



The Spirit Soars

Douglas Roane Farmland off Montana Highway 3 northwest of Billings

Montana is defined by its seemingly boundless troposphere. The nickname Big Sky State—which later morphed into Big Sky Country—was borrowed in 1961 (with the author’s permission) by the Montana State Advertising Department from A. B. Guthrie’s best-selling novel of the fur trade, *The Big Sky*. Half a century later, despite several new slogans (including the short-lived Montana: Naturally Inviting), the one extolling our expansive heavens still resonates.

The Big Sky moniker applies statewide, even though Montana’s two halves couldn’t be more different. In eastern Mon-

tana’s prairies, it’s the lack of view-blocking trees that reveals 360 degrees of horizon. In forested western Montana the sky opens up only as you gain altitude, but upon reaching a mountaintop vista you can see all points of the compass.

The sky here isn’t big everywhere. Canoeing down the cottonwood-lined Yellowstone River, fishing the deep Gallatin Canyon, or hiking through Douglas fir forest in the Swan Range, often the only visible sky is straight overhead. It’s the same obscured view you’d have in Michigan’s North Woods or Boston’s skyscraper-dominated downtown. But in Montana you

can climb out of a river valley onto the plain, or veer off a forested mountain trail to reach a rocky outcrop. Immediately a great expanse opens in all directions.

Stars and clouds expand the distance farther still. It’s dizzying to search for distant galaxies at night or watch billowing masses of fair-weather cumuli marching eastward. Scanning a night sky for constellations renders the enormous space and distances beyond comprehension. Wrote author Bill Bryson about watching the northern lights: “You have no idea how immense the sky is until you try to monitor it all.”

Perhaps the appeal of big skies is not the vast space itself but the liberating emotion it inspires. If so, people have been feeling that for a long time. Guthrie once wrote that his father, on his first day in Montana in 1901, said “standing under the big sky I felt free.”

Anyone ambling across the sagebrush flats of Garfield County or summiting a pass on the Continental Divide can still feel that sense of liberation. It’s also amply evident in the upward-looking photos we present on these and subsequent pages.

—Tom Dickson



Jason Savage *Above:* Rainy Lake, Seeley-Swan Valley
Shanna Mae Swanson *Right:* Heavy clouds over Bozeman
Denver Bryan *Below:* Montana sunset





Dana Phipps *Above:* Sunset over a reservoir in the Missouri River Breaks, west of Jordan

John Lambing *Above right:* Autumn clouds in western Montana

Mark N. Roberts *Below right:* Summer storm approaching Bozeman





Tony Bynum *Top:* Rafting the Missouri River in the Upper Missouri River Breaks National Monument
Don MacCarter *Above:* Flathead Lake in late spring



Steven Akre Square Butte, west of Great Falls