

# FROM HERE TO THERE

How Montana's trail system  
**links people**  
to the state's most  
**spectacular**  
**places**



MOUNTAIN BIKING IN THE BIRCH CREEK TRAIL AREA, NEAR KALISPELL, BY HEATH A. KORVOLA/LIQUIDLIGHTPHOTO.COM. COMPASS IMAGE BY DEA VOGEL



By Jeff Erickson



TRAILS

**W**E WERE HIKING UP the Prospect Shafts Trail on Mount Helena, under a bright summer sun. As my wife, Mary, our old friend, Bruce, and I neared the summit, sweeping views of the Helena Valley and surrounding mountains unfolded.

Bruce, an avid hiker on a quick stopover from his home in California, exclaimed, "Helena might be the nicest state capital in the country!" He was even more impressed when we pointed out the many other trails in the distance. Clearly, there were too many choices for just one day, and all were easily accessible from our house.

As we headed down the mountain, Bruce remarked, "It's amazing—everyone here seems so happy." He was right: All morning the many hikers, joggers, mountain bikers, and even dogs we passed displayed nothing but friendly grins.

Helena trail users aren't the only ones smiling. Across the state, a growing number of Montanans are enjoying more trails closer to home. Montana's diverse and far-flung trails—including its legendary backcountry routes—are gradually becoming more connected and accessible, improving the health of trail users, local economies, and Montana communities throughout the state.

**15,000 TRAIL MILES**

An expanding population, growing numbers of tourists, and increasing participation in outdoor recreation mean more people are using Montana trails than ever before. Most trail use is for nonmotorized travel (a 1998 FWP survey indicated 90 percent of Montana trail users participated in hiking), but motorized use is rapidly growing, too, as the population ages. For example, the number of motorcycle and off-highway vehicle (OHV) registrations in Montana grew by

more than 200 percent from 1990 to 2001. Montana's 2,300 designated public trails cover nearly 15,000 linear miles, 99 percent of which are on federal land (mostly in national forests). Though extensive, this trail system has actually declined in number and mileage over the past few decades, due to lack of maintenance and other reasons.

There are exceptions. City and county trails are growing more extensive in Montana's metropolitan areas. In Great Falls, for example, the number of miles in the River's Edge Trail quadrupled over the past decade from 7 to 28. Though urban trails comprise a tiny percent of Montana's total trail system, they receive considerable use by being close to population centers.

As in other parts of the country, Montana's urban residents increasingly want trails near where they live, and communities are working to meet that demand.

As Great Falls trails advocate Doug Wicks observes, "We're taking trails to the people, rather than having people come to the trails."

Cities and towns are also building trails to connect their residents to backcountry routes in surrounding federal lands. One example is in Bozeman, where the Gallatin Valley Land Trust is working to link urban routes with trails in the nearby Bridger and Gallatin mountain ranges.

Each of the federal, state, and local agencies responsible for managing Montana's trail system has its own policies, procedures, and regulations. Yet because Montana's trail system is an interconnected web, agencies are increasingly working together.

FWP's Parks Division, for example, manages relatively few trails yet administers the Recreational Trails, Snowmobile, and Off-Highway Vehicle Grant programs. The programs provide roughly \$1.4 million each

year in state and federal funding for a variety of trail projects such as construction, maintenance, rehabilitation, grooming, and weed control on municipal, state, and federal lands throughout Montana.

In addition, FWP provides trail-related educational programs on topics like ethics and safety and cooperates with federal officials on trail-related law enforcement.

John Favro, U.S. Forest Service trails coordinator at Missoula, says the federal agency is coordinating its trail management with other agencies "to create a seamless trail system across the state."

**TRAILS FOR EVERY USE**

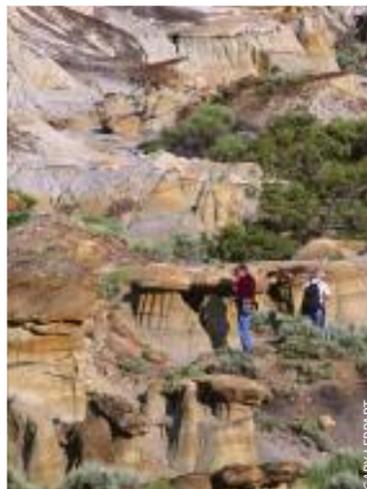
People have been walking, riding, and canoeing along Montana trails for centuries. Many existing trails follow these ancient routes, such as the Old North Trail along the Rocky Mountain Front, an important travel and trade corridor for at least 3,000 years. Over the years, trail use technology has expanded to include skis, bicycles, in-line skates, motorcycles, all-terrain vehicles, snowmobiles, and other ways of getting from one place to another.

Montana is best known for its web of backcountry hiking and equestrian trails, traversing vast, spectacular landscapes. Most of the backcountry system has been in place for decades, so agencies now focus primarily on maintenance, enforcement, improving access, protecting natural resources, and connecting trails to each other.

