

WATER, WATER EVERYWHERE

AT FLATHEAD LAKE STATE PARK, YOU CAN SWIM, SNORKEL, SAIL, SEA KAYAK, OR JUST SIT BY THE SHORE AND LET THE WAVES LAP AT YOUR FEET



WILD HORSE ISLAND AS VIEWED FROM THE STATE PARK'S BIG ARM UNIT BY BARBARA THOMAS

BY DAVID MADISON

IT'S EARLY ON A SUMMER MORNING, and Bert Finch, state park ranger, has wild horses on his mind. Though ordinarily busy patrolling the lake, cleaning facilities, delivering supplies, and greeting park visitors, today Finch has agreed to give me a special tour of Flathead Lake State Park, and especially the park's jewel, its Wild Horse Island unit.

Unlike Montana's other major state parks, Flathead Lake has no main visitor center but instead comprises six different units (all previously individual state parks) incorporated in 1992. Flathead Lake is not so much a state park as it is a collection of wondrous state park portions.

So that I can see as much of the lake as possible, Finch wants to take the scenic route, a beachcomber's meander around Flathead's 122,500 acres, before finally landing at Wild Horse Island later in the afternoon. That's when we'll take to the forest and trail in search of bighorn sheep and the wild horses for which the island is named.

In the calm of sunrise, the lake's surface is still smooth, allowing us to speed away in Finch's 22-foot outboard from the dock at the state park's Big Arm unit. We motor past Bootlegger Island and White Swan Point, then around Black Point. Approaching Bull Island, we

see snowfields high in the Mission Mountains to the south.

Along the island's shore, pleasure boats bob by private docks. A thick forest of Douglas fir and ponderosa pine extends to the waterline. Between the cliffs along Flathead Lake's 185 miles of shoreline are stony beaches that create a three-color palette of diffused crimson, earthy light brown, and slate gray.

From Bull Island, we head north past a rock outcropping dotted by double-crested cormorants—black, fish-eating water birds commonly seen standing on rocks and posts. As we cruise through The Narrows, which separates shallow Polson Bay from the deep, open water of the main lake, Finch points at his depth gauge. In seconds, it drops from 20 to 170 feet. At its deepest point, Flathead Lake reaches 369 feet.

"Quite a piece of water," he says, moving his hand in a slight arc, tracing the oceanlike curve of the choppy horizon ahead. Covering nearly 200 square miles, Flathead is the largest natural freshwater lake in the American West.

The state park was established to allow people to experience this vast and scenic body of water. Most visitors come to fish, camp, or



PARK PADDLER: At more than 120,000 acres, Flathead Lake resembles an inland sea. The glacier-fed water and numerous state park sites attract sea kayakers, who find smooth paddling between the lake's many islands.

just spend an afternoon along the shore.

Though we don't visit them on this day's outing, the state park's five other units (besides Wild Horse Island) are spread out along the lake's scenic shoreline. Big Arm, ten miles northwest of Polson, is a popular jumping-off point to Wild Horse. Campers pitch their tents at sites under a stand of mature ponderosa pine and juniper. A long beach attracts sunbathers and swimmers. Birders say the nature trail there is a great one for spotting a variety of species.

Next along the west shore is the aptly named West Shore unit. Here, glacially carved rock outcrops rise from the lake to overlooks that provide sweeping views of the water and the Swan and Mission Mountains to the east. Considered the most private of this state park's units, West Shore is graced by towering firs, pines, and larches. The beach is rocky, so sand castles are out, but visitors can swim, boat, and camp there.

Just south of the town of Bigfork is the Wayfarers unit. From spring through late fall, wildflowers abound along a nature trail running from the rocky shoreline to a band of cliffs rising from the lake. A popular picnic spot for Bigfork residents, this site also has a boat ramp, trailer dump stations, flush toilets, and a scenic beach.

Along the middle of the lake's east shore sits the park's Yellow Bay unit. Often overlooked by visitors heading to the larger sites, this small parcel has a secluded feel. It includes four walk-in tent camping spots and a wide, sandy beach used by swimmers,

A PARK OF PIECES:

Flathead Lake State Park is composed of six units and several islands. There is no main park visitor center, but all the shoreline units have camping sites, water, and picnic areas.

sunbathers, and scuba divers. In spring, tree blossoms color nearby hillsides, the heart of Montana's famous cherry orchard region.

At Flathead's southeast end, sticking into the lake like a bent finger, is the Finley Point unit. Located in a secluded, mature pine forest, this spot provides 16 campsites with running water as well as boat slips and a boat pump-out station.

