

Missouri River

Missouri National Recreational River

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Nebraska/South Dakota

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



A Great American Riverway

The Missouri has a story like no other river. Beginning at the confluence of three tributaries at Three Forks, Montana, it flows southeast for more than 2,300 miles before joining the Mississippi River a few miles north of St. Louis, Missouri. It was the great waterway of American Indians, fur trappers, Lewis and Clark, and early settlers. In the 1800s the river shared with the Oregon and Santa Fe trails the distinction of being one of the three main thoroughfares to the Far West.

For centuries it was a wild and unpredictable river that transported tons of silt and rocky freight. Forced into much of its present course by glaciers, the river rushed along their faces. Eventually the glaciers receded. The river remained, continuing its job of transporting the Rocky Mountains to the Gulf of Mexico grain by grain. As it changed course any permanence of its channel and banks was accidental. Its floodplain was a mixture of wetlands, sandbars, wet prairies, and bottomland forests.



The Missouri River touches seven states on its journey from its headwaters in Montana to St. Louis, Mo., and drains a watershed encompassing the heartland of America.



Original Highway West

American Indians



In 1879 Ponca Chief Standing Bear (right) won a court battle to have Indians recognized as "persons with rights of citizenship" under United States law.

Lewis and Clark kept trip notes in this journal (right).

For centuries Yankton Sioux (camp at left) have carved ceremonial pipes from red catlinite (below).

True pioneers along the Mnisose Wakpa (turbulent river) were the American Indians for whom the river valley was a highway and a home. It provided shelter, wild game, and garden plots of fertile soil. The "Great Circle" of life along the river followed seasonal patterns. Each season the river renewed the resources that supported those who lived here. Spring brought floods that fertilized the fields. Fruits, berries, and other wild plants became available in season. Migrating birds, spawning fish, roaming bison, and animals wintering along the river dictated the direction of the hunt. American Indians used fire to shape the river landscape. Fire

stimulated the growth of new grass, attracting bison and other animals, and kept the land free of trees. When Europeans arrived here, they found a wild but human-touched landscape.

At the time of the first European contact in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, the Siouan Ponca were living on the Niobrara River to the west. It is probable that the territory was also visited by Oto, Omaha, and Pawnee. Yankton Sioux were living on the north bank of the Missouri River.

Spanish explorers in long, flat-bottomed boats (*bateaux*), followed by French and British fur traders, were the first Europeans to enter the Missouri basin. Americans followed in keelboats, then by steamboats, as the river formed the most practical route to the Great Plains. But the river exacted a price. Artist George Catlin observed that the snags and rafts made of huge trees on the "River of Sticks" presented "the most frightful and discouraging prospect for the adventurous voyageur." Snags, fire, and ice continued to devour boats until the end of the 19th century. The bends were the most dangerous, for here the snags accumulated.

The Missouri River—North America's longest river—had abundant braided channels, chutes, sloughs, sandbars, islands, and backwater areas. Historically it carried high loads of sediment, earning it the nickname "Big Muddy."

Wetlands may be created during major floods if the Missouri slices a new channel through the banks of a meander and diverts water into a natural containment area. Wetlands are nature's way of controlling floods and providing new habitats.

Sandbars are created when fast-flowing waters lose their energy while moving downstream and deposit sand and soils picked up from the river bottom and banks. Sandbars are prime habitat for nesting terns and plovers.

Islands develop (typically during floods) when the river follows its older channel and breaks open a new channel to encircle a sandbar or piece of land. Islands are stable enough to support vegetation and a variety of wildlife, including eagles.

Looking southeast Nebraska is on the right of the Missouri River, and South Dakota is on the left (above). ERIC FOWLER, NEBRASKA LAND MAGAZINE/NEBRASKA GAME AND PARKS COMMISSION (NGPC)

The Lewis and Clark Expedition traveled along this section of the Missouri from late August to early September 1804, and again on their return trip in 1806. They explored landscape features such as Spirit Mound, held a council with the Yankton Sioux, and wrote the first reports on pronghorns, mule deer, and prairie dogs that were previously unknown to western science.

