

How NOT to Take a Girl on a Date:

The Ride To Reddish Knob

A ride report by Skippii Kai Tollkühn

I made it until I was 25 before I ever got taken home in a cop car.
But that's getting ahead quite a bit. The important part is that I made it home.

Being broke and cheap, unable to afford the luxury of satellite directions, my usual methods of navigation generally followed one of two forms: Either I'd duct tape direction from MapQuest to my gas tank, or I'd drive in circles for hundreds of miles until I found where I was supposed to be. More often than not, it was actually a combination of the two.

I decided to put an end to all that. Last week, GPS systems went on sale, and I went home with one of them, a Garmin Nuvi 200.

Eager to try it out, I looked up some local coordinates, and input them into the GPS. Yesterday, I rather spontaneously call up a local friend I've not seen in a few months, and suggest we go out for a picnic at one of my new Waypoints (Reddish Knob, the highest mountain peak in the area--a popular picnic spot.)

The GPS shows about 4 roads to Reddish Knob. I've been told that at least one of them is a new, paved road, while some are dirt or gravel.

When I'm out in the woods like this, I actually prefer the dirt roads--less traffic, more interesting, and you can stop at any time in the middle of the road to take pictures or whatever without holding anyone up. So I pick one at random and set the GPS.

I pack up an extra riding jacket and helmet for the girl, pick her up, and we leave her place around 4:45. Up to the Forest, I've got the GPS set to "Fastest Route", so I was rather surprised when it started suggesting some very sketchy dirt and gravel roads. At this point, we're only 15 minutes from my house, so I know exactly how to get to the forest, but just for the hell of it we follow the GPS's recommendations and plow through the middle of a cornfield. Well, not quite, but pretty close. I wouldn't have tried that in my car. After a mile or so of playing around in the dirt, we finally emerge back onto the road off of which we'd originally come. I have no idea what the benefit of that little excursion was--perhaps it is indeed a few seconds faster assuming you take the dirt road at a suicidal 55mph?

Anyway, a bit later, we enter the National Forest, and come to a fork in the road. The sign says "Reddish Knob: RIGHT". Looking at the road, it's quite obvious that is the new road I'd instructed my GPS to avoid, and the GPS says left, so left we go, onto some hard gravel (the nice kind, not the really loose stuff).

A few miles down the road, the GPS says to turn right, so I slow down. Then it says to turn around, because I missed it. Missed WHAT???

After a bit of searching through the bushes, I finally see it: there is indeed a small path leading to the

right up a hill.
So up we go.

I'll mention at this point that my friend Melissa has no real motorcycle experience whatsoever. Actually, she can't even drive, having wrecked the instructor's vehicle into a parked car during her Driver's Test. So obviously, she had absolutely no idea what we were getting into. Then again, neither did I.

Despite her being only 98 pounds or so, I was only a matter of feet into the path before I had to ask Melissa to get off the bike for a moment. A rather sharply pointed hill meant my bike was resting on the engine rather than the wheels, and I needed to unload the suspension a bit. She hopped off, I rolled a bit forward, and she hopped back on. Just the first of many such hills, but I certainly wasn't going to stop for each and every one of them. Pretty soon I was getting the hang of taking these high bumps fast enough that the wheels wouldn't come down until I was well over the other side of the bump. Quite an exciting experience.



Did I mention that I'm on a Kawasaki Ninja? And I'm still running the tires from the track day last weekend--not the greatest for off-roading.

So this continues for a while, taking small jumps over hills, plowing through a shallow stream or two, and navigating various rocks and stumps lying in the path. The after landing another small jump, I noticed I was no longer accelerating.

We got off, enjoying the opportunity to get out of our helmets, gloves, and jackets, while I managed to burn my hands several times on the hot muffler fumbling to put the chain back on the sprocket. Immediately after succeeding in this, it occurred to me how much easier that would have been had I left my leather gloves on.

Back on the path, still heading up, the road seems to get a little better, then worse again, then better. It's a really steep hill up which we are going, though, and I'm starting to feel the clutch slipping at times. Well, it's sort of understandable, riding 2-up with full side cases on a really steep uphill. Could just be the clutch cable is a bit tight--I've had that happen before, and I loosen the cable a touch and it's all back to normal. But soon I forget all about that and instead focus on the tree that has fallen down across the path. I can't get around it. It's either over the tree, or back the way we came. Before you criticize me too much for my decision, remember what tires I'm riding. I had serious questions about my ability to regulate my speed down a hill that steep with a passenger on dirt. So I lifted my bike over the tree and we continued.

