speed reaches 32km/h.

Pedal-assisted e-bikes have been permitted on the Legacy Trail, but a revised restricted activity order has been expanded to allow pedal assist e-bike use on other trails, including Tunnel Mountain technical trails such as Topp Notch, Star Wars and Return of the Jedi.

In the Lake Louise area, e-bikes are allowed on the Bow River loop, the Tramline and Great Divide Route.

However, the more controversial trails include the Healy Creek-Brewster Creek trail and the Redearth Creek trail.

Specifically, e-bikes, are allowed on the Healy Creek and Brewster Creek trail from the trailhead at the base of Sunshine Village to Sundance Lodge, which is operated by Banff Trail Riders; however, they are not allowed on the Healy Creek trail east beyond the junction with Brewster Creek trail.

E-bikes are also now allowed on the Redearth Creek Trail year-round from the parking area off the Trans-Canada Highway to and back from the Redearth warden cabin. However, e-biking is only allowed on the trail beyond the Y-junction to and from Shadow Lake Lodge, operated by the Alpine Club of Canada, from Dec. 15-March 15 annually.

Bunyan said BVN is at an utter loss to understand Parks Canada's reasons for opening up e-bike use in the backcountry.

He points to the draft management plan for Banff National Park, which specifically indicates e-bikes won't be permitted in wilderness areas.

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