

Sneaking in to Wildlife Havens

By quietly cruising down a river in a canoe or kayak, you can see more birds and mammals than you ever thought possible. **By John Manuel**

I was riding the swift current on the Sun River north of Augusta when a pair of Canada geese and four goslings appeared on river left. They waddled to shore away from our flotilla of canoes—nothing remarkable about that. On river right, high over a grove of cottonwoods, a golden eagle circled in the noonday sun. I watched it for a moment, then glanced downstream to check for rocks. When I looked again, the eagle was just above the cottonwoods, coming in at top speed.

“Eagle on the right!” I yelled.

Like a fighter plane on a strafing run, the eagle soared right between the canoes—head, neck, and wings in perfect alignment—and nailed one of the goslings on the far bank.

“Oh, man, did you see that?”

“Amazing!”

There are many ways to see wildlife in Montana, but I’ve found none better than by paddling rivers and streams. The aquatic environments support insects, fish, reptiles, and amphibians, which in turn draw birds and mammals that feed on them. Montana rivers are often bordered by diverse grass, shrub, and tree species that provide food and cover for everything from mice to moose. Rivers also serve as corridors for wildlife traveling from one territory to another.

One way to reach rivers is to walk. But by the time you reach the water, most critters will have heard or seen you and raced off. By traveling by water, however, you can silently glide into these riparian wildlife refuges and spot birds and mammals often before they’re aware you’re there.

I prefer a canoe, but a kayak or an inflatable one-person pontoon boat works, too. These watercraft put you at eye-level with wildlife, so you hear the same sounds and breathe the same air they do. It’s an altogether different experience from watching wildlife while in a car or through binoculars.

Note: For your own safety and theirs, don’t paddle too close to wildlife. Try not to disturb nesting birds and mammals with young. And keep at least 100 yards away from potentially dangerous species such as moose and bears. ►►

WATER PATROL A curious river otter pops up near the rudder of a sea kayak on the Madison River. Kayaks and canoes are so quiet that wildlife will allow them—and their inhabitants—to get surprisingly close.



Three rivers for starters

Though wildlife can be found on rivers of any size, I prefer smaller ones or larger rivers that braid into multiple channels around wooded islands. A favorite is the Jefferson. Formed by the confluence of the Big Hole and Beaverhead Rivers, the Jefferson flows 83 miles through diverse habitat including steep-walled canyons, meadows, marshes, and cottonwood groves. I almost always see bald eagles, ospreys, and white pelicans, along with white-tailed and mule deer. I've also seen wild turkeys, common mergansers, belted kingfishers, various waterfowl, and neotropical warblers. It's not surprising to see a moose.

Designated as part of the Lewis and Clark National Historic Trail, the Jefferson is a relatively easy river to paddle—rated Class I on American Whitewater's International Scale of River Difficulty. The only permanent hazards are the remains of two diversion dams, one just below the Waterloo Bridge

John Manuel of Durham, North Carolina, frequently visits Montana to view and photograph wildlife from his canoe.



and another at the Parrot Castle Fishing Access Site (FAS). In low water, both can be easily portaged or waded.

Several access points along the river allow for trips of varying length. Wildlife is most prolific along the 44-mile stretch from Twin Bridges to Cardwell. The river winds and braids among islands and gravel bars. Outfitters in Three Forks and Silver Star rent

canoes and kayaks and provide shuttle service and guided trips.

Another favorite for midriver wildlife viewing is the lower Madison River from Greycliff FAS to Missouri Headwaters State Park near Three Forks. Like the Jefferson, the lower Madison features braided channels with many islands. The river and bordering floodplain harbor birds of every

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: DONALD W. JONES; MICHAEL HARRING; DANIEL DUFOUR; CAROL POLICH; DWYER/SHANNON

RIVER VIEW By silently gliding along rivers and streams, canoeists and kayakers can see a surprising diversity of wildlife species, which are abundant along riparian habitats. Clockwise from top left: Bull elk browsing streamside; a floater eyeing a beaver; a black bear swimming along the Clearwater River; common mergansers scrambling across the Missouri River; an otter's-eye view of a canoeist in the Missouri River Breaks.





STREAMSIDE BIRDS Above left: immature bald eagle along the Smith River; an American dipper (water ouzel) on a channel of the Jefferson River.

shape and size. In one day I saw white pelicans, hooded merganser families, bald eagles, and various hawks, herons, and owls. As the evening drew to a close, I also watched a trio of sandhill cranes in flight silhouetted against the setting sun.

