

PEDAL TO THE MEDAL

THE RACE TO ALASKA EVENT WAS PARTICULARLY DIFFICULT FOR BOATERS IN 2022. BUT FOR ONE KOOTENAY CREW, BICYCLES HELPED PROPEL THEM TO THE FINISH LINE.

BY JAYME MOYE

In Port Townsend, Washington, at the start of the 2022 Race to Alaska (R2AK), 36 boats set out on the 1,200-kilometre (746-mile) odyssey to Ketchikan, Alaska, through Canada's Inside Passage. Only half of them would succeed, even less than the usual finishing rate of 60 per cent for the event's five previous iterations. High winds snapped a trimaran's 10-metre-high mast. Giant waves tossed three other boats into the air, capsizing two and pitchpoling another—picture a boat doing a cartwheel—resulting in four rescues by the Coast Guard. And this all happened within a few kilometres of the starting line. “It was angry waters,” says Jay Blackmore, a Nelson, British Columbia, resident and 2022 race competitor, “and an example of how angry the waters can be at any point along the course.”

The rest of the race doesn't have the Coast Guard standing by. Other than the starting leg from Port Townsend to Victoria, British Columbia, the R2AK is completely unsupported—no food drops, no pit crews, not even a racecourse. Competitors have only one waypoint, at Bella Bella on British Columbia's Sunshine Coast, and they choose their own route there before tackling the last 450 kilometres (280 miles) to Ketchikan. They also choose their vessel: the race has been attempted in everything from stand-up paddleboards to row boats to yachts. The only real rule is no motors. “It's less about a race to get there to win,” says Blackmore. “It's more about having a



Top: Dameon Colbry and Leigh Dorsey of team Backwards AF, from Maine, cross the finish line of the 2019 race after 18 days of rowing. Bottom: Kootenay Pedalwheelers' team members Jay Blackmore (left) and Doug Kennedy navigate Hecate Strait, east of Haida Gwaii, BC. Two bicycles mounted to the team's stern operate propellers that help move the boat during moments of slack wind.

wide variety of skills and the resilience and resourcefulness to make it all the way to the end.”

Blackmore and his team, the Kootenay Pedalwheelers, made it to the finish line this past June, becoming the first crew from the British Columbia Interior to complete the R2AK. The team, which included Mike Bowick, Roger Hassol, Doug Kennedy, Todd Kettner, and Mike Sagal, spent seven days, five hours, and 53 minutes at sea, including a seven-hour saga repairing a rudder that started breaking while they navigated the turbulent waters off Vancouver Island's west coast. Of the 19 teams that finished, the Pedalwheelers came in sixth, approximately three days after the winners, a three-person crew from Seattle aboard a sailboat, and a full two weeks before the last team crossed the finish line in a trimaran schooner.

The Pedalwheelers' vessel of choice was a 10-metre-long racing sailboat with bicycles instead of a motor. A contractor by trade, Blackmore helped his team mount two steel hardtail mountain-bike frames to the stern and then modified the drivetrains so the pedals turn an underwater propeller—hence the name “Pedalwheelers.”

Blackmore says he'd like to return to the race next year as a volunteer because he loved the camaraderie so much. If anyone else from the British Columbia Interior is inspired to try the R2AK in 2023, the team has its boat up for sale—bicycles and all.