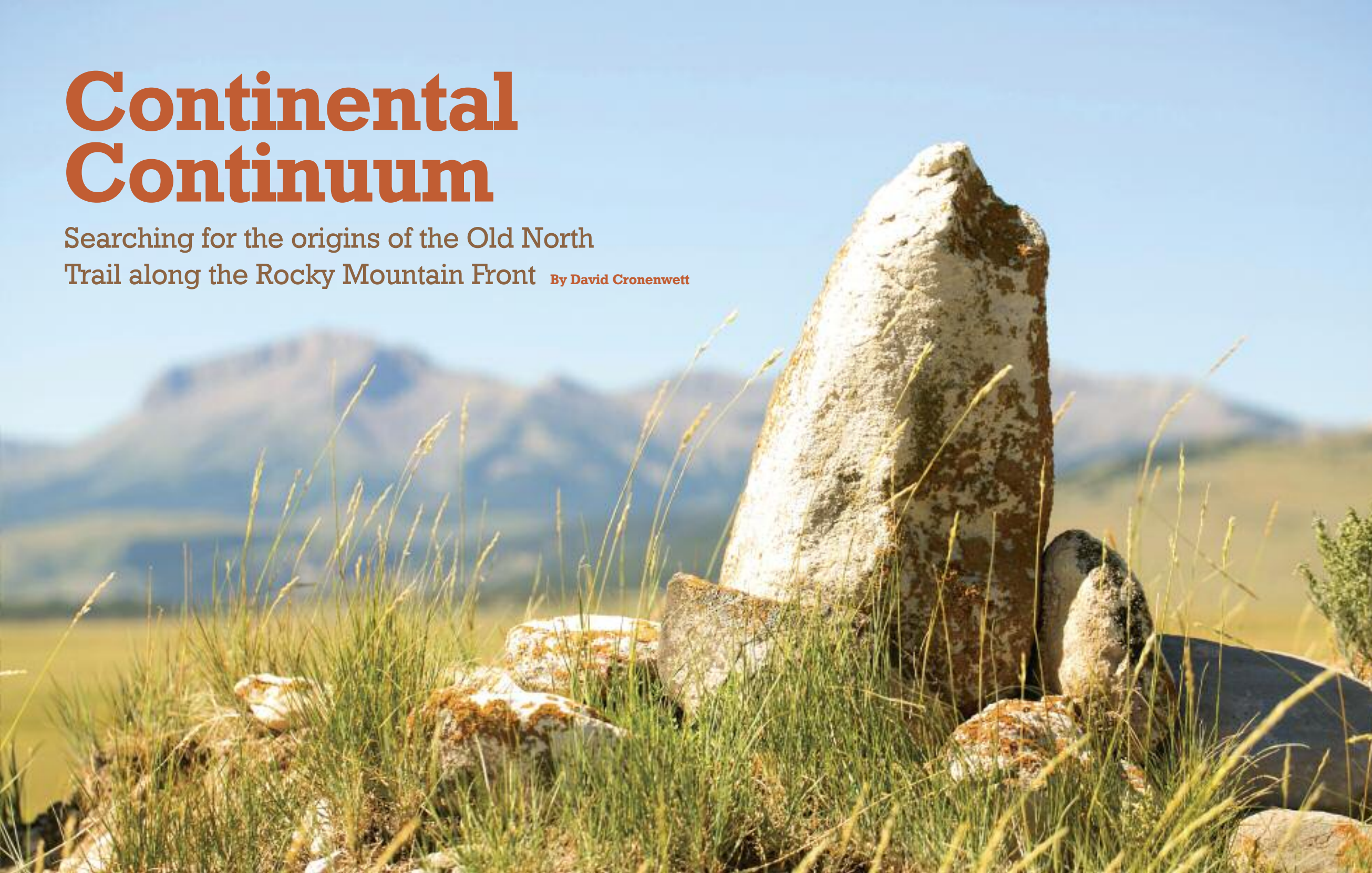


# Continental Continuum

Searching for the origins of the Old North  
Trail along the Rocky Mountain Front **By David Cronenwett**

**TRAIL MARKER** A small boulder near Choteau, placed by local residents, indicates where travelers have been moving along the Rocky Mountain Front for thousands of years.



the base from which my friend Kyle and I hunted last fall.

A few miles downstream, near the mouth of the canyon, sits a marker. After four days of living in the bush using the “old-school” methods described above, Kyle and I stop to inspect the small boulder just off the county road. As we approach, we can read “Old North Trail” etched on one side. I’d wanted to show Kyle this rock, placed in 1998 by local residents, a monument to an important travel route used by human beings for a long time. Roughly two dozen such boulders across Teton County approximately mark ancient ruts left in the ground by generations of people and their domesticated animals crossing this country. At our little primitive camp we’d lived, though briefly, in a manner similar to that of travelers who preceded us in previous centuries and even millennia, using simple and traditional gear, close to the land. The experience had a time-travel quality about it, one that fostered a tangible connection with the past.

