

Lolo, Montana, to the Big Hole National Battlefield, Montana,
through the Bitterroot Valley



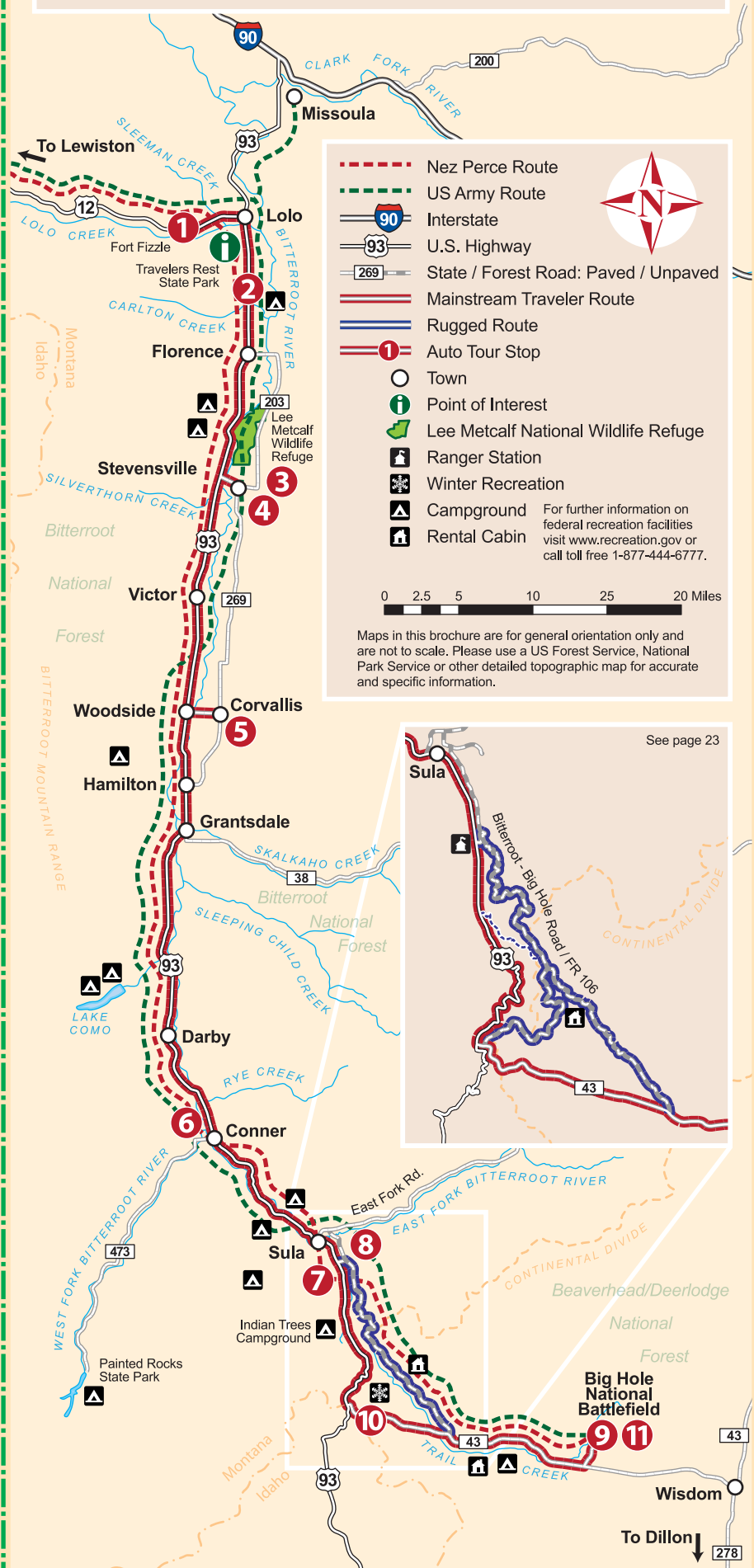
Experience the Nez Perce Trail

3

AUTO TOUR



Through the Bitterroot Valley



The Nez Perce (Nee-Me-Poo) National Historic Trail

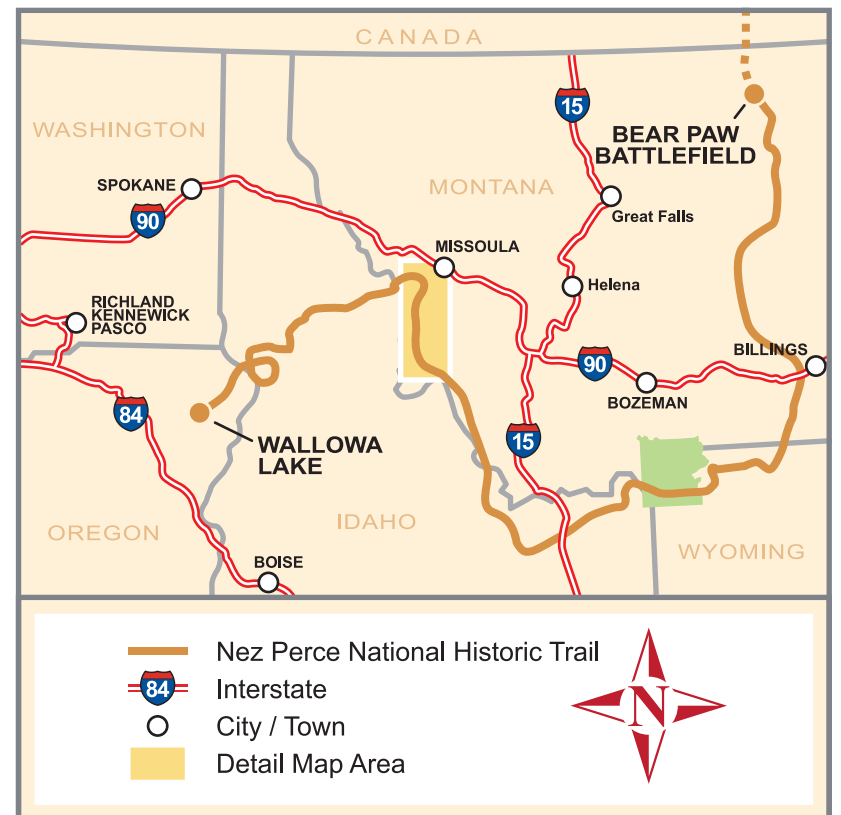
Designated by Congress in 1986, the entire Nez Perce National Historic Trail stretches 1,170 miles from the Willowa Valley of eastern Oregon to the plains of north-central Montana.

This segment of the Nez Perce National Historic Trail from **Lolo, Montana, to the Big Hole Battlefield, Montana through the Bitterroot Valley** is one of eight available tours (complete list on page 35). These are available at Forest Service offices and other federal and local visitor centers along the route.



As you travel this historic trail, you will see highway signs marking the official Auto Tour route. Each Mainstream Auto Tour route stays on all-weather roads passable for all types of vehicles. Adventurous and Rugged Routes are an alternative for those seeking the most authentic historic route. They are often on gravel or dirt roads, so plan ahead.

Check weather and road conditions before embarking on your journey. Call 511 for road condition reports on major routes. For road condition information on Adventurous and Rugged routes inquire locally.



Experience the Nez Perce Trail



How do I get there?

This Auto Tour begins at Fort Fizzle, 4.6 miles west of Lolo Montana. Lolo is located approximately 7 miles south of Missoula, Montana.

