



**NOT JUST A PRETTY PLACE** Belt Creek may be one of Montana's most scenic waters, but it also holds a healthy trout population. According to a 2004 FWP fish survey, Belt Creek's Sluice Boxes stretch held roughly 350 rainbows 8 inches or longer per mile. Fisheries crews didn't estimate the brown trout population, but they did find one specimen weighing 4 pounds, a reminder of the days when the Great Northern Railway's "Fish Train" carried anglers up the canyon from Great Falls.



# A Grand Little Canyon

Excellent trout fishing, rich mining history, and breath-taking scenery make Sluice Boxes one of the most delightful state parks you've never heard of.

By Jeff Erickson





Beneath the soaring limestone cliffs of Belt Creek, I lobbed a heavy stonefly nymph into the frothy head of a riffle. I could feel the meaty fly tickle the boulders as it dropped into the fast, upper maw of the run, and I visualized its rubber legs twitching enticingly in the complex currents. The water drew the bug deep into the turquoise pool, where it continued to skip along the bottom.

Just upstream my wife, Mary, worked her Stimulator dry fly along the surface current seams created by the remnants of a massive railroad trestle. Earlier, we had noticed streamside rocks covered with the shed exoskeletons, or casings, of golden stoneflies. The Stimulator is a good imitation of this aquatic

insect, which only lives in clean, cold streams.

Montanans have many templates for “the perfect trout stream,” and I was convinced I had discovered mine. Belt Creek winds through the serpentine canyon of Sluice Boxes State Park, 30 miles southeast of Great Falls. The park is rich in history and geologic features, provides excellent hiking, and contains abundant wildlife. Of immediate interest to me was the creek’s remote trout fishery—once considered among central Montana’s finest and now on the rebound after decades of abuse from mining waste. In the early 20th century, the creek teemed with native westslope cutthroats up to 20 inches long. Later, introduced brown, rainbow, and brook trout

established wild populations.

“Different sportsmen have their favorite streams, of course, but [Belt Creek is] probably the best of them all,” reads an article from a 1914 issue of the local *Belt Valley Times*. “Two to three pound trout are not rare and include the native black spotted cutthroat.”

After hurling out another cast, I heard Mary yell, “Check it out!” She had spotted Albright, the ghost town we had been searching for as we fished our way through the gorge. We reeled in and waded across to explore, ready to peel back a few layers of the state park’s fascinating natural and cultural history.

Relatively unknown even to Montanans, 1,450-acre Sluice Boxes is a remarkable state park even by Montana’s high standards. “I like to tell people I’m lucky enough to manage two of the nicest places in the state,” says Sluice Boxes State Park manager Colin Maas, who also administers the nearby Smith River, a nationally known destination. As Mary and I scrambled up the bank to Albright, we couldn’t agree more. Belt Creek’s scenic ravine is a pretty kid sister to the Smith River canyon, located 20 miles to the west.

The park’s central feature is Belt Creek, which rises from the flanks of 9,000-foot peaks in the Little Belt Mountains before flowing 80 miles north to join the Missouri River. The Lewis and Clark National Forest largely encompasses the stream’s headwaters above the park, an area checkered with patented mining claims.

In its upper reaches, Belt Creek

tumbles boisterously through a narrow mountain valley, past the old mining towns of Neihart and Monarch, before zigzagging through a deeply incised canyon. Dr. David Baker, a local earth scientist and educator, explains that the canyon continues to deepen during high water as Belt Creek “becomes a high-speed stream of liquid with abrasive particles carving deeper into the limestone. You can hear the boulders hitting each other as they move down Belt Creek.”

The steep-sided canyon affords “spectacular views,” says Maas, “like looking down into an abyss.” The chasm’s limestone walls are riddled with caves, where lucky visitors sometimes spot pictographs made centuries ago by Native Americans.

The canyon’s name comes from its resemblance to the vertical sluice boxes that early placer miners used to settle out gold.

Below the Sluice Boxes, Belt Creek enters a buff-colored landscape of rolling hills, cottonwood valleys, large cattle ranches, and the historic coal-mining town of Belt. Between Belt and the Sluice Boxes, much of the creek disappears mysteriously into the underlying, crack-riddled Madison limestone, feeding one of the largest artesian aquifers in the country. According to Baker, a substantial volume of the “lost” water joins slow-moving groundwater from the Little Belt Mountains to emerge near Great Falls at Giant Springs State Park, where 156 million gallons of 54 degree water gush to the surface daily.