Flooding—Doing What Comes Naturally During the time of westward expansion the Missouri River had a vast floodplain. It periodically overflowed its banks, creating new channels as the main one moved from side to side. A shifting channel was normal, especially below Yankton and downstream to the confluence with the Platte River. Typically, in April brief floods of one to two weeks occurred as a result of local snowmelt and spring rains. In June floods lasted longer and inundated larger portions of the plains when melting snowpack from the Rockies and rain from lower elevations swelled the Missouri beyond its banks.

Taming the Missouri—The Pick-Sloan Plan After a series of floods devastated farms and towns in the early 1940s, Congress enacted the Flood Control Act of 1944. A component known as the Pick-Sloan Plan called for construction of five dams along the Missouri. By the mid-1960s, after the dams were built and reservoirs filled, the river ceased to be the meandering and high sediment-carrying sculptor of scenery. Although seasonal floods no longer replenish the floodplains, dam-controlled fluctuations provide habitats for an amazing array of plants and animals.

Today two stretches of the Missouri River along the Nebraska-South Dakota border are vital remnants of the historic river. In 1978 and 1991 Congress preserved these free-flowing sections by designating them as the Missouri National Recreational River and adding them to the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System.



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Steamboat traffic largely disappeared after a devastating flood in March 1881. Towns appeared first on the Nebraska side, but only after the 1859 treaty with the Yankton Sioux did communities spring up in Dakota Territory. The 1862 Homestead Act encouraged settlement in both territories. The promise of 160 acres attracted Americans from the East and Europeans from abroad. Many settlers farmed in the river's rich bottomlands, although one wit commented that these farmers never knew whether they would harvest corn or catfish. Descendants of these Czech, German, and Finnish immigrants maintain a rich heritage today.

The hand-colored engraving Snags on the Missouri depicts the perils of steamboat travel (above left).

These sternwheelers docked at Yankton carried 300-400 tons of cargo but drew only three feet of water (above).

Pallid sturgeons have bony plates instead of scales. They can weigh up to 65 pounds and reach five feet in length (right).

Restoring the Past



Today everyone and everything here has a stake in the Missouri River, and sorting things out can be a challenge. No single agency can decide alone how to preserve this important riverway. Federal, state, and local governments, tribal agencies, private landowners, and the people who depend on the river for jobs and recreation are working together to find ways to protect the river. Stewardship—saving the river and its natural and cultural resources for future generations—is critical for the river to retain its natural state.

Active management of fish and wildlife and restoration of habitat along the river are vital. The goal is to integrate habitat restoration and conservation efforts with all of the beneficial uses currently provided by the river, and to do it in a way that minimizes conflict.



Discovering the Park

Missouri National Recreational River comprises two free-flowing reaches of the Missouri River separated by Lewis and Clark Lake.

59-Mile District: The eastern portion (Gavins Point Dam to Ponca, Neb.) exhibits the river's historic, dynamic character in its islands, shallow bars, chutes, and snags.

39-Mile District: The western portion (Fort Randall Dam to Running Water, So. Dak.) has one of the best natural landscapes associated with the river along its entire course. Included are 20 miles of the lower Niobrara River and eight miles of Verdigre Creek.



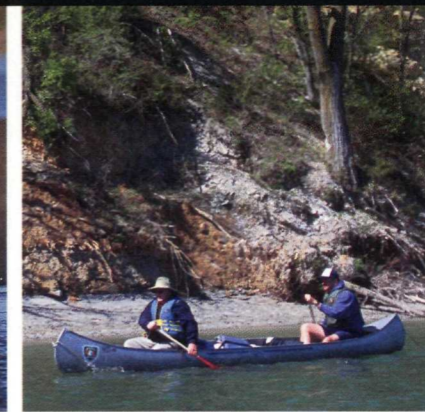
Fishing together for walleye and catfish can be lots of fun.



A visitor watches wildlife.



Avocets use their bills to stir up aquatic insects.

