



GUSHING OVER



GIANT SPRINGS



What with the fishing, Lewis and Clark history, riverside trails, hatchery tours, picnicking, and more, it's hard to keep the great features of this state park bottled up

By Bruce Auchly

For Gerald Kunday, the past 25 years of visiting Giant Springs Heritage State Park are all about fishing.

"I fish the Missouri River every day," says the 69-year-old Great Falls resident, one of the park's most regular visitors. "An hour in the morning and an hour in the afternoon, if it isn't too cold."

Kunday is one of the roughly 160,000 people who visit Giant Springs each year. The springs and their namesake park are just a few miles downstream from Great Falls, on the banks of the Missouri River. Although Kunday and his friends come for the trout fishing, the park attracts other visitors with group picnic grounds, an adjoining state fish hatchery, natural and human history interpretive tours, historic sites, and, of course, the springs themselves, Montana's largest.

This summer, thousands of visitors from across the United States will follow the Lewis and Clark Trail to Giant Springs. There they will find one of Montana's premier state parks and learn that there's much more to this riverside oasis than meets the eye.

Both sides of the Missouri

Established as a Montana state park in the mid-1970s, Giant Springs encompasses slightly over 3,000 acres, about 90 percent of which is on the north shore of the Missouri. Most of the north parcel is an open

GIANT SPRINGS BY JOHN REDDY

Giant Springs Heritage State Park

space conservation easement. On the river's south shore, where FWP manages nearly 400 acres, is the area most people associate with Giant Springs Heritage State Park. This is the main place for sightseeing, fishing, bird watching, picnicking, or just loafing on a summer day. And at the center of it are the springs.

Bubbling up alongside the Missouri River, Giant Springs has probably existed since the last ice age. The springs are a terminal point of the Madison aquifer, which begins about 75 miles south in the Little Belt Mountains. At times the aquifer drops to 600 feet deep before popping to the surface at several spots near Great Falls. The largest of these is Giant Springs, which each day gushes 156 million gallons of water.

Visited by Indians for centuries, the springs were given their first written description in July 1805 by Captain William Clark, who called them "the largest fountain or Spring I ever Saw," adding that the clear spring water "boils up from under the rocks near the edge of the river."

The springs were more or less ignored until 1884, when the city of Great Falls was founded. The bubbling oasis became a popular spot for locals on Sunday afternoons.

City founder Paris Gibson, sensing the great recreational potential of the site, began a program of shading the prairie area by planting several hundred cottonwood and box elder trees.



Though Great Falls residents knew about the springs, out-of-towners usually discovered the area only by accident.

"Nobody tells you about it; you run across it by chance," wrote John Neihardt in *The River and I*, published in 1910. "Down East they would have a great white sprawling hotel built close by it wherein one could drink spring water....But nobody seems to care much about so small an ooze out there [in Montana]: everything else is so big."

Bruce Auchly is an FWP regional information officer at Great Falls.



Cool, clear water

So bountiful is the output of Giant Springs that the 58 feet from the springs to the Missouri is considered one of the two shortest rivers in the world and is officially called the North Fork Roe River.

The water is also exceptionally clean and clear. "I could have seen to the bottom of the fountain to pick up a pin," wrote Sergeant John Ordway of the Corps of Discovery in 1805.

The pure and plentiful spring water has long been eyed by businesses interested in putting it to commercial use. In 1993, Montana Giant Springs began leasing more than 200 million gallons each year to bottle as drinking water at a nearby plant. Recently, a malting company began construction on a \$70 million plant that will lease water from the spring for use in its malting process. Both operations have undergone environmental assessments and been approved by the Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks Commission.

No such review was given to the highly toxic silver smelter built in 1888 by the Montana Smelting and Refining Company. The smelter, which used water from Giant Springs, consisted of roughly 75 buildings, from blast furnaces to worker residences. It was the first major industry in newly formed Great Falls, and hopes ran high as



it began operation. But after just 14 years the smelter closed, mostly due to plummeting silver prices and a shortage of ore that made the operation unprofitable. By 1928, the city had torn down the decrepit buildings, which had become an eyesore.

Though only a few crumbling smokestack remnants of the smelter remain visible, the plant left a huge and toxic underground legacy for more than a century. In 2002, the Montana Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) discovered abnormally high levels of contamination in the soil at the park. The toxins were in slag flue dust and contaminated bricks left from the abandoned silver smelting operation.

"We found metals, lead, and arsenic concentrations that caused us to be concerned," says John Koerth, who supervises the DEQ's Abandoned Mine Section. "There was potential there for a public health problem."

Fortunately, contamination was only found in the soil on the site and not in the spring water. However, the soil had to be removed. Concerned about park disruption, particularly with the approaching Lewis and Clark Bicentennial, FWP and DEQ worked out an accelerated cleanup plan to remove contaminated soil, haul it to a landfill, and replace it with clean soil and fresh landscaping.

Cleanup of the contaminated parcels



PHIL FARNES

THROUGH THE YEARS People have been drawn to Giant Springs for centuries. Indians first discovered the site, and later the Corps of Discovery visited what Captain Clark called “the largest fountain or Spring I ever Saw.” Clockwise from far left: the ill-fated silver smelter; Great Falls visitors in the 1890s; stonework creating the aquamarine pool; the spring flowing into the Missouri; trees and other landscaping at the park today.



STEVEN AKRE

was completed by fall 2003. The project cost of \$2.1 million was paid for from a state program funded by a federal fee on coal mining.