Set in a transition zone between the high plains to the north and the Little Belt Mountains to the south, Sluice Boxes State Park contains a wide range of habitats. Visitors will find cool, shaded rock walls next

*“You can hear the boulders hitting each other as they move down Belt Creek.”*

**ROCKY AND REMOTE** Scenic Belt Creek sparkles as it tumbles over boulders. Along the canyon above the stream, visitors may find hidden mining buildings.



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**MINIATURE MONTANA** With its mountain scenery, mining history, and trout fishing waters, Sluice Boxes State Park is a microcosm of the state. Clockwise from top left: Belt Creek as it flows through the limestone canyon dubbed the Sluice Boxes; a lime kiln in the Albright ghost town; a rainbow trout held gently before release; a remnant of Neihart, established in 1882, which thrived briefly off trade generated by nearby sapphire and silver-lead mines.



to miniature waterfalls—luxuriant with ferns and moss—as well as open, sun-baked south slopes covered in prairie grasses and an occasional prickly pear cactus. Wildflowers abound in early summer, and various berries appear later. Bird watching can be excellent, and hikers occasionally see elk, mule and white-tailed deer, moose, mountain lions, black bears, and bobcats.

Wildlife were not on our minds as Mary and I stashed our fly rods under a pine and walked silently through the ghost town. We were thinking of the people who, more than a century ago, built and used the remnant limestone quarry, cabins, flumes, and mine carts scattered about the site. Towering above Belt Creek were the twin cones of a lime kiln once fueled by coal mined in Belt and hauled upstream by train. In the late 19th century, this was a bustling place, but the only souls in Albright today are occasional park visitors who reach the site after hiking or floating through the canyon.

By 1890 a small town had grown up next to a quarry established by William Albright, eventually home to approximately 500 residents. In 1911, Amalgamated (Anaconda) Copper Company bought the quarry and shipped tons of limestone each day by rail to Great Falls, where it was used as flux in a smelter. A neighboring sawmill was kept busy with logs that were floated down nearby Logging Creek during high water.

We paused on the rail bed carved into the hillside, old ties scattered helter-skelter. The rail bed, a critical element in the Sluice Boxes' history, was the Belt Mountain Branch Line of

James J. Hill's Great Northern Railway. Now used by hikers to access the canyon, the rail spur was completed in 1891 and connected the Great Falls smelter with the upstream lead, zinc, and silver mining districts opened a decade earlier. Snaking 56 miles up Belt Creek into the mountains through the seemingly

impassable Sluice Boxes, the line was an engineering marvel. The dangerous construction, completed with the help of Chinese crews, required a right-of-way blasted from sheer cliffs, as well as the construction of enormous rock retaining walls, dozens of trestles, and several tunnels.

Always on the lookout for new

ways to reach fishing waters, anglers took advantage of the new rail line. In 1914, the Great Northern began running a Sunday morning "Fish Train" out of Great Falls. Angling parties rode the train to their favorite canyon reaches. In the evening, often with full creels, they caught the return run back to Great Falls.

Fishing wasn't the Sluice Boxes' only draw. In the early decades of the 20th century, visitors took the Belt Mountain Branch Line to camp, picnic, and view mountain scenery. Other attractions were summer cabins, a guest ranch and dance hall at Logging Creek, and baseball games in Neihart.

The last train labored through the Sluice Boxes in 1945. By then, most of the mines in the upper basin had closed because of falling metal prices. The tracks were pulled the next year.

The mining that opened up Belt Creek to recreational use also poisoned the stream's waters. As in so many Montana streams, acid and heavy metals had leached from the mines and killed the aquatic insects that fish need to survive. Trout numbers plummeted. A 1936 issue of the *Belt Valley Times* noted that Belt Creek "was for many years the fishermen's paradise. However, the tailings from the mine concentrators have so polluted the waters that the fishing tribe is no longer evident."

Baker, whose father was a depot agent on the railroad, says when he visited Belt Creek as a boy in the 1940s, "the water was running milky gray." The river, however, has slowly begun to recover. Baker says occasional floods like a big one in 1953 have helped scour polluted mining tailings from Belt Creek's streambed.



