



Mountain Biking Magazine Test

WILDERNESS TRAIL BIKES PHOENIX

High Quality In An Understated Package.

If you equate high-performance mountain bikes with aggressive angles, a laid out position, and very quick steering, the Wilderness Trail Bikes (WTB) Phoenix is not for you. If, however, a high-quality, light-weight, steel frame designed for all-day cruising is your bag, this could be the bike for you.

The WTB threesome of Charlie Cunningham, Steve Potts, and Mark Slate are some of the oldest names in mountain bike building, and they certainly know what it's about when it comes to building frames. They were generous enough to send us two Phoenixes, one a 15-inch frame and the other an 18-inch frame, and the workmanship on both was exquisite.

BASIC BEAUTY

One was a muted blue color, the other a pearlescent white. Both colors played up the simple elegance of the frames. The welds on these TIG-welded, double-butted chromoly frames were lovely, smoother than a newly lubed chain, and seamless. The down tube and top tube are triple-butted, and Potts uses brass at the head tube and down tube junction to strengthen them. Slate explained that "it's almost like a leg and almost like fillet brazing. It helps to diffuse the stress of TIG welding."

Graceful quick release levers and clean

cable routing contributed to the bikes' aesthetic appeal. With so many manufacturers using oversized and ovalized tubes, the Phoenix's smaller, round (except for the seat tube) tubes give the bikes an understated look. The steeply-sloping top tube added to the bike's long, lean look. Call it elegant simplicity. Call it fine workmanship.

A tap of the top tube with a fingernail produced a high-pitched chime, much like the sound fine crystal makes when you tap it. It sounded like very thin wall tubing, and a lift of the bikes to test for weight confirmed our suspicion. Made of Ritchey Logic Prestige tubing, they were relatively light indeed.

We were even more impressed with the bike's high tolerances. On the 18-inch frame the tolerance between the seatpost and the seat tube was so tight that when we undid the quick release and pushed the seatpost down, it rose back up by itself! However, that made us wonder about venting to keep water out of the bottom bracket. Mark Slate explained to us that they didn't vent the seat tube because they didn't think it was that effective. "We try to educate people about how to care for their bikes instead," he said.

TAKING FLIGHT

When we hit the trail with the Phoe-



Speedblaster cantilever brakes exhibit the same kind of workmanship and performance of their roller-cam predecessors. They're light, powerful, and produce some of the best modulation characteristics we've ever felt from an aftermarket cantilever. Attention to detail is standard with WTB — the machined straddle cable quick release has an anti-slip feature.

Custom craftsmanship from some of the oldest names in the business make the Phoenix a desirable ride. Ride-all-day geometry makes the Phoenix a bike for discriminating riders who don't necessarily want to race or shred.

ais, one thing became very clear: This is not a bike to hurry on. It's built for comfort, not for speed. While the Nike's angles, wheelbase, and general geometry is pretty standard, somehow it felt like it had more relaxed angles, a long wheelbase, and long chainstays. The larger than normal fork offset (1.75 inches) accounts, in part, for the relaxed feel of the bike. That feel and the wide and sweeping handlebar made us want to cruise rather than to race the Phoenix. And cruise all day we did on this comfortable, stable bike.

All testers enjoyed the well-configured rider compartment. Those who rode the smaller bike appreciated the generous top tube and ample clearance — two things that are often missing on scaled-down bikes.

Now we don't mean to imply that you can't go fast on the Phoenix. You can, with confidence in the bike's stability and predictability. But why? A ride this sweet and mellow ought to be savored.

We do have one complaint, although it's not about the frame itself. We're going to send a bill to WTB when all of our test riders have to have their knees replaced. Although the Phoenix is sold as a frameset, the guys at WTB were kind (?) enough to build up the bikes for us. In general, that was a good thing because they built them up with lots of WTB goodies — handlebar, stem, bar ends, brakes, grips, and hubs. But we don't know what possessed them to use the gearing that they did. Both bikes were full XT with top-mounted shifters, but the low

adept at climbing. It proved equally stable on wide open, fast descents. In fact, "stable" sums up its performance under a variety of trail conditions. While not the quickest-handling bike, it was quick enough and very predictable, allowing us to maneuver technical singletrack without problems. Basically, we just didn't go into corners as hot as on bikes with a more aggressive geometry. On one particularly rocky, narrow descent, we had no trouble steering it up, over, and around boulders and onto rock ledges. When coming down steep, loose or rocky descents, the bike could be pointed in a

desired direction and it would hold the line firmly, even if there was a turn at the bottom.