Take Interstate 90 to Missoula, MT. Take exit 101, US Highway 93. Proceed South on US Highway 93 for 12.9 miles to the junction with US Highway 12 in Lolo, MT. As you travel south through Missoula on US Highway 93 / Reserve St. you may wish to visit Fort Missoula, located near the intersection of Reserve and South Ave. Continue west on US Highway 12 for 4.6 miles to the Fort Fizzle Interpretive site.

If you are continuing from Auto Tour 2, Continue east From Lolo Hot Springs on US Highway 12 for 21.1 miles to Fort Fizzle.

As you encounter this “snapshot in time,” try to understand the fears and feelings of those involved in events of the past. Reflect on the different viewpoints of those who lived in the Bitterroot Valley. History is more than dates and events; it is an encounter with real people from the past. What would you do in their place?

Fort Missoula, Montana



Roger Peterson - USDA / Forest Service

Mainstream Traveler

(Passable for all types of vehicles.)

For most travelers this will be the appropriate route.

The roads are generally paved and won't pose a challenge for typical cars, campers with trailers, and RVs.

Mainstream Travelers take U.S. Highway 12 from Fort Fizzle, east to US Highway 93, and then follow US Highway 12 south to Lost Trail Pass and Montana State Highway 43. Then drive east on Montana State Highway 43, over Chief Joseph Pass to Big Hole National Battlefield.

Rugged Traveler

(Recommended for high clearance, four wheel drive vehicles only - usually passable from July to October.)

Rugged Travelers are taken even closer to the actual sites of many of the events of the summer and fall of 1877. Travelers may leave the route of the Mainstream Traveler near Sula, Montana. This tough, one-lane road (Forest Service Road 106) crosses the Continental Divide at Gibbons Pass and follows Trail Creek to the Big Hole Valley, and joins up with the Mainstream Traveler before Big Hole National Battlefield. This route takes travelers over roads that are gravel or even just dirt, has no guard rails and winds along above a steep drop off. Please be sure your vehicle is appropriate for these conditions. The Sula Ranger Station located near the junction of US Highway 93 and Forest Road 106, can provide information on road conditions.

Note that some roads along the Rugged routes can be impassable during periods of inclement weather.

Hiking Opportunity

For the ambitious hiker, National Forest Trail 406 offers an opportunity to experience the forbidding terrain the Nez Perce and the U.S. Army had to contend with. Scarred trees are still visible. The trailhead is approximately 6 miles south of Sula and east of U.S. Highway 93 near the Indian Trees Campground. This 3.1 mile long trail is one of the very few actual “verified” sections of the “corridor” that was used by the tribes as well as Lewis and Clark. Captain William Clark used this trail in 1806 on his return from the Pacific Ocean and today this is part of the Lewis and Clark National Historic Trail. See page 25 for details.

A Proud People Connected to the Land

We were always here, Nature placed us in this land of ours.

*– Yellow Wolf
(Hímiin maqsmáqs)*

The Nez Perce (or, in their language, Niimípuu, meaning “the real people” or “we the people”) believe the Creator molded them from the earth. The Niimípuu lived for centuries as a loosely knit confederation of small bands.

The Nez Perce depended on the land for their survival. The earth and rivers provided roots and berries, fish and game. Farming and land ownership were foreign to the Nez Perce. They believed the earth was not to be disturbed by hoe and plow. The land was their home, not a commodity to be bought or sold.



Photo courtesy of WSU L.V. McWhorter Collection

Tensions Mount ~ War Erupts

In the mid 1800s, Indian-settler disputes intensified in the West. In the Nez Perce homeland (present day southeastern Washington, northeastern Oregon and north-central Idaho), the federal government failed to enforce an 1855 treaty prohibiting unlawful encroachment by settlers on Indian reservation land.

In 1863, the U.S. government drafted another treaty that reduced the 7,000,000-acre Nez Perce Indian Reservation to a tenth its original size. After a decade of mistreatment and abuse endured by the Nez Perce, five chiefs refused to sign this treaty. During the 1870s there was increasing pressure to force these remaining “non-treaty Nez Perce” onto the reduced reservation.



White Bird Battlefield

Roger Peterson - USDA / Forest Service

Although the Nez Perce agreed to move to the reservation, mounting tension between the Nez Perce and settlers finally erupted in violence that led to the first battle at White Bird Canyon, Idaho, June 17, 1877. Before fleeing eastward over the Buffalo Trail (K’usey’ne’ískit Trail) to Montana, the non-treaty Nez Perce fought several more battles with U.S. Army units commanded by General Oliver Otis Howard and settler volunteers. The Nez Perce believed the U.S. Army and its volunteers were only chasing them out of Idaho and that they would be safe in Montana. The Nez Perce intended to travel to a place where they could find peace, someday returning to their homeland.



Wallowa Lake

Roger Peterson - USDA / Forest Service

Flight to Freedom

Fear spread among Montana settlers as reports of increasing unrest in Idaho reached the territory. Newspapers fanned the flames of fear by printing distorted stories. The Nez Perce were heading over the Lolo Trail toward Montana.

It is a monstrous outrage that the Nez Perce shall be allowed to pass through our territory.

– J. H. Mills, editor, New Northwest, Deer Lodge, MT.

Many Montana settlers were accustomed to Nez Perce visits. Some settlers claimed Nez Perce as friends, but panic prevailed. Newspaper editors demanded action by Montana Territorial Governor Benjamin Potts. Telegrams to President Rutherford B. Hayes demanded that the Army punish “the hostiles,” ignoring the fact that the Nez Perce were defending their homeland.

Montana settlers formed volunteer militia groups. In Stevensville, Montana, settlers hastily rebuilt Fort Owen, a crumbling, walled trading post. In Corvallis and Skalkaho, Montana, the residents built sod forts to protect their families.



Bitterroot Salish Chief Charlo and his people had been friendly to both settlers and Nez Perce. However, the Salish were also experiencing increasing pressure from settlers to give up their land in the Bitterroot Valley.

Chief Charlo refused to sign the 1872 Garfield Treaty. His name was forged on the document. Chief Charlo and several hundred Salish people remained in the Bitterroot Valley in the face of growing hostility.

The Bitterroot Salish

Traditionally, the Bitterroot Valley in western Montana was home to the Bitterroot Salish, but they ranged hundreds of miles in all directions to hunt buffalo, fish for salmon, trade and visit neighboring tribes.

The 1855 Hellgate Treaty established a reservation about 75 miles north of Montana's Bitterroot Valley for several other Salish bands, and they considered the Bitterroot Valley of western Montana a reservation for the Bitterroot Salish. However, in 1872, the federal government bowed to pressure from settlers and negotiated an agreement with the Bitterroot Salish to remove them to the Jocko Reservation. The last Salish left their Bitterroot Valley homeland in 1891.



Chief Charlo
Photo courtesy St. Mary's Mission Inc.

Nobody was sure how the Salish would react to the Nez Perce presence. By the time the Nez Perce reached Lolo Pass, Montana residents had been reading about supposed “terrible atrocities” for five weeks. The highly publicized fate of Lt. Colonel George A. Custer the year before at the Battle of the Little Big Horn magnified the settlers’ fears. While the Nez Perce intended to pass peacefully through Montana, the panic-stricken settlers feared for their lives.

Chief Charlo allowed the Nez Perce to pass through the valley but warned them not to harm the settlers. His warriors assisted in the defense of strongholds like “Fort Fizzle.”

The Flight of the Nez Perce of 1877 symbolizes the dramatic collision of cultures which continues to shape the West and its people. A native people were forced to flee their homelands in a futile attempt to avoid war and save their traditional ways. Immigrated European people found themselves fighting neighbors who had been their friends for many years. Traditional trails, which had long been a source of joy and sustenance, became a trail of flight and conflict, a trail of sorrow.

