



Photography
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Hot topic

cycling

RIDIE RAGE

Why do cyclists make drivers so mad? Greg Foyster investigates ... from the seat of a bicycle.

Fitzroy Street, St Kilda
1:09 pm

We couldn't have chosen a worse time to ride. It's been raining all day, there are floods in the state's north-east, it's nearly peak hour and the rapidly darkening sky is threatening to unleash another torrent. Yet we're about to enter four lanes of traffic on Dandenong Road in Malvern East, following a route on which our guide, Lachlan Toose, has come off his bike five times in two years (when we first met, he held up his elbow to show the result of a recent run-in with a delivery van door. "Just scabs," he said. "To be expected"). Now we're on a tour of his collisions, a 12-kilometre journey from Orrong Road, Balaclava, where he works as a primary school teacher, to his home near Warrigal Road in Camberwell. Toose speeds up on his blue Giant racing bike, mud flicking from the back tyre onto his T-shirt. Up ahead, the Dandenong Road intersection is a lagoon of shallow puddles. Toose rarely sees cyclists out this far from the relative safety of the inner city and, apparently, neither do drivers:

shortly after we cross Dandenong Road, a silver Holden hatchback swerves in front of him to reverse park. Toose says it's commonplace: a driver cuts him off once every three weeks, someone opens a car door on him – an illegal act – once every few months, and he receives verbal abuse fortnightly, with the usual insult an unimaginative but revealing, "Get a car!"

Hail almost any regular cyclist and you'll hear stories of angry insults and dangerous incidents caused by the banal – motorists' inattention – to the sinister – drivers intent on frightening or injuring. Liam Crowley, 32, the store manager at Abbotsford Cycles, Richmond, says a Commodore driver threatened to "punch his head off". Another bike store worker, Bill Bretherton, 30, from Human Powered Cycles, says a driver chased him on foot shouting, "Do not block the road. The road is for cars." Gary Simm, 28, claims a motorist threw a coin at him, then swerved into the bike lane and slammed on her brakes. It can be like a war zone out there. And it's likely to become more fraught with the increase in cycling's



Victoria Crescent, Abbotsford ● 8:43 am



St Kilda Road, city ● 10:52 am

Brunswick Street, Fitzroy ● 3:14 pm



"What could I have done wrong to be on the receiving end of a violent attack? Was it because I was wearing Lycra?"

the receiving end of such a violent attack. Was it because I was wearing Lycra? Or do you think that cyclists shouldn't be riding on 'your' roads?"

Cycling researcher Dr Jan Garrard, a senior lecturer at Deakin University's School of Health and Social Development, suggests harassment of cyclists is widespread and largely condoned. "It's a form of aggression that's sanctioned because we have a dominant car culture." Over the years, Garrard, a cyclist herself, has had an assortment of things thrown at her while riding, including a boomerang. "It didn't go back," she says, laughing. Why do some drivers get so angry with cyclists? "I think the underlying factor is that they are a minority group," she says, citing a UK study that showed drivers see cyclists as an "out group" and find their behaviour more annoying than that of other drivers.

We take to our bicycles and serendipitously meet two police officers riding along the Beaconsfield Parade bike path. "We get a lot of complaints at the station, a lot of road rage," says Senior Constable Georgia White, resting on the handlebars of her blue mountain bike. "The motorists are getting angry with the cyclists because they are taking up a lane, which they are entitled to do." As she speaks, Lycra-

popularity: the number of people riding to work rose by almost 50 per cent between 2001 and 2006, and Bicycle Victoria's annual counts show a steady surge since.

Commuter cycling is most popular in inner northern suburbs (City of Moreland and City of Yarra) and bayside areas (City of Port Phillip). Infrastructure appears to be the main reason for the increase – Melbourne's bike path network nearly doubled in length between 2000 and 2008. Laws forcing new buildings to have bicycle parking, lockers and showers have also played a part.

Melbourne is now Australia's cycling capital, with the bicycle share of trips twice as high as in Sydney. But we're still a long stretch from Copenhagen, where more than a third of people commute by bike, and our surge in cycling hasn't been a smooth ride. As early as 2005, two-thirds of Bicycle Victoria members surveyed said they had experienced on-road harassment in the past year, averaging one incident a fortnight. The conflict spiked in the media in 2006 with the death of James Gould, an elderly man who died after he was hit by a bicycle when the notorious "Hell Ride" cycling group surged through a red light at a crossing; and there are regular reports of incidents usually involving cyclists on the receiving end.

