

Nobody gets left behind

Group riding off-road is great – unless someone gets lost... CTC Off-road's **Dan Cook** suggests ways to stay together and, at worst, regroup

You're out in the hills with half a dozen friends, pausing for breath at the top of a climb while taking in the view. As you get ready to set off, someone says: 'Hang on a minute. Where's Jon?'

Maybe he's walking up the hill with a flat he can't mend? Maybe he got fed up and went home? Perhaps he thought everyone turned left halfway up? Or maybe he's fallen off and is lying in a ditch...

Group riding turns mountain biking into a social experience. It's fun. But unless you pay attention, it's not hard for the group to split apart; routes aren't as clear as on road.

Lost – and found?

Back to lost Jon. No one knows what's happened to him. A phone comes out but Jon's not answering. Maybe he's got no signal. Or maybe he's busy riding?

Your concerns will be based on what you know about Jon. Does he often have bike problems, for example? Mood changes? Navigation issues? At this point, someone will typically go back to look for him. It's a natural response. But what does that person do on finding Jon? Or upon not finding him?

Meanwhile, Jon will be feeling uncomfortable. He can't see the rest of the group, isn't sure if he's going the right way, and might not know where he is. Even if everything turns out okay, the experience might put him off riding with your group again.

Keeping it together

Preventing the group splitting apart is better than trying to get it back together. Your strategies for this can run quietly in the background. In our example, all it needs is another

rider who knows the route hanging back with Jon. Jon is then not lost and won't feel abandoned. For the rest of the group, it's easier to identify that two people aren't there as against just one. And they know that if they wait, the tail-enders will be coming their way.

On formally organised rides, or informal ones with experienced and capable group members, there are some fundamentals.

- **Rider position within the group.** Being able to see everyone all the time isn't always necessary, especially if you have nominated stopping points (see below). But it's worth having someone capable near the back to encourage those less fit on climbs, and near the front where riders may get wayward if their speed isn't controlled by having to follow a leader (particularly if there is a sudden change, junction or drop).
- **Agreed stopping points.** Wherever the group is likely to split up, decide where you'll regroup – such as the tops of climbs, ends of descents, and trail junctions. Have impromptu stops where necessary.
- **Communication.** It's always useful for riders to know what to do in advance. This can be learned through consistency (e.g. always stopping at hill tops) or by talking as you ride along (e.g. 'Hang on at the junction!'). Walkie-talkies can be useful once you have split up, but it's better to avoid the situation in the first place.
- **Observation.** When there are people missing, or the group is spreading more widely, stop or ease up. Even if you post a back marker, remember that with too large a gap between front and back, those in the middle can go astray!



Top by Phil Stasiw. Second from top by Jan Bailey



- **Count heads.** Know how many people are out and discreetly count them – regularly.

Taking the lead

Groups of friends or clubmates riding together may value spontaneity, but there is no harm in utilising the techniques used by professional leaders, particularly if you're riding further afield.

If you ride the route in advance (a pre-ride) you will know exactly where you're going, where any challenging parts are, and what the conditions are like at the moment.

Complete or utilise an existing risk assessment for the route. Doing this will influence how and where your group rides.

Use a base contact – that is, someone you can phone – who knows: your route; your intended return time; and what to do if you don't call in by your EAT (Emergency Action Time – usually 1-2 hours after your intended return time).

Keep a closer eye on those who aren't as aware of your group routines and protocols: young people, novice riders and those on their first couple of rides with you.

Lastly, consider other circumstances – such as riding at night or in bad weather. In these situations, the group needs to be kept closer together. Consider buddying people up in

pairs, stopping more often and communicating route plans clearly.

Losing it

If, despite following the above advice, your group does split up, what should you do?

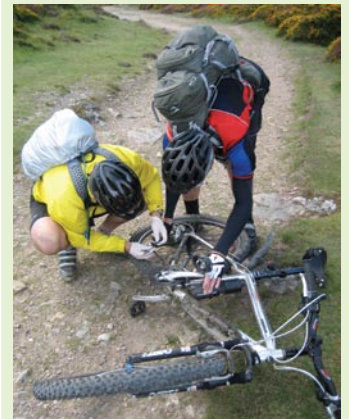
1. Don't panic. Most likely Jon's stopped for a leak, or his spare Schrader-valved innertube doesn't fit his presta-drilled rim.
2. Communicate the situation to the whole group, along with your plan of action.
3. Find out the last known point where Jon was with the group.
4. At least two people head back along the route to try to find him. That way, if you do find Jon in a ditch, one rider can start first aid whilst the other gets the group and further help.
5. Agree a return time (10-15 minutes maximum). Stick to it.
6. The rest of the group remains at the stopping point and keeps warm.

Trail leader training

CTC's training courses are just as applicable in club or informal environments as they are in professional ones. The Trail Leader Award is the one to start with.

CTC also offers a range of maintenance, riding skills, and first aid courses. Find the details at www.promtb.net or ring CTC Training on 0844 736 8463.

Use stopping points to regroup, communicating where they'll be in advance



Don't leave home without it

Every rider should have:

- spare tube or two
- pump
- tyre levers
- water
- food
- waterproof layer

Individuals should carry their own medical requirements (inhaler, epipen, etc).

Additional equipment for the group (not per rider) will depend on where you're going, the season, the forecast, and the ability of anyone in the group to use said equipment.

- first aid kit
- map(s). Even if you know where you are going, you might need to give a grid reference to emergency services. Do **not** rely on mapping apps.
- mobile phone(s), fully charged. Keep them waterproof and have riders' and base contact numbers plugged in.
- 50p for a phone call when there is no reception (or your phone is wet or broken).
- tools. At least a decent multi tool, spare chain joining links (8-, 9- and even 10-speed!), zip-ties and a bit of duct tape.

If you're going into remote or mountain terrain, add:

- whistle
- lights
- group shelter
- additional clothing
- compass
- spare waterproof map
- access (i.e. everyone knows whose rucksack it's in) for all riders to the route, base contact details and all riders' medical information.