Chronology of Events

The events in this timeline coincide with the sites seen on this auto tour:

- July 24** – Two companies of the 7th Infantry with Captain Rawn, supported by over 150 citizen volunteers, construct a log barricade near Lolo Creek at Fort Fizzle. **1** Many women and children are sent to Fort Owen **4** or to two hastily constructed forts near Corvallis **5** and Skalkaho (Grantsdale).
- July 28** – Nez Perce reach the Bitterroot Valley, bypassing Fort Fizzle, and camp on the McClain Ranch north of Carlton Creek. **2**
- July 29** – Nez Perce camp with Chief Charlo on Silverthorn Creek west of Stevensville. **3**
- July 30** – Nez Perce trade for supplies in Stevensville. **3**
- August 1** – Nez Perce camp at Corvallis. **5**
- August 3** – Colonel Gibbon reaches Fort Missoula.
- August 4** – Nez Perce camp near junction of the east and west forks of the Bitterroot River. **6** Colonel Gibbon's command camps north of Pine Hollow southwest of Stevensville. **4**
- August 5** – Nez Perce camp above Ross Hole near Indian Trees Campground. **7** Colonel Gibbon is at Sleeping Child Creek. John Catlin and volunteers agree to join him.
- August 6** – Nez Perce camp at Trail Creek. Colonel Gibbon makes "dry camp" south of Rye Creek on his way up the hills leading to Ross Hole, closing the gap between his command and the unsuspecting Nez Perce. General Howard's command camps at Lolo Hot Springs.
- August 7** – After a difficult climb over the Continental Divide, the Nez Perce camp along the North Fork of the Big Hole River. **9** Colonel Gibbon is now at the Continental Divide. **10** Lieutenant Bradley is sent ahead with volunteers to scout. General Howard is at Lolo Hot Springs.
- August 8** – Nez Perce camp at the Big Hole. **9** Colonel Gibbon crosses crest of the Continental Divide, parks wagons and deploys his command just a few miles from the Nez Perce camp. General Howard enters the Bitterroot Valley, camps north of Pine Hollow.
- August 9** – Just before dawn, Colonel Gibbon and his troops charge the sleeping Nez Perce village along the banks of the North Fork of the Big Hole River. **11** Some 90 Nez Perce are lost, many of them women and children. General Howard is near the mouth of Rye Creek.
- August 10** – General Howard goes with his fastest cavalry to Trail Creek, a 53-mile trek. Infantry is now above Stevensville.
- August 11** – General Howard and his men reach Colonel Gibbon. **11**
- August 12** – Remaining cavalry reach the Big Hole Battlefield. **11**

— **AS YOU TRAVEL THE TRAIL** —

The trail memorializes not only those who died during the flight, but those who survived.

Their tragic journey marked the end of freedom for the Nez Perce and opened their lands to settlement.

As you travel this historic trail through the Bitterroot Valley, whether you drive, ride or walk, you will gain an understanding of and appreciation for the difficulty of their journey and the tremendous odds the Nez Perce had to face and overcome.



① Lolo Trail Barricade: “Fort Fizzle”

I had a talk with Chief’s Joseph, White Bird and Looking Glass, who proposed if allowed to pass unmolested, to march peaceably through the Bitterroot Valley in western Montana.

– Captain Rawn, 7th Infantry

To block the Nez Perce from entering the Bitterroot Valley, Captain Rawn, 30 enlisted men and four officers from nearby Fort Missoula entrenched themselves behind log breastworks in a small opening along the Lolo Creek drainage adjacent to the Lolo Trail. About 150 settlers joined the soldiers. The 750 Nez Perce, with approximately 2,000 horses, were camped about five miles to the west. At a meeting between Nez Perce chiefs and Army officers, the Nez Perce made four things very clear: (1) They had no intention of molesting settlers or property. (2) They wanted to travel in peace. (3) They would not surrender their horses, arms and ammunition. (4) They were not ready to return to the hostile environment in Idaho.

Soon after the meeting, many settler volunteers returned home. Some reports say they were convinced that the Nez Perce wanted a peaceful trip through the valley.



Others, “at the sight of so many Indians ... deserted.”

– Corporal Loynes, 7th Infantry

Captain Rawn had clear orders. He said the Nez Perce could not pass. However, the barricade failed when the Nez Perce, with their horses and possessions, climbed a steep ravine behind the ridge to the north and bypassed the soldiers. The previously unnamed barricade became the ridiculed “Fort Fizzle.”

② Through the Bitterroot Valley:

Lolo Creek to Carlton Creek

From Fort Fizzle travel east along US Highway 12 to Lolo, MT. Turn south on US Highway 93 and go 5.5 miles to Carlton Creek Road.

After avoiding a major conflict on the Lolo Trail, the Nez Perce followed Lolo Creek to the Bitterroot River. Here they were joined by Poker Joe and several others increasing their numbers by twelve lodges. Also known as Lean Elk, Poker Joe would later assume leadership of the Nez Perce. Chief White Bird and others wanted to go north to Canada. Chief Looking Glass insisted on traveling south toward the Big Hole Valley where he had led many hunting parties. He knew there were few settlements and many lush meadows for grazing horses. The chiefs made a fateful decision to go south, up the Bitterroot Valley, into the Big Hole Valley, and east to the buffalo country.

The Nez Perce camped on settler J. P. McClain’s ranch just north of Carlton Creek, in the vicinity of today’s Looking Glass Recreation Area. Some Bitterroot volunteers could not return home without passing through the Nez Perce camp. Chief Looking Glass made it clear that they did not wish to fight and permitted the volunteers to pass unharmed through the camp.

You are volunteers; you come over to fight us. I could kill you if I wanted to, but I do not. You can go to your homes. I give you my word of honor that I will harm nobody.

*– Looking Glass (younger)
Wrapped in Wind (‘elelimyete’qenin’)*

Looking Glass met us and told us he would not harm any persons or property in the valley if allowed to pass in peace and that we could pass through his camp to our homes.

– W. B. Harlan, settler



Poker Joe

Known by many names, Lean Elk, Little Tobacco, and hotóoto, the half French and half Nez Perce loved to gamble and was best known as Poker Joe to the white men in many frontier towns in Montana. Poker Joe was one of the many heroes of the Nez Perce during the war and flight of 1877.

During the summer of 1877, Poker Joe was returning to Idaho across the Lolo Trail from Buffalo country. Six miles away from Kamiah he heard of the outbreak of war and he decided to turn back toward Montana. During his trip back to Montana, he accidentally injured his leg with a knife. The white settlers of the Bitterroot Valley accused him of being hurt in one of the battles in Idaho and would not believe him when he tried to explain his injury. Disgusted that he was not believed he decided to join the Nez Perce. The Nez Perce welcomed Poker Joe, impressed by his skills as a brave and impulsive fighter.

*"I knew Poker Joe very well. He was a great leader - a brave warrior."
- Yellow Wolf (Himiin Maqsmáqs)*

Following the massacre and battle at Big Hole, Poker Joe was chosen as trail leader for the Nez Perce. He knew Montana very well from years of hunting buffalo. Choosing the route carefully and setting a quick pace, Poker Joe would have the people rise early and travel until ten o'clock at night. Every day the Nez Perce bands would gain distance from their pursuers. Some thought that Poker Joe moved the people too quickly but remembering the tragedies of Big Hole he felt that he could not afford to lighten the pace.

"I am trying to save the people, doing my best to cross into Canada before the soldiers find us. You can take command, but I think we will be caught and killed."