Several testers complained that the bike's front end tended to flop in technical climbing situations. Weight distribution wasn't the problem. The front wheel just didn't seem to want to track a straight line. Skate confirmed that the fork rake could lead to some wheel flop in slow speed technical climbing.

One thing that surprised us was the rigidity of the bikes, despite the thin wall tubing. The reduced weight and length of the frame tubes, along with



The radically sloping top tube on our smaller test bike created a good amount of standover height for our smaller test riders. Fairly standard angles with a longish fork trail create a more stable than aggressive bike for most trail riding situations.



gear was a huge 28 x 26! Needless to say, this interfered with our ability to enjoy the bike and to test it thoroughly in steep climbing situations.

That said, we found the Phoenix to be a very capable bike in most trail situations. It was a good climber, and we especially enjoyed it on long, seated climbs. Even with the adverse low-end gearing, we could tell the bike was very

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MFG. OR DST.:	Wilderness Trail Bikes, Inc. 134 Redwood Avenue Corte Madera, CA 94925 (415) 924-6632; Fax (415) 924-9540
SUGGESTED RETAIL PRICE:	\$1045 (frame), \$350 (fork); Special Edition \$1095
COLORS AVAILABLE:	Pearl White, Midnight Blue
SIZES AVAILABLE:	12", 15", 18"
SIZE TESTED:	15" and 18"
GROSS BICYCLE WEIGHT (APPROX.):	Frame only (15"): 4 lbs. 3 oz.
FRAMESET:	
Frame Materials:	Ritchey Logic Prestige (overized)
Frame Construction:	TIG-welded
Frame Weight:	4 lbs. 3 oz.
Fork:	Type F custom, chromoly, 1.7 lbs.
GEOMETRY:	
Head Tube Angle:	71 degrees
Seat Tube Angle:	73 degrees
Top Tube Length:	22.75" (effective)
Chainstay Length:	16.3"
Wheelbase:	41.5"
BB Height:	11.7" (1.86 tires)
Fork Offset:	1.75; can also get with suspension fork rake of either 1.5" or 1.652"



Although the price tag is kind of high, you're not going to find this kind of frame building expertise on many other bikes.

the correspondingly extended seatpost, is designed for vertical forgiveness while maintaining lateral and torsional stiffness. This definitely worked on the bigger frame, and resulted in a bike that was plenty stiff in power climbing situations on both, but because of the tight triangulation on the smaller bike, rough downhills were a bit harsh.

BONUS GOODIES

As we said before, the Phoenix is sold as a frameset only, but the WTB parts that came on our test bikes deserve some comment. Testers universally praised the WTB brakes. The machined



aluminum brakes looked good and proved strong, but their best characteristic was their great modulation. If only all aftermarket brakes offered such a precise feel.

In this day and age of no-rise stems, our Phoenixes looked a little retro with their relatively high rise PowerBand stems (chromoly) and swept back handlebars (titanium). As with all WTB parts, these were nicely machined and attractive. The WTB grips, like the other parts, were straightforward and functional. No funky colors or weird patterns or shape. Just basic black and comfortable. The final goodie was

WTB's Grease Guard external grease injection port hubs, the design that gave birth to SunTour's successful components.

WTB's bar ends provided a nice, flat surface to rest our palms on, and the bend in the bar ends was remarkably comfortable to a variety of riders. Thanks to two Allen bolts on the joint that connects the bar ends to the bars, the extensions rotate 360 degrees to any position within the clamp. This means we could customize the fit and angle of the bar ends to meet our personal tastes. Unfortunately, WTB has discontinued



WTB's PowerBand stem uses an oversized clamping surface and machined 7005-Ti aluminum clamps that you can remove and replace quickly for specific events, training or terrain. You can also theoretically use a thinner-walled handlebar as load stress is disbursed more evenly. It's available in both chromoly and titanium.



The Phoenix is understated, but performance and quality are top-notch. While paying the extra dollars for the Wickedness Trail Bikes deal is a subjective decision, after riding the Phoenix we'd have to say that there's a strong argument for it.

making the bar ends because, according to Slate, "They were overly heavy and too expensive to make." Maybe we can start a letter-writing campaign to bring them back.

Of course, the essentially custom Phoenix comes at a price. It retails for \$1045 for the frame only. It will cost you another \$350 for the WTB Type II fork. You can also opt for the Phoenix Special Edition, which comes with brake studs designed for staystay toggle cam brakes, for \$1085.

Consider, too, that these bikes are built to last. "We really strive for longevity," says Slate. "That's why the bikes are designed to be strong. That's why we triple butt them in places. They should last a long time."