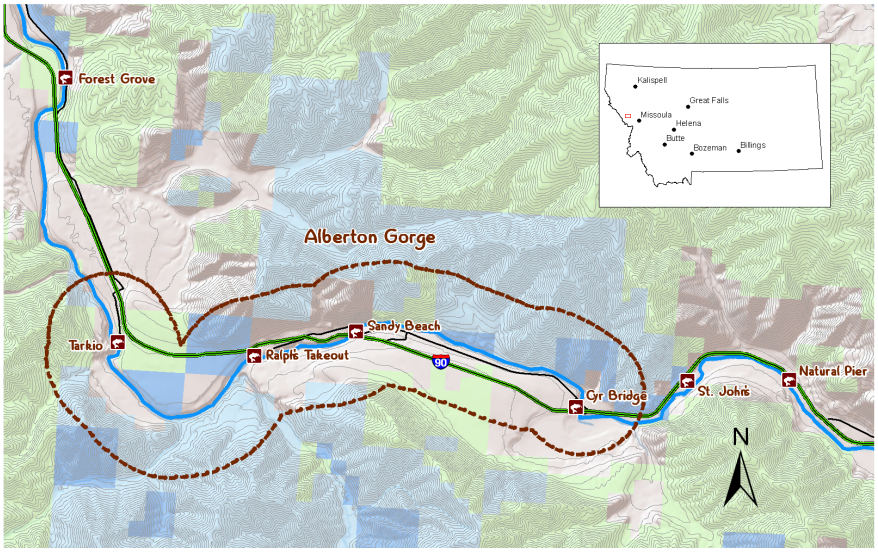
Alberton Gorge Recreation Management
2010 Annual Report

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks • 3201 Spurgin Road • Missoula, MT 59804 • (406) 542-5500

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks

Introduction

The Alberton Gorge or "the Gorge," is a 10-mile section of the Clark Fork River west of Alberton, Montana that extends from Cyr fishing access site (FAS) to Tarkio FAS (see map). The Gorge is well known for its class III/IV whitewater and beautiful scenery. Due to its location near Missoula and easy access via Interstate 90, the Gorge attracts a high number of visitors during the summer months. Recreation consists primarily of whitewater rafting and kayaking, with some angling and limited camping opportunities. Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (FWP) is responsible for managing recreation through the Alberton Gorge. The following report summarizes program components, visitor use statistics, management activities and accomplishments from 2010.



Map of the Alberton Gorge Area

Fang Rapid, Alberton Gorge

Cultural and Natural History

In addition to the recreational opportunities of the Gorge, there are several attractions with historical significance in the Gorge and in the surrounding area. Some of those include the following:

- Evidence of Glacial Lake Missoula is seen in the horizontal strandlines cut into the slopes along I-90 and from the large glacial gravel deposits, which can be witnessed near Alberton and Tarkio.
- Traces of the Mullan Trail can be seen on the north slopes near Cyr FAS. This 624-mile military road was built by Lieutenant John Mullan and his men between 1859 and 1860. It allowed the transportation of troops and supplies between Fort Benton, on the Missouri River, to Fort Walla Walla in Washington.
- While less bustling today, mining and the railroad had spurred a handful of town sites in the Alberton Gorge area. Some of these, such as Cyr, Rivulet and Tarkio had post offices and stores, serving residents through the early to mid-1900's.
- At Big Pine FAS, 4.5 miles up Fish Creek Road, stands the largest known ponderosa pine in Montana.

