

# FORT BENTON



The fur trade era stimulated the first extensive use of the Missouri River as an avenue of transportation. Keelboats, macknaws, bullboats and canoes plied the upper river bringing trade items and returning with a wealth of furs. Fort Benton was established as a trading post in 1846 by Alexander Culbertson of the American Fur Company.

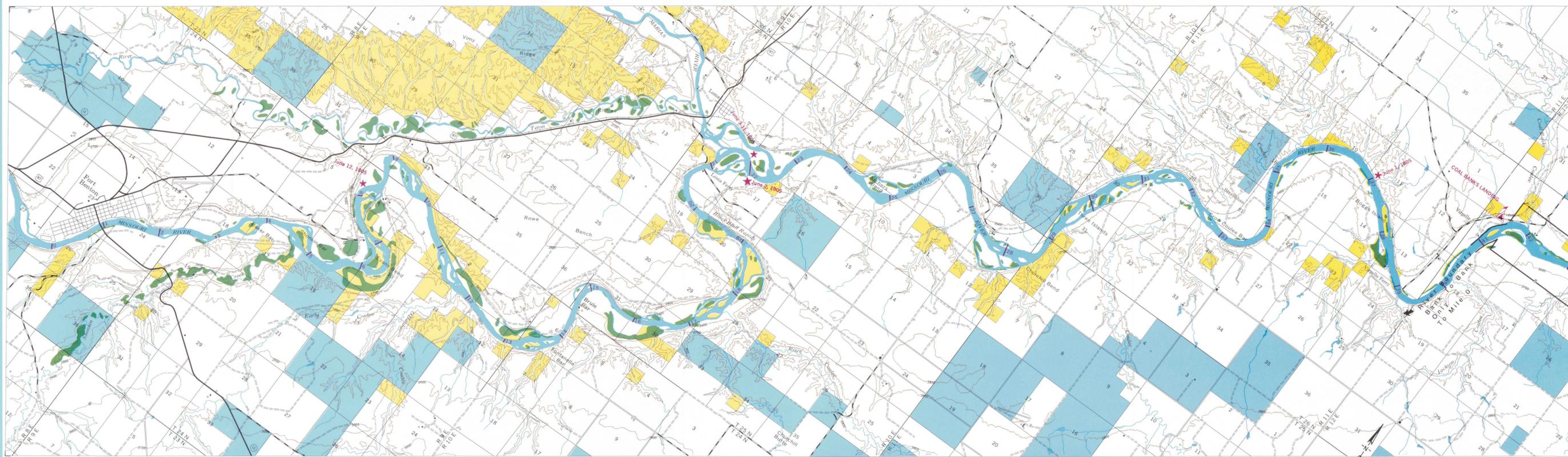
Here the Indians and white fur traders alike exchanged their pelts and hides for clothing, arms and other items. Liquor was used extensively as a means to separate Indians from their furs.

The vast amount of capital to be obtained encouraged steamboat captains to brave the rapids above Fort Union. On July 2, 1860, the steamboat Chippewa reached Fort Benton and proved that the channel of the Missouri was navigable to that point.

The discovery of gold in the northern Rockies in the 1860's gave increased stimulus to steamboat use. The all-time peak of river traffic was in 1879, with 47 boats carrying 9,444 tons up the river. A rowdy Fort Benton boomed.

Almost as exciting as the river traffic was the overland transportation industry. Stage lines, bull trains and mule trains transported travelers and commodities to points beyond. "All trails lead out of Fort Benton" was a familiar statement. The famed Mullan Trail leading west connected the heads of navigation on the Missouri and Columbia Rivers. Fort Benton was the western end of an emigration route from Fort Snelling, Minnesota. The town was also the southern staging point of the legendary Whoop-Up Trail leading to Fort Macleod, Alberta, Canada.

Fort Benton was never really a fort in the military sense. Its military occupation was from the period of October 1869 to June 1881. There never was more than one company of soldiers stationed at the post. The chief military activity was tracking down illicit whisky smugglers and deserters from its own ranks.



