

Montana millionaires

BY TOM DICKSON

What a week,” I said to the dog as I walked into the living room one evening last August. Mesa offered a sympathetic wag as I collapsed onto the couch. It was only Wednesday.

When my wife came home a bit later, she too complained of a long slog at work. Too weary and dispirited to cook dinner, we threw a container of leftover chicken salad and some day-old rolls into a backpack and headed out of town.

Twenty minutes later we arrived at McDonald Pass, parked, and walked up a U.S. Forest Service road to the top of a nameless, to us, mountain. Along the way we passed colorful pockets of lupine, Indian paintbrush, and monkeyflower. Beargrass glowed like lanterns against the dark timber. Mesa flushed a blue grouse. In the distance, a thrush made a sorrowful, flutelike call.

From the summit, we could see mountains in every direction: the Garnets, Jack Mountain, the Elkhorns, and, beyond the

Tom Dickson is editor of Montana Outdoors.

Helena Valley, the Big Belts. As I dug in to my chicken salad up on that mountaintop, I felt a weight lift off me, replaced by the calm I always feel after escaping hectic everyday life into open space.

Such freedom is available to almost anyone who lives in Montana. Hike up a nearby trail. Cycle to a local fishing access site and sit on a riverbank. Drive onto BLM land, park, and roll down the window.

A favorite Montana pastime is to complain about how crowded our state has become. The traffic. The lines. Finding a place to park at a boat ramp or trailhead.

On some evenings, the line of cars, SUVs, and pickups backed up on the road outside my office stretches for nearly a mile. The Montana Department of Transportation just announced that “traffic volumes” there are predicted to drastically increase. I’ll bet they heard my moan as far away as Ekalaka.

For those of us who moved to Montana from elsewhere, it sometimes seems that our best day here was the day we arrived. As others have followed us to the Treasure State, it’s been all downhill.

The traffic delays and sprawling housing developments are even more annoying for those who grew up here and remember when Montana was still undiscovered by all but a few ski bums and trout anglers. Before *A River Runs Through It* and celebrity vacation homes and write-ups in travel magazines. When they had the state all to themselves.

“Montana is full,” reads a popular bumper sticker. “I hear North Dakota is nice.”

Yet bad as it might seem when you’re trying to fish between flotillas of inner-tubers and kayakers, it doesn’t take much to put all this “crowding” into perspective. I regularly return to the Twin Cities to visit my parents. That greater metropolitan area is home to three times as many people as live in all of Montana. It’s a great place to visit. But, jeez, talk about traffic, and lines, and no parking spots.

Historian Joseph Kinsey Howard, author of *Montana: High, Wide, and Handsome*, once said that what he wanted most in life was “room to swing my arms and to swing my mind...,” then added, “Where [but Montana] is there more opportunity to enjoy the elemental values of living, bright sun, and clean air and space? We have room. We can be neighbors without getting in each other’s hair. We can be individuals.”

In the 75 years since *Montana: High, Wide, and Handsome* was published, the state’s population has nearly doubled. But it’s still pretty small, relative to almost anywhere else. Opportunities to hunt, fish, camp, boat, and hike remain abundant. We still have room to swing our arms, to be ourselves. There’s still enough space to be a neighbor without being a bother.

States traditionally measure prosperity in GDP, mineral extraction, industrial output, job growth, livestock production, and the like. Those measures still tell us something. But as the world’s population continues to grow, a new form of prosperity may be simply having enough room—to breathe, to roam, to explore, to be yourself. What many people value even more than money is heading out after work and hearing a thrush, seeing wildflowers, and picnicking while looking out over hundreds of square miles.

Montana ranks low in per capita income, and has nearly since statehood. But if open space is the new currency, then those of us who live here are all millionaires. 🐻

