Montana is world famous for its hiking trails, so there’s definitely no shortage of options. But if I were limited to only ten trails and wanted to take in the widest possible diversity of Montana’s landscape—from glaciers to grasslands—it would be the hikes listed here. I’ve hiked most of them and consulted experts on the rest. These day trips are for hikers of average ability and experience, but they can be shortened or extended for those with less or more fortitude. See you out there.

1. **MOUNT AENEAS LOOP**

Mount Aeneas, in the Swan Mountains, is one of the most accessible summits in Montana. The 5.9-mile loop trail tops out at 7,528 feet, yielding big views for little work. The peak overlooks Jewel Basin, a 15,349-acre hiker-only area cradling 27 sparkling lakes, and its summit panorama includes Flathead Lake, Glacier National Park, and the Bob Marshall Wilderness. Don’t expect solitude: An average of 100 people depart from the Camp Misery trailheads daily.

The route combines Trails 717, 392, 68, and 8, beginning up a wide roadbed to a four-way junction. After you climb multiple switchbacks lined with huckleberry bushes, watch for mountain goats as the trail traverses an arête (thin rock ridge) to Mount Aeneas. From the summit, the trail plummets into the Picnic Lakes Basin before climbing through a saddle to drop back to Camp Misery. As with any day trip outdoors, call ahead to be sure the trail is open (snowpack closes many high-elevation routes well into July) and to learn of bear or fire warnings. Always bring water, lunch or other sustenance, and rain gear.
2. MANN GULCH

Steeped in the history of Lewis and Clark on the Missouri River, Mann Gulch is also hallowed ground for anyone who has studied or fought wildland fires. In August 1949, lightning ignited a fire there that burned 3,000 acres in less than 15 minutes. The blaze killed 13 smokejumpers trapped in the gulch. Chronicated in Norman Maclean’s gripping Young Men and Fire, the tragedy launched modern fire science and new tactics for surviving wildland fires. Crosses mark where the smokejumpers died.

From Meteorite Picnic Area (reachable most easily by boat), follow the Vista Point Trail north, climbing the switchbacks past the Vista Point turnoff. The forested trail ascends the ridge toward the head of Mann Gulch. Reaching the firefighter memorials requires a 20-minute traverse on a faint gravelly side trail to the north slope of the gulch overlooking the Missouri. A steep, well-worn trail loops past the markers, indicating where each firefighter fell.

3. ROSS CREEK CEDARS

Here’s a great hike for grandparents, grandkids, and everyone in between. The Cabinet Mountains conceal a grove of ancient western red cedars—some 8 feet in diameter and more than 175 feet tall. Protected in a 100-acre scenic area since 1960, the ancient Ross Creek cedars have survived floods, fires, and insects. Several of the towering giants in this temperate rainforest were saplings when Columbus arrived in the New World.

The flat 1-mile trail loops through the old-growth forest below a canopy so thick it shades the damp forest floor even on sunny days. Along the trail, hikers discover cedar castles hollowed out by fire and downed cedars regenerating new growth. The dense overhead canopy—home to pine martens—blocks so much light that only shade-tolerant species such as lush ferns and dainty white foamflowers can grow on the duff floor. Next to the trail runs Ross Creek, where hikers might see a mink or an American dipper.

4. BITTER CREEK

Tucked in northeastern Montana, the 59,660-acre Bitter Creek Wilderness Study Area and surrounding Bureau of Land Management (BLM), state, and private lands harbor vanishing prairie that once defined the northern Great Plains. This prairie, along with Canada’s Grasslands National Park across the border, forms one of the largest intact grasslands left in North America. “Not only did it escape the plow, but you can hike all day and not see another person,” says John Carlson, BLM biologist in Glasgow.

Because Bitter Creek lacks formal trails, hikers wander through the vast, rolling semiarid grasslands, broken by glaciated badlands and dotted with tipi rings. Boost-to-knee-high native grasses, fading from green to gold during summer, create a mosaic of vegetation that sustains chestnut-collared longspurs, Sprague’s pipits, sage-grouse, long-billed curlews, and other prairie birds. (The Audubon Society recognizes Bitter Creek as a Globally Important Bird Area.) Hikers might also spot pronghorn and, if especially lucky, the seldom-seen swift fox.