Though numerous, the state park units are relatively small and secluded. Many visitors are surprised to find privacy even in the campsites, which in other campgrounds can be crammed together like seats on a bus.

"People tell us the camping experience they find at Flathead isn't available in many other places anymore," says Ken Soderberg, FWP State Parks Division resource program manager. "The tall trees overhead, the stars in a dark night sky, the smell of wood-

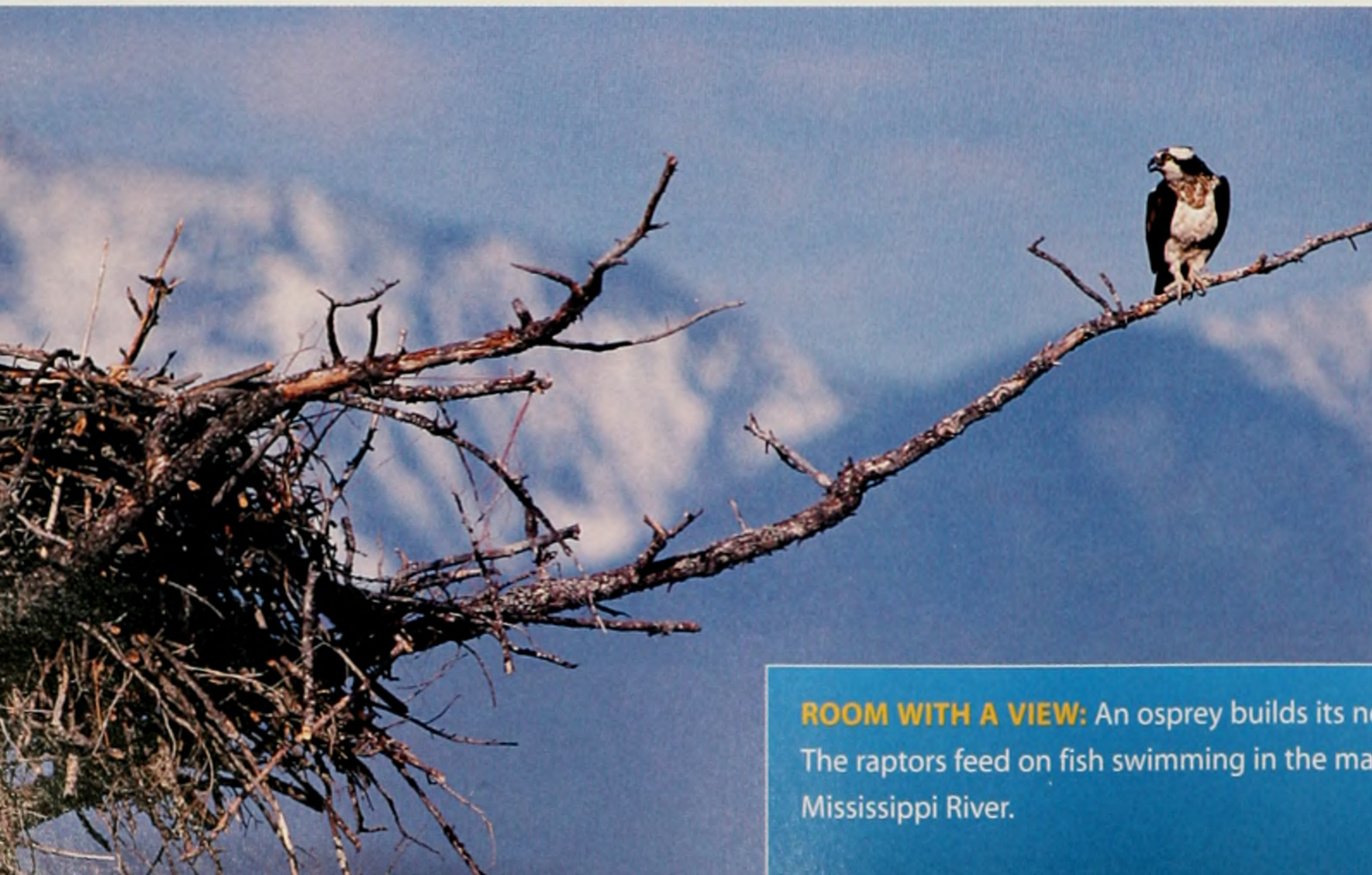


smoke—it's the kind of camping they remember having when they were kids."