- Poker Joe

Poker Joe led the Nez Perce from the Big Hole Valley, through Yellowstone National Park and all the way to the Missouri River, approximately 500 miles. Tragically Poker Joe was mistaken for an enemy during the Battle of the Bear Paw and was accidentally killed by a Nez Perce warrior.

3 Through the Valley:

Carlton Creek to Stevensville

Continue south on US Highway 93 from Carlton Creek Road for 10.9 miles. Turn east onto SEC269 / Montana State Highway 269. Continue for approximately 1.3 miles into Stevensville, MT.

The Nez Percés were by far the finest looking tribe of Indians I have ever seen.

- Henry Buck, Stevensville shopkeeper

The Nez Perce moved up the Bitterroot Valley in western Montana on July 29, 1877, in "a cavalcade about five miles long" to the Stevensville area. The main body of Nez Perce spent two of the three days camped along Silverthorn Creek west of Stevensville, Montana, near the home of Chief Charlo, leader of the Bitterroot Salish in an area known today as Indian Prairie.

"I sat on top of the fort where I had a plain view of the caravan and watched their passing. As was always customary with Indians traveling on horseback, they jogged their ponies along on a little dog trot. Being curious enough to gain some idea of their number, [I] took out my watch and timed their passing a given point. It took just one hour and a quarter for all to move by and there were no gaps in the continuous train. There was no unusual confusion or disorder and none came over on our side of the river."

- Henry Buck



General Howard, whom the Nez Perce Indians nicknamed “General Two-Day Behind,” was back in Idaho. The few soldiers the Nez Perce had encountered on the Lolo Trail had retreated to Fort Missoula. Chief Charlo found himself in an awkward position. He was friendly with both whites and Nez Perce, and he wanted peace. Frequent intermarriage, ongoing trading, shared buffalo hunting and mutual defense had cemented good relationships between the Nez Perce and the Bitterroot Salish. Chief Charlo’s people had lived among the settlers in the Bitterroot Valley in western Montana for many years.

Many of the white settlers were friends of the Salish. How could Chief Charlo join one side against the other? When asked to support the Army, he said, “We are friendly to the whites, but in your war with the Nez Perce [we] could not take sides.” He remained neutral.

It was my father’s boast that his hand had never in seventy years been bloodied with the white man’s blood, and I am the son of my father. We could not fight against the Nez Perce because they helped me several years ago against my enemy the Blackfeet, but we will not fight with them against the whites.

– Chief Charlo

Crossing the Lolo Trail with their remaining possessions and approximately 2,000 hungry horses was a major achievement. The Nez Perce and their stock needed rest.

The Indians ... are moving very slowly, in fact they have not

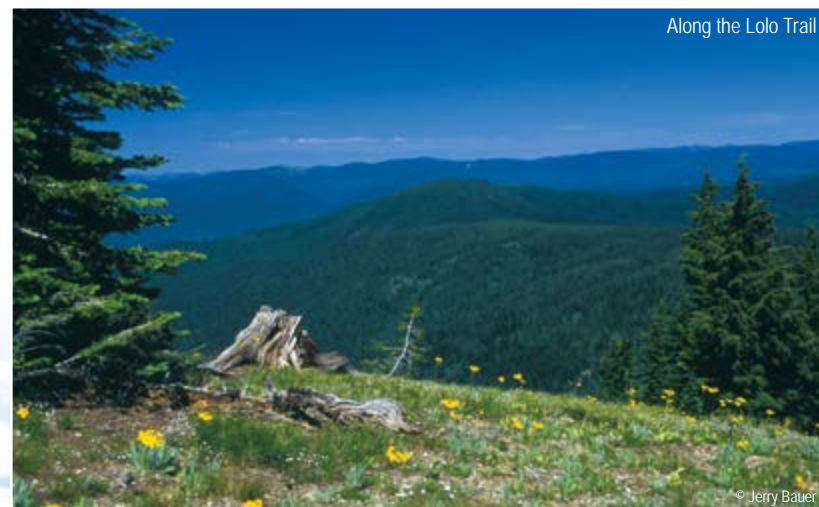
The Nez Perce had no idea that Colonel John Gibbon and the 7th Infantry were coming from the newly formed Fort Missoula to join the chase. During their stay across from Stevensville, groups of Indians visited the town for supplies.

They soon made known their wants to us, saying they needed supplies and had money to pay for them, but if we refused to sell, would take them anyway.

– Henry Buck, Stevensville shopkeeper

The Indians have plenty of gold dust, coin and greenbacks and have been paying exorbitant prices for flour, coffee, sugar and tobacco.

– Washington McCormick, Missoula businessman

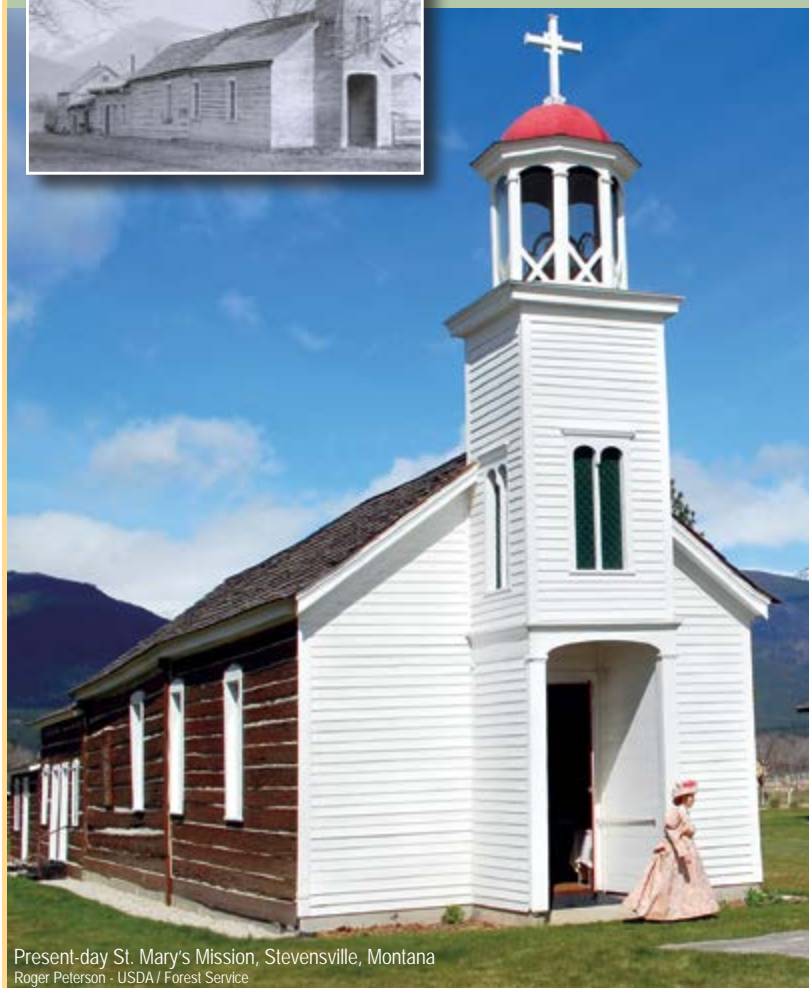


The Bitterroot Valley

During the first half of the 19th century, trappers, traders and missionaries came to the Bitterroot Valley. St. Mary's Mission, built by Jesuits at Stevensville in 1841, was the first Roman Catholic mission in the Northwest. When the Jesuits left in 1850, the St. Mary's Mission was sold to Major John Owen, who established a trading post and built an adobe "fort" near the site. Sixteen years later in 1866, the Jesuits returned and reestablished St. Mary's Mission in its current location south of Fort Owen.