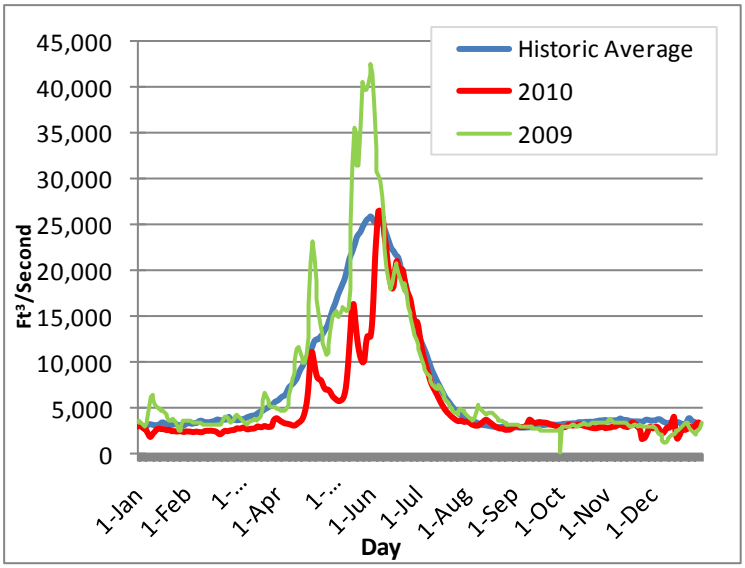
2010 Seasonal Conditions

A cool and wet June kept river levels high for a sustained period of time. While these cool wet conditions reduced river and camping use in June they provided an adequate flow to maintain quality float levels throughout July, August and September. 2010 saw no closures or restrictions on use for fishing or campfires.

2010 flows peaked at levels similar to the historical average. Figure 2 (on the next page), compares flows

for 2009, 2010, and the average historic flows for the Alberton Gorge. These flows were taken at the United States Geological Survey (USGS) St. Regis gauging station (#12354500).

Figure 2: Alberton Gorge Flows — 2010 Compared to 2009 and Historic Average



Administration and Staff

River Recreation Manager

The FWP River Recreation Manager is responsible for day-to-day operations, implementation of programs, and compiling reports related to recreation on the Alberton Gorge. This year-round position is based in Missoula and oversees the Alberton Gorge River Ranger and the Middle Clark Fork Caretaker.

Alberton Gorge River Ranger (April-September)
The River Ranger is responsible for directly managing the recreation activity on the Alberton Gorge and adjacent areas. Duties include maintaining boat ramp traffic flow, general maintenance of fishing access sites and FWP owned lands. The river ranger enforces the commercial use program regulations, fishing regulations and rules associated with FWP owned lands through water and land-based patrols. In addition, the River Ranger organizes the annual river clean-up.

Middle Clark Fork Caretaker (June-August)
The Middle Clark Fork Caretaker performs park maintenance and operations by cleaning facilities, collecting fees, and enforcing campsite and FAS regulations. The caretaker is also involved in organizing the annual river clean-up.
In addition to staff positions dedicated specifically to the Alberton Gorge, there are other FWP personnel such as Program Managers, Wardens, and Biologists who contribute to the management of the Alberton Gorge. The Mineral County Sheriff and Sheriff's Deputies, as well as the Mineral County Search and Rescue, play an integral role in emergency situations.

Electronic Traffic Counts

Traffic counts are collected for select sites in the Alberton Gorge through the use of electronic counters. These counters record the number of vehicles using the sites and this data is collected by FWP staff and compiled on a monthly basis. The data can be used to compare the amount of traffic using a site over the course of a season and to compare use trends from one year to the next.

Figure 3, below, shows a comparison of Cyr and Tarkio fishing access sites on the Clark Fork River utilizing summer traffic counts over the past five years. Traffic counts for the Tarkio FAS indicated steady use, peaking in 2008, with last season's numbers dropping below the previous four years.

Figure 3: Comparison of Summer Traffic Counts for Cyr and Tarkio Fishing Access Sites

