

# 10 TRAILS YOU HAVE TO TRY

From rain-soaked cedar forests to sun-drenched prairies, these day hikes take you to some of the state's most scenic places. **BY BECKY LOMAX**



**WORTH THE (EASY) CLIMB** Enjoying the view from the summit of Mount Aeneas, in the Jewel Basin Hiking Area east of Kalispell. Crater Lake is visible in the distance.

LAWRENCE STOTE



**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.

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.

BACKPACK BY ISTOCKPHOTO.COM

## Mount Aeneas Loop



- ▶ **Distance:** 5.9-mile loop
- ▶ **Elevation gain:** 1,811 feet
- ▶ **Directions:** From Kalispell, take U.S. Highway 93 south to Montana Highway 82 east to Echo Lake Road. Drive 3 miles north and turn right onto Jewel Basin Road 5392 for 7 steep, narrow miles to the Camp Misery parking lot.
- ▶ **Contact:** Flathead National Forest, Swan Lake Ranger District, (406) 837-7500, [fs.fed.us/r1/flathead](http://fs.fed.us/r1/flathead).



CRUCK HANEY

## 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. ■



## 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. Chronicled 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 Meriwether 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 grassy 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. ■



BECKY LOMAX

► **Distance:**

8-mile round trip

► **Elevation gain:**

1,500 feet

► **Directions:** Drive 20 miles north of Helena on I-15 to Exit 209 and then east on Gates of the Mountains Road for 2.7 miles to Gates of the Mountains Marina—(406) 458-5241, [gatesofthemountains.com](http://gatesofthemountains.com)) to launch your boat or catch a boat tour 4 miles down the Missouri River to Meriwether Picnic Area.

► **Contact:** Helena National Forest, (406) 449-5490, [fs.fed.us/r1/Helena](http://fs.fed.us/r1/Helena).



## 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. Boot- 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. ■



CHUCK HANEY

► **Distance:** 3 to 8 miles

► **Elevation gain:** varies

► **Directions:** From Glasgow, drive 20 miles west on U.S. Highway 2 and turn north onto Britsch Road for 15 miles. The gravel-then-dirt road, bordering the southern boundary of the Bitter Creek Wilderness Study Area, becomes impassable gumbo when wet.

► **Contact:** Bureau of Land Management, Glasgow Field Office, (406) 228-3750, [blm.gov/mt/st/en/fo/glasgow\\_field\\_office.html](http://blm.gov/mt/st/en/fo/glasgow_field_office.html).



JOHN REDDY

## 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 foam flowers can grow on the duff floor. Next to the trail runs Ross Creek, where hikers might see a mink or an American dipper. ■

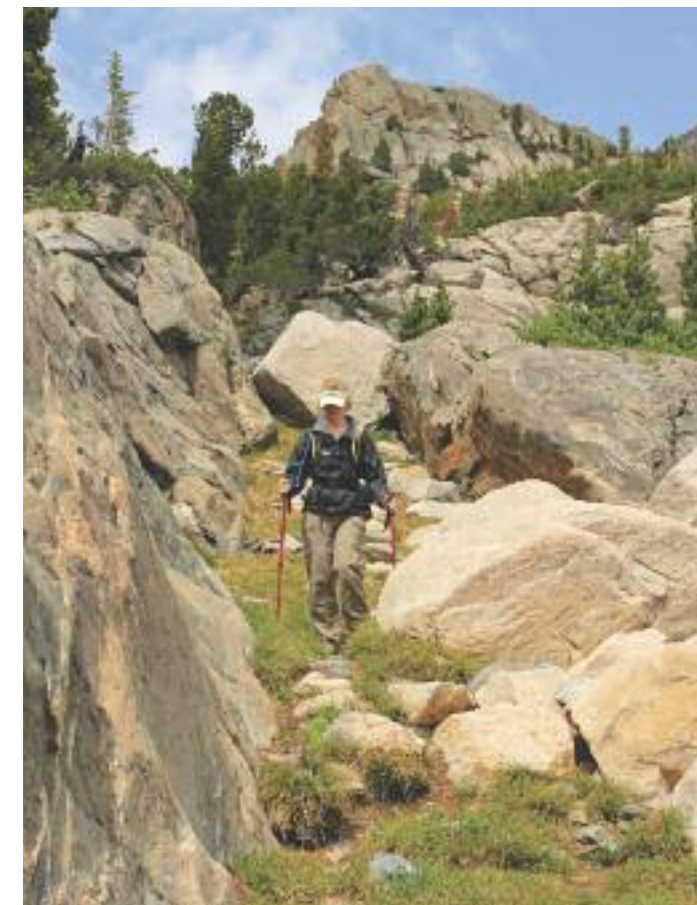
Becky Lomax, a writer in *Whitefish*, guided in *Glacier National Park* for many years.