Standing on what the Blackfeet call *Miisum Apatosiosoko* (the Ancient North Trail), where bare and moccasin-clad feet once walked, my friend and I had goose bumps, realizing that our presence there along the Rocky Mountain Front made us part of a continuum of hunters and travelers stretching back to the very origins of the continent’s ancient human history.

## “A well-known trail”

Beginning roughly 1,500 years ago at the start of the Late Prehistoric period, this trail was one of the most significant of many that crisscrossed the mountains and plains of today’s Montana and beyond, part of what constituted a vast trade network among far-flung tribal peoples. “Lewis and Clark specifically mention the frequent presence of ‘Indian roads’ in their journals, which coincides with our understanding of well-established travel and trade routes across the region,” says Sara Scott, State Parks Heritage Resources Program manager for Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks. Diverse artifacts like Northwest coast harpoon tips and coiled basketry from the Southwest found near routes in Montana indicate just how far trade items traveled.

The Old North Trail runs along a north-

A cold and quiet autumn morning settles into the canyon. As the sun finally climbs above thousand-foot limestone walls, shafts of October light begin to touch the forest understory. Overnight, frigid air from the surrounding mountains had pooled in the drainage, coating everything with a light frost. In this dense wood-

land of spruce and aspen sits a small, inconspicuous shelter. Joining with the chattering of chickadees and nuthatches are murmurs of human activity near a rough lean-to. A crouching figure clad in buckskin and wool digs through the remains of the previous night’s fire. He soon finds a glowing coal in the ashes and transfers it to a nest of dry

fibers, carefully blowing until the bundle bursts into flame.

Nearby, his companion chops dead timber with a hand-forged axe to feed the growing blaze, now thoroughly warming the shelter and its inhabitants. Water is quickly boiled, and the smell of mint-pine needle tea wafts up from the campsite. The men

drink from cups carved of aspen wood and discuss the day of hunting ahead. They’d fashioned the camp using rudimentary tools with materials found entirely on the landscape: a raised duff bed and shelter, its poles lashed together with twisted willow; a tripod of sticks that held a pot over the fire. Fine shavings of curled wood litter the area near

the hearth, evidence of hours spent patiently crafting objects useful for wilderness life. If a stranger bumped into this camp with its wool blankets, blackened pots, steel tools, and birchbark containers, they might think they’d gone back in time 200 years, when native peoples and fur trappers freely roamed the country. But no. The camp was



south axis. It follows the east flank of the Rockies between Alaska and the heart of the continent as far south as Mexico. Standing on the trail, it's easy to imagine bands of Blackfeet and other tribal groups with their dogs and, after about 1700, horses hauling travois loaded with possessions over the rolling foothills to visit family or move camp to a new buffalo jump. In the early 1900s, young ethnographer Walter McClintock, working for the fledgling U.S. Forest Service at the Blackfeet Reservation, quoted a Blackfeet man, Brings-Down-the-Sun, about the route: "There is a well-known trail we call the Old North Trail. It runs north and south along the Rocky Mountains. No one knows how long it has been used by the Indians."

To be clear: The "trail" is not and never has been a maintained single-track path like what you'd find in a national forest. Prehistoric routes like this are travel corridors, up to several miles wide, with bare spots in areas of concentrated use. These routes often braided out and sometimes disappeared altogether with changes in topography. Travel was slow in those days of foot and dog and horse, making the world a great deal bigger. Evidence of that tread has been lost to erosion and development, but abundant cultural sites remain that help define the travel corridor. Tipi rings, buffalo jumps, drive lines, rock cairns, pictographs, and ancient campsites littered with stone tools remain along the corridor in Alberta, Montana, and beyond, evidence of thousands of years of use. "Nobody has done a landscape-scale study of this particular trail," Scott says, "but the linear flow of sites indicates a clear north-south trending route."

#### Into Montana from the south?

Though the heyday of the Old North Trail and its heaviest use seems to have been during the Late Prehistoric period (A.D. 500–1750) there is no question that people used it for thousands of years before that. The deep history of the trail relates to the history of mankind in North America.

For decades, scholars theorized that the first people on this continent arrived here via a long-vanished land bridge—known as Beringia—linking Siberia and Alaska over

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**WHICH WAY?** The Old North Trail follows the Rocky Mountain Front in both directions. Original use may have been from generations of travelers moving from today's Canada via Beringia from Siberia. A newer theory suggests that the first users came from the south, having reached southern parts of the Americas traveling by boat along the Pacific Coast.