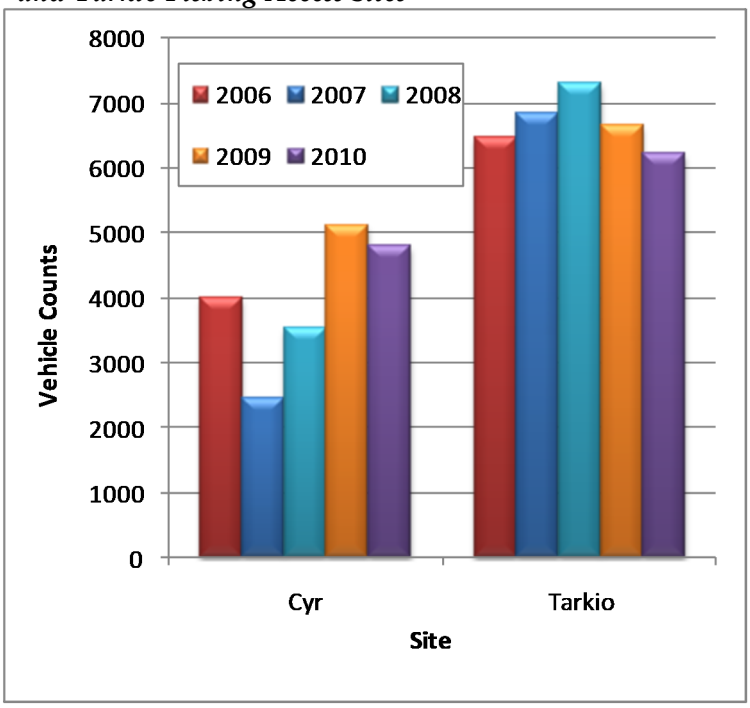
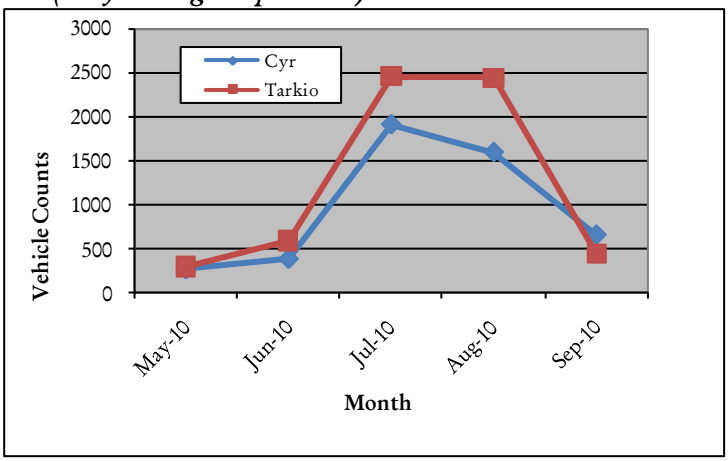


Figure 4 compares the annual traffic counts for the Cyr and Tarkio Fishing Access Sites in the Alberton Gorge with vehicle counts over the course of the 2010 summer season. Tarkio was the busiest site, with over 6,000 vehicle passes counted May through September.

Figure 4: Traffic Counts for Alberton Gorge Fishing Access Sites (May through September)



Commercial Use Program

FWP began a commercial use program on the Alberton Gorge in 1998. This program registered a limited number of authorized permittees based on documented historic use. A use report and fee payment is required for each authorized permittee; data from these reports is compiled at the end of the year. In 2010 there were 23 active commercial permittees, 20 of which actually ran trips on the Alberton Gorge.

The primary type of commercial use occurring on the Alberton Gorge is guided whitewater float trips with some guided fishing trips taking place. Table 1 shows the number of boats, clients, guides and user days (clients and guides combined) for each active outfitter on the Gorge. The number of user days conducted by each permittee varied, ranging from a low of 0 to a high of 3,085. In total, the amount of commercial use for 2010 was 11,468 user days. This was down slightly from 2009 which saw 12,054 commercial user days.

The Alberton Gorge commercial use program generated a total of $14,970.39 in revenue, down from 2009 which generated $17,391.28. Two commercial use permits were issued for photography. These permits generated $100 of revenue.

Special Activities and Events

Special activities and events that take place in the Alberton Gorge are permitted under Special Recreation Permits. In 2010 the Gorge had four organized groups with 504 combined user days, down from 675 in 2009. This use generated $1,050 in revenue. These groups included one church group float, two church camp floats and a youth group float.