By 1865, the valley had 100 permanent white settlers although the area had not been officially opened to white settlement. Five years later, more than 300 whites inhabited the valley. Most settlers were growing produce to supply food to regional mining camps.

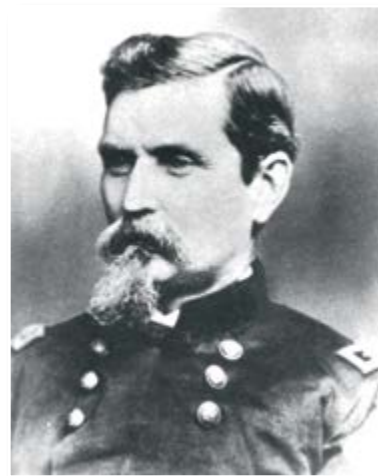
The settlers demanded more land for agriculture. They felt the remaining Bitterroot Salish should be removed from the valley and placed on the Jocko (Flathead) Reservation to the north.



Present-day St. Mary's Mission, Stevensville, Montana
Roger Peterson - USDA / Forest Service

4 Gibbon Enters the Bitterroot Valley

Colonel Gibbon and his command entered western Montana's Bitterroot Valley on August 4. They camped near the present-day Pine Hollow Road southeast of Stevensville. As Colonel Gibbon moved up the valley, volunteer settlers, who were now manning the sod forts, joined Gibbon in pursuit of the Nez Perce. The settlers elected J. L. Humble of Corvallis and John Catlin of Skalkaho as company "captains." Both were at first hesitant to join the chase. The Nez Perce Indians had kept their word and traveled through the valley without incident.



When we got to Sleeping Child Creek, I told Scott Sherrill that I thought we were doing wrong. The Indians had gone through the valley and had done just as they agreed to. I did not think that we had any right to follow them up and pick a fight ... But what did these same settlers do when General Gibbon came along? They volunteered to go with him after the Indians, who only a few days before had allowed them to pass through their camp to Fort Owen without bloodshed.

– Alex Notes, settler



5 Through the Valley:

Stevensville to Skalkaho

From Stevensville, MT head back to US Highway 93 by taking SEC269 / Montana State Highway 269 north out of town. In approximately 1.3 mile turn south onto US Highway 93. In 14.5 miles turn left onto Montana State Highway 373 / Woodside Cutoff Road and continue east for 2 miles into Corvallis, MT.

While he lived, Major Catlin never changed his opinion, always asserting his belief that the (Bitterroot) citizens went into the battle without just cause.

– Will Cave, Bitterroot settler and relative of Major Catlin

Because the Nez Perce traveled slowly up the valley—12 to 14 miles a day—most settlers believed the Indians had no warlike ambitions. However, not all businessmen were willing to deal with the Nez Perce. A Corvallis merchant, P. R. Young, angrily ordered the Nez Perce out of his store and barred it shut. Later, Colonel Gibbon praised the merchant, while he chastised the Stevensville merchants.

Reports of incidents at the Corvallis (Fort “Skedaddle”) and Skalkaho sod forts suggest that the settlers would have been safer in their own homes. One historian reports, “The Nez Perce warriors rode up and examined the forts. Their friendliness and amusement reassured the settlers, some of whom were even said to have visited the Indian camp and sold bullets to the warriors.” Several warriors reportedly shot arrows at “Fort Run” (Skalkaho). The arrows fell far short of their mark.

The fort at Corvallis was built of green sods for a surrounding wall. This section of the valley was peopled largely by ‘Missourians’ who, during the Civil War, received warnings often to ‘get up and go’ to a safer place of refuge ... hence the newly-coined word “Skedaddle” came into vogue and the stockade was thereupon christened ‘Fort Skedaddle.’

*– Henry Buck,
Stevensville shopkeeper and relative of Major Catlin*

6 Over the Continental Divide:

From Corvallis, MT head back to US Highway 93 by taking Highway 373 / Woodside Cutoff Road and turn south onto US Highway 93. Travel south for 28 miles and then turn right onto Conner Cutoff Road / Forgotten Ln. In 0.3 miles you will reach Conner, MT, near where the Nez Perce camped on August 4, 1877.

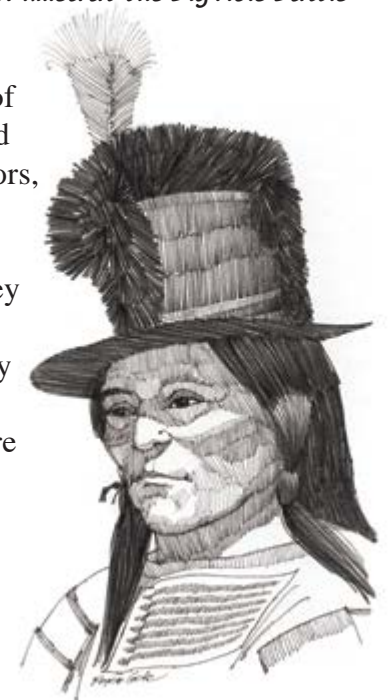
My shaking heart tells me trouble and death will overtake us if we make no hurry through this land! I cannot smother, I cannot hide what I see. I must speak what is revealed to me. Let us be gone to the buffalo country.

*– Lone Bird (Piyóopiyo ‘ipciwáatx)
Nez Perce warrior*

My brothers my sisters, I am telling you! In a dream last night I saw myself killed I will be killed soon!

*– Wahlitits (Wáalaytic)
Nez Perce warrior killed at the Big Hole Battle*

On August 4, the Nez Perce camped near the confluence of the Bitterroot River’s east and west forks. Two young warriors, Lone Bird and Wahlitits, told of dreams they had warning that death would follow if they did not hurry. Chief Looking Glass was still convinced they need not hurry. The war was left in Idaho. The dreams were disregarded. Chief Looking Glass prevailed. Completely unaware of Colonel Gibbon, Yellow Wolf expressed the same belief by proclaiming, “War is quit!”



Chief Looking Glass - ‘elələmyete’qenin’

Personal Guardians

The Nez Perce had a strong belief in dreams and visions. Young boys and girls often went alone to remote places, hoping to receive knowledge imparted by a personal guardian spirit. This personal Wéeyekin would warn them of danger and give them special powers. In all phases of daily life, the Nez Perce thought of the spirits of the forces and objects around them as supernatural guardians—their Wéeyekin.

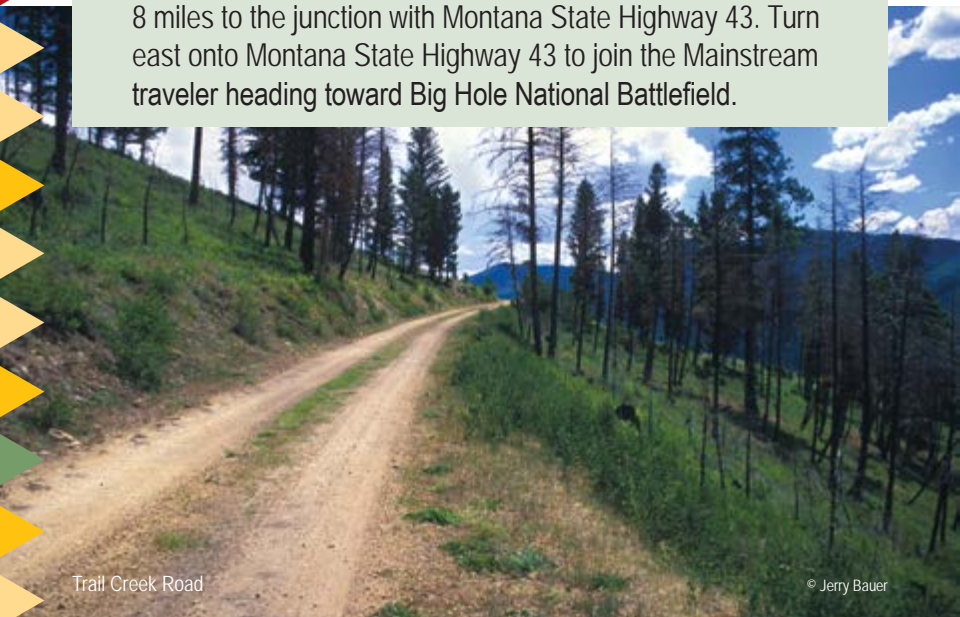
Rugged Traveler

Over Gibbons Pass

The Bitterroot-Big Hole Road, locally known as Gibbons Pass Road, provides a relatively low elevation route (6,941 feet) over the Continental Divide. The pass played a significant role furnishing easy access through the Bitterroot Mountains for Native Americans, explorers, trappers, traders, and settlers. For centuries, the tribes in this region used this pass to travel to and from buffalo hunts on the plains.

