

# HOW TO SURVIVE YOUR NEWLY DISCOVERED LOVE OF CYCLING IN FLAGSTAFF: PART TWO

STORY AND PHOTOS BY KYLE BOGGS



Congratulations on obtaining a bicycle that you love to ride, locating a bike shop mechanic you trust, and making it this far without getting your steed stolen. Now that you have discovered — like so many who came before you — that pedaling around Northern Arizona University and Flagstaff on your own steam is making you a happier, healthier, and more confident person, this edition of Loose Spoke is dedicated to keeping you rolling safely.

Though it is rare that a cyclist is killed in Flagstaff, it does happen, on average once or twice a year. Minor, and typically avoidable injuries, are commonplace. As Northern Arizona University Police Officer **Eric Greenwald** told me last month, “For our bicyclists most of the related injuries are cuts and scrapes to their limbs” as well as “a few broken bones and possible concussions throughout the year.” Indeed, hazards abound. Sometimes incidents are caused by the carelessness of motorists; sometimes infrastructure problems in town create unnecessarily dangerous situations for cyclists; construction all over NAU’s campus can create unpredictable circumstances that cyclists must navigate on the fly. While this article will cover these details and more, sometimes dear freshman cyclist, the problem is you.

## HOW NOT TO RIDE YOUR BIKE

Watch your speed on campus, and always yield to pedestrians. For the love of bikes, ride on the right side of the road. If the flow of traffic were envisioned as a river — as terrible as the metaphor is — the salmon cyclist is going against the flow. This is referred to as “Salmoning.” Going against the flow in life, is not a bad thing. You’re a punk; you question authority; you create your own path. I respect that. But on a bike, you’re creating a dangerous situation for yourself and other cyclists. Consider the following two scenarios.

**First Scenario:** You’re salmoning down San Francisco Street against the flow of traffic. Because this is a one-way street, the car trying to merge in from Cottage Street is only looking at traffic coming north, and you’re going south. The car slams into you. Perhaps you think you can avoid this by riding on the sidewalk. There are three problems with this, the first of which is that it is illegal to ride on the sidewalk downtown. Second, it’s illegal because you’re going to hit a pedestrian. The third problem with riding on the sidewalk is that you’re even more invisible to cars. If they’re looking in your direction at all — they are certainly not looking at you coming from the sidewalk.

**Second Scenario:** You are riding in the bike lane on the wrong side of the street on **Butler Ave**. Another cyclist — me perhaps — is also in the bike lane going with the flow of traffic. Now you’ve created a situation where two cyclists are headed straight for each other. You could go around me, but then you’re going head first into oncoming traffic. Or, you force me into the car lane. And that forces my middle finger in the air, or worse, kills me. Now you’ve killed a fellow cyclist, which isn’t very punk at all.

**Flagstaff resident Ray Walker** sees this all the time. Outside of the two scenarios above, Mr. Walker regularly sees “that cyclist that salmons up to the intersection by hopping up to the crosswalk, then when the light changes, they merge into whatever bike/car is already in the lane without looking.” Essentially, your actions have to be predictable to other cyclists and motorists. If you’re not going with the flow of traffic, nobody knows what you’re doing.

Speaking of crosswalks, don’t ride in them. The law in Arizona regarding this is pretty ambiguous and you probably won’t get cited for it. It does, however, create a potentially dangerous situation. Say there is just a few seconds on the crosswalk timer before the red hand goes up, and pedestrians have already made it across. If you dart through the crosswalk, the car that has been waiting to turn will turn into you.

Many accidents can be avoided with some simple awareness of your surroundings, communicating your actions by signaling, and rethinking the use of ear buds and cell phones while riding. Many folks I know wear one ear bud in the right ear, that way they can still respond to traffic sounds. Arizona bike law also says that after dark, you need to have a light — a white one up front, and a red one on the back (at least a reflector in the back). This is less about you being able to see, than it is about others seeing you. Increasing visibility is always important — there are even reflective stickers, paints, spoke lights, and other pretty dorky things you can put on your bike to make you stand out. The problem with over emphasizing cyclist visibility is that it removes any responsibility on the part of motorists, and perhaps inspires too much confidence in cyclists. Even cyclists, who are lit up like the Griswold’s house in *Christmas Vacation*, can and do get hit. For both motorists and cyclists, it’s infinitely more important to understand the common ways cyclists are struck in an effort to foster awareness on both sides.