Table 1: 2010 Commercial Use by Outfitter

Permittee	Boats	Clients	Guides	User Days
10,000 Waves Raft & Kayak, Inc.	131	600	109	709
Adventures with Western Waters	195	990	195	1185
Blackfoot River Outfitters	15	28	15	43
Clark Fork Ministry Center	1	5	1	6
Idaho Afloat	6	25	6	31
ASEWU - EPIC Adventures	30	149	32	181
Fairchild AFB - Outdoor Adventure	12	20	54	74
Lewis & Clark Trail Adventures	157	912	165	1077
Malmstrom AFB - Outdoor Recreation	12	11	31	42
Montana River Guides	173	2829	256	3085
Montana River Outfitters	3	10	5	15
North Idaho College	39	37	9	46
Northstar Wilderness River Pirates	6	35	6	41
Northwest Voyageurs	0	0	0	0
Pangaea River Rafting	191	1039	190	1229
River Resource Outfitters	0	0	0	0
ROW Inc.	238	1598	238	1836
Rugg's Outfitting	9	36	9	45
Tarkio Kayak Adventures	76	55	21	76
U of M Campus Recreation	39	210	39	249
Wild River Adventures	0	0	0	0
Wiley E. Waters	191	982	203	1185
Zoo Town Surfers	135	300	87	387
Total	**1647**	**9851**	**1617**	**11468**

Revenue Collected

Fees are assessed for certain types of recreational activities in the Alberton Gorge and at access sites. Table 2 shows revenue generated through camping, commercial use fees and special activities and events associated with the Alberton Gorge. The total amount of fee revenue generated for 2010 was $17,130.89.

Table 2: 2010 Fee Revenue Summary

Fee Source	Generated Revenue
Forest Grove Camping	$1,010.50
Commercial Use Fees	$14,970.39
Commercial Photography	$100
Special Activities and Events	$1,050
Total	**$17,130.89**

River Patrol

River float patrols were continued in the 2010 Alberton Gorge Recreation Management season. River Ranger, Ben Schmidt, and other FWP staff conducted patrol floats in an FWP raft during the months of June through September.

The primary purpose of these river patrols is to improve management understanding by observing first hand the resource and its users. Additional objectives were also achieved by the river patrols including: increasing ranger accessibility for emergency and rescue situations, ensuring commercial use and fishing regulation compliance, trash pickup, routine maintenance of highly used recreation sites, noxious weed detection and documenting wildlife.

Wildlife documented as a result of these float trips included osprey, eagles, otters, white-tail deer and beaver. Black bear tracks were also seen on and around several beaches. In addition multiple hazards were removed during the patrols including tires, steel posts, a couch, and human waste.

River patrols are an integral component to many river management programs and the Alberton Gorge proved to be no exception. With the continued success of the 2010 river patrols, FWP will continue patrols next season and in years to come.

Middle Clark Fork River Cleanup

The Annual Middle Clark Fork Cleanup was held Saturday, August 28th. A crew of 17 volunteers floated the river and walked the banks gathering trash. In all, 22 river miles were cleaned from Petty Creek FAS to Forest Grove FAS. Over 1,500 pounds of trash were removed from the river, most notably 850 lbs of steel was recycled, 43 fence posts, 3 bed spring sets, a side of a truck, and a 15 ton jack. In addition 7 tires and 26 golf balls were collected. Volunteers were treated to an appreciation dinner and door prizes near Cyr FAS. The cleanup received support from concerned businesses and organizations that donated services and prizes for volunteers.

FWP thanks the following for their support of the cleanup: Advantage Porta Potty & Pumping, Allied Waste, Montana River Guides, Superior Meats, The Clark Fork Coalition, Rivers Edge, Trail Head, Zoo Town Surfers, and the individual volunteers that dedicated their time to the Alberton Gorge.

Accomplishments

- Middle Clark Fork River Cleanup held August 28th.
- Expanded river ranger patrols on the water including compliance checks and resource monitoring.
- Assisted in three rescues, including two helicopter medical transports with the help of co-operative rescue groups.

Medical helicopter transporting a patient from the Alberton Gorge.

- Opened a reservable group use site at Big Pine FAS.
- Installed bear proof food storage lockers at Forest Grove, Big Pine and Forks campgrounds.
- Installed New Fire rings at Big Pine FAS.
- Worked with Boy Scouts to remove a trash dump located adjacent to Old Hwy10.

Contact Info

For further information about the content of this annual report or for questions/comments regarding recreation or recreation management, please contact the FWP River Recreation Manager:

Chet Crowser
River Recreation Manager
Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks
3201 Spurgin Road
Missoula, MT 59804
(406) 542-5562
E-mail: ccrowser@mt.gov