RIVER MILE 0  
Recreational  
MAP 1

### RIVER SAFETY AND COMFORT

**The Upper Missouri offers adventure amid beauty, solitude, and an aura of the past. Make sure your adventure is an enjoyable one by proper planning, outfitting and care.**

**THE RIVER** — Although considered an easy river to float, hazards do exist. While identified primarily as steamboat problem areas, rapids should be taken straight to avoid being capsized by shallow rocks. Canoeists should lash all gear securely in their craft. Low hanging ferry cables present another hazard, and the ferries themselves create a strong undertow.

**WEATHER** — Extremes are not uncommon. Temperatures often exceed 90 degrees F. Cold thunderstorms and strong winds may occur with little warning. Gear should be stored in watertight containers.

**TRIP DURATION** — Principal launch points are Fort Benton, Coal Banks Landing and Judith Landing. River permits and information are available at each of these sites from the weekend before Memorial Day to the weekend after Labor Day. Additional launch opportunities at the Lorna and McClelland Ferries make trips of various lengths possible. Planning a full day for each 20 miles of floating allows an enjoyable pace. Using a motor will shorten trip duration, but no-wake speed restrictions will impede accustomed rates.

**FOOD AND WATER** — A river trip can cause insatiable thirsts and ravenous appetites. Outfit for the duration of your trip and allow extra in case of floating delays. Drinking water is generally unavailable except at the principal launch points. River water is unsafe to drink unless boiled or chemically treated.

**CLOTHING** — Tennis shoes are desirable for wear in watercraft. Hiking boots will make exploring shoreline areas easier. Basic necessities should include a shade hat, long sleeve shirts, rain gear, jacket, suntan lotion, sun glasses, and mosquito repellent.

**BOATING** — Montana boating regulations are in force on the river, and no-wake speed restrictions apply to 'wild' and 'scenic' segments. Approved personal flotation devices are required for every boater, and children under 12 must wear a life vest at all times. Don't overload your boat — it's illegal and it's dangerous in rough water. You are responsible for your wake and liable for any damage it might cause. Be considerate of others and their desire for solitude.

#### LEGEND

- Public Land (BLM Administered)
- Game Range (Fish and Wildlife Service)
- Corps of Engineer Land (Acquired)
- State Land
- Private Land
- Federal and State Highways (Paved)
- Gravel Roads
- Improved Roads
- Primitive Roads
- Jeep Road or Trail
- Railroad
- County Boundary
- Township and Range Line
- Section Line
- Section Subdivision
- Stream or Creek
- Reservoir and Dam
- Dry Lake
- Spring
- Ranch or Farm
- Mile Points
- Contours (with elevations)
- Cottonwood Trees
- Pine Trees
- Historical Spot
- Lewis and Clark Campsite 1805
- Camp Site

1 0 1 2  
SCALE IN MILES

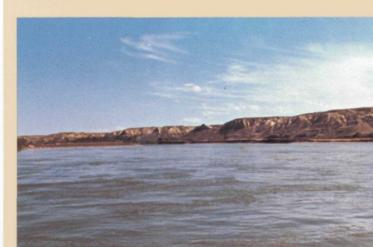
All Lewis and Clark quotes are from Vol. 2 of Rueben G. Thwaites Original Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition.

All Maximilian quotes are from the English translation of his account of the journey by Rueben G. Thwaites in Vol. 23 of the series, Early Western Travels, 1748-1846.



**Mile 5.2 Heron and cormorant nest on Evans Bend. Enjoy, but don't intrude.**

The wild and scenic river corridor lies within a region known as the "Missouri River Breaks." The term "Breaks" comes from the landform that has resulted from the downward cutting action of the river. The geological layers exposed by the river were all laid down as marine sediments beneath the waters of a great inland sea. This sea covered the Great Plains 80 to 70 million years ago. The vertical sequence of the layers tells the story of a shoreline which migrated back and forth across the area due to shifting of the earth's crust during the period of deposition. Thick shale layers were deposited in marine waters, while sandstone layers were deposited along shorelines or deltas.