MONTANA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

**TROUT TRACKS** The Great Northern Railway's "Fish Train" hauled anglers from Great Falls to Belt Creek in the early 19th century. By the time the line closed in 1945, the creek had been ruined by mining waste.



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"I've seen a dramatic improvement in Belt Creek's water quality since the end of World War II," he says.

Scott Brown, the federal Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) local project manager, also has been impressed with the creek's ability to begin a slow recovery on its own.

"Belt Creek is thriving pretty well in spite of all that has happened up above in the watershed," he says.

A significant factor has been the watershed's limestone geology. The springs emanating from the abundant limestone in and around the Sluice Boxes are highly alkaline. This buffers acidic mine drainage and helps keep toxic metals in a less-dangerous solid form. The limestone geology also adds calcium

to the water, enhancing the growth of aquatic insects and the trout that eat them. The combination of limestone, springs, and abundant tributaries has given Belt Creek the capacity to bounce back from decades of abuse.

Travis Horton, the FWP fisheries biologist who manages Belt Creek, says the stream's trout fishery compares favorably with that of the famous Smith River. Though most of the remaining westslope cutthroats in Belt Creek have hybridized with rainbow trout, some of the stream's tributaries contain pure or almost pure cutthroats. These fish are considered genetic reservoirs for attempts by FWP and federal agencies to conserve and restore cutthroat populations elsewhere in the upper Missouri River basin.

All this, however, does not mean the Belt Creek watershed is ecologically healthy. In 2001 the EPA placed two mining districts in upper Belt Creek, encompassing dozens of inactive mines, on its Superfund cleanup list. Some tailings have been moved to sealed repositories, where rain and spring runoff don't wash the polluted mining waste downstream. But full recovery of Belt Creek will require millions of dollars and a long-term commitment by public agencies.

Despite the lingering toxins, the creek and its surrounding wonders offer recreation for a new generation of anglers, hikers, and wildlife watchers. As crimson light faded from the

canyon walls, Mary and I reluctantly hiked the old rail grade back toward the truck. Though eager to hit the brewpub in Belt, we just couldn't resist a few more casts into the creek on the way back. Withstanding such temptation is difficult in the Sluice Boxes.

At a fishy-looking run, I cast my stonefly nymph and let it bounce along the edge of some trestle debris. Gazing at the old rail bed above me, I happened to look down just as my indicator shot under. I raised the rod sharply and was in to something heavy and solid, moving downstream like a resurrected ghost from the old Fish Train days. 🐟

*To read more about Belt Creek's mining history, visit [fwp.mt.gov/mtoutdoors/webextras.htm](http://fwp.mt.gov/mtoutdoors/webextras.htm).*

## *If you go:* SLUICE BOXES STATE PARK

Montana FWP acquired Sluice Boxes State Park in 1974 and subsequently designated it as a "primitive" park. That means few amenities, rustic conditions, and unspoiled scenery.

**LOCATION:** The primary entrance to Sluice Boxes State Park is at the Riceville Bridge, 8 miles south of Belt on U.S. Highway 89, then a half-mile west on the Evans-Riceville Road. (It's also possible to access the upper park where Logging Creek Road crosses Belt Creek. However, there are no facilities here, parking is along the road, and visitors must take care to avoid adjacent private property.)

**FACILITIES:** The only facilities are a parking lot, vault toilet, park map, and a trail following the abandoned rail grade into the park's interior.

**KAYAKING AND RAFTING:** The stream requires advanced rafting or kayaking skills. During high water in early summer, the Sluice Boxes can be a treacherous death trap for the unwary or inexperienced. And by midsummer, the water is often too low to float.