The full run on this stretch of the Madison between Greycliff FAS and Missouri Headwaters is 19 miles, which means a long day of paddling. A shorter run is between these fishing access sites: Greycliff to either Cobblestone (6.7 miles) or Blackbird (about 16 miles).


One of my favorite small rivers for viewing wildlife is the upper Clark Fork between Warm Springs and Missoula. The river parallels I-90 for 125 miles, coursing through alfalfa fields and willow thickets. I always see white-tailed deer in this stretch, and often beavers and even otters. The narrow, twisty channel can produce brief but exciting wildlife encounters.

The upper Clark Fork was long polluted from former mining operations around Anaconda, but restoration work over the past decade has improved water quality considerably. Trout swim throughout the upper Clark Fork, an indication of cleaner water. Bring a fishing rod.

The most effective way to see wildlife is

to be quiet. Avoid hitting your paddle on the side of the canoe, a sound that carries far downstream. Whisper when paddling with companions. Better yet, don't talk at all and use hand signals if you see something worth telling others.

Early morning and late evening are the


Early morning and late evening are the best viewing times. In the morning, aim to be the first boat down the river.

best times to view wildlife. In the morning, aim to be the first boat down the river. Once scared away from the banks, animals such as bears, elk, or moose may not return for hours that day, if at all.

For wildlife photography, I recommend a telephoto lens of at least 300mm or a 10x optical zoom. For close-ups of birds, you'll need twice that focal length. A waterproof

case is essential for cameras when you're paddling. Make sure the case is clipped to a thwart or other secure part of your craft in case you tip.

You can't watch wildlife while drowning

Safety on the water is paramount. Learn the rating of any rapids on the river stretch you plan to float and run only those you know you can navigate. Understand, too, that the difficulty of a river varies tremendously with water flow. High, fast water creates much more dangerous conditions.

Low water is safer but has its own difficulties. Dragging your boat down miles of river you thought you could float is exhausting. And good luck seeing even a mallard when the sound of your boat bottom scraping rocks reverberates downstream for miles.

Guidebooks suggest minimum and maximum safe levels for most of Montana's frequently run rivers. These levels, listed as cubic feet per second (cfs) of water flow, are measured at various U.S. Geological Service (USGS) stations along rivers. Instantaneous readings for these stations are posted on the Internet (Google "Montana stream-flow") and should be checked both the evening before and the morning of your planned float trip.



IN FOR THE CLOSE-UP Wildlife are often long gone when you walk to a stream or river. But when you travel by boat, wildlife often won't be aware of your presence until—with smaller animals—you get to within just a few yards. Clockwise from top: An elk calf naps on a sandbar in the lower Flathead River; an American bittern feeds along the Yellowstone River; painted turtles watch a dragonfly along Logan Creek west of Whitefish.

Hypothermia from immersion in cold water is another hazard. Stay off water colder than 50 degrees F. unless you are wearing a drysuit, wetsuit, or similar safety gear. Wind, too, can be a challenge. Strong headwinds can greatly slow your progress, while crosswinds can drive you to the bank and even tip your canoe or kayak.

Of all the hazards on the water, fallen trees, known as strainers, are the most dangerous. Strainers can show up at any time on any river but are the greatest threat on small, forested rivers where a tree may block an entire channel. If you hit a strainer in even moderate current, your boat will flip and you can be caught underwater by branches and quickly drown. If you spot a strainer, paddle

immediately to the opposite side of the river and portage around the obstruction.

Low-head (diversion) dams are another danger. Just below a dam is a backwater swirl, called a boil or hydraulic, that creates



WATCH WILDLIFE SAFELY Irrigation diversion dams are just one of the hazards on rivers that can drown unwary wildlife watchers.

a powerful recycling water flow able to hold even strong swimmers underwater. Always portage around diversion dams.

For all these safety reasons and more, wear a life jacket when paddling Montana rivers, even in summer.

Plan your trip knowing how many miles you can reasonably paddle. An experienced canoeist can cover 20 miles a day in swift current, but most paddlers should plan on half that distance. Set out early on a calm summer morning and you will find yourself reinvigorated by the beauty of the land. Stop and take photos. Have a picnic or take a nap. And marvel at how close you can get to more species of wildlife than you ever thought possible in one day. 🐾

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: ERIC HEDLER; FRANCIS C. BERGQUIST; RICK SHEREMER; DAVID R. ARMER; ORING & ALZ LARSON; JOHN RUTH