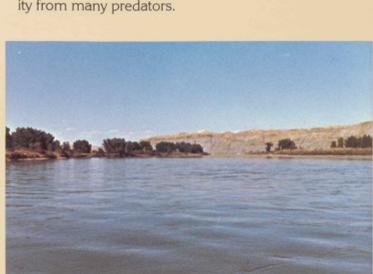


**Mile 11.0 A slumping bluff in a bend of the river signals gravel bars ahead.**

Erosion is an active and natural process in the soft shale and siltstone of the Breaks. As the river cuts its channel deeper and meanders across the valley, banks and bluffs slump into the water to be redeposited down stream. The maze of islands and gravel bars in this area attest to this action.

Government steamboats dredged the channel and built jetties to overcome the navigational difficulties presented by this condition. They spent so much time in the area that they maintained a landing and shipyard above the site previously occupied by Fort McKenzie.

What was an obstacle to steamboats provides ideal nesting habitat for waterfowl. The islands provide security from many predators.



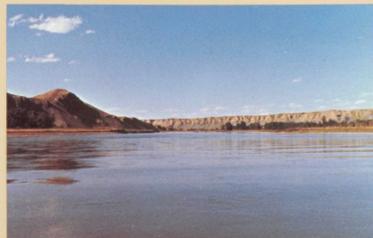
**Mile 13.0 A mile above Fort McKenzie, the center of fur trade for 11 years.**

Fort McKenzie was established in 1832. It replaced Fort Piegan which had burned after only one year. McKenzie's completion marked a permanent foothold in Blackfoot Indian country. During its life, McKenzie was one of the most profitable posts of the American Fur Company.

Early trade in this area was mainly in pelts, but it gradually shifted to buffalo robes.

Among the more notable visitors to McKenzie were Prince Maximilian and Karl Bodmer. The scientist and the artist spent several months in the area documenting the natural history and social setting of the frontier.

During 1843 two unscrupulous traders instigated a fight with the Indians. After the fight the post was abandoned and burned.



**Mile 18.0 First of four ferry crossings three miles ahead. Caution!**

At the mouth of the Marias River, Lewis and Clark were confronted with a major geographic dilemma. Which river was the Missouri? They camped there from June 2-11 while the decision was made and supplies were cached.

Had the captains not made the right decision here, the expedition might have failed. The lost time would probably have prevented a crossing of the mountains ahead before winter set in, and it might have resulted in a disastrous meeting with hostile Blackfeet, whose homeland was along the Marias.

On the return trip in 1806, the Lewis contingent spent only part of July 28 at the site. Fearing attack by Blackfeet, the party hurriedly recovered part of their cache and headed down river.

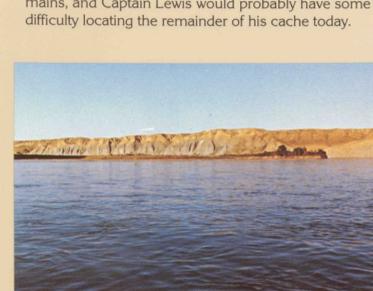


**Mile 22.7 A meandering Missouri has left this gaging station high and dry.**

In 1831 James Kipp established the first trading post above Fort Union at the mouth of the Marias, Fort Piegan. After a winter of thriving business with the Indians, Kipp returned to Fort Union and the site was abandoned.

The confluence almost became the city of Ophir. Planned in 1864, it was abandoned in 1865 after a work party of 10 was massacred.

An ice jam or a flash flood can change the complexion of the river almost overnight. This is particularly true at the confluence of tributaries. From the map it is obvious that the junction of the Marias with the Missouri has shifted several times. No evidence of Piegan remains, and Captain Lewis would probably have some difficulty locating the remainder of his cache today.



**Mile 28.0 Crowding goslings makes them scatter and threatens their survival.**

The abundance and diversity of wildlife along the Upper Missouri River has been noted since the days of the Lewis and Clark expedition. While some of the species recorded by the Captains such as the grizzly bear, wolf and bison have disappeared from the scene, 60 species of mammals, 233 species of birds, 20 species of amphibians and reptiles, and 49 species of fish are known to inhabit the Wild and Scenic River area today.

