

The Misadventures of Lewis and Clark

It was July 11, 1806, near the Great Falls of the Missouri, and Captain Meriwether Lewis was not a happy continental explorer. The Corps of Discovery had been on the march for the better part of two years. After waiting out a tedious Oregon winter eating moldy elk meat and watching the buckskin clothing rot off their backs, the men were finally homeward bound. They were crossing today's Montana west-to-east on the

home stretch. It

was downstream all the way to St. Louis, but the going was far from easy.

When they reached Lolo, Lewis and Captain William Clark decided to split up so they could cover more territory. The plan was to meet up later where the Yellowstone and Missouri rivers joined. Clark, Sacagawea, and most of the others headed south up the Bitterroot under the shadow of Trapper Peak. They explored the Big Hole River, crossed Bozeman Pass, and then floated down the Yellowstone. Lewis and his squad followed the Blackfoot River upstream, then rode their horses over the Continental Divide north of Lincoln.

By Ben Long
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Frustration followed Lewis like a lice infestation. Between injuries and disease, his squad of explorers looked like a walking infirmary. They had also lost some of the precious horses obtained from the Nez Perce Indians. And when Lewis finally arrived back at the Missouri River, he found spring floods had swamped a cache of supplies, ruining many of his hard-won scientific specimens. And then there were the grizzlies.

In those days, millions of bison roamed the Great Plains of North America, sometimes dying by the thousands. Often they drowned in the Missouri, plunging through thin ice or getting swept away in high water. Carcasses by the score washed down the Missouri, accumulating in places like the foot of the Great Falls. This heap of odoriferous protein attracted congregations of grizzlies from miles around (like the bear mobs that used to gather around garbage dumps in Yellowstone National Park). The Corps of Discovery blundered into the midst of a grizzly gang and, forced to camp in the area, suffered one sleepless night after another. They named the campsite "White Bear Island."

On the evening of July 11, Private Hugh McNeal was riding bareback alone through a thicket near the river when his horse nearly stepped on a bedded grizzly. The bear was not inclined to retreat. The horse reared, dumping the soldier on the ground, and raced off.

McNeal found himself in an unfavorable position: unhorsed and at the foot of a beast surprised and upset at having its nap so rudely interrupted. The private quickly regained his composure and swung his rifle at the bear like Barry Bonds aiming for a low and outside slider. The blow cut open the bear's skull but also broke McNeal's precious rifle. In the ensuing confusion, as the bear clutched its scalp, McNeal scrambled up a nearby cottonwood. He stayed beyond the reach of the bear until certain it was gone. Meanwhile back at camp, Lewis fretted over the private's long absence. McNeal returned to camp late, with a broken rifle and the best bear story of the expedition.



Lewis and Clark spent 28 months crossing North America. Today, school kids learn about the explorers' many picturesque moments: Clark glimpsing the Little Rockies through his spyglass; Lewis marveling at the misty thunder of the Great Falls; Sacagawea recognizing Beaverhead Rock; Clark carving his name in Pompeys Pillar. Amid all the storied heroics, however, there were numerous all-too-human misadventures. Abridged versions of the Lewis and Clark journals omit these mistakes, misfires, and mishaps, which seemed to occur with uncanny frequency across Montana. And which, often as not, involved some wild animal or another. There were days it seemed to the explorers that all God's critters were out to stop them.



Here's a quiz you won't find in middle school history class: Which of the following mammals drew the most blood from the explorers? a) grizzly bears, b) wolves, c) beavers.

The answer, of course, is beavers.

Members of the Lewis and Clark Expedition ate like wild animals—literally. When they could get it, each member of the expedition consumed 7 to 9 pounds of red meat per day. They needed massive calories to haul their mountain of gear up swift rivers and over rough terrain. Most often, those calories came in the shape of an elk, deer, or bison. The 30-odd-member team would reduce one bison to a pile of bones in a day, eating it down to the entrails and bone marrow. When they had to, they also dined on horses, dogs, and coyotes.

Venison was the preferred meat, but the explorers also loved to munch beaver tails, which Lewis called “a most delicious morsel.” Trapped hard by colonists, beavers were already growing scarce in the Atlantic coastal states, but the West was still loaded with them. Beavers were particularly thick in the area around Three Forks. The explorers set traps in the evenings and fired at swimming beavers when they got the chance.

Lewis owned a prized Newfoundland named Seaman, a big, black dog with the heart of a retriever. One day, when one of the men wounded a beaver, Seaman charged after the animal with all the enthusiasm of his breed. There was a great squall and splashing as the creatures tangled. We don't know the fate of the beaver, except that it sliced the dog open in self-defense. Lewis feared for his prized dog's life until he staunched the bleeding.

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Canine hunters weren't the only ones to run afoul of North America's largest rodent. Mountain man George Drouillard was the expedition's master hunter. A half-Shawnee born in the backwoods, Drouillard was to the Lewis and Clark Expedition what Michael Jordan was to the Chicago Bulls. Day after hungry day, Drouillard brought home the bacon—or more accurately, the venison. While the Corps was crossing the Continental Divide near Lincoln in early summer 1806, Drouillard shot two beavers and wounded a third. When the hunter approached the animal to finish it off, the beaver bit him in the knee with its tree-felling incisors. Luckily, Drouillard was a tough cookie and healed quickly.