## 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 Hellroaring 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. ■



SAM &amp; STEPH ZIERKE



- ▶ **Distance:** 7.8- to 11- mile round trip
- ▶ **Elevation gain:** 1,600 feet
- ▶ **Directions:** From St. Mary, take U.S. Highway 89 north to Babb and turn west for 12 miles to trailheads at Many Glacier Hotel or the Swiftcurrent Picnic Area. For the shortest route, take the tour boat from Many Glacier Hotel to the upper Lake Josephine boat dock. Book a ride at (406) 257-2426 or glacierparkboats.com.
- ▶ **Contact:** Glacier National Park, (406) 888-7800, nps.gov/glac.



BERT GILBERT

## 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 tiptoes 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. ■



- ▶ **Distance:** 2.4- to 11-mile round trip
- ▶ **Elevation gain:** 1,800 feet
- ▶ **Directions:** From Main Street in Bozeman, take 19th Avenue south to Hyalite Canyon Road. Turn left, climbing past Hyalite Reservoir. At the fork, veer right toward Grotto Falls to the parking lot.
- ▶ **Contact:** Gallatin National Forest, Bozeman Ranger District, (406) 522-2520, fs.fed.us/r1/gallatin.

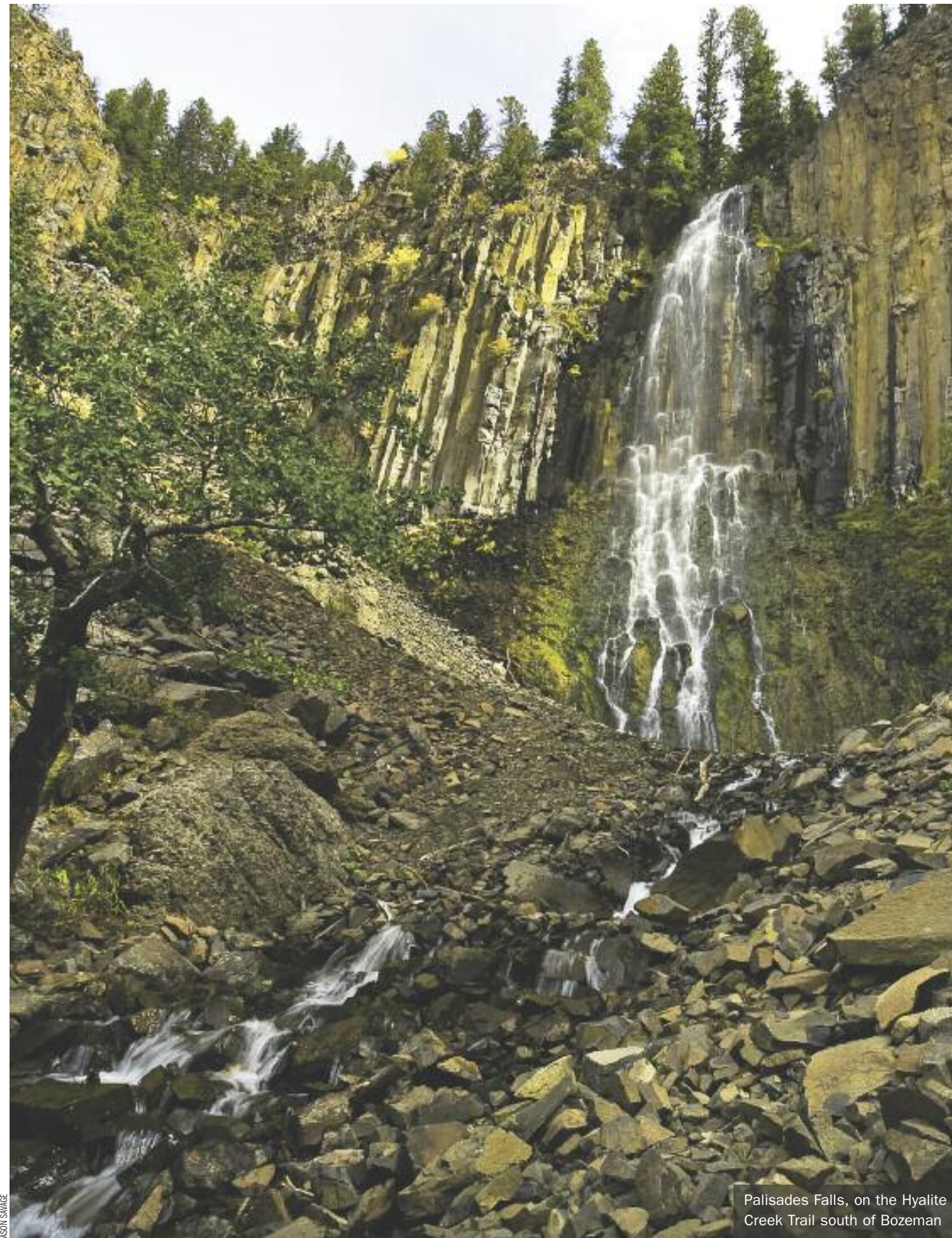


JODY DURAN

## 7. HYALITE CREEK AND LAKE

Hyalite Creek plunges over 11 waterfalls on its route from the Gallatin Crest to Hyalite Reservoir. The popular trail, which begins south of the reservoir and follows the creek upstream past the waterfalls toward its source at Hyalite Lake, attracts so many people that on Fridays and Saturdays from July 16 to September 4 the U.S. Forest Service restricts use to only hikers and horseback riders (motorbikes and mountain bikes are allowed Sundays through Thursdays). The area's geologic features are named for the hyalite opal found around the lake.