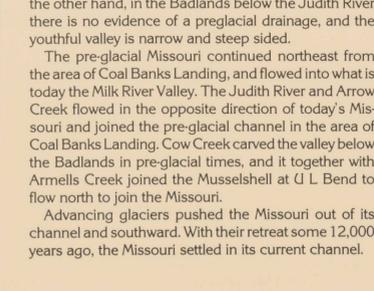
Basic to the abundance and diversity of wildlife in the Breaks is the wide variety of habitat available. Different zones across the valley each meet special requirements such as food and cover for the different species, as do different areas up and down the river.

The different wildlife habitats are quite distinct within the Breaks. For example, along the shoreline reside soft-shelled turtles, beaver, and a wide variety of waterfowl. Where the valley widens and supports riparian vegetation, residents include white-tailed deer and pheasant. Along the side drainages (or coulees) and valley slopes are found sharp-tailed grouse and mule deer. Antelope roam the prairies above.

The variety in habitat up and down the river has resulted largely from the geologic formations encountered and from the age of the valley. The valley in this area pre-dates the last glacial age, and the wide bottoms and gentle side slopes are a result of this maturity. On the other hand, in the Badlands below the Judith River there is no evidence of a preglacial drainage, and the youthful valley is narrow and steep sided.

The pre-glacial Missouri continued northeast from the area of Coal Banks Landing, and flowed into what is today the Milk River Valley. The Judith River and Arrow Creek flowed in the opposite direction of today's Missouri and joined the pre-glacial channel in the area of Coal Banks Landing. Cow Creek carved the valley below the Badlands in pre-glacial times, and it together with Armells Creek joined the Musselshell at U L Bend to flow north to join the Missouri.

Advancing glaciers pushed the Missouri out of its channel and southward. With their retreat some 12,000 years ago, the Missouri settled in its current channel.

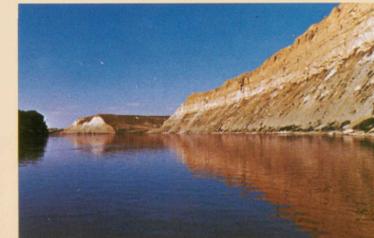


**Mile 33.5 White sandstone begins to appear along the rim of Sixmile Coulee.**

Coal seams can be seen along the valley slopes in many places. As steamboat traffic became more active, fuel became quite scarce. The average boat burned about 25 cords of hardwood or 30 cords of cottonwood in twenty-four hours of steaming. Timber along the bottoms was soon hard to obtain. Efforts were made to use the local coal, but when it was added to the boiler fireboxes, it only reddened around the edges and refused to burn.

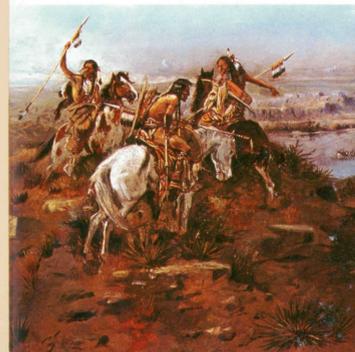
While attempts to utilize the local coal were unsuccessful, Coal Banks Landing still played an important role in steamboat history. It was the landing point for Fort Assiniboine (at present Havre). Assiniboine was established in 1879. Steamboats brought building materials and supplies into Coal Banks for the Fort. By 1886 Camp Otis had been built at the landing to accommodate the 20th Infantry stationed there during the season of navigation.

Today the railroad climbs out of the river valley here and links Coal Banks Landing with Havre. Residents of Fort Benton celebrated the arrival of the railroad in September of 1887. It was an ill-fated celebration, for with the driving of the silver spike the river trade which had nurtured the community was destined to end. In 1878 sixty steamboats had come up the river. In 1888 only four made the trip, and the last load of river-borne freight arrived in 1890. Attempts were made to revitalize the commercial traffic, and government snag boats made trips on the river into the early 1900's, but the great steamboat era was over.