Yeah, I'm actually serious about that. I put it in neutral, Melissa held the bike upright while I grabbed the front tire, and lifted the wheel up and over the tree, resting the engine on the tree. Then lifted up the back tire, moved that over, and we were on our way again.





Well...almost. Melissa didn't quite succeed with her task as I dropped the back tire back down to the ground. But no sweat there, no damage at all.

Just some flooded carbs, making the engine really hard to start.

Which tends to drain the battery really quickly.

Eventually, though, I did manage get it going, using the starter while bumping it forward.

And on we went.

For maybe 1,000 feet before getting to an identical situation.

Another tree down.

This time, now that we've got the technique down, it's easier.

But by now both my clutch and battery are starting to give me some major concerns. I unplug the headlight to save some juice.

Speaking of juice, Melissa and I take a moment to have a drink at this point, since it's stupidly hot outside.

Further along the path, it changes from dirt to rocky, and then to grassy, and then to dirt again. The whole time, one thought keeps running through my head:

This is not a road!!!



Unfortunately, that was the last picture before the camera's battery died.

Significantly higher up the mountain now, we come to a third tree down. This time, however, there's a way around, just to the left.

Despite only going about 5mph, we still slide out trying to go a bit to the left. Crap, but no harm done to us or the bike. Soft ground is nice.



Pick up the bike. Carbs are flooded again. Battery is pretty much dead. And the clutch isn't working well enough for me to be sure I can bump-start it.

Anyway, do I bump start it down the side of the cliff, uphill, or back down the hill where I'd have to try to make it past that downed tree again?

I try for a while to get it started, with no luck. I've certainly cranked it enough that the carbs should be cleared out by now, but it's still not catching.

Finally, after much pushing and praying, it comes alive. Briefly, at least. It revs high, and then slows down. Any movement of the throttle at all seems to kill the engine.

And it rather concerns me that it's doing all this revving stopped in gear with the clutch engaged.

The bike ran for maybe 5 or 6 seconds, then died. Couldn't get it started again. But it did run, so the float bowls should be clear now. But why was it acting so strange?

At this point it begins to rain.

Don't know where the hell that came from---it was nothing but clear blue skies when we left.

This is when I called Adrian from the AdvRider.com message board. Things weren't looking too good right now, and I don't think I was really impressing Melissa.

I called Adrian to ask if he wanted to do a dual-sport ride to where I was (I gave him GPS coordinates) and maybe help me out. More importantly, though I just wanted someone to know that I was out here, because I'd not told anyone before I left.

Melissa and I had actually mentioned our plans to her roommate. But as he didn't ever make eye contact, never once glancing up from his game of World Of Warcraft, I didn't have the greatest confidence in his ability to remember what we'd said.

Or, for that matter, his ability to notice that we were missing anytime in the next few weeks. So I spoke to Adrian. He was at work, but said ...well, actually, I don't know what he said, because this is when the cell phone cut out. But I did hear some static, so he definitely said something.

So, I prepare to drain the float bowls. Just in case. But first I'll give it a few more tries with bump starting.

Amazingly, it actually starts after a minute or two of trying. I kick it in neutral, get off, and walk away. I'm not touching anything until I'm sure it's still running.

After we'd loaded our stuff back into the side cases and mounted them on the bike and it was still running, we decided to head out again, figuring we were about 5 miles from Reddish Knob. So I called Adrian again and told him our plans, saying that we would call as soon as we arrived.

Going up hills now meant Melissa had to get off or the clutch just wouldn't grip. Luckily the hills weren't so bad now, and the path was actually no longer dirt, but very long grass--a good two feet high or so.

Not really a problem, but it really made me wonder when the last time this "Road" was traveled.

Coming up one hill, with Melissa walking next to me, I was trying to maintain a constant speed to keep the clutch from slipping. But then I realized that I had in fact just swapped positions with my motorcycle. It was now on top of me, while my face was in the dirt.

There was another tree down in the path. The tree was maybe a foot or so in diameter. The grass was about two feet higher than the tree. Never could have seen that one.

My side cases are getting a little bent by this point, but nothing too bad, and no damage to the front wheel.

I hope Melissa at least enjoyed the view of that one.

So yeah, Melissa.

I've known her for almost 2 years now, I think, but we've never really hung out too much. One of those things where we keep meaning to, but never get around to it.

