

## Stratford Gravel 101

### First Question: Why Gravel?

Let me start off by saying that I am a dedicated gravel junkie, and the gravel in the SW Ontario area surrounding Stratford has made it accessible for me to do 90% of my riding off of paved roads. But the question I am asked most often is why? Let me quickly explain the resurgence in off road on-road riding.

First, it is quiet and the traffic is far less aggressive. There are times when I can ride 2-3 hours and never once see a vehicle depending on the roads I am riding. The key statistic here is volume of vehicles per hour per day. I know that is an odd number to calculate but the government has those stats. I rode across North America in 2017 and Nebraska publishes a map of the state for cyclists on which they colour code all roads based on that statistic. Volume of vehicles per hour per day. On most of the gravel roads I ride in SW Ontario I would guess that statistic is less than 10 per hour and on some of the gravel I ride less than 10 per day.

Second, the delight of discovery. If you are a tad bored of the regular routes you ride 50-100 times or more per summer you can expand your repertoire immeasurably using gravel in our area. There are hundreds and even thousands of kilometers of new roads for you to discover within a few kilometers of Stratford. My longest route I did in 2020 was 255k of which 88% was gravel. I have discovered swimming holes, wild fruit (apples, raspberries, strawberries, grapes etc.), small out of the way parks (see Arthur Meighen), quiet and incredibly indescribable beauty, right in my back yard (per se). What's not to love.

Third, to be honest it is better training. Gravel is harder, and depending on the time of the year if the gravel is freshly graded it is downright punishing. Your average speed will go down (I did 9000k in 500 hours in 2020 so average is 18-20k/h for me), and there are times when it is just a hard workout. Consider it mountain bike training for roadies.

Lastly, the opportunity to expand your riding horizons. Once you get hooked on gravel, bikepacking and a whole new world can open up. Think about the possibilities. You can ride from Stratford to Niagara Falls almost exclusively on gravel and bike paths. What an incredible gift.

### Second Question: What do I need to ride gravel?

If you have primarily been dedicated to road riding the primary difference is the tires you will use. I will state outright there is no bad gravel bike. Yes, some bikes will dampen the ride a little better. In quality of ride on gravel my bikes from worst to best are 1) Carbon road bike, 2) Carbon cyclo-cross bike, 3) Carbon mountain bike, 4) Steel single speed mountain bike and lastly aluminum 27.5+ mountain bike with fat tires. I have ridden every one of these bikes on gravel. My go to gravel bike for the most part is my cyclo-cross bike with 700X34 tires (I can go up to 45). It is comfy, soaks up the bumps and is faster than riding a mountain bike. If I want to go for a complete comfort ride some days, I grab the big tires and upright positioning of the mountain bike.

So, tire selection is the most important decision you will make. Let me put on my bike mechanic hat here and say don't ride outside of town without the tools to repair a flat, and this is especially true of gravel. I haven't flattened on gravel in two years but I never go anywhere without a flat repair kit. Every bike has one.

So for tires, if you wanna ride your road bike out there go for one of two realities. Either an indestructible tire (Continental Touring Plus, or Schwalbe Marathon Plus). Both of these tires for example are literally indestructible with multiple layers of Kevlar etc. built in. If you want a smoother ride and a more safety from flats go a little fatter. Standard road tires for example are in the 25-27 width range. I would expand that to 28-30 if the bike can handle it. My Specialized Roubaix can handle a 30 with no issues and makes the ride a LOT more enjoyable.

Last thing to bring to gravel is a sense of adventure.

Last Question:            Finding Routes

I have included a couple very simple routes from central Stratford in links below. The closest gravel routes to Stratford start anywhere from 5k – 10k outside of town and they spread outwards in every direction. I have included a screen shot from the 'Ontario Back Road Atlas' from CCCMaps.com. It is an incredible resource and I have included a scan of the two pages around the Stratford area. All of the brown dotted roads are gravel. Look at the extensiveness of them. They are far reaching and fun. I have ridden all of the highlighted roads plus a few more. In 2019 I started my own little notebook/atlas of places to pick fresh fruit and where I will find the best places to stealth camp etc.

20K Out and Back

<https://ridewithgps.com/routes/35040372>

St. Mary's Circle Route

<https://ridewithgps.com/routes/35040389>