**Mile 40.0 Coal beds formed from plant material deposits in swamps or lagoons.**

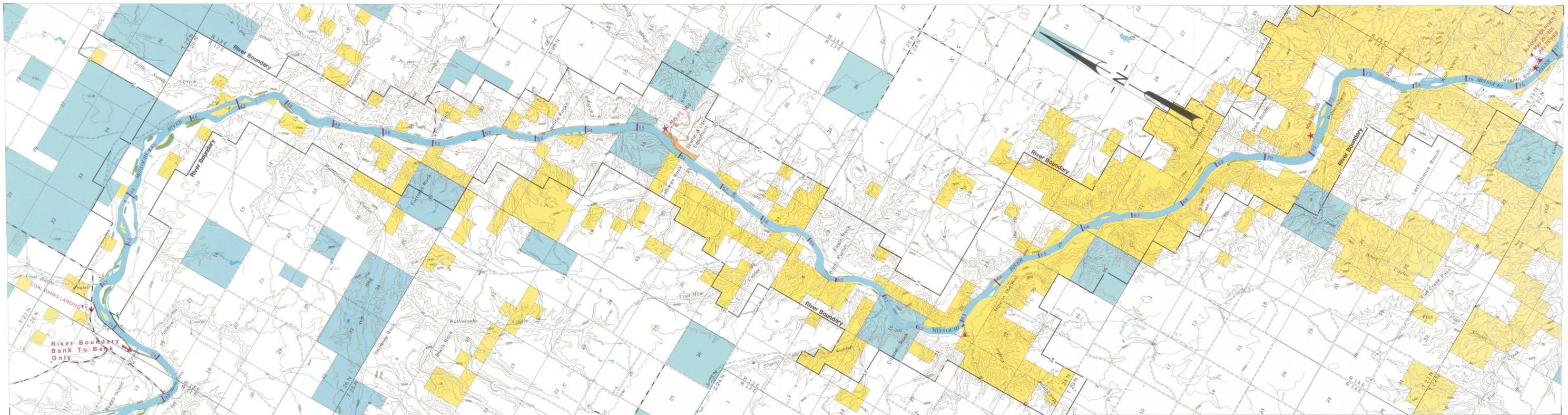
## Upper Missouri National Wild & Scenic River



Indians Discovering Lewis and Clark  
Charles M. Russell, 1896  
Montana Historical Society, Helena

### maps 1 & 2

Bureau of Land Management  
Lewistown District  
Airport Road  
Lewistown, Montana 59457



MAP 2

**CAMPING CONSIDERATIONS**

A clean and pleasant campsite can be the perfect end to an enjoyable day. Leaving your campsite in good condition for the next party is a task that should be welcomed by all who enjoy the beauty and primitive setting of the river.

**LOCATION** — BLM encourages camping on public lands only. If you stop on private land, remember that you are the landowner's guest, and you must treat private property with respect.

Cottonwood groves attract many floaters toward evening. In a strong wind, the brittle nature of cottonwood can make these campsites hazardous. Locate camps with some regard to this — check for dead or dying limbs, leaning trees, scars on the trunk, and under-cut root systems before setting up your outfit.

**CAMPFIRES** — Wood is scarce around the more popular campsites. Gas stoves or charcoal are recommended for cooking. If you plan an evening fire, it is a good idea to collect firewood during the day. Cutting live or standing timber for firewood is not permissible. Use existing fire-rings. Make sure your fire is dead out before retiring — drown it with water, stir the remains, and check around the fire-ring.

**GARBAGE AND WASTE** — Please pack out all garbage and leave a clean campsite for others to enjoy. Bury human waste. Dig a temporary latrine well back from the campsite — 8 to 10 inches deep is recommended. Also use the latrine for dumping dish water and when brushing teeth.

**HAZARDS** — River trips have been spoiled because proper equipment was lacking or necessary precautions weren't taken. Camp and store gear above the water line — river levels can fluctuate significantly in a short period of time as up-river hydroelectric dams vary releases. Violent thunderstorms can appear seemingly out of nowhere. They can churn up whitecaps, topple trees, blow gear around (including canoes and rafts) and cause hypothermia. Keep gear secure and craft tied up. Become familiar with hypothermia, its causes, prevention, symptoms and treatment. Even at 50 degrees, dampness, wind and exhaustion can cause hypothermia, the No. 1 killer of outdoor recreationists. Rattlesnakes are found throughout the river area, and hikers should be careful where they place their hands and feet. Ticks are also residents, and you should check regularly for these pests.