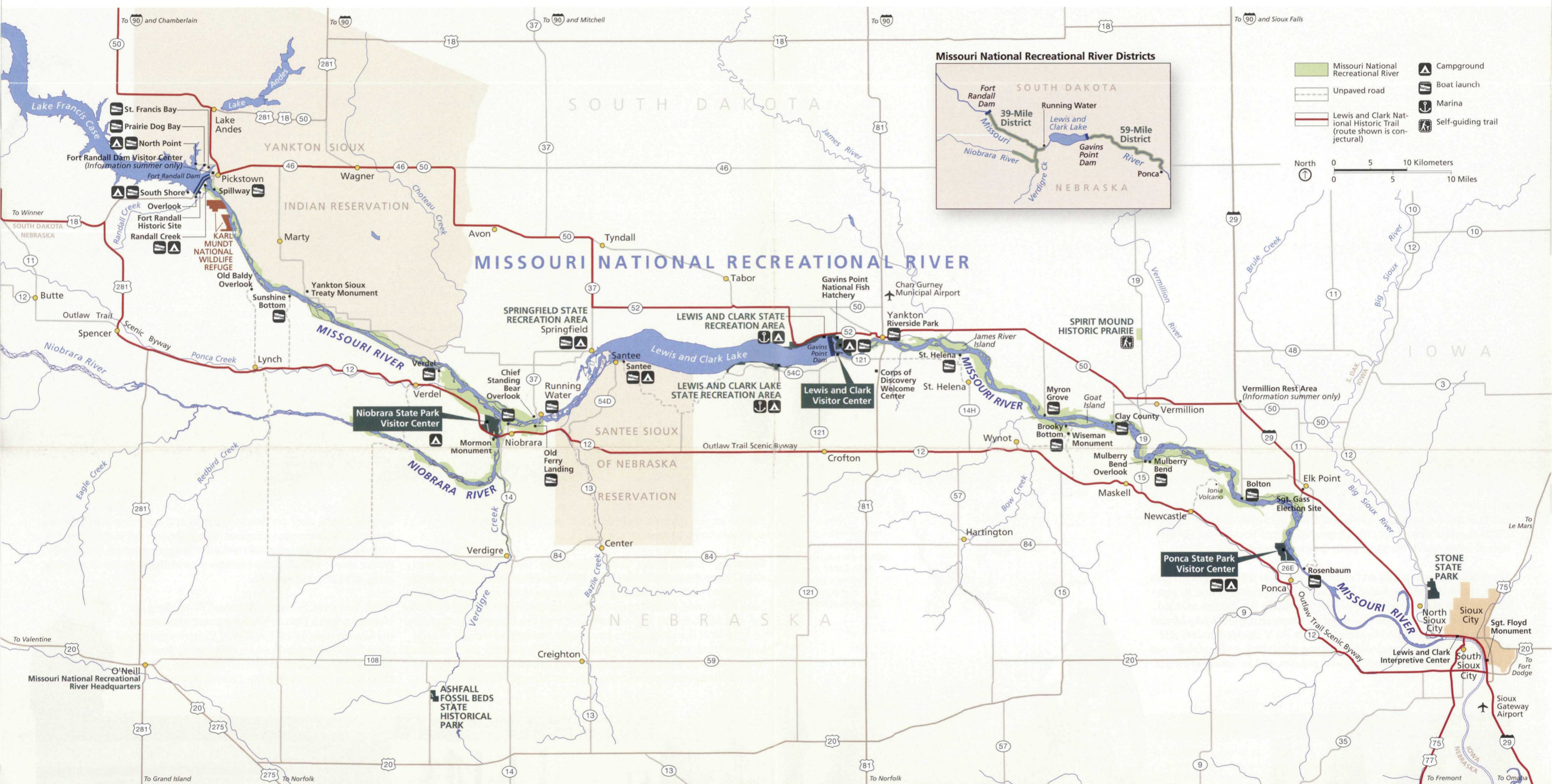


Canoes and other craft ply the river.



The world seems magical from horseback.

PHOTOS: NEBRASKALAND MAGAZINE/NEBRASKA GAME AND PARKS COMMISSION



Planning Your Visit

On the Edge of the Plains The two districts of Missouri National Recreational River lie on either side of the 98th Meridian, considered the eastern border of the Great Plains. The abundant rainfall and large forested areas east of this north-south line of longitude are missing to the west. As Lewis and Clark headed west they noticed a change in the landscape: the woodlands receded, tailed off into tall grass prairie, and finally gave way to the short grass of the drier high plains. This change is increasingly noticeable west of the Niobrara River.

