



BERT GILDART

Stop and Smell the S'mores

Slow down to get more from your campground experience this summer. BY BECKY LOMAX

JUST HANGIN' It's tempting to rush around Montana admiring one scenic site after another. Resist. Remember that you're on vacation. Find a great campsite, then set down roots for a few days. Kick back. Hang out. Build a fire. Even consider taking a nap—or two.

Pine needles and campfire smoke scent the air. The sunset sends a pale pink glow across the landscape. A stream gurgles nearby while, in the distance, a barred owl calls to its mate. Camping offers many ways to immerse your senses in nature. Unfortunately, too many people race through camping adventures in the same way they run through the grocery store—at high speed trying to fill their carts with a life list of experiences. Glacier: check. Flathead Lake: check. And so on.

There's nothing wrong with wanting to pack a lot into a camping trip, or visit as many sites as your vacation will allow. But during 35 years of camping throughout the Northern Rockies, I've learned that campgrounds offer a lot more than simply spots to set up a tent or park an RV. Campgrounds themselves can be destinations,

offering plenty of the nature, relaxation, recreation, and scenery we seek while vacationing. Listed here are four simple tips for making your next camping trip more enjoyable, meaningful, and memorable, along with nine Montana

campgrounds that anyone who loves camping won't want to miss.

PUT DOWN ROOTS

1 Camping remains one of the most popular outdoor activities in Montana. In many places, more people are camping than ever. Glacier National Park reported a



BECKY LOMAX

EASY DOES IT Roasting a marshmallow exemplifies the benefits of slow camping. Toast it too quickly, and it's ruined. Take your time, and the classic campfire treat browns perfectly.

record number of visitors during July and August last year, its campgrounds filled with tents and RVs nearly every day.

Beat the crowds by arriving at popular campgrounds between 10 a.m. (the usual check-out time) and noon. Then—and here's the real tip—stay put for a few days. Rather

than rushing from campground to campground—arriving each evening after a long day of travel and then grubbing for the few remaining spots—put down roots and make one site your base. Use the time ordinarily spent setting up and dismantling camp to fully enjoy the camping experience. Sleep in. Read a book in the shade of a tree. Head to a nearby hiking trail or scenic vista.

Be sure to pick the right campground for your base (see my picks on page 21). A dusty facility next to a highway or a site littered with trash is no place to spend even one day. Look for campgrounds with hiking and bicy-

business. But if the main reason to camp is to enjoy and appreciate nature, I've learned that almost anything requiring electricity interferes. (The exception for me is a camera, which adds to my outdoor experience.)

As someone who often camps with youngsters, I know that leaving video games and MP3 players at home isn't the easiest sell to kids or grandkids—at first. But without electronics blanketing natural sounds, you and your family will begin to hear the sighing of wind through treetops, the call of nearby loons, or the mournful yips of distant coyotes—sounds kids quickly learn to love.

“Nature has a restorative effect to calm, soothe, and reset the attention of both kids and adults.”

cling trails, swimming and boating lakes, or fishing and kayaking rivers within walking distance of your tent or RV. And keep in mind that many campgrounds without recreational amenities, especially ones near any type of water, can still be great places to watch birds and other wildlife.

2 UNPLUG Bring bug spray and sunscreen, but leave the electronics at home. I'm not being a Luddite. The whole point of camping for me is to leave my regular life—which includes e-mails, video games, TV, and the Internet—at home. In many campgrounds, RVers keep their generators droning on late into the night so they can watch television. How people choose to recreate is their own

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“Returning to the simpler sensory experience that nature provides can be soothing,” says Heather Ristow, education director for the Montana Audubon Conservation Education Center in Billings. “Nature has a restorative effect to calm, soothe, and reset the attention of both kids and adults.”

3 EXPLORE THE GROUNDS If you pick the right campground, there's no need to drive off each morning to discover new and exciting things to see. You can find plenty of natural wonders simply by meandering around the campground or even staying put at the campsite.

Though they can't compare with what you'd see backpacking into the wilderness, many Montana campgrounds are packed with delightful natural features. Over the years I've spotted glacier lilies, morel mushrooms, golden eagles, and deer fawns. And because you're not driving from one tourism

site to another, there's time to really look at wildlife, wildflowers, trees, and constellations. Bring along a few good field guides to help identify what you see.

