

THE UPPER MISSOURI RIVER BREAKS NATIONAL MONUMENT is a place of stunning contrasts. Its boundless vistas, towering cliffs, and rambling river corridor – a ribbon of green coursing through a rugged arid landscape of reds and browns – makes for grand, inspiring scenery. At the same time there's a subtler, more intimate side to the Breaks; in the fragile, exquisite beauty of a sandstone formation, the mystery of a winding slot canyon, the delicate yellow of a flowering prickly pear cactus, or a cottonwood grove's inviting cool shade.

NATURE reigns in the Breaks, one of very few intact ecosystems remaining on the northern prairie. The past is present too, with the many dinosaur bones and fossils that have been found. Human history has left its mark as well. It's in the rock art and tipi rings of ancient Indian hunters, the written record of Lewis and Clark, the tales of fur trappers, river men, and outlaws, and the silent testimony evoked by weathered sod roofed cabins of homesteaders come and gone.

MONUMENT HISTORY

NATIVE AMERICANS

WHILE the written record of the Breaks is just two centuries old, native peoples have known the region for thousands of years. Archeologists have examined just a fraction of the Monument and have found hundreds of archeological sites, including tipi rings and rock art. In more recent times, the western end of the Monument was Blackfeet domain. Downstream, Gros Ventre, Assiniboine, and Cree tribes considered the Breaks home territory. Their descendants on the nearby Fort Belknap and Rocky Boys Reservations maintain strong connections with the area today. Crow, Shoshone, Sioux, and Salish peoples also knew the Breaks. Metis of mixed French Canadian and Chippewa ancestry settled in the region in the latter 1800s. In 1877 Chief Joseph and his Nez Perce followers passed through today's Monument on their epic 1300 mile odyssey, attempting to evade the United States army. They forded the Missouri and skirmished with soldiers at Cow Island. Their trail ended near the Bear's Paw Mountains, just north of the Breaks, and the Monument area remains special ground to the Nez Perce.



LEWIS AND CLARK

THE Upper Missouri River Breaks National Monument is a premier locale of the 3,700 mile Lewis and Clark National Historic Trail.

The Corps of Discovery entered the area that would be the Monument on May 24, 1805. It would take three weeks to toil upstream to the west end, the site of today's Fort Benton. Boats were towed as much as paddled and poled. Detailed descriptions from the expedition journals allow the precise locations of

"As we passed on it seemed as if those seems of visionary enchantment would never have an end; for here it is too that nature presents to the view of the traveler vast ranges of walls of tolerable workmanship, so perfect indeed are those walls that I should have thought that nature had attempted here to rival the human art of masonry had I not recollected that she had first begun her work."

Meriwether Lewis, May 31, 1805, contemplating the White Cliffs section of the Monument

WHILE a tapestry of American history rolls out in the Breaks, the Monument also seems suspended in time. It's a harsh, remote, silent place, yet it hosts flourishing populations of mule deer, elk, and bighorn sheep. Though very much a prairie landscape, the Breaks is framed by isolated mountain ranges: the Little Rockies, Bear's Paws, Highwoods, Moccasins, and Judiths.

SIMPLY put, the Upper Missouri River Breaks National Monument is the wild, scenic, and historic heart of Montana.

A TRADITION OF CONSERVATION

THE fabled Upper Missouri River has long been a place worth protecting, and citizens have worked for decades to ensure the landscape remains wild and undeveloped. In 1966 the state of Montana declared the river a "Recreational Waterway." A decade later, at the urging of Montanans, President Ford designated a 149 mile stretch of the river

Corps campsites – 14 within the Monument – to be pinpointed today. The passage through the Breaks, though arduous, inspired members of the Corps, as it does modern-day explorers. Meriwether Lewis extolled "scenes of visionary enchantment," echoing thousands of paddlers who pass the same way today. Sergeant Patrick Gass noted "very curious cliffs and rocky peaks ... as if built by the hand of man, and so numerous that they appear like the ruins of an ancient city." It was from today's Monument that Captain Lewis "beheld the Rocky Mountains for the first time."

AT the confluence of the Missouri and another major river, now called the Marias, the Corps faced a crucial decision. Committing the expedition to the wrong branch might have proved fatal. Most expedition members reckoned the Marias as the correct choice. Captain Clark and five others reconnoitered further up the Missouri by foot. They covered some 70 miles, camped in "an old Indian lodge," had a close call with "a huge he-bear," and killed three more "coming up the river towards us." The correct route was chosen and the Corps proceeded on. This river juncture, "Decision Point," is one of many historic Monument sites.