I've got to say, I'm extremely impressed with her so far. Most girls I know (most guys I know, too) would have been screaming after the first stream crossing, let alone the second or third faceplant. But she's completely calm and seemingly in a good mood.

And so am I.

I don't get upset about stuff, especially mechanical problems. I don't stress about it, and I don't worry about it. I figure, I've got a GPS, a day's supply of food and drink, and hell--I could probably walk home from here within 2 or 3 days.



A picture from a few months before

Something I've noticed about former girlfriends: the hate that. They hate it when I'm calm. They want me to be freaking out. I don't understand it. They don't get upside because I nearly accidentally killed them. They get upset because I'm not freaking out, so they think I don't care about them. Because if I really cared about them, I'd be freaking out. I don't get it. This is why I haven't had a girlfriend in 4 years.

Anyway....

We continue riding together, although she does have to get off a bit for the steeper hills. It starts to get dark, so I plug the headlight back in and hope for the best with my battery.

The GPS indicates that the "road" we are on now soon ends onto a larger road. The whole time I've been hoping that this larger road is significantly easier than the one we were on.

It is.

Slightly.

It's almost 6 feet wide, and covered in grass.

Then it goes up, and down, and up, and down, and turns to dirt and mud.

Finally, it straightens out into a relatively flat grassy road going around the mountain, with a steep incline to the left, and a sharp drop to the right.

And a tree straight across the road. No way around, under, or over this one.

I tell Melissa it's her choice what we do next.

It's starting to drizzle again.

We can try to pick up the bike and lift it over this tree like the last ones, but I'm not sure how well that will work this time. And with no idea what the road is like up ahead, there's no guarantee the same thing won't happen 100 feet down the road.

We can turn around and go back the way we came, but in all honesty, I do not know if my bike and its clutch will be able to get up the rather steep hill we'd just descended.

Or, we can lock the helmets in the cases, stuff the food in our pockets, and use the GPS to hike up to Reddish Knob, where would be the closest place where we might be able to find someone to get a ride home.

She chose hiking.

Before we set off on foot, we wanted to make someone aware of our plans, hopefully assuring that there would be someone at Reddish Knob to pick us up.

We tried calling Adrian, roommates, and other people, but we couldn't get through to anyone. It would almost work, but then when it was connecting, every time the signal would drop and the call would fail.

I figured if there was one number that would actually work, it would be the emergency number. It took a few tries, but eventually I got through to the 911 operator. I told her where we were, explained that we were heading out on foot, and gave her Adrian's phone number. She put me on hold, called Adrian, and came back to tell me she'd told him of our plans.

She told me to keep the phone on, and she'd periodically call back to make sure we were okay, and that Adrian was trying to see if he could get someone to meet us at Reddish Knob.

I was a little nervous about leaving my phone on, since if we were hiking, I can't charge it from the bike, but I did what she said.

I saved the location in my GPS, took all the food, finished off the drink, locked up the helmets, and we set off down the path.

If the moon was in the sky, we didn't know it.

The forest cover was dense, and the thick clouds above were denser.

Without the benefit of my Ninja's 100-watt headlight, illumination was provided only by the faint glow of the GPS screen.

Approaching 9:00pm, we were hoping to be able to average at least two miles per hour, which would allow us to cover the 3 miles to Reddish Knob before it was too absurdly late.

Walking up the mountain at that speed, while tiresome, wasn't too much of an issue. Staying on the path in the darkness, however, was. With various forks leading nowhere, we frequently found ourselves face to face with impassable brush or even a sheer drop. The accuracy of the GPS impressed me here. By zooming in, we often found we were only 10 feet East or West of the actual path, although from looking around you might have thought we were deep into the Amazon Basin.

Several times we were forced to crawl through the growth and under trees, trying to rejoin the path that had seemingly simultaneously disappeared from both in front of and behind us.

And sometimes, while ducking under low-hanging branches, we were surprised to find that we were, in fact, still on the path. Had we been on the motorcycle, we certainly would have been clotheslined. Well, assuming we'd somehow been able to make it this far.

Eventually, we came to a small clearing.

The reason for this clearing was obvious: the ground was nothing but a hill of very large, loose rocks.

An interesting formation, but more interesting was that there didn't seem to be a reasonable way down from the hill. Was this part of the path? We didn't know. Throwing a few rocks to the sides and waiting to see how long they took to hit the ground didn't exactly inspire much confidence in finding an easy path forward. We backed up to confirm we hadn't missed yet another fork, and after a while of searching, ended up back in the same spot. Scouting the area thoroughly eventually led to our discovery of a small pass back down to the dirt ground. Success! We were still on the path. On we went.