In January, Fox FM breakfast host Matt Tilley broke his back (thankfully not permanently) after he was hit by a car on Beach Road. In March, two cyclists wrote letters to The Age claiming they had been recently hit by projectiles thrown by motorists. Ross Bunn, who survived being hit by an apple while riding his bike downhill at 60km/h, wondered "what I could have possibly done wrong to be on

Pedalling myths

Q: Is it true you that as long as you're wearing a helmet it doesn't matter if it's done up?

No. Helmets must be strapped on securely, or you face a \$149 fine.

Q: Can you use a mobile phone while riding a bike?

No. It's the same as the law for cars.

Q: Do bikes really have to do hook turns?

Yes, where cars do, so long as it's not at an intersection marked "No hook turn by bicycles".

Q: Car owners pay for the roads, so it's fair only cars should be able to use them, right?

No. Roads are maintained out of general taxation. Most if not all cyclists contribute to road maintenance by paying income tax.

Q: Do you really have to check for cyclists when you open your car door?

Yes, step into the path of an oncoming bike, or cause a hazard with your door, and the fine is \$119.

Q: Can you ride a bike while over .05?

There's no offence of exceeding a blood-

alcohol limit for bikes as such but it's not a good idea – and you could be charged with being drunk in a public place.

Q: "Look, no hands!"
Look, it's a \$119 fine!

Q: What about dinking?
\$119 also.

Q: Those fixies without brakes are cool, huh.

Not really. All bikes must have a bell and at least one working brake.

Q: I hate it when cyclists block the road. It's the law that cyclists have to ride single file, isn't it?

No: they can ride two abreast, but no more than two unless some are overtaking others.

Q: Are bike lanes optional?

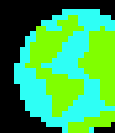
No. Riders must use the lane if there is one.

Q: Can cyclists squeeze past stopped trams?

No. The penalty for not stopping is \$299.

Q: It's illegal for adults to ride on the footpath, isn't it?

Not if they are accompanying children under 12. Or if they are disabled or a postie.



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"The bottom line is, I don't like cyclists. They are too slow."



St Kilda Road, city ● 11:09 am



"Behave like you're a car and obey the traffic rules."

Jan Watson, 62, cycles about 30 kilometres a week from North Carlton.



"It's healthy, good cardio for my body, good for the environment."

Matteo Testa, 30, cycles 70 kilometres a week from Elwood to the city.



"It's less stressful than public transport and cheaper."

Jason Hood, 39, rides about 50 kilometres a week.



"I got a broken collarbone cycling along the Yarra trail and slipped on tram tracks in Carlton."

Olga Lorenzo, 52, rides 240 kilometres a week.



"No serious accidents but near misses every day - car doors, taxis."

Kirby Cameron, 23, commutes 70 kilometres a week from South Yarra into the city.



"Ever had an accident? Yesterday, actually. I went over the handlebars."

Jay Palomares-Callander, 16, rides to school.



"You should have a driver's licence if you're going to be riding in traffic."

Tim Harbour, 35 (with Ella), commutes 30 kilometres a week from Collingwood into the city, via childcare.



"Being safe on the road is about everybody showing respect."

Tim Bamford, 49, commutes 250 kilometres a week from Brighton to the city via Mordialloc.

clad cyclists whiz past, riding two abreast. The officers say this is legal, though many drivers think it isn't. Some other largely unknown or ignored rules: cyclists receive the same penalties as drivers for running red lights (\$299) and drivers and passengers can be fined for opening car doors on cyclists (\$119). The penalty for not wearing a helmet recently increased to \$149.

"A lot of complaints are due to a lack of education between both cyclists and motorists," says Senior Constable Damien Vallas. In the CBD, we hear drivers' complaints firsthand. Interviewed outside car parks, they tell us cyclists run red lights, can be "unpredictable" and "think they own the road".

One says: "The bottom line is, I don't like cyclists. They're too slow." Another driver, Floyd Ralston, 46, tells us he lives in Bunyip and does "about a thousand" kilometres a week in his Holden ute, much of it travelling up and down Beach Road. "I reckon they're a pain in the butt," he says of Melbourne cyclists. "You'll be driving along and there'll be two and three abreast. If they stayed single file it wouldn't be a problem."