From the parking lot, Hyalite Creek Trail 427 begins with a 1.2-mile wheelchair-accessible route to Grotto Falls. The trail parallels the creek through a canyon pinched by cliffs. Drop off the main trail onto spurs to reach the waterfalls, or fish the creek for trout. The trail eventually reaches sparkling Hyalite Lake. Strong hikers can continue on to the Gallatin Crest Trail or scramble up Hyalite Peak. ■



JASON SAWICE

Palisades Falls, on the Hyalite Creek Trail south of Bozeman

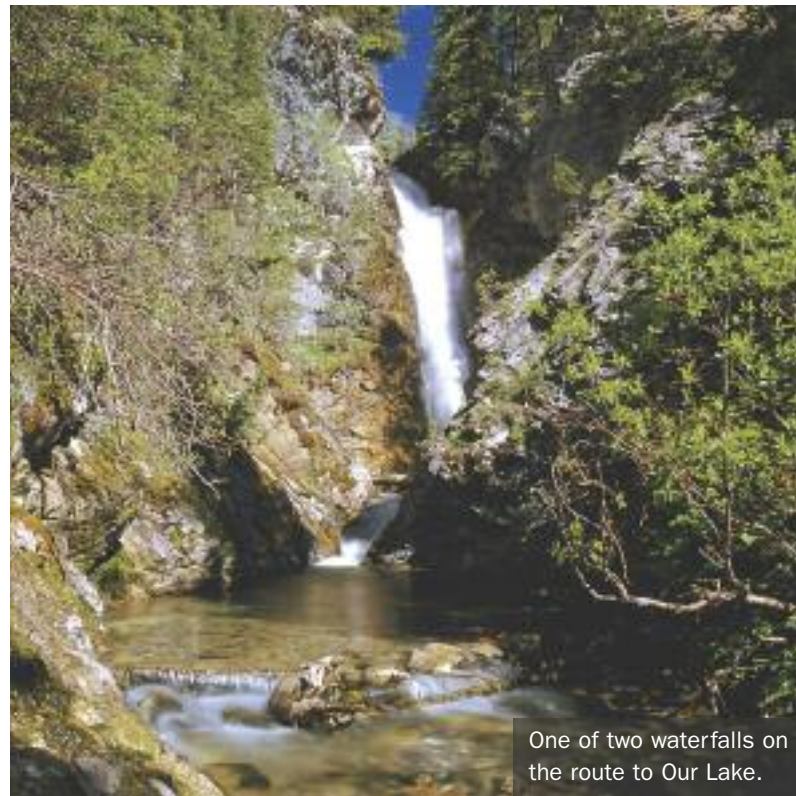


- ▶ **Distance:** 5-mile round trip
- ▶ **Elevation gain:** 1,506 feet
- ▶ **Directions:** From Choteau, drive 4.4 miles north on U.S. Highway 89 and turn west onto Teton River Road 144 for 16.5 miles. Turn south onto South Fork Teton Road. After crossing the Teton River, turn right onto gravel Forest Road 109 for 10 miles.
- ▶ **Contact:** Lewis and Clark National Forest, (406) 466-5341, fs.fed.us/r1/lewisclark.

## 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 firs. 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. ■



One of two waterfalls on the route to Our Lake.

JOHN LAMRING



DAVID ANDERSON

The ice caves make a cool day hike destination in midsummer.

## Blodgett Canyon



- ▶ **Distance:** 2.8-mile round trip
- ▶ **Elevation gain:** 400 feet
- ▶ **Directions:** From Hamilton, drive north on U.S. Highway 93 across the Bitterroot River. Turn west onto Bowman Road for 0.7 mile and swing left onto Richetts Road for 2 miles. Continue onto Blodgett Camp Road for 2.5 miles until the pavement turns to gravel. Turn west onto Canyon Creek Road for 3 miles to the trailhead.
- ▶ **Contact:** Bitterroot National Forest, (406) 363-7100, fs.fed.us/r1/bitterroot.

## 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, swooping 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. ■



NELSON KEMER

## Ice Caves



- ▶ **Distance:** 9-mile round trip
- ▶ **Elevation gain:** 2,200 feet
- ▶ **Directions:** From Lewistown, drive west on Montana Highway 200 for 8 miles, then turn south onto Crystal Lake Road 275 for 22 miles, turning at signed junctions to Crystal Lake.
- ▶ **Contact:** Lewis and Clark National Forest, Judith Ranger District, (406) 566-2292, fs.fed.us/r1/lewisclark.

## 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. ■



Crystal Lake, past the ice caves in the Big Snowy Mountains near Lewistown.

CHUCK HANEY