59-mile District This section—with its wide, meandering channel, shifting sandbars, and secondary floodplains—contains some of the last forested floodplain and floodplain wetland habitats on the river. On the Nebraska side the land ranges from a nearly level floodplain to steep, tree-covered bluffs. On the South Dakota side is a relatively level floodplain. Riverbanks vary from flat, sandy beaches to vertical faces 10 to 15 feet high where active erosion is taking place. This landscape has

backwater marshes, open sandbars, and cottonwood forests that provide habitat for wildlife.

39-mile District This reach—while influenced by controlled releases from Fort Randall Dam—remains in a generally free-flowing condition. It is 2,000-3,000 feet wide above its confluence with the Niobrara River. It meanders through a valley that varies in width from 5,000-9,000 feet. On the Nebraska side much of the shoreline is forested chalkstone bluffs adjacent to gently rolling to flat agricultural crop and range bottomland. On the South Dakota side the valley bottom is up to one mile wide and is bordered by chalkstone bluffs and rolling hills.

Things to See and Do Most visitors come to the Missouri National Recreational River for its refreshing water and premier boating, fishing, and canoeing. You can also camp, tour powerhouses and historic sites, trace the Lewis and Clark Expedition, visit a fish hatchery and aquarium, and explore quiet trails.

Where To Start

Visitor Centers Stop first at a visitor center for information, publications, and exhibits. Visitor centers are open daily in summer; off-season hours vary and are limited. Call for information.

Lewis and Clark Visitor Center The visitor center offers views of the river, Lewis and Clark Lake, and Gavins Point Dam. It has information, exhibits, a theater, and a bookstore. National Park Service and Corp of Engineers staff can help you plan your visit.

Niobrara State Park The 1,260-acre park is on Nebraska's northeastern border at the confluence of the Niobrara and Missouri rivers. It has a visitor center, camping, cabins, swimming, fishing, and a variety of year-round activities.

Ponca State Park The 2,166-acre forested park sits on a bluff at the eastern gateway of the Missouri National Recreational River. It has a visitor center, camping, cabins, and activities ranging from horseback riding to cross-country skiing.

Enjoying a Safe Visit

Lodging, Services, Camping Lodging and services are available in nearby communities. Niobrara and Ponca state parks and the recreation areas on Lewis and Clark Lake offer camping.

Fishing and Hunting Walleye, largemouth bass, smallmouth bass, bluegill, and catfish are popular catches. In season hunters take geese, ducks, quail, turkeys, pheasants, and deer. Licenses required.

Accessibility State parks are generally accessible for visitors with disabilities. Contact the parks for information about facilities for your special needs.

Park Neighbors The national recreational river is bordered by a mosaic of homes and communities, tribal lands, federal, state, and community parklands, and recreational facilities. Please treat all property with care and respect.

Safety and Regulations Regulations differ among areas managed by federal, state, tribal, local, and private agencies. Read bulletin boards and know the regulations—*your safety is your responsibility*. • Beware of snags, stumps, sandbars, and floating debris. • Personal watercrafts (PWC) are prohibited on the river. • Always wear a life vest (PFD) when on the river. • Swimming in the river is discouraged because of unpredictable currents. • Stay back from cliffs; large chunks of the riverbank can suddenly collapse. • **Emergencies: Call 911**

For More Information Plan ahead. Contact the parks about activities, facilities, reservations, fees, permits, safety tips, and regulations.

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P.O. Box 666
Yankton, SD 57078
402-667-2550
www.nps.gov/mnrr

Lewis and Clark Visitor Center
P.O. Box 710
Yankton, SD 57078
402-667-2546
www.nwo.usace.army.mil/html/Lake_Proj/gavinspoint/welcome.html

Niobrara State Park
89261 522 Avenue
Niobrara, NE 68760-6087
402-857-3373
www.outdoornebraska.org

Ponca State Park
88090 Spur 26E
Ponca, NE 68770
402-755-2284
www.outdoornebraska.org

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