The main gripe from drivers, though, is that cyclists break the rules. "Like this bloke," Ralston says, pointing at a silver-haired man riding down Elizabeth Street in the rain. "Aren't you supposed to wear a helmet? It's just hanging on his handlebars."

Once we start looking for rule-breaking cyclists, they're everywhere. Here's a sample from a single commute: at 7.50am a cyclist rides diagonally across Gisborne Street, near St Vincent's Hospital, in front of oncoming traffic; at 8.16am a cyclist runs a red light on St Kilda Road; at 8.44am, a cyclist rides the wrong way down a service lane on the Nepean Highway, then illegally enters an intersection.

Yet drivers are hardly blameless; indeed, some simply refuse to share the road. 8.02am. A taxi blocks the bike lane on Macarthur Street, forcing a cyclist to veer into traffic. 8.03am. A ute swerves left in front of a cyclist at the top end of Collins Street. 11.42pm. A silver Toyota pulls in front of me on Brunswick Street, Fitzroy, without looking.

A 2010 study from Monash University and the Amy Gillett Foundation found drivers were at fault in 87 per cent of incidents with cyclists. So if drivers are often at fault for incidents, why do they get so aggressive? It's not just that cyclists break the rules. A 2005 Victorian inquiry found that "the simple act of riding on the road" was enough to trigger violence from drivers.

Dr Garrard, who submitted to the inquiry, thinks drivers' justifications for hating cyclists – they run red lights, they ride two abreast, they break the rules – conceal a deeper reason. "It's not stated publicly, but I think there's an underlying assumption that the roadway and the road system is there for cars," she says. In other words, it's territorial. And some streets

are more sacred than others. A 2010 government-commissioned study suggested tension could be higher on roads where drivers don't expect cyclists. This explains why the conflict remains heated in the suburban sprawl but has cooled to a simmer near the city. "In the fringe outer suburbs, where rider numbers are lower, riders will tell you they still get aggression from drivers," says Garry Brennan from Bicycle Victoria. "But in the inner suburbs, if you're riding in from Thornbury, it's a rare occurrence these days." The good news for everyone is anti-rider rage is probably on the wane. As more people take up cycling, drivers will be more likely to know a cyclist or cycle themselves. "Social empathy" will kick in, and cyclists will be seen as legitimate road users. "We're at that point now," says Brennan. Dr Garrard agrees. "I don't think it will get worse. I think it will improve." (m)

On Tuesday mornings when I travel along Beach Road, my trip and those of thousands of other motorists takes at least 10 minutes longer because there are packs of cyclists racing each other for fun, causing traffic jams. No wonder people just hate cyclists.

They run red lights. The corner of Flinders and Swanston is particularly hazardous, and woe to any pedestrian who dares to step out onto the road when the walk signal comes on without checking first to see if a cyclist has decided to ignore the light change and just plough on through.

Thousands of dollars have been wasted on bike tracks all over

Melbourne. In eight years since they first started painting the white lines in our area I have not seen a single bike using them. That is the biggest joke of all.

I live in Hampton and you cyclists are ruining it. Go train elsewhere, not on public roads, or else I will start to train for walking races on Beach Road as well. See how you like that!

Too many MAMILs (Middle Aged Men In Lycra) are using the road as a personal training track and pushing all of the responsibility for safe use of the road onto drivers.

ANTI-CYCLIST

An edited selection of comments posted on theage.com.au

PRO-CYCLIST

It's time to stop blaming cyclists for our problems, and start seeing them as a cost effective and positive solution to a city that has reached motorised vehicle saturation point.

Bike paths can take the load off public transport in the inner city, which means public transport is less crowded for public transport users travelling to/from outer suburbs. Less crowding on public transport will mean more people will take it, reducing the pressure on roads.

The inescapable fact is that 10 cars makes 100 metres of traffic jam when they are stopped and about 250 metres when they are moving. It makes sense to improve riding conditions for cyclists.

Traffic was at a standstill this morning, while I cruised past on my bike. Of course I bet you wish I was in another car, with you, taking up even more space on the already choked freeway.

Aarrghh! I'm so conflicted! Most days I cycle and hate all motorists, some days I drive and I hate all cyclists. I ask myself why I don't pay taxes and rego, then I realise I do after all! I'm now beginning to hate myself ... somebody please help me!

I drive. I buy petrol. I pay tax for the roads. I also ride to work (every single waking day). Anyone complaining I don't deserve to be there is an utter moron.