As we continue our boat trip around the lake's southern portion, we pass numerous sea kayakers. They and other boaters often tour Flathead by following a marine trail around the lake, stopping along the way at shoreline park sites or at several of the lake's scenic islands, like the one Finch and I are now approaching.

"See how pristine that is?" the park ranger says as we near the picturesque shore of Bird Island. Inland from the pebbled beach, a lush bed of moss grows beneath a canopy of Douglas fir and ponderosa pine. The water, as it gets deeper, fades from a sun-soaked shade of aquamarine to bright emerald to dark blue.

Despite its allure, we pass by Bird Island and head north. After a long haul across the lake and then past the high cliffs called Painted Rocks, we approach Cedar Island's rocky shore. Cedar has few landing spots, so Finch heads for a popular cove on the southwest side. As we round the island's southern tip, he tells me visitors often snorkel just off-



ROOM WITH A VIEW: An osprey builds its nest in a dead tree along the Flathead Lake shoreline. The raptors feed on fish swimming in the massive natural freshwater lake, the largest west of the Mississippi River.

“People tell us the camping experience they still find at Flathead Lake isn’t available in many other places anymore.”

—KEN SODERBERG, *FWP State Parks Division*

shore of the 30-acre island.

Tonya Robinson has swam in this clear water many times. “In one place, the rocks are smooth and blue. It looks just like the bottom of a swimming pool,” says Robinson, who along with her husband and two young daughters have come to the island in their 25-foot pontoon. The girls toss pebbles while their parents gaze out at sailboats cruising past.

After visiting with the Robinsons, Finch and I decide to take a hike. We’re not ten feet into the forest before the sound of laughing children and rumbling boat engines is nearly drowned out by the singing of songbirds. Black-capped chickadees, red-breasted nuthatches, and yellow-rumped warblers dart among Douglas firs and western cedars. A breeze blowing off the lake is scented by the evergreens, which shade the old homesite of the island’s original owners.

Cedar Island is now owned by the state. In the early 1950s, when FWP acquired it along with Douglas and Bird Islands, Canada geese were becoming less common in the region. The acquisitions preserved nesting habitat for these and other birds on a lake that has little secure nesting habitat.

“They’re jewels on the lake,” says Jim Williams, FWP regional wildlife manager. “It took incredible foresight 50 years ago to buy them.”

Today, the small islands are designated as state wildlife habitat protection areas. Under a management plan now being developed, FWP is working to strike a balance between preserving bird nesting habitat on the three islands while still allowing some existing recreation to continue.

The draft management plan calls for installing official campsites to concen-

trate camping in areas where it causes the least disturbance to wildlife. The sites would be open most of the year, closing only for the spring nesting season.

Back in the boat, Finch and I head to Skeeko Bay, one of five designated FWP landing sites on Wild Horse Island. There we beach at a trailhead that loops into the island’s backcountry.

The island is surprisingly diverse. Bighorn sheep roam the high country, and ospreys nest in the trees. Black bears swim out from the mainland to roam the shady forests and yellow fields of arrowleaf balsamroot. Coyotes stalk rodents and the occasional young or aged mule deer, keeping the deer population in check. And the island’s four wild horses—one black, one buckskin, one paint, and one brown—graze on a prairie of owl clover, larkspur, yarrow, and nodding onion.

The prairie first fed horses roughly 300 years ago. Early European explorers wrote that Indians told them the first herds



HATCHLING HAVEN: Three islands acquired in the 1950s provide nesting habitat for Canada geese, which had become rare in the region.

HEATH A. KORVOLA/LIQUIDLIGHT



arrived as refugees from ongoing raids between the Blackfeet and Kootenai Tribes in the early 1700s. The Kootenai tried to outfox the rival tribe by swimming their best horses from island to island, hopscotch fashion, before finally hiding them on Wild Horse. The horses established a wild population, but they were removed after settlers homesteaded the island in the early 1900s. Thereafter, visitors would occasionally see a free-roaming horse or two, likely fugitives from an island rancher’s corral.

In the early 1980s, FWP decided to officially restore wild horses to the island and adopted several from a feral herd on federal Bureau of Land Management property in eastern Oregon.

The horses were set free on this 2,163-acre mound of glacially formed cliffs and rolling Palouse prairie, a type of native grassland once common to this region.

As Finch and I hike through prairie bunchgrass and Idaho fescue, we scan the high crest to the west for wild sheep or horses. Finch isn’t making any promises.