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the Bering Strait, then followed a nearly 1,000-mile-long ice-free corridor that emerged east of the Rocky Mountains in present-day Canada and continued south into the United States.

But recently, some scientists speculate that no person could have survived along the

corridor until 12,600 years ago. They maintain that most of Canada was still covered in ice and without vegetation or wildlife. Yet carbon dating at archaeological sites shows that people were living on this continent, south of the glaciers, at least 13,000 years ago. If, as they believe, these early North Americans couldn't use a land route from Alaska, how did they get here?

One new theory suggests that early Paleo-Indians, after reaching Alaska from Siberia, boated down the Pacific coast, an environment rich in food and materials for boat building and shelter. Some eventually made it as far south as southern Chile in South America, as indicated by recent archaeological finds. An argument in favor of this theory is that maritime technologies have been employed by people for millennia. Australia, for example, was colonized by boat around 60,000 years ago. What's more, the Pacific Ocean was nearly 400 feet lower at the time of the North American migrations, because enormous amounts of Earth's water were still frozen in polar ice sheets. That exposed more near-shore islands and coastal landforms than we see today, making coastal travel safer and easier. At some point, the pioneers



LEFT TO RIGHT: LUKE DURAN/MONTANA OUTDOORS; JEREMIE HOLLMAN; JOHN LAWNING



**SMART ROUTE** Above: Travelers may have selected the corridor along the Front because it provided abundant prairie game and a steady water source from streams flowing from the mountains. A north-south route farther to the east would have meant difficult river crossings. Below left: Tipi rings, along with buffalo jumps and rock cairns along the corridor in Alberta and Montana, provide evidence that people have used the Old North Trail for thousands of years. Old-timers along the Front say the route was still being used as recently as the 1950s by people traveling by wagon between Montana and Alberta.

moved inland, perhaps up the Columbia River drainage, and began to explore the continent's vast interior, possibly 15,000 years or more ago.

#### Tenuous existence

The first bands to arrive in what became Montana were highly mobile hunter-gatherers traveling on foot in small groups. Though that world was empty of all other people, it was by no means vacant. Massive predators and large, dangerous herbivores roamed the landscape. Trails were created by roaming mammoths, mastodons, and several species of bison, as well as the monstrous predators that followed across the cold, shrub-steppe environment: American lions that may have hunted in large prides, three species of saber-tooth cat, dire wolves that weighed up to 150 pounds, and massive short-faced bears that stood up to 12 feet tall and weighed a ton. These creatures hunted humans and often showed up when people butchered a kill. The earliest Americans lived a tenuous existence, relying completely on stone and bone tools to make everything they needed to survive.

In addition to traveling along rivers and other natural corridors, those early North

Americans likely followed seasonal migrations of game, wherever that might lead. There were no human-established trails, no trade routes, and certainly no "Old North Trail." Then, around 13,400 years ago, the climate warmed and began rapidly thawing the great glaciers to the north. A gap eventually emerged in the ice sheets, and wildlife and people began to enter it—from the south. Once the corridor was fully free of glacial ice, movement could occur in both directions, and the landscape slowly became an active travel corridor. Such may have been the fragile beginnings of the Old North Trail.

This new version of the corridor's origins is perhaps less evocative than the more established one—which implies that by visiting the Old North Trail you might walk in the footsteps of the first people who entered today's United States from the north. But what the revised theory lacks in drama, it makes up for in mystery: Where did those first people who walked north along the corridor come from? Had they journeyed east from the Columbia River Basin, crossing the Rocky Mountain Front at Rogers Pass, south of Augusta? Were they working their way north from today's

Central America and Mexico, eventually reaching Alaska, from where their forebears first began coastal journeys south hundreds of years before?

Few of the stories that occurred along the Old North Trail will ever be told. But the overall tale of the corridor is known, and it is one of the human family and its survival. From its earliest use during the Pleistocene to the rise of the buffalo hunting cultures to the present, the Old North Trail was not only a physical pathway, but a vast cultural corridor. It is our generation's task to keep the idea of the trail alive through study, education, and conservation, and to protect one of the world's greatest cultural treasures—a big piece of which sits right here in Montana. 🐾

*Granite boulders marking portions of the Old North Trail were placed by local historian Al Wiseman, of Choteau, and several friends. Most are on private property. Three can be seen from public roads, with some searching and effort. Inquire about directions to the markers at the Old Trail Museum in Choteau (406-466-5332) and Two Medicine Dinosaur Center (406-469-2211), both open from Memorial Day through Labor Day.*