Abundant archeological evidence reveals a record of human use in the upper Missouri River area from about 10,000 years ago until today. Stone circles identify former Indian campsites, bones exposed by erosion often reveal old buffalo jumps or butchering areas, and stone implements, ranging from delicately worked arrow heads to crude chopping tools, give evidence of a gathering and hunting culture.

Much remains to be learned about the primitive societies of the area, and it is important to leave artifacts exactly as you find them. Only by systematic scientific investigation of sites in their original context can archeologists further unravel the fascinating story of the first Americans.



**Mile 47.5 Prehistoric times ended as Lewis and Clark wrote their journals.**

With entry into the "White Cliffs" section of the river, the scene changes dramatically. Attention focuses on the sandstone cliffs, remnants of an ancient seashore. Igneous dikes create striking contrasts. Sandy soils produced by weathering of the cliffs support mixed stands of Douglas-fir, limber pine and juniper.

The "White Cliffs" captured the imaginations of Lewis and Clark, and they went into great detail in describing the area. Modern day explorers usually enjoy a similar experience.

A caution though — what took nature centuries to develop can be easily destroyed by careless or thoughtless acts. In addition, the soft nature of the sandstone which makes it so susceptible to damage also provides very poor footing.



**Mile 51.5 Beginning of "Wild" designation. Slow motors to wakeless speeds.**

In recording their observations along this stretch of the river, Lewis and Clark described "scenes of visionary enchantment." They wrote of "elegant ranges of lofty freestone buildings, having their parapets well stocked with statuary" and noted "niches and alcoves of various forms and sizes are seen at different heights as we pass." They identified erosion as having worn "the soft sand cliffs . . . into a thousand grotesque figures." In addressing the igneous dikes they stated that "nature had attempted here to rival the human art of masonry."

Twenty-eight years later Karl Bodmer feverishly sketched some twenty subjects as he passed through the area, while Prince Maximilian described the formations. One he saw as "a castle or barracks room built upon a summit." In describing another, "it was like an old Gothic Chapel with a chimney and pines . . . growing around the wall." In another place he fancied himself "in a garden laid out in the old French style, where urns, obelisks, statues as well as hedges and trees clipped into various shapes, surround the astonished spectator." Their descriptions provide names (Castle Rock, Chapel Rock, etc.) for many river landmarks today.

Steamboat pilots named distinctive landmarks as navigation aids. A typical one is LaBarge Rock (the large igneous formation on the right bank in the next photo), probably named for Captain Joseph LaBarge who ranked among the most capable and fearless navigators of the upper river.

Across the river from LaBarge Rock is Eagle Creek, Lewis and Clark's Stone Wall Creek. Here the Captains camped the evening of May 31, 1805, rested their weary crew, and probably wrote most of their lengthy, almost poetic journal entries of that day.

Eagle Creek was to later become a substitute steamboat landing in low water years. The USS Mandan, commissioned to clear the river channel, entered the scene in the 1880's, and swamped at Eagle Creek in 1910 when the crew failed to get her ashore before ice blocked her in.

One of the Mandan's crew, James Conley, homesteaded the area in 1892. He had a fairly complete development, including a blacksmith shop, and in 1906 he even established a post office.



**Mile 55.5 This tranquil setting once echoed with sounds of a developing nation.**

Time and the elements have erased most signs of Conley and other settlers along the river.

There were various reasons at different periods for locating along the river. Trappers sought the beaver and muskrat of the waterway. Woodhawkers supplied steamboat fuel. Homesteaders matched wits with the harsh environment on the promise of land. Wolfers pursued the predator for pelts and bounties. Those outside the law found asylum in the Breaks.