“I was real pleased with the outcome,” Koerth says. “We’re confident the park is now a very safe site and will continue to be so in the future.”

Trout hatchery

The most beneficial use of the park’s famous water, which is free of impurities and stays at a constant 54-degree temperature, is for rearing trout in Giant Springs Fish Hatchery, located within the park. Built in 1922, the hatchery produces roughly 1.25 million fish each year, mostly rainbow trout and some Chinook salmon. FWP stocks the fish in lakes and reservoirs throughout Montana as well as in the Missouri River along the park for Kundey and other anglers to catch.

According to Bruce Chaney, hatchery manager, the fish are first reared in 41 indoor fiberglass troughs, then are raised to stocking size in 24 outdoor concrete raceways. A show pond allows visitors to view and feed large fish. The facility also has residences for hatchery workers and their families along with a garage and a workshop.

Giant Springs is the only Montana state hatchery inside a state park. That means

lots of people—creating both a challenge and an opportunity for hatchery workers. On some summer days, when the state park and hatchery are full of visitors, the staff has its hands full keeping visitors away from the fish.

“We get people taking fish out of the river and putting them into the raceways, people trying to catch fish in the raceways, people stealing fish, people trying to grab fish, you name it,” Chaney says.

But the hatchery staff also recognizes the advantage of such intense public interest. Fish culturalist Mark Gaub says dozens of school groups come through the hatchery each year. “When they’re here, the students learn about water chemistry and biology and how we transport these fish to other parts of Montana,” he says. “One thing we always tell them is that if they want to be a fish culturalist or work at other jobs in FWP, they need to stay in school and study math and science and English.”

Park improvements

The site of Giant Springs Heritage State Park was originally owned by Montana Power Company, which acquired the property as it went about the business of building the nearby Black Eagle and Rainbow hydroelectric dams on the Missouri River. In 1920, Montana Power leased 2 acres to

the state of Montana and leased the springs and 14 surrounding acres to the city of Great Falls, which established a city park there.

Little changed at the site until the mid-1970s, when the city turned the park over to the state (while retaining some water rights to the springs). Montana Fish and Game, as the department was called then, immediately embarked on major renovations. It built a new, mile-long entrance road, turned the old entrance road into a pedestrian path along the river, and put in a hatchery visitor center, restrooms, and a concession stand. The department also seeded lawn, planted trees, and installed playground equipment.

In the 1980s, FWP acquired additional land south of the springs and entrance road for group activities and renamed the park Giant Springs Heritage State Park. That’s also when the department’s regional headquarters moved into the park.

Improvements to the area have continued. One exciting new addition has been the city’s paved 28-mile River’s Edge Trail, which traverses the park on both sides of the river and allows safe and scenic hiking and cycling access from downtown Great Falls. To the delight of year-round visitors like Kundey, FWP built heated, handicapped-accessible restrooms for the public.

“When they changed from an outhouse

Giant Springs Heritage State Park



to an inside bathroom, that was a real plus,” Kundey says.

Lewis and Clark Center

The area’s biggest development has been the \$6 million Lewis and Clark National Historic Trail Interpretive Center, built in 1998 along the river just a mile west of Giant Springs Heritage State Park. The center’s main theme is Lewis and Clark’s relationship with American Indians, such as the explorers’ winter with the Mandans, their search for Sacagawea’s Shoshone people, and how the Nez Perce provided food and shelter during several crucial months of the expedition.

The federally operated interpretive center is technically outside the park, on U.S. Forest Service land. But most visitors see the center and the state park as one entity, especially since the old county road along the Missouri has been transformed into a nature trail connecting the two sites.

Lewis and Clark are central to Giant Springs Heritage State Park, especially this year. They were the first Euro-Americans to describe the springs, and 2005 marks the bicentennial of their visit.

To commemorate the event, the National Park Service is sponsoring a moveable national display called Corps of Discovery II, which will visit Montana

THE MISSOURI RIVER RUNS THROUGH IT

Most of the park is on the north shore, including Sulfur Springs, the waters of which were said to have saved the life of Sacagawea when she was feverish in June 1805. It’s the south shore, however, that holds most of the park’s main attractions, including the primary state park facilities (above), the River’s Edge Trail (right), and the fish hatchery (lower right).

between May 6 and September 11, 2005. The central feature of the traveling exhibit is a 150-seat auditorium for cultural arts demonstrations, folklore, music, living history presentations, and readings from the expedition journals.

The traveling exhibit will be at Giant Springs Heritage State Park June 25 through July 4, the same time, 200 years before, when the expedition portaged around the Great Falls of the Missouri.

No one knows for sure how many Lewis and Clark buffs will visit Giant Springs Heritage State Park this year. Great Falls businesses are hoping for tens of thousands. But no matter how many new visitors arrive, regulars like Gerald Kundey don’t anticipate many problems.

“I don’t care,” says Kundey of the anticipated surge in visitors. “As long as they don’t bother the fish.” 🐟



CRAIG & LIZ LARCOM



GEORGE WUERTHNER

Throughout the summer, Giant Springs Heritage State Park offers interpretive walks and programs on wildlife, natural history, American Indians, the Corps of Discovery, trading routes, the Great Falls, and more. For information, call (406) 454-5858.

To learn more about the National Park Service’s Corps of Discovery II traveling exhibit, including a schedule of other Montana stops, see page 4 of this issue.