“No telling where they are,” he says, leading me up a hill and then down a wildlife trail into a grove of tall pines, cool and shady. We hike a ways, pausing to glance up the hillside. The sunlight comes and goes, blocked and revealed by passing clouds. I’m walking slowly, listening to the wind in the trees, when I hear him whisper, “There they are.”

Finch nods at me wide-eyed. I peer around a jumble of scrub pine to see all four horses grazing quietly. As I approach, the paint seems the most skit-

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PAUL F. UPDIKE

LAKER LIKERS: Most visitors to Flathead Lake State Park come for the renowned lake trout fishing there.

tish, while the black stares at me calmly, its long tail dragging over the prairie grasses.

I watch for several minutes, privy to a scene remarkably similar to that of three centuries before. While the horses graze, a hawk screeches overhead, and in the brush just up the ridge, a mule deer emerges, tailed by two fawns.

I continue to inch my way toward the horses. But then I get one step too close and the paint decides to bolt, alarming the others. All four race down a slope and disappear into the scrub pines.

Finch and I spend the rest of the afternoon hiking the island. We hope to see bighorn sheep, but they remain hidden, away from the hikers and beachcombers scattered around the island.

When we arrive back at the trailhead on Skeeko Bay, the place is crowded with boats. Sailboats are anchored just offshore, and speed boats are beached for an afternoon picnic. Of all the islands we've visited



DAVID MADISON

this day, Wild Horse is by far the most popular, Finch says. Every year, it sees roughly 10,000 visitors.

Currently Wild Horse and the other islands are accessible only to those who own or rent smaller watercraft, such as catamarans, sea kayaks, and small motorboats. Commercial operations that could bring additional lake visitors out to the islands in tour boats are currently prohibited.

Jerry Sawyer, supervisor for Flathead Lake State Park, says an advisory committee is now studying options for allowing some limited commercial activity. Based on comments from the committee, citizens, and FWP staff, the FWP Commission will decide on the issue later this spring.

"It's not that we're opposed to commercial use," says Sawyer, "but we do need to regulate it so we don't degrade the islands and lose the quiet, solitary experience they offer."

State park officials know that won't be easy. As development rapidly grows around the lake, the park sees increasing use from visitors and residents.

"There's not much public land left in the Flathead Lake area," says Doug Monger, FWP State Parks Division administrator. "Our biggest challenge is to continue providing visitors with the type of pristine experience like that now available at Wild Horse Island."

For now at least, Wild Horse Island still feels wild. As we prepare to head back to Big Arm, Finch reflects on the past 40-odd years and his many trips to Wild Horse. He's watched young bighorn lambs grow into adult sheep. He's spied coyotes on the hunt and black bears foraging in the grass. He once caught glimpse of a mule deer buck with antlers so big "they looked like trees growing out of the side of its head," he says.

Still, says Finch as we pull out of Skeeko Bay, "There's a lot on this island I haven't seen." 🐾

UNBRIDLED INTEREST: Many visitors to Wild Horse Island hope to catch a glimpse of the island's four elusive namesake residents. A growing challenge faced by FWP is how to preserve the island's wild and tranquil setting while still accommodating increased use.



MONTANA OUTDOORS

Visit Beautiful
FLATHEAD LAKE
State Park

IF YOU GO

Open: All year.

Information: (406) 751-4575, or on the Internet at: fwp.state.mt.us/parks.

Activities: Swimming, snorkeling, sailing, boating, sea kayaking, picnicking, fishing, hiking, wildlife viewing, camping.

Shoreline park units:

- 1. Big Arm:** Shoreline camping, showers, a new yurt (large wall tent) available for overnight get-togethers, and a popular boat launch.
- 2. Finley Point:** Boat slips, boat pump-out station, and 16 campsites with water.
- 3. Yellow Bay:** A tiny park unit just off Montana Highway 35. Secluded. Tent camping only.
- 4. Wayfarers:** A popular campground with showers, flush toilets, a pretty beach, and a hiking trail. Near a band of cliffs used for sunbathing.
- 5. West Shore:** Awesome views of Flathead Lake and the mountains to the east. Overlook and terraced campsites offer scenic, lakeside getaways for overnights or picnics.

Shoreline park features: Secluded bays, islands, nature trails, beaches.

Services: Campsites, marine trail campsites for kayakers and canoeists, barbecue grills, leashed pets allowed, access for the disabled, public restrooms, water.

Directions: Follow U.S. Highway 93 north from Missoula. Take Montana Highway 35 to reach the shoreline units along the east shore and stay on U.S. 93 to reach the west shore units.

Flathead Lake size: 122,500 acres

State park established: 1955