Eventually, the trail ended onto yet another trail, but I seemed to have a difficult time working out which way to go: if you're not moving, the GPS doesn't really know which way you're actually facing. We went left.

The left path seemed to be quite nice, as it soon led slightly downhill--a welcome relief, even if I had a feeling that we were in fact supposed to be heading uphill. We didn't go very far down this path though, as once the GPS started saying we were getting farther from our destination rather than closer, we knew we were supposed to have gone right. So, another quick break to eat some oranges, and we turned around and headed back up.

My feet, and especially one toe on my left foot were starting to become quite painful at this point.

During one of the faceplants, I might have hurt my toe a bit. Or maybe it was just a blister. I was, after all, wearing my Teknic Chicane boots. The ones for motorcycle racing. The ones designed to keep your ankle straight, and not let it flex. The ones that make it really hard to walk down a road, let alone go hiking up a mountain.

Approaching 1:00am now, I had to be honest and admit I was getting a bit tired of walking.

The GPS showed 1.0 miles to the main road to Reddish Knob, though it had been fluctuating a bit, dropping down to 0.3 miles at times, so I wasn't sure exactly how far we were. My phone had never rung, likely due to us being too far out of service at this point. Melissa's phone had long since died, and now mine did too. Hopefully, there's be someone waiting for us at the Knob, and we wouldn't need them.

We pressed on, and eventually came to a sign of civilization.

Not much, mind you but every little bit boosts spirits.

We were now on a very narrow, rocky pass, and we were climbing as much as walking.

To the left, just as the rocks dropped off down a cliff, was a single metal cable. I'm not sure what its purpose was, as it was too high to be useful as a fence or restraint, but it gave us some hope that we were close.

Was that even the main road on the other side?

No, it wasn't. The path continued, but once again we were back to dirt, and were able to walk on only two limbs. About another quarter mile down this path, and another clearing seemed to emerge in the distance.

Unlike the other clearings, this one wasn't caused by a change in the terrain to large, sharp and dangerous rocks. No, this one was asphalt!

ROAD!!!

At last! We we'd made it to the main road to Reddish Knob.

Only a little bit further now, up the twisty road, to the peak where we could be rescued!

Melissa was, at this point, in surprisingly good spirits. After getting off her knees from when she'd been kissing the pavement, the two of us burst into song, singing some silly and highly repetitive songs she'd learnt as a girl scout years ago.

These songs continued as we walked up the road to the peak of the Knob. We didn't stop singing until we'd reached the very top, looked around, and realized that it was now 2:00am, and we were completely alone.

I had two promised I'd made to Melissa.

I had every intention of keeping both of them.

When we'd left the bike behind, I'd promised Melissa we'd get out of this alive.

But before we'd left, I'd made her another promise.

We would have sandwiches on Reddish Knob.

We looked around, found two rocks, and we sat down and pulled the somewhat squashed meals from our pockets.

Maybe I was just really tired, but that was the best damn peanut butter and jelly sandwich I'd ever had.

We also tried our phones once more, figuring if we even got another 30 seconds out of our batteries, we might be able to call for help.

I called 911 again, and spoke to a man. I said, as quickly as I could, that I'd called before explaining the situation, and that we'd reached Reddish Knob.

He said he had no idea what I was talking about, that I hadn't called that emergency number before, and that I'd probably been in a different county and therefor routed to a different dispatch. He then asked me what Reddish Knob was, and before I had a chance to answer him, my phone died. Melissa wasn't able to make any call from her phone.

I wasn't overly worried at this point. We could spend the night at Reddish Knob, and generally someone would be up there at some point during the next day. I figured even if no one came looking for us, people would probably take the trip to the scenic location the next evening: people go there all the time enjoy the view of the sky, the surrounding cities and to get drunk, so it's unlikely we'd have to wait more than 24 hours before someone came along.

On the other hand, being at a mountain top meant it was really windy. We were already pretty wet from sweat and the earlier rain, and it was getting to be rather cold. But the sun would rise again in 4 or 5 hours, and taking a glance at Melissa gave me quite a few ideas of various ways to keep warm until then.



(Not our picture, obviously, as it was pitch black at that time).

Several years ago, while at James Madison University in Harrisonburg, I worked as a Cadet at the police department there.