A few remnants of log, dug-out, sandstone and frame structures remain to give testimony to those who tried to eke out a living along the river. Enjoy the sites, visit the remains and try to imagine how it might have been, but leave them intact for others to appreciate.



**Mile 61.8 The talent of Bodmer is exhibited in his painting of Citadel Rock.**

The various dark colored igneous rocks along the river are associated with the volcanic activity which formed the Highwood Mountains to the south and the Bears paw Mountains to the north. Molten material was forced into cracks in the sedimentary rocks. Subsequent erosion of the surrounding softer sedimentary rocks has left the dikes standing like great walls and the intrusive plugs like LaBarge and Citadel Rocks towering above the adjacent terrain.

The cliffs and pinnacles provide ideal habitat for birds of prey. Among the more common are the redtail and Swainson's hawks. Golden eagles are frequently seen, and bald eagles winter here. Prairie and peregrine falcons have a history of nesting along the river.



**Mile 63.7 Sandstone is slippery and often crumbles underfoot when climbing.**

The sedimentary rocks seen along the river were laid down in horizontal layers. Occasionally the sandstone layers are seen inclined from their normal level position, illustrating another impact of the volcanic activity.

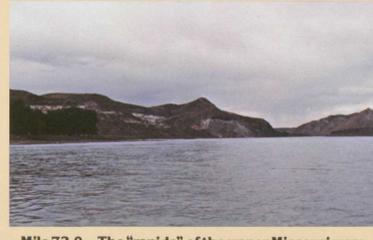
Preceding the volcanic activity, an uplift of the earth's crust occurred at the present site of the Bears paw Mountains causing the preexisting sedimentary rocks to arch upward. Volcanic material was later extruded on top of this arch, creating an unstable condition. The result was a massive sliding of the igneous rock away from the axis towards the plains below. As the volcanic material slipped down and out, the layers of sedimentary rock in the path were folded and buckled for as far as 35 miles.



**Mile 68.0 Exercise your imagination by trying to name some of the formations.**

The distance from Steamboat Rock to the Gulf of Mexico was given as 2,215 miles by the combined reckoning of the Mississippi and Missouri River Commissions. The work of the Missouri River Commission in establishing the channel mileage was a boon to shippers, who were frequently victimized by the readiness of steamboat captains to over-estimate the freight haul.

The treacherous nature of the upper Missouri was shown when the steamboat Marion, commanded by Captain Abe Wolf, went hopelessly aground in Pablo Rapids in 1864. Captain Marsh brought the Luella down from Fort Benton, rescued the passengers and freight, salvaged the machinery, and returned to Fort Benton where the unfortunate vessel's equipment was sold.



**Mile 73.0 The "rapids" of the upper Missouri were often obstacles to steamboats.**

Prior to the steamboats, up-river travel was an arduous task. River craft had to be pulled and poled along, or occasionally, when current and wind allowed, they were rowed. With a favorable wind, a sail offered welcome relief.

The loads carried were often huge. Lewis and Clark, for example, required six dugout canoes and two pirogues to carry supplies and provisions for their party of 33 along with presents for the Indians. The smaller of their pirogues was approximately 35 feet long and was designed to haul eight tons.

It is difficult to imagine the exhausting work it took to go up river. Lewis described the effort above Pablo Island, "the men are compelled to be in the water even to their armpits, and the water is yet very cold, and so frequent are those points(s) that they are one fourth of their time in the water, added to this the banks and bluffs along which they are obliged to pass are so slippery and the mud so tenacious that they are unable to wear their mockersons, and in that situation dragging the heavy burthen of a canoe and walking occasionally for several hundred yards over the sharp fragments of rocks which tumble from the cliffs and garnish the borders of the river; in short their labour is incredibly painful and great."

James Kipp established Fort Piegan in 1831, 28 years before the first steamboat made it that far up the river. One of the most popular craft wrestled up river during the intervening years was the 60 to 70 foot long keelboat.

The upper Missouri is unique among Wild and Scenic Rivers. The law which added it to the National System also directed that it be managed under principles of multiple use. Natural resources along the river can be utilized as long as their exploitation doesn't significantly impact Wild and Scenic River values.