## COMMON WAYS TO GET HIT BY A CAR ON YOUR BIKE

### RIGHT HOOK

This is one of the most common ways to get hit, and in fact, is how I was struck myself in Tucson a few years back. You’re riding along in the bike lane. A car passes you, and suddenly turns right into you. The other way this happens is when there is a line of cars waiting at a red light, and you’re cruising past them to the front of the line. Once you near the front, the light turns green. You are going straight, and the car right next to you is turning — bam! When these kind of accidents happens, make no mistake; the driver is at fault. That doesn’t mean it can’t be avoided. Of course, the driver should be looking and turning only when they see the bike lane is clear (even if there is no bike lane). And you should never assume a driver sees you, under any circumstances. Orient yourself so that you’re behind the car, not next to it, anticipating that even if the car doesn’t signal, it could still turn in front of you. Speed up once you realize you’re in the clear.

Flagstaff resident **Emmett White** advises cyclists to be wary of the potential Right Hook situation at the **Arizona State Credit Union on Beaver**. The bank is located right on the corner, so many cyclists speeding up at the intersection might not expect a car to turn right so soon. And of course drivers should be looking for you and signaling, but they don’t always. This can of course take place all over town, and not necessarily where there is a light, such as the right turn into Beaver Street Brewery’s parking lot on Beaver. Mr. Walker has also found several Right Hooks at intersections on Route 66 at 4<sup>th</sup> St., Steve’s Blvd and Fanning Street.

### LEFT CROSS

You’re pedaling up a hill on Franklin, or San Francisco Street near the hospital. Perhaps you’re going east at 5PM when the sun is low in the sky behind you. Meanwhile a car sits at the top of the hill trying to turn left, a street coming up on your right. The car has been waiting for a while and guns it when there is a small break in the rush hour traffic. The driver might not see you because he’s not looking for bikes, or because the sun is blinding. Either way, you’ve got to slam on your brakes, speed up and hope for the best, or make a sharp turn right before he gets there.

### DOOR PRIZE

You’re cruising down a street lined with parked cars. Someone pops a car door open, and you go head first into sharp metal and glass. Assert your right to take the lane, which you can always do to avoid hazards that may exist in the bike lane. Get away from those parked cars. On San Francisco St, cyclists can always take the entire right lane.

## CAREFUL OF CONSTRUCTION

There are dry erase boards all over campus inviting students to answer the question, “how do you envision NAU in ten years.” Among predictable answers such as the “legal weed,” “more vegan/vegetarian options,” were phrases like, “Probably still under construction.” Mr. Walker had more to say about this than anything. “There are infinite construction zones on campus for four years now blocking, disabling, confusing, deteriorating bike lanes,” he said. “My current favorite was the steel 2” pipes hanging 15 feet into bike path, over a fence about 6ft high with no markers, and workers wiggling ‘em around, which was the only way I was able to see them in the early morning dawn and avoid getting brained.”

While much of what has been mentioned in this article can be avoided with some common sense and experience, Flagstaff resident and NAU graduate student **Joe Turner** wishes the police would “issue fines and warnings to vehicles, including buses, violating the three foot rule, specifically calling out south Beaver.” When a motorist passes a bike, by law, there must be at least three feet of space between the car and bike, and for trucks and buses, there must be five feet. Mr. Turner, however, also points out the way some cyclists intentionally ride “aggressively close to cars and buses,” which he believes ultimately “empowers drivers to get aggressively close later.”

If you do get into an accident — regardless of whose fault it is — get a license plate number and always call the police. 🚓

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