Lewis and Clark not only roamed strange lands, but they also wandered amid strange animals. It was not unusual for them to aim their rifles at a creature and wonder, *What the heck is that?* Many of Montana's most familiar wildlife species—pronghorn, mule deer, and coyote—were animals the explorers had never seen before. The most amazing was the grizzly bear.

Truth is, grizzlies never so much as scratched any member of the expedition, even though the bears tried with all their might. The explorers knew of black bears from back home, but they didn't hear stories of the great new bears until 1805 while wintering with the Mandan in what is today North Dakota. A few months later, they saw their first grizzly tracks in a riverbank, “3 times as large as a mans track,” wrote Clark.

In April 1805, Lewis and several other hunters killed a 300-pound grizzly near Big Muddy Creek, in far northeastern Montana. It was the expedition's first grizzly kill, but far from the last. Clark and Drouillard killed another a few days later, shooting it ten times with half-inch balls from their muzzle-loading rifles. Lewis called it “a very large and turrible-looking animal, which we found very hard to kill,” as if marking emphasis with extra r's.

The explorers were so impressed with the tenacity of these “white bears,” they took to stalking them in squads, firing carefully timed

volleys at the tough new adversaries. The bears often tried to kill the explorers right back, sometimes sending the men fleeing over a riverbank and into the water. Armed with primitive flintlock muskets and rifles, Lewis and Clark hunted grizzlies with more élan than firepower, and often seemed to escape unharmed from wounded grizzlies more by sheer luck than anything else.

Wolves, oddly enough, were another story. The explorers did not emerge unscathed from all their encounters with the large canines. Wolves were abundant on the prairie, constantly shadowing herds of elk and bison. Along the Rocky Mountain Front near Augusta, Lewis wrote of “vast assemblages” of wolves following the bison like shepherds. At one point along the Yellowstone River, Clark noted in his journal that he would no longer write about the incredible abundance of elk, bison, and wolves, because he figured no one would ever believe him.



For the most part, the wildlife Lewis and Clark encountered had never been hunted with anything other than Stone Age weapons. As a result, wild animals along the Missouri River were often unafraid of humans. Sometimes, the explorers actually had to beat bison with rocks and sticks to clear a path through the herds. Along the Missouri, Clark wrote, “the wolves are fat and extremely gentle.” While walking up the river near Loma, the captain found a wolf so lethargic from feasting on bison meat he simply walked up and killed it with his spearlike esponentoon.

Not all wolves were so docile. A year later, Clark's squad was sleeping along the Yellowstone River near Billings when a wolf stole into camp and bit Sergeant John Pryor “through the hand.” The wolf then turned on Private Richard Windsor before being dispatched by another squad member.

It was one of the very few documented wolf attacks on humans in North America. Clark called the animal “vicious,” and speculated it may have been a half-wild wolf-dog mix from a nearby Crow Indian encampment.

Though brave, intelligent, and tenacious, Clark was also the expedition's most prodigious whiner. For the sake of morale, he didn't gripe in front of the men, but when the weather was miserable, the road full of cactus, or the elk meat moldy, Clark complained freely in his journals. Through this grumbling, we get a clearer picture of the hardships the explorers endured. Clark kept a

special poison pen for mosquitoes.

Near the confluence of the Missouri and Yellowstone rivers, Clark watched bighorn sheep scramble along the rim rock and breaks above the water. He knew his boss, President Thomas Jefferson, would love to see the burly horns and pelt of this marvelous new species. He loaded his .54-caliber rifle and stalked a big ram.

After much effort, Clark approached within range. He thumbed the hammer back and squinted down the barrel. As he tried to aim, however, the ever-present mosquitoes swarmed around his head. In fact, so many mosquitoes alit on the gun that Clark could not see the front sight. Meanwhile the ram, sensing danger and perhaps seeing his pursuer twitching, quickly departed.

Clark was by no means the last rifleman to be foiled by a bighorn, nor the last Montana camper to be tormented by mosquitoes. Indeed, as long as wildlife roam the wild lands of Montana, the adventures enjoyed by Lewis and Clark will still live for centuries to come. The explorers' journey continues to burn in the American imagination. Montanans and others from throughout the country float the Missouri, hike the Bitterroots, and otherwise attempt to revisit the world of Lewis and Clark.

They may even eat a bison steak in a restaurant or, if particularly adventurous, sample a beaver tail. But they'll never dine on one wild meal eaten by Lewis and his men.

That dish was served at Camp Disappointment, on the prairie between Browning and Cut Bank. Lewis had taken some of the expedition there in summer 1806 to explore the Blackfeet country and search for the Marias River's source. Rainy, cloudy skies often plagued the crew. One night, chilled and disappointed from the wet weather, the men cheered up around a campfire meal. The main course was a creature that has come to symbolize the great productivity of North America, as well as the fact that precious things squandered often cannot be regained. That night, unaware of the changes the next centuries would bring to this land, the explorers dined on roasted passenger pigeons. 🐦