Outside of national parks and designated wilderness areas, many trails are open to snowmobiles, motorcycles, and four-wheelers. However, riders have seen increasing restrictions in recent years due to trail damage by vehicles and conflicts with other trail users. According to Doug Abelin, a



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**TRAIL MIX** With 2,300 different trails covering more than 15,000 miles, Montana is laced with a diversity of routes ranging from backcountry foot trails to urban commuter bicycling lanes.

Clockwise from top left: Backpacking across Corduroy Bridge in the Beartooth Wilderness Area; snowmobiling a winter trail in the Whitefish Range; canoeing the Lewis and Clark National Historic Trail near Great Falls; horse riding on the Refrigerator Canyon Trail in the Helena National Forest; cross-country skiing the Chief Joseph Cross Country Ski Trail near Lolo Pass; mountain biking the Prairie Trail, part of the Mount Helena City Park trail system; following a quiet path through the Ross Creek Cedar Grove Recreation Area, near Libby; running along Jogging Trail Creek Road in the Paradise Valley; following guide rocks and interpretive signs on the Cap Rock Nature Trail at Makoshika State Park, near Glendive.



JEFF ERICKSON

**Finding your own trail**

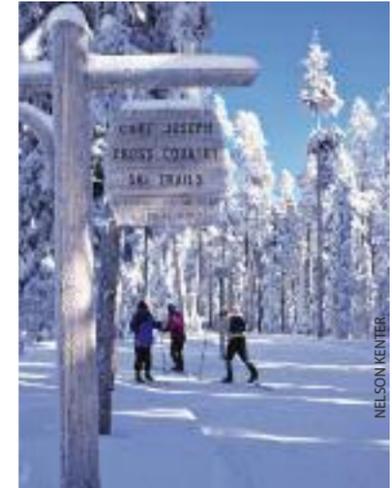
- DeLorme Montana Atlas & Gazetteer:** An indispensable atlas of trails, back roads, mountain lakes, and other features.
- U.S. Forest Service maps:** Essential for finding most of the state's best trails. (406) 329-3511 or [www.fs.fed.us/r1](http://www.fs.fed.us/r1).
- Bureau of Land Management maps:** (406) 896-5000 or [www.mt.blm.gov](http://www.mt.blm.gov).
- U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) topo maps:** These 1:24,000-scale maps, which show land contours, are essential for longer backcountry hikes. <http://topomaps.usgs.gov>.
- National parks maps.** Excellent trail maps are available for both Glacier and Yellowstone. [nps.gov/glac](http://nps.gov/glac) and [nps.gov/yell](http://nps.gov/yell).
- Travel Montana:** This Montana state agency publishes a free winter guide that provides an excellent overview of the major snowmobile and Nordic ski trails. (800) 847-4868 or [travel.state.mt.us](http://travel.state.mt.us).
- Falcon Guides:** The Falcon series of Montana hiking and backpacking guides, published by Globe Pequot Press, are great for beginners and experts. The recently updated *Hiking Montana* features 100 of the state's best hikes.



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representative on FWP's OHV Advisory Committee, demand is growing for more long-distance routes that allow riders to spend the entire day exploring, such as those in the Whitetail-Pipestone area near Butte, which has become a major OHV destination.

Across the country, trails built on abandoned railroad grades have been a spectacular success story. Unfortunately, Montana has not capitalized on rail-to-trail opportunities to the extent many states have. Between 1979 and 1992, approximately 1,400 miles of rail line were abandoned in Montana, largely reverting to private landowners rather than becoming public trails. Nonetheless, there are scattered rail trails in Montana, including the spectacular Route of the Hiawatha along the Idaho border.

Winter trails have become increasingly important components of Montana's trail system. Snowmobilers come here from across the country to enjoy two dozen major systems that provide roughly 4,000 miles of groomed routes. Although the status of Yellowstone National Park snowmobiling is in legal limbo, West Yellowstone has become a mecca for snowmobilers in recent years, with nearly 600 trail miles in the immediate vicinity of town.

"The interconnectivity of trails in the West Yellowstone area allows folks to go as far as they want," says Bill Howell, a local snowmobile advocate.

Montana's Nordic (cross-country) ski routes are less extensive than those for sleds, though excellent systems exist throughout the state's western half. In addition to some of the wildest winter backcountry in the lower 48 states, Nordic skiers can find many groomed systems, such as Rendezvous Ski Trails in West Yellowstone. In Missoula's Pattee Canyon, "groomed ski trails are within a few miles of town, allowing skiers to use trails after school or work" says Steve German, Nordic ski representative on FWP's State Trails Advisory Committee. As with snowmobile trails, local cross-country ski clubs run by enthusiastic volunteers apply for FWP grants to purchase, maintain, and operate trail groomers and other equipment.