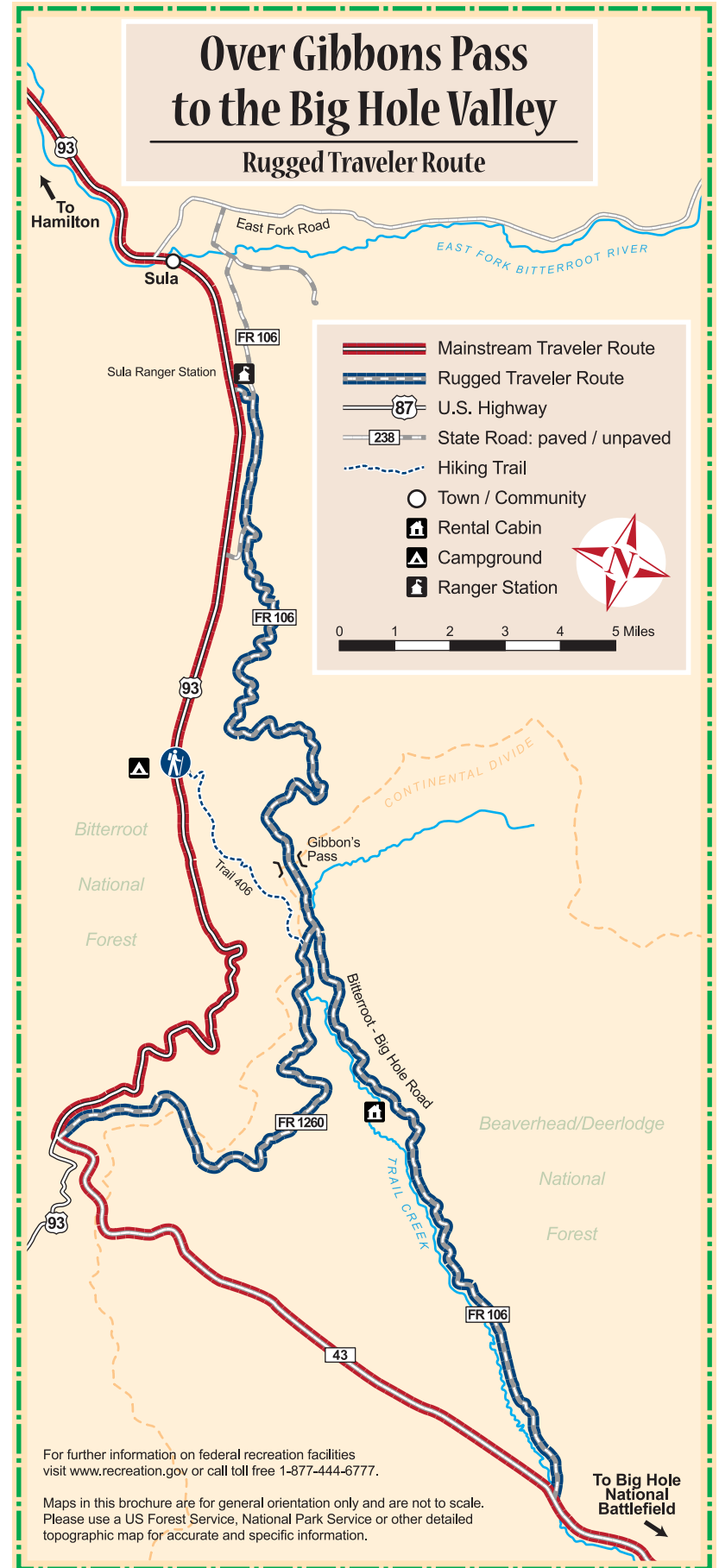
From Conner, MT, take US Highway 93 south for 12.1 miles. On the east side of the road is the Sula Ranger Station. Road conditions for this Rugged Route and other information is available here. Continue south on US Highway 93 for 0.2 miles and turn east (left) onto Edwards Rd / Gallogy Rd. In 0.2 miles turn south (right) onto Bitterroot-Big Hole Road / FR 106. In 1.2 miles keep to the left to stay on Bitterroot-Big Hole Road / FR 106. In approximately 8 miles you will reach the jct. with Forest Road 1260. Continue east on FR 106 (Trail Creek Rd) for another 8 miles to the jct. with Montana State Highway 43. Turn east onto Montana State Highway 43 to join the Mainstream traveler heading toward Big Hole National Battlefield.

For an easier alternative route and for those who wish to visit historic Gibbons Pass, consider using Road #1260 at Lost Trail Pass. This route is also a single lane road, but has frequent turnouts. From Conner, MT take, US Highway 93 south for 23.1 miles. Turn left onto Montana State Highway 43. In about 50 feet turn left onto FR 1260 / Gibbons Pass Road. In 6.8 miles turn right onto the Bitterroot-Big Hole Road / FR 106. Follow Bitterroot-Big Hole Road / FR 106 along Trail Creek for 8 miles to the junction with Montana State Highway 43. Turn east onto Montana State Highway 43 to join the Mainstream traveler heading toward Big Hole National Battlefield.



Trail Creek Road

© Jerry Bauer





Driving the Bitterroot-Big Hole Road

Be Prepared. This route is not recommended for vehicles over 25 feet in length or vehicles with low clearance. Take along a good spare tire, not a temporary one. Be sure to have a full tank of gas.

Don't cut curves. Drive slowly enough that you could stop in 21/2-car lengths, in case another vehicle is coming toward you around a curve,

Watch for soft shoulders. Especially near those 100 foot drop-offs. Watch for falling rocks, and fallen trees or rocks on the road.

Keep track of pull-outs as you drive. You may need to back up a distance to one of them to let another vehicle pass. Vehicles traveling uphill have the right-of-way, so the downhill driver has to back uphill to a safe spot for passing.

Nearest services. Sula on Highway 93, Wisdom in the Big Hole Valley, and Gibbonsville in Idaho.

Check current road conditions
Sula Ranger District at 406-821-3201

Trail Creek Road



The Bitterroot-Big Hole Road follows part of the historic Nee-Me-Poo Trail, which roughly follows an ancient tribal trail. It is this trail that the fleeing Nez Perce traveled on their way to the Big Hole Valley, closely followed by Colonel Gibbon with U.S. Army soldiers and Bitterroot volunteers.

By today's standards, access isn't easy. Forest Road #106 from Sula Ranger Station to Gibbons Pass is a steep, winding, and narrow one-lane road with few turnouts. In places the side hill drops off several hundred feet, and driving can be nerve-wracking! This section of road is NOT suitable for vehicles longer than 25 feet (motor homes, trailers) or low clearance vehicles.