5. GLACIER LAKE

With its high altitude, trout fishing, and rugged subalpine environment, Glacier Lake epitomizes the Beartooths—the state’s highest mountain range. But unlike other Absaroka-Beartooth Wilderness lakes, reachable only after hours of hiking, Glacier Lake requires only a short—though steep—climb. The lake, at 9,706 feet, between the Hellsroaring and Beartooth plateaus, sits at the head of Rock Creek Valley, a testament to the glaciers that once carved through the 3.2-billion-year-old gray and pink rock—the oldest in Montana.

From the trailhead at the road’s terminus in Wyoming, the steep route ascends into Montana and crosses Moon Creek on a log bridge at 0.5 mile. Stay on the main westward path as it switchbacks up and over a ridge—it’s a steep climb at high altitude, so pace yourself—before dropping to the lake. Because the lake’s southern tip sits in Wyoming, anglers with Montana fishing licenses may fish only on the northern half.
6. GRINNELL GLACIER

Glacier National Park’s namesake glaciers may be mostly puddles by 2020, according to U.S. Geological Survey ecologists. That’s ten years earlier than predicted just a few years ago, and all the more reason to hike to Grinnell Glacier, the most accessible one in the park.

Most of the trail’s elevation gain comes during one 2-mile stretch. Hikers can use the tour boat from Many Glacier Hotel to chop mileage off one or both ways, though there’s no avoiding the climb. From the hotel or the Swiftcurrent Picnic Area, catch the trail that circles Swiftcurrent Lake to the west-shore boat dock. Hike over the hill and traverse west along Lake Josephine’s north shore, diverting at signed junctions toward Grinnell Glacier. The trail tip toes along multicolored cliffs, stair-steps under a waterfall, and skips through pink spirea where grizzly bears sometimes feed. Trudge up the moraine to see the glacier and its ice-filled lake. Make your way through the maze of paths crossing the bedrock to the shore, but stay off the ice, which harbors hidden crevasses.
8. OUR LAKE

Located on the edge of the Bob Marshall Wilderness, this is one of the few alpine lakes along the Rocky Mountain Front accessible in a day’s hike. Our Lake sits at 7,295 feet in an ice-scoured alpine tundra basin surrounded by scraggy subalpine fir. In late July, meadows fill with wildflowers, while mountain goats traverse cliffs above the lake.

From the Headquarters Creek Trailhead, the route follows the heavily used pack trail leading into the Bob Marshall Wilderness for 0.4 mile. At the junction, veer right onto Trail 184 for the forested climb up numerous switchbacks. Viewpoints along the way take in Rocky Mountain Peak (the highest in the Bob Marshall Wilderness), and hikers will also see two waterfalls along the trail before reaching the lake. Anglers can fish Our Lake for westslope and Yellowstone cutthroat trout. Hikers with more time and stamina can climb to the west saddle for views of the famed Chinese Wall.

9. BLODGETT CANYON OVERLOOK

Blodgett Canyon is a geological wonder featuring dramatic spires and sheer 500-foot cliffs with vertical walls that lure rock climbers. The canyon, scooping more than 2,000 feet from the creek at the base to the summits, was carved into a deep U-shape trough by ice bulldozing through slabs of gray granite. The 12-mile-long canyon reaches into the Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness.

There are two main trails. The lower one covers the canyon floor, while the overlook trail offers even more spectacular views from a high ridge. From Canyon Creek Trailhead, take the signed path heading east through large boulders toward the overlook. Built after a fire in 2000, the trail switches back and forth up through a lush green hillside of lupine and arrowleaf balsamroot. Interpretive stations explain the cycle of fire, and benches offer scenic, tranquil rest spots. Explore multiple viewpoints at the overlook, but be careful near the steep drop-offs.

10. ICE CAVES

Located in the distinctive island range of the Big Snowy Mountains, the Ice Caves Trail combines expansive views with unique geology. “You can almost see Wyoming and Canada from the top,” says Dave Byerly, leader of the Montana Wilderness Association’s annual hike to the caves. The 400-million-year-old white limestone contains fossils of ancient sea creatures as well as caves that fill with ice that stays well into September. Water seeping into one 100-foot-wide cave freezes in columns or spreads across the floor to make the surface slick as an ice rink.

From the Crystal Lake Trailhead, the route follows Trail 493 through old-growth conifers before pitching into steep switchbacks up to the ridge. Turn east onto Trail 490, following cairns and signs for 1 mile across the open ridge, looking out for sinkholes. A spur trail leads to two entrances into the caves. Strong hikers can extend the route into a 12-mile loop that picks up at Grandview Point for a view of Crystal Lake.