Montana is also bisected by many historically significant trails. The Lewis and Clark National Historic Trail follows rivers, the

interstates of the pre-rail era. Others, like the Bozeman Trail, Mullan Road, and Nee-Me-Poo (Nez Perce) National Historic Trail, are historic human migration corridors. Though these routes run mostly through private property, visitors can often find signs or other interpretive displays where the routes intersect public land.

With so many types of trails and trail users, it's not surprising that people cross paths, sometimes with differences of opinion about who should be where. The most publicized conflicts recently have been between motorized and nonmotorized users. Although the differences in perspective sometimes seem insurmountable, many trail users maintain that most disagreements can be resolved.

"Lots of conflict comes from a lack of understanding of the other side," says Angie Grove, a mountain biker from Helena. And Howell, the snowmobiler, says, "Everyone has their own interest, and mine is no better or worse than anyone else's. If people would sit down across the table and talk, they could work out a lot of these problems." Adds Bob Walker, FWP trails coordinator, "There's room out there for everybody, but everybody doesn't need to be everywhere."

### MORE THAN JUST A GOOD TIME

While conflicts persist, there's no argument that trails enhance a community's quality of life. In addition to the obvious recreational benefits, trails help bind communities together. Urban trails in particular have become a kind of modern common space where people from many different backgrounds can mingle.

"Anywhere you live in Helena, there's a network of accessible trails," says Connie Cole, an avid equestrian trail user and board president of the Prickly Pear Land Trust, which helps preserve public land and trails in the Helena area.

Farther down the Missouri River from Helena, the beautiful River's Edge Trail has become a huge recreational and social amenity, linking Great Falls parks along the river and attracting a wide range of users, from day-care toddlers to senior-center septuagenarians. "It has added a new dimension to life in Great Falls," says Wicks, the local trailblazer. "There's an uplifting character to the River's Edge Trail,

even for people who never use it."

Darleen Tussing says she and other trail enthusiasts in Billings are working to create a 60-plus-mile system for the city's metropolitan region, tying together neighborhoods, schools, parks, commercial areas, the Yellowstone River, and nearby communities. Trails, says Tussing, offer "another opportunity to connect people—socially, recreationally, and through transportation."

Trails don't just strengthen communities; they also beef up local economies. From afternoon dogsledding jaunts to weeklong outfitted pack trips, Montanans and visitors spend millions of dollars on trail-related activities. According to a recent University of Montana study, nonresident snowmobilers spend an average of \$224 per day, for a total of \$44 million annually. And a study by the Gallatin Valley Land Trust found that Bozeman's popular Gallagator Trail enhanced nearby property values and was a selling point used by real estate agents.

Wicks knows of some Great Falls businesses that whisk potential employees off to the River's Edge Trail to help form an early, positive impression of the city. "The idea is that the visitor has come to a place where the quality of life is improving," he says.

And Tussing says more and more Billings developers are viewing trails "as a positive enhancement for both the community as a whole and their development projects."

The benefits of trails don't stop there. Urban trail networks provide alternative transportation opportunities, reducing air pollution, energy consumption, and traffic congestion. "I use urban riverfront trails to commute to work by bicycle, and my rides are frequently the best part of my day," says German, the Missoula trail advocate. Cole laments that many people in the Helena

area who wish to walk or cycle to work are often forced to drive for lack of commuting trails. "I know that if more trails could be integrated into the Helena Valley, they would be used," she says.

Trails also offer opportunities for friends and families to spend time together. Howell, who notes that parents often take their kids snowmobiling, says, "Anytime you can provide family recreation, you're going to have a positive impact on [kids'] quality of life."

Many trails are tied to conservation efforts. Greenways are linear trail corridors that provide open space, native vegetation, wildlife habitat, protective buffers along waterways, and groundwater recharge areas. Trails can also help link, highlight, and conserve important historical sites. Additionally, trails are important places for organizations to provide interpretive and educational information through signs, brochures, and guided walks.

And then there's the obvious health benefit of trails, which encourage and enhance physical activity and fitness for an increasingly obese population.

Perhaps the greatest benefit of Montana's trails, however, is that they take people to the state's most beautiful and sought-after places. Backpackers and hikers use trails to reach vistas in Glacier National Park and other scenic destinations. Snowmobilers and Nordic skiers follow trails to striking winter landscapes. And hunters and anglers take trails to prime elk habitat and mountain trout lakes.

For many folks, trails may not be why they are outdoors but instead are how they reach their favorite places to do the things they love.

As Whitefish-area hiking enthusiast Rachel Schmidt puts it, "Trails are tools for creating adventure." 🐾

PHOTOS BY HEATH A. KORVOLAVLIQUIDLIGHTPHOTO.COM



### ROUTES TO MONTANA WONDERS

Right: Mountain biking in the Flathead National Forest near Whitefish. Far right: Taking it all in along the Continental Divide Trail.



TRAILS



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