For ease of travel, and to protect the old trail tread, the "modern" route of the Nee-Me-Poo Trail follows a series of old logging roads. If you hike the Nee-Me-Poo Trail, look for sections of the old trail along your way.

For Hikers: Trail 406

Directions: From Sula, MT, head south 4.3 miles on US Highway 93. Turn east on to Forest Road #10001 and follow for approximately 0.25 mile to the trailhead.

The trail is open for Hiking and Horseback Riding.

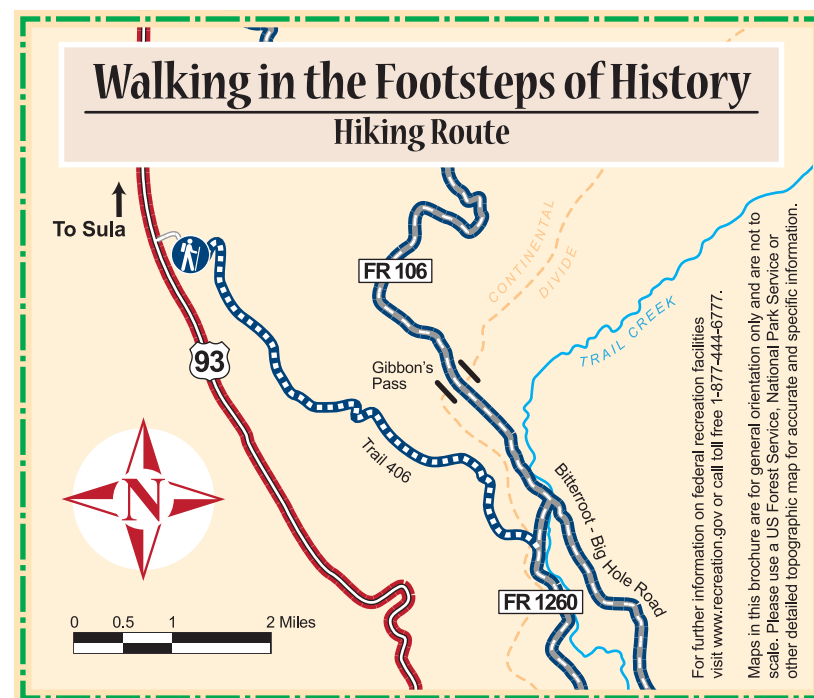
Note: *Weed free hay is required. Riders and hikers should be aware there may be trees down on the trail that need to be navigated.*



This section of the Nez Perce National Historic Trail (Nee-Me-Poo) trail is 3.1 miles long. It begins at Forest Road 10001 and ends at Beaverhead - Deerlodge National Forest

! *There is an abundance of wildlife along the Nez Perce National Historic Trail. All wild animals need to be treated with caution and respect. If you are planning to hike, check with the nearest land management agency for information on local wildlife. Know how to be safe in wild country.*

Road 1260 The trailhead is east of US Highway 93 near the turnoff to Indian Trees Campground. The trail gives the ambitious hiker an idea of the forbidding terrain. Scarred trees are still visible. Captain William Clark, of the Lewis and Clark expedition, and his party used this trail in 1806 on their return journey east.



7 Camp at Ross Hole

From Conner, MT take US Highway 93 south for 15.8 miles. This is near where the Nez Perce camped on August 5th 1877. Indian Trees Campground is nearby, look for signs.

On August 5, the Nez Perce traveled up Spring Gulch, across Low Saddle on the north side of Sula Peak, dropped down into Ross Hole and camped near present-day Indian Trees Campground before crossing the Continental Divide.

We traveled through the Bitter Root Valley slowly. The white people were friendly. We did much buying and trading with them. No more fighting! We had left Howard and his war in Idaho.

– Yellow Wolf (Hímiin maqsmáqs)

Scarred Trees

The Salish and the Nez Perce, among others, stripped the bark from the ponderosa pine trees to eat the sweet cambium, or inner bark. These scarred trees can still be seen at Indian Trees Campground and hiking trails in the area.



8 Gibbon at Ross Hole

All right, Looking Glass, you are one of the chiefs! I have no wife, no children to be placed fronting the danger that I feel coming to us. Whatever the gains, whatever the loss, it is yours.

– Five Wounds (Páaqatos 'ewyíin)
Nez Perce warrior

On August 6, Colonel Gibbon, commanding the 7th Infantry and the volunteer army, crossed the hills south of Rye Creek. The crude wagon “road” was so slow and difficult that they had to make a “dry camp” before reaching the summit. They crossed into Ross Hole the next day, making camp just a few miles below the spot where the Nez Perce had camped two nights before. Here, near the confluence of Waugh and Camp Creeks, Captain Humble and many of the volunteers returned home, fulfilling their obligation to accompany the soldiers as far as Ross Hole. Thirty-four settler volunteers, enticed by Colonel Gibbon’s offer of captured Nez Perce horses, continued the chase.

Now some have accused us of going out just to steal the horses; that gives the wrong impression, as we did not think of that until the general made us the offer. He told us that we could have all the horses except enough to mount his command, if we could whip the Indians.

– Tom Sherrill, settler

9 Nez Perce Reach Big Hole

Continue south on US Highway 93 for about 6.8 miles to Lost Trail Pass, the Montana / Idaho border and the junction with Montana State Highway 43. Turn east onto Montana State Highway 43 and in another 1.1 miles you will reenter Montana. Continue on Montana State Highway 43 for 6.4 miles to the junction with Trail Creek Road. On the north side of the road you will find a Nez Perce interpretive site. Continue east for 8.9 miles to Big Hole National Battlefield.

The steep trail over the Continental Divide was familiar but difficult. After the climb, and one night at Trail Creek, the Nez Perce made camp on the banks of a clear, cool stream where the forested mountains meet the green meadows. Horses grazed. Women cut lodge poles and gathered roots. Children played and men hunted game. They had made it to the *Iskumkselalik Pah*; meaning place of the ground squirrels.

That night the warriors paraded about camp, singing, all making a good time. It was first since war started. Everybody with a good feeling. Going to the buffalo Country! No more fighting after Lolo Pass. War was quit.

– Yellow Wolf (*Hímiin maqsmáqs*)

Most of the Nez Perce believed they could relax and savor their freedom. Still, a few questioned Chief Looking Glass's optimism. Several young men wanted to scout back along the trail for signs of trouble. Chief Looking Glass would not agree and said that scouting would violate trust in their peace agreement with the Bitterroot settlers.

10 Crossing the Continental Divide

Colonel Gibbon dispatched Lieutenant Bradley and Captain Catlin with some of their men and a couple volunteers to locate the Nez Perce. Early on August 8, Gibbon and his men started over the Continental Divide. It required many laborious hours using double teams and men with drag ropes to get the wagons up the steep slope.

The road was excellent until we commenced to climb the divide separating us from Ross Hole at the extreme upper end of the Bitter Root Valley. Here the ascent that we were compelled to halt at nightfall and make a dry camp before reaching the summit.

– Colonel John Gibbon

Before reaching the top, Bradley's messenger arrived with news that the Nez Perce camp had been located. Leaving the wagon train to follow later, Colonel Gibbon and his men pushed on. They reached Lieutenant Bradley and his scouts about sunset.

Meanwhile, General Howard was still playing catch-up. He had camped near Lolo Hot Springs before moving up the Bitterroot Valley.