THE WAY WEST

FUR trappers followed Lewis and Clark up the Missouri, the river being the principal artery for westward travel across the northern plains for most of the 19th century. The first trading post on the Missouri above its juncture with the Yellowstone River was Fort Piegan. The American Fur Company established the post in 1831, near the confluence of the Marias and Missouri Rivers. It only lasted a few months before succumbing to a Blackfeet attack. More forts held



GLENN MONAHAN

from Fort Benton downstream as a National Wild and Scenic River. This action spared the last free-flowing portion of the Missouri, America's longest river, from several dam proposals. Following numerous regional public hearings and input from Montanans and citizens across the nation, President Clinton established the Upper Missouri River Breaks National Monument in 2001 to provide further protection to the river corridor and adjacent uplands. Montanans can take pride in the Breaks as one of the gems of the National Landscape Conservation System.

THE Proclamation creating the Monument states that the land it embraces contains a "spectacular array of biological, geological, and historic objects of interest." It also emphasizes that the Breaks "remains remote and nearly as undeveloped as it was in 1805," when Lewis and Clark passed through. Here is one of the few places along the entire



KARL BODMER, JENSEN ART MUSEUM

forth, at least briefly, within the lands of the Monument. Among these was Fort McKenzie, where German prince Alexander Maximilian and Karl Bodmer, the young Swiss artist who accompanied him, were notable visitors and witnesses to an Assiniboine raid. Their 1833 keelboat journey up the Missouri is well chronicled in the journal writings of Maximilian and the paintings of Bodmer, whose detailed artwork beautifully captures the scenery and native culture of the Upper Missouri. Today's Monument

visitors relish opportunities to compare views of prominent Breaks landmarks with those painted by Bodmer.

FORT Benton, Montana's oldest continuously occupied settlement, sprang to life in 1846 as an American Fur Company post. Situated on the west end of the Monument, it is now a principle gateway to the Breaks. In its heyday, as the end of the line for steamships making the 2,385 mile, ten week journey up the Missouri, it was "the world's most inland seaport." From 1860 to 1891, some 600 paddle wheel vessels steamed upriver through the Breaks to unload at Fort Benton's levee. Gold seekers, homesteaders, fur traders, buffalo hunters, speculators, missionaries, soldiers, "sporting girls," bullwhackers, cowboys, lawmen, and desperados passed through town. Barrels of whiskey were unloaded here and hauled north by wagon trains to the Canadian frontier over the appropriately named Whoop-Up Trail. Canadian Mounties, tasked with stopping the illegal liquor trade, were likewise provisioned from Fort Benton. Steamboats headed downstream were loaded with buffalo robes and gold dust. Not surprisingly, Fort Benton's bustling river-front developed a reputation as "the bloodiest block in the West."

RECREATION

RIVER RECREATION

IN the tradition of Lewis and Clark and those who followed, the Upper Missouri River Breaks National Monument is best known for its canoeing and kayaking opportunities. Here's a place to get away, to enjoy a truly wild river experience. Roads follow most rivers, but the Upper Missouri is a notable exception. And while a Monument river trip takes paddlers into remote country and should never be taken lightly, whitewater boating skills aren't required. The Upper Missouri is a people's river featuring swift but easily paddled water in a spectacular natural setting, beckoning young and old alike.



GLENN MONAHAN

"Changing as only a wild river can, the Missouri buries its history only to shift again and open its record to the passing traveler."

Bernard Shanks
The Living Wilderness, 1978

THE most popular launching place for boaters is Coal Banks Landing (mile 41.5), just below Virgelle (river mile markers in the Monument increase downstream, with Fort Benton being mile marker 0). Coal Banks Landing provides quick access to the famed White Cliffs section of the Monument. Many end their trip at Judith Landing

transcontinental route of the Corps of Discovery that is still essentially unchanged.

MONUMENT ADMINISTRATION

THE Upper Missouri River Breaks National Monument contains 374,976 acres of public land administered by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). Included within this designation are six Wilderness Study Areas (WSA) and an Area of Critical Environmental Concern (ACEC). Some 39,000 acres of state land and 81,000 acres of private land are intermingled with Monument land. The Proclamation specifies that the BLM has no jurisdiction over state or private land, and these lands are not part of the Monument. The Monument managers are based in Lewistown, while Fort Benton is home to the Monument Visitor Center. The Breaks is one of 15 National Monuments overseen by the BLM.

THE arrival of the Great Northern Railroad in 1887 signaled the end of Fort Benton's booming river era. But the creation of the Upper Missouri River Breaks National Monument has brought a new, if somewhat calmer, sense of purpose and prosperity to town. Fort Benton's main street is fronted by many historic buildings, including the stately Grand Union (Montana's oldest operating hotel) and remnants of the original American Fur Company post. Strolling through town, you can almost hear the whistle of a steamboat, the crack of a teamster's whip, or song and laughter from a boisterous saloon.

IN the late 1800s, stray cattle and outlaws sought refuge in the canyons and coulees of the Breaks, Kid Curry and the Wild Bunch being the most notorious of the latter. A wave of homesteaders passed through central Montana and the Breaks in the



GLENN MONAHAN

"... below the village of Virgelle, we were deeper in the past than ever ... The last town was behind us. Ahead, our only contemplated contact with the outside world would come at a lonely ferry crossing ..."