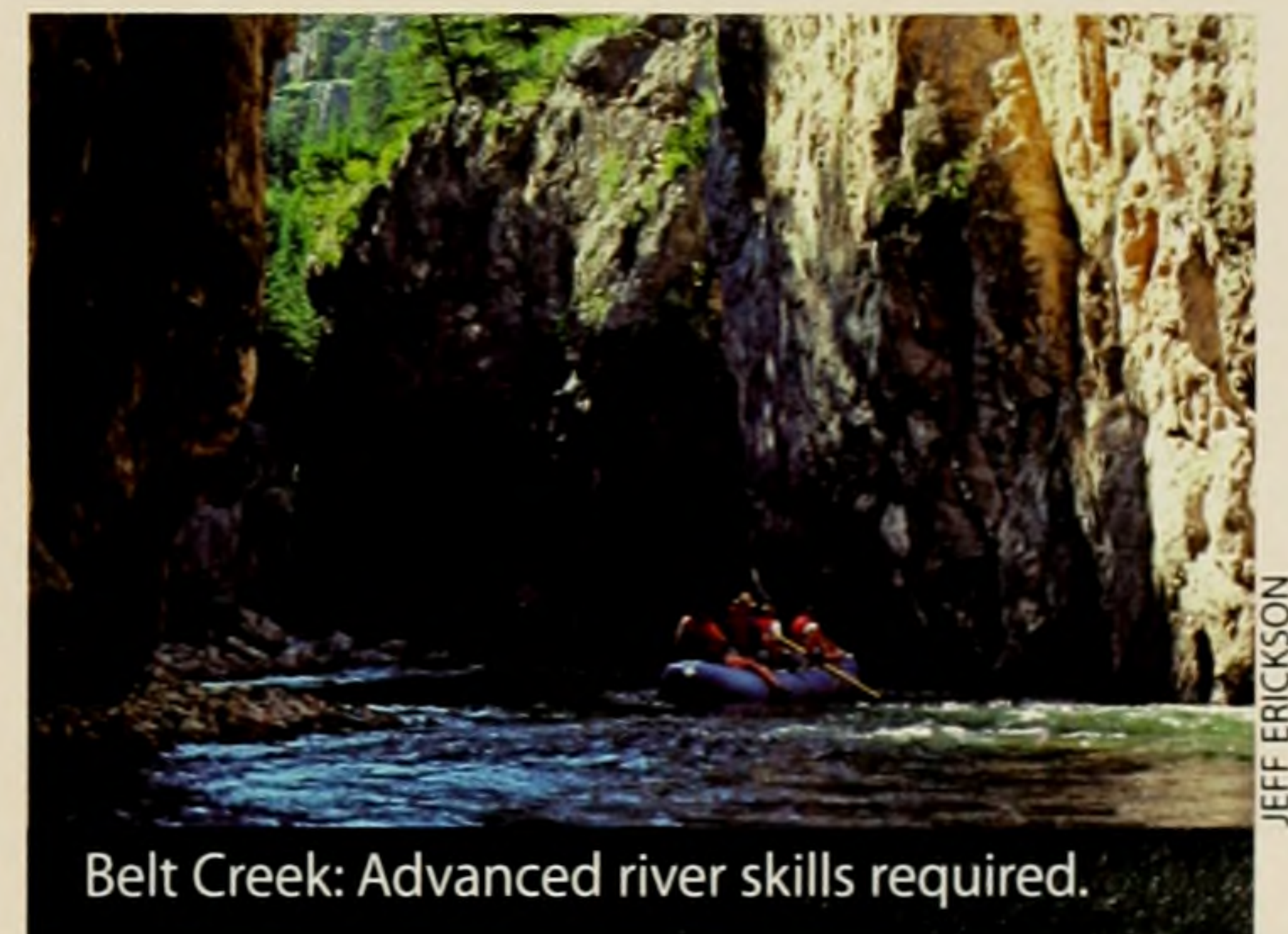
**HIKING:** Hiking is available along the old rail bed. Park manager Colin Maas cautions that most of the old rail trestles are down, requiring hikers to scramble along rocky areas in places. The trail is not maintained and in many places requires crossing Belt Creek. Hikers should

be in good shape and bring rain gear, footwear for stream crossings, a topographic map, and plenty of food and water. Also, hikers should watch for poison ivy.

Reaching the central gorge on foot can

be dangerous during spring runoff. Plan hikes into the Sluice Boxes from mid-July through October, when safe fords are more predictable. When flows permit, the entire distance from Riceville to the Logging Creek Road bridge can be covered in a day. The canyon between the two bridges encompasses 7.5 river miles and requires 12 fords.

**CAMPING:** There are no designated sites in the park, but backcountry camping is allowed by permit. Maas is trying to foster a leave no trace ethic among park users. He asks visitors to pack out all garbage, camp away from the creek, and use stoves, fire pans, or grills rather than open fires. "Because the park is such a gem, it requires a high level of stewardship," says Maas. "We're always looking for volunteers to help us keep it clean." ■



Belt Creek: Advanced river skills required.

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