On August 9, Howard camped near the mouth of Rye Creek. When he learned from a relay of military messengers and the settlers that Gibbon was not far behind the Nez Perce, General Howard selected 20 of his best cavalry and began a forced march to reach Colonel Gibbon.

11 Gibbon Attacks

On August 9th, the dawn's silence was shattered when Colonel Gibbon's 7th Infantry and Captain John Catlin's Bitterroot volunteers attacked the unsuspecting, sleeping Nez Perce at their camp beside the North Fork Big Hole River. Today this is part of the Big Hole National Battlefield.

Thundering gunfire from the willows along the creek ended the tranquil dawn. A cry of "we are attacked" aroused the sleeping Nez Perce warriors to battle. The war was "not quit." The Big Hole Battle had begun. Years afterward, an elder Nez Perce woman expressed the heartfelt Nez Perce distress:

We were fools and the white man's lies made us more foolish.

White Bird's sentiments were similar,

A white man must have no respect for himself. It makes no difference how well he is treated by the Indians, he will take the advantage.

In the initial attack at Big Hole, 90 Nez Perce were killed, mostly women and children. The remaining warriors drove the attackers back across the river where they found what defence they could in hastily dug shallow rifle pits. The warriors held them pinned there for an entire day while they buried their dead. The women packed up what remained of the camp, loaded the wounded on travois and headed south. Of the Army and citizen volunteers, 29 were killed and 40 wounded including Colonel Gibbons.

The leadership of the Nez Perce changed from Looking Glass to Lean Elk, also known as Poker Joe as the urgency of the situation intensified. No longer were they merely removing themselves from a bad situation. The stakes had been elevated.

General Howard arrived at the battlefield the next day, August 11, and with him two doctors to attend the wounded military. Two days later he would pick up the pursuit of the Nez Perce.

Big Hole National Battlefield

Big Hole National Battlefield tells the story of what happened at this site on August 9-10, 1877, through the words, voices and objects of the people who were here.



The Park's visitor center offers compelling new exhibits, a 26 minute film, indoor and outdoor viewing areas, ranger led programs and a 3D map of the entire Nez Perce route. For those wishing to learn more, books about the Nez Perce and this era of history are available for sale at the book store.

Trails throughout the battlefield are open year round and during the summer months ranger programs are offered daily.

Big Hole National Battlefield memorial



Roger Peterson - USDA / Forest Service

Epilogue:

The Struggle Continues

After the battle at Big Hole the Nez Perce, with the military constantly in pursuit, began a desperate fight to reach a place of safety and regain their freedom. The odyssey continued throughout the summer and into the fall as they traveled across Idaho, into the newly created Yellowstone Park, through part of Wyoming and then north through Montana in an attempt to reach Canada.

The Nez Perce eventually surrendered in the Bear Paw Mountains, near today's Chinook, Montana, where Chief Joseph made his memorable speech. White Bird and nearly 300 Nez Perce escaped to Canada. The war was finally "quit," but human suffering was not.

More than 400 Nez Perce were imprisoned in Indian Territory, now Oklahoma. There, more Nez Perce died than were killed in all the fighting. Some Nez Perce were eventually allowed to return to the Nez Perce Indian Reservation in Lapwai, Idaho, but Chief Joseph and others were forced to settle on the Colville Indian Reservation in northeastern Washington State and the Umatilla Indian Reservation in north-central Oregon.

The Bitterroot Salish

The Nez Perce trip through the area was not the end of Indian conflict in western Montana's Bitterroot Valley. Just 14 years later, in 1891, Chief Charlo sadly agreed to move the remaining Salish people to the Jocko (Flathead) Indian Reservation.

Henry Buck, Stevensville settler, merchant and war participant, reflected on the situation:



Chief Charlo
Photo courtesy St. Mary's Mission, Inc.

It was this same high-handed dictatorial policy of our government in Idaho that fired Chief Joseph to wrath in defense of his birthright and forced us, as innocent citizens, to seek our own protection, and which, only a few years later, demand of Charlo and his tribe, our defenders, the surrender of his heritage in exchange for a home not of his choice.

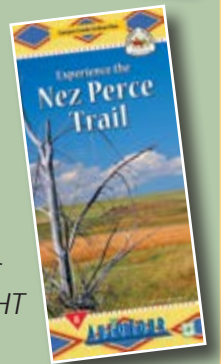
Notes

Nez Perce National Historic Trail Auto Tours

See the Auto Tour brochure for each trail segment indicated on the map below for specific route information.



- 1 Wallowa Valley, Oregon, to Kooskia, Idaho
- 2 Orofino, Idaho to Lolo, Montana
- 3 Lolo, Montana, to the Big Hole National Battlefield, Montana, through the Bitterroot Valley
- 4 Big Hole, Horse Prairie and Lemhi Valleys
- 5 Leadore, Idaho, to Yellowstone National Park, Montana
- 6 Through Yellowstone National Park
- 7 Yellowstone National Park to Canyon Creek, Montana
- 8 Canyon Creek to Bear Paw



Auto Tour Brochures are available at local visitor centers, from the NPNHT Staff or from the NPNHT website at, www.fs.usda.gov/npnht/

For an interactive, Google Earth virtual tour of the trail please visit the Nez Perce Foundation website at www.nezpercetrail.net

This Trail is a Sacred Trust for All Americans

“We, the surviving Nez Perces, want to leave our hearts, memories, hallowed presence as a never-ending revelation to the story of the event of 1877. These trails will live in our hearts.

We want to thank all who visit these sacred trails, that they will share our innermost feelings. Because their journey makes this an important time for the present, past and future.”

– Frank B. Andrews, Nez Perce descendant

For more information on the Nez Perce (Nee-Me-Poo) National Historic Trail visit on the Web at www.fs.usda.gov/nphnt or contact:

Nez Perce
National Historic Trail
12730 Highway 12
Orofino, ID 83544
(208) 476-8334
nphnt@fs.fed.us

Nez Perce National
Historical Park
39063 US Highway 95
Spalding, ID 83540
(208) 843-7001
www.nps.gov/hepe

Nez Perce Trail
Foundation
www.nezperctrail.net

Nez Perce Tribe
P.O. Box 365
Lapwai, ID 83540
(208) 843-2253
www.nezperce.org

Lolo National Forest
Building 24, Fort Missoula
Missoula, MT 59801
(406) 329-3814
www.fs.usda.gov/lolo

Bitterroot National
Forest
1801 N. First Street
Hamilton, MT 59840
(406) 363-7100
www.fs.usda.gov/bitterroot

Beaverhead-Deerlodge
National Forest
420 Barrett Street
Dillon, MT 59725
(406) 683-3900
www.fs.usda.gov/bdnf

Big Hole National
Battlefield
P.O. Box 237
Wisdom, MT 59761
(406) 689-3155
www.nps.gov/biho

Lee Metcalf National
Wildlife Refuge
4567 Wildfowl Lane
Stevensville, MT 59870
(406) 777-5552
www.fws.gov/leemetcalf/

Missoula Field Office
Bureau of Land
Management
3255 Fort Missoula Road
Missoula, MT 59804
(406) 329-3914
www.blm.gov/mt/

Travelers Rest
State Park
6717 Highway 12 West
P.O. Box 995
Lolo, MT 59847
(406) 273-4253
www.travelersrest.org

St. Mary's Mission
P.O. Box 211
Stevensville, MT 59870
(406) 777-5734
www.saintmarysmission.org

Rocky Mountain Museum
of Military History
P.O. Box 7263
Missoula, MT 59807
(406) 549-5346
www.fortmissoula.org

Ravalli County Museum
205 Bedford
Hamilton, MT 59840
(406) 363-3338
www.brvmuseum.org



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