

Riding Solo

Becoming paralyzed from the neck down hasn't stopped Ian Mackay from hitting the open trail. Instead, it's challenged him to set records.

BY CARI SHANE

Off to the right was water, and that meant sure death. Ian Mackay had lost control of his wheelchair. The straw that allowed him to steer had disconnected from the chair, and Mackay, paralyzed from the neck down, had no way to stop it.

Mackay was out on Washington's Olympic Discovery Trail alone. It was pure relief when his chair veered left, towards a ditch instead of open water. "I'm gonna flip over, and that's gonna be the end of the ride," he remembered thinking. He'd flipped his chair many times before. But this time he just kept going, out of the ditch and into a field, over gopher holes and brambles, up hills and back down, somehow missing every tree until he finally crashed into a chain-link fence. "It [caught] me like a catcher's mitt," he said.

More than a decade earlier, when he was 26, Mackay's life was upended. An avid cyclist and biology student, his plan was to study tree canopies. In his free time, he liked to hike and backpack—until he was in a cycling crash in 2008. He was left paralyzed from the neck down and, unable to breathe on his own, was placed on a ventilator.

The light and hope first crept in when, a year after the crash, he was able to come off the ventilator, at least during the day. Then, 18 months after the crash, Mackay went outside for a short ride alone in his wheelchair to his grandfather's house just a quarter mile away. In 2014, the introduction of Apple's Siri gave Mackay a hands free way to call for help, and the tool he needed to finally hit the open road again, alone.

Mackay would ride on Washington's 135-mile paved Olympic Discovery Trail, which he could access from his house. First 5 miles, then 10, then 20. Eventually, he completed the entire length. For 10 years straight, he's hit the open trail daily, putting 35,000 miles on his wheel-

chair in that time. "[My] wheelchair is my bike," he said of the metal and aluminum sip-and-puff-controlled chair he steers with his breath.

He's gone on 10-day, 325-mile rides from British Columbia to Portland, down the Redwood Coast from Brookings, Oregon, to Fort Bragg, California. He's ridden both the entire western- and eastern-most sections of the Great American Rail-Trail (which is yet to be completed), and plans to ride on existing trails in each of the 12 states the GART will eventually pass through. "Getting to experience our nation at 7 miles per hour in a power chair is pretty special," he said. In 2024, he rode the 275-mile Katy Trail in Missouri. And in 2022, he landed in the Guinness Book of World Records after traveling 184 miles in 24 hours around Oregon's Sauvie Island.

"Even though I can't feel, I can feel the discomfort," said Mackay. Long rides put him at risk of spasms, sores and infections. His inability to regulate his own body temperature—he can't shiver if he's too cold and he can't sweat if he's too hot—can be fatal. He remembered thinking, "Am I crazy? Who have I become? What am I trying to prove?"

The answer is simple: He's trying to prove what's possible. And to show the world the diversity of endurance, he said. Mackay wants to normalize the concept that "people with disabilities want adventure, too." Ten years ago, he launched Ian's Ride, a non-profit that, among other things, hosts a series of outdoor events, like Sea To Sound—a 74-mile, three-day, multi-modal group ride on the Olympic Discovery Trail.

When Mackay was stuck in a hospital bed tied to a ventilator, he never imagined he'd be able to explore the outdoors again. "It's pretty amazing what's possible," said Mackay of his adventures. "I think I want to do more."



▲ Top to bottom: Mackay has, on multiple occasions, flipped or lost control of his wheelchair, which he's affectionately named Rocinante, from Don Quixote. He likes to refer to these misadventures as "Mr. Toad's Wild Ride"; On the summer solstice of 2022, Mackay achieved a Guinness World Record after circling a 12.29-mile loop around Oregon's Sauvie Island 15 times.