Historically the river's resources have contributed to our nation's economy. Furs stimulated the first settlement in the region. Timber was used to fuel steamboat boilers. Cattle and sheep replaced buffalo. Irrigation often made the difference in a homesteader's future.

Agriculture is the mainstay of Central Montana. The Breaks are well suited for raising livestock, and proper grazing helps maintain the vigor and variety of vegetation. For some 50 river miles below Fort Benton, grain crops frequent the bottom lands. Further down river a few irrigated hay fields provide visual relief and a pleasant contrast during late summer.

Steamboat crews tried unsuccessfully to use the river's coal resource. More recent efforts involve tapping natural gas reservoirs.

The Upper Missouri today more resembles the river explored by Lewis and Clark than what was experienced by turn of the century travelers. Bottoms and slopes stripped bare for steamboat fuel again support trees. Many homesteads have fallen to disrepair, abandoned because the environment was too harsh. If properly cared for, the outstanding values and experiences of the river will be maintained while her resources continue to help satisfy our Nation's needs.



**Mile 75.8 Preserving the values of the river requires the help of ALL her users.**

As the nation's principal conservation agency, the Department of the Interior has responsibility for most of our nationally owned public lands and natural resources. This includes fostering the wisest use of our land and water resources, protecting our fish and wildlife, preserving the environmental and cultural values of our national parks and historical places, and providing for the enjoyment of life through outdoor recreation. The Department assesses our energy and mineral resources and works to assure that their development is in the best interests of all our people. The Department also has a major responsibility for American Indian reservation communities and for people who live in Island Territories under U.S. Administration.

The Bureau of Land Management, an agency of the Interior Department, carries out the Department's public land management mandate on more than 400 million acres of public lands. The BLM's goals and objectives provide for public land use planning on the basis of multiple use and sustained yield unless otherwise specified by law. The public lands are managed in a manner that will protect the quality of scientific, scenic, historical, environment, air and atmosphere, water resource, and archaeological values. Furthermore, the lands must be managed in a manner that will preserve and protect certain public lands in their natural conditions; that will provide food and habitat for fish and wildlife and domestic animals; and that will provide for outdoor recreation and human occupancy and use.

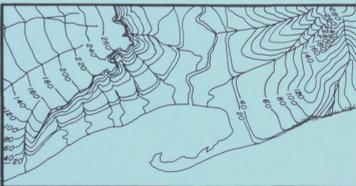
Among its many programs, the BLM is entrusted with the management of the Upper Missouri National Wild and Scenic River — a priceless remnant of primitive America. There are two objectives we ask you to share with us in this management. The first is to help you "discover" this beautiful and historic river even as Lewis and Clark did in 1805 — and to do so with the safety of you and your companions in mind. The second objective is to ensure that the river will retain its essentially wild and pristine nature for all those who follow after you. That means caring enough not to despoil the beauty and heritage you will find on this magnificent river.



**USING THE FLOATER'S GUIDE**

To navigate with the floater's guide, one must first become familiar with the map legend. Under the various symbols, colors and line widths are understood, a little practice should develop the ability to keep track of your location. Also, once your group has established its pace, timing yourselves, will help estimate distances covered. The average current is 3 1/2 m.p.h., but that varies from location to location, and an up-or-down-river wind can alter your speed significantly.

A key to navigation on the river is tracking your progress from river bottom (adjacent flat land) to river bottom, from cottonwood grove to cottonwood grove, and from bluff to bluff. Widely spaced contour lines indicate gentle terrain, closely grouped ones are steep slopes. Contour lines forming a "V" pointing away from the river identify a side drainage. "U" shaped lines pointing toward the river locate a ridge.



Photos of sites with some identifiable feature have been included to free you from having to navigate continuously, or to relocate yourself should you become disoriented. The photos were taken at the mileages indicated. Some features are easily recognizable, others are associated with unique land forms (i.e. the tip of an island, a major side drainage) and others will have to be watched for very carefully. As with the map, using the photos will require some practice. The panorama of the river changes with the time of day or with the weather.