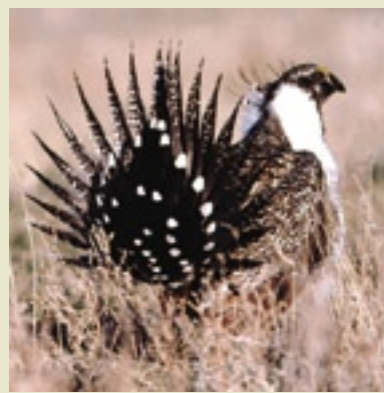
Montana author A.B. Guthrie,
Saturday Evening Post, 1952

early 20th century. Initial optimism and some unusually wet seasons gave way to a harder reality of poor agricultural land and isolation, and by mid-century most of these homesteaders had moved on, their lonely cabins and rusting farm machinery legacy to another passing chapter of Breaks history. The roots of at least a few sod bustlers were planted deeper, however, and their offspring still carry on with ranching and farming operations on the benches above the Missouri Breaks.

NATURAL FEATURES

WILDLIFE

WILDLIFE is diverse and abundant in the Monument. The remote coulees, canyons, and prairie provide important habitat for 60 different kinds of mammals, ranging from mountain lions to prairie dogs. If the combination of plentiful game, exceptional scenery, and a primitive experience are a measure of a good hunt, the hunting in the Breaks



MONTANA WILDLIFE FEDERATION



MONTANA WILDLIFE FEDERATION

is arguably without equal for mule and whitetail deer, elk, pronghorn antelope, bighorn sheep, and waterfowl. The bighorn sheep herd in the Breaks is one of the most significant in the West.

MORE than 230 bird species utilize Monument habitat, notably sage grouse, white pelicans, bald and golden eagles, and peregrine falcons. At least 20 kinds

of reptiles and amphibians call the Breaks home. The Missouri River and its tributaries harbor 49 varieties of fish including golden-eye, sauger, northern pike, the threatened pallid sturgeon, walleye, and the rare and odd-looking paddlefish.

GEOLOGY

ENTIRE textbooks could be written on the fascinating geology and geomorphology – the processes that shaped the landscape – of the Upper Missouri. The Breaks reveals not only dinosaur bones but its own geologic bones too with the interplay of intrusive igneous rock, uplifts, thrust faults, and sedimentary layers. The erosive forces of water and weather



GLENN MONAHAN

er upon soft sandstone are readily apparent in an endless variety of spires, arches, and hoodoos. The Missouri River used to flow northeast, draining into Hudson Bay. Continental glaciers rerouted the "Big Muddy" southward on its current course to the Mississippi River and the Gulf of Mexico during the last ice age.

"Here, on both sides of the river, the most strange forms are seen, and you may fancy that you see colonnades, small round pillars with large globes or a flat slab at the top, little towers, pulpits, organs and their pipes, fortresses, castles, churches with pointed towers, etc."

Prince Maximilian in the White Cliffs section of the Breaks, summer 1833

ADVICE AND REMINDERS

- Roads within the Monument are gravel and dirt. Rain can make them impassable. Ask about local road conditions and always be prepared for an extended stay.
- Keep vehicles on the established roads that are clearly open to the public. The BLM is trying to restore areas in the Breaks where off-road driving has left lingering scars.
- The Breaks is rattlesnake and cactus country – watch where you step!
- Whether you explore the Breaks by boat, horseback or foot, bring a hat and sunglasses, as well plenty of water and sunscreen.

- When floating the river, every boater should have an approved personal flotation device.
- Secure all camping gear and personal items in boats.
- Summer storms are frequent on the Upper Missouri. When they threaten, get off the river, tie down boats on the river bank, and beware of high winds and lightning.
- While the Monument landscape is a treasure in its own right, the natural, archeological, and historic objects within the Monument make it profoundly more meaningful. Sandstone is fragile. Its myriad spires, shapes, and arches should be admired from a distance. Please leave Native American rock art, tipi rings, and artifacts for others to likewise discover. Cabins, machinery, and other remnants of the homesteader era are amazingly well preserved, but will only be so for future generations if care and respect is exercised today.

- Finally, farmers and ranchers make their living in portions of the Breaks. RESPECT ALL PRIVATE PROPERTY along the river and in the uplands both inside and adjacent to the Monument. Many landowners will let you hike, hunt, or camp on their property but always ask first!

CONTACTS

Friends of the Missouri Breaks National Monument
224 W. Main, Suite 280
Lewistown, MT 59457
(406) 538-8506
www.MissouriBreaks.org

Bureau of Land Management
Lewistown Montana Field Office
920 NE Main -or- P.O. Box 1160
Lewistown, MT 59457
www.mt.blm.gov/ldo