It was a fun job, though I only did it for less than a year. I must have left some sort of impression on the

department, though, because one of the officers recognized my name when he heard it over the police radio. Obviously not his jurisdiction, of course, but it sparked his interest for a while.

Several hours later, around 12:45am, curiosity got the better of him. He called a friend of his on his cell phone, a Sergeant in the Rockingham County department, and asked what the result had been of "those guys on Reddish Knob".

Well, the Sargent knew nothing of this--which ultimately isn't surprising as Reddish Knob is not in nor particularly close to Rockingham County--it's on the boarder of Augusta County and West Virginia.

So, the Sergeant said he'd find out and let the officer at JMU know how the story had ended. He made a few phone calls to his dispatch office to get the info. He was told that they had received a phone call from two motorcyclists who'd had the bike break down and ended up walking to Reddish Knob, and that the police dispatcher had called a friend of the motorcyclist to have someone pick him up, but hadn't been able to confirm that anyone was in fact available to do so. There was no more information available.

This troubled the sergeant, but was immediately sent on another call. As soon as he got a chance, though, he figured he'd drive over to the next county and up to Reddish Knob to make sure there wasn't anyone over there waiting.

It was after 2:00am before he got a break from police calls, when he and another officer headed out on the 30-mile drive to Reddish Knob.

Just before he arrived, he got a call from the Rockingham County Dispatcher. The dispatcher said that she had just received a call from the Augusta County Dispatcher, who had asked her if she knew anything about a guy stuck on Reddish Knob, because it sounded like there was someone there.

Well, 15 minutes later, at around 2:30am, he pulls up to the top of the mountain and see two people wearing motorcycle jackets sitting in the cold.

The sergeant couldn't believe that the communication had been this bad, that no one in either Rockingham or Augusta county had been notified by the dispatcher. It had been 6 hours since the motorcyclist had made the phone call saying he was stranded, and yet the only way he found out was when a friend had called to ask for the details of the incident.

Taking the two stranded motorcyclists home, he expressed his concern for them, as well as his concern about the communication in his department.

Epilogue:

Arriving home at 3:00am in the back of a police car (despite being a friendly trip) wasn't exactly the ending I'd expected for this trip. It was, however, better than some ending I'd feared at certain points. This was the second time I'd ever had to return from a motorcycle trip without my bike--the first time being a rather uneventful flat tire from which I hitchhiked home.

I soon noticed that I'd also somehow returned home without my cell phone. I remembered calling 911 from Reddish Knob, so I figured I must have dropped it there. Well, I was far too tired to go back now, but I figured I'd take my car in the morning to see if I could find it.

The next morning, I start up my car with my fingers crossed.

My car isn't exactly the most reliable thing around. I drive it on average 10 miles a month, when I don't have access to my bike (This usually involves a scenario such as me dismantling the engine before I realize I've forgotten to pick up the replacement part from the dealership.) The last time I drove it, it stalled out several times, wouldn't start, and overheated.

I pulled out of the parking lot, thinking to myself, "the adventure isn't over yet!"

A minute later, I pulled back into my driveway, filled the engine up with coolant, added a quart or two of oil, pondered briefly what all those crusty lumps were on the oil dipstick, and set off once again.

The engine may have badly needed the coolant, but adding it didn't seem to help much with keeping the engine cool. It wasn't long before the needle was into the red. Oh well. I'm planning on selling the car soon anyway.

I get back to the forest, being extremely careful to make sure I'm taking the MAIN, PAVED road to Reddish Knob.

BAM!

That was the sound of the deer slamming onto the hood of my car, rolling off my windshield, and then running away back into the woods.

That's the second time in my life I've hit a deer, and neither time was I rewarded with fresh venison--only dents and broken lights.

This time, though, the damage didn't look too bad. So I got back in the car and kept driving. A bit of a funny noise, but nothing too loud. And then the engine coolant light comes back on. And I know it was filled up half an hour ago.

Sigh

Driving in the hot weather with the heating on full isn't exactly a nice trip, but at least it keeps the engine temperature from going past the red--while I'm moving at least.

Going up this steep mountain doesn't seem to help much either, but my car gets me there in the end, up to the top, where sure enough, I'm able to find my cell phone.

A few missed calls from the police dispatch, and a message telling me I need to come into work for the graveyard shift that night. So much for my day off to recover.

The luck from the ride didn't continue only with me, however.

Melissa and her roommate had gone out grocery shopping in the morning, only to have his car break down coming home. Unable to get it started again, they finally were given a ride home--once again, in the back of a police car by a friendly police officer.

THE END