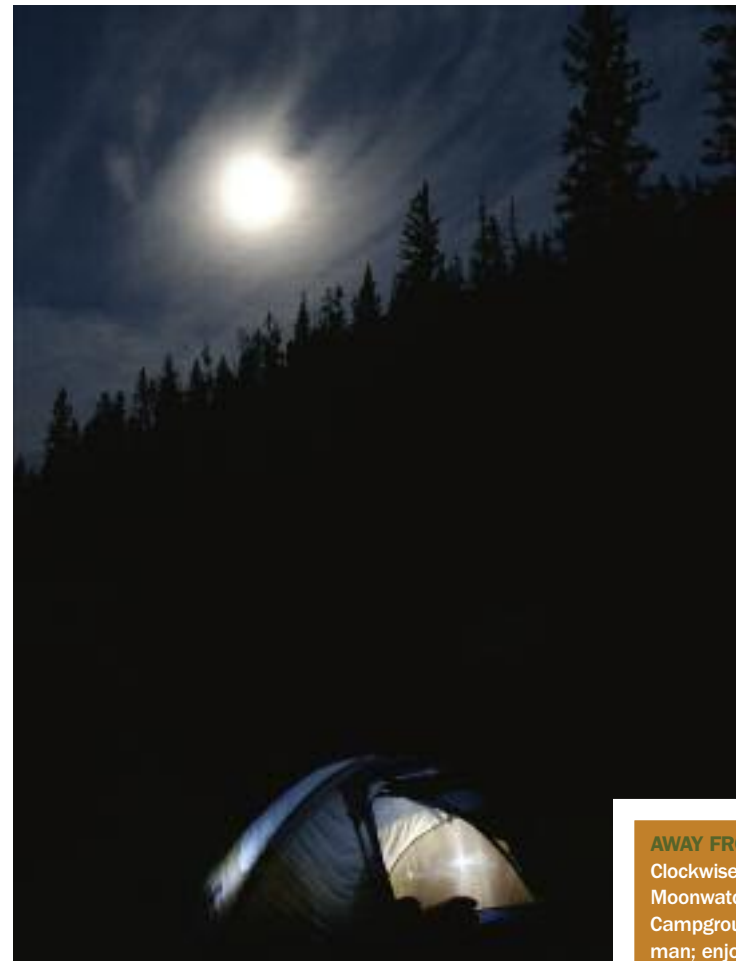
Another way of squeezing more from a campground stay is to draw, describe, or photograph what you see. Time abounds to sketch pine cones, write about surrounding sounds and smells, or figure out all the different things your digital camera can do, like taking macro shots of wildflowers or long-exposure pictures of the pre-dawn sky.

Dusk and night are wonderful times to enjoy camping. Each evening I search for the best place near my campsite to watch the sun go down. Even without a good westward view, I'll find a spot to enjoy alpenglow lighting up a distant mountainside or the twilight sky reflecting in a lake. And then things get even better.

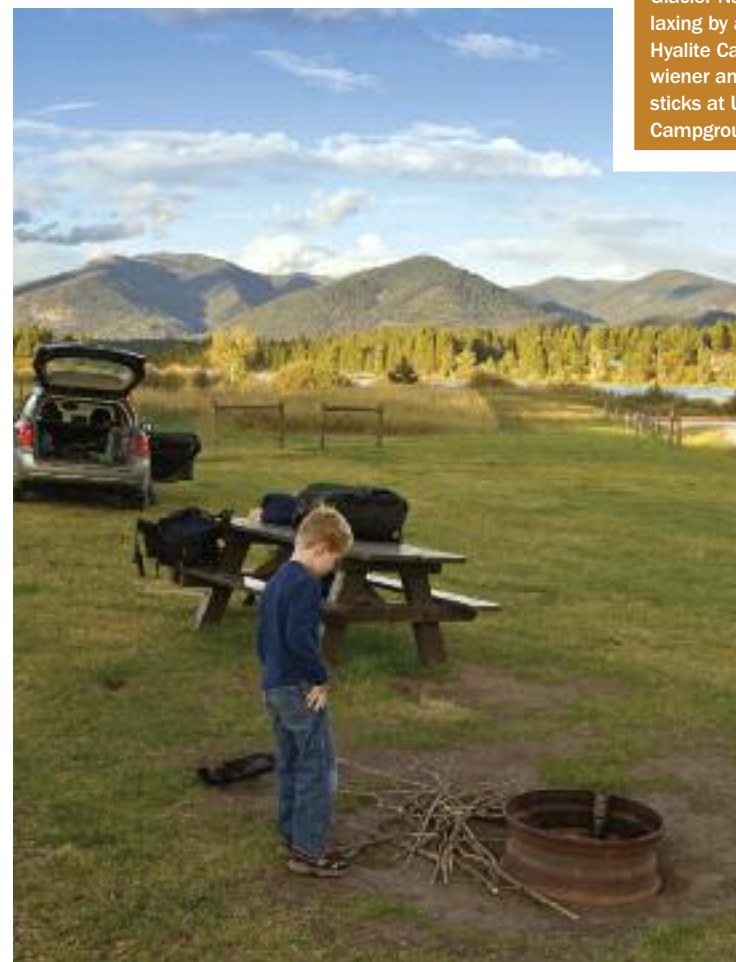
Most of our lives are spent indoors during darkness, but camping offers the chance to be outside at night. After the last marshmallow has been toasted and devoured, spend time around the campfire. Talk about what you saw that day, share stories, or play word games by the glow of dying embers.

After dousing the fire, turn off flashlights and soak in the night sounds, gaze at stars, and stare at the moon. You don't need a telescope, but binoculars can definitely enhance the experience of watching a full moon rise or identifying Orion, Draco, Canis Major, and other famous constellations.

4 COOK, FAMILY STYLE Camping can be even more fun when preparing and cooking food are part of the experience. Make dinner a time to experience different cooking methods, new foods, and even a little history. “Cooking on camping trips is a great way to involve the whole family. When done right, it can be very rewarding,” says Lori Rittel, who grew up cooking outdoors as the daughter of a Montana backcountry outfitter. With her brother John, she also co-authored the outdoor



AWAY FROM IT ALL
Clockwise from top left: Moonwatching at Langhor Campground near Bozeman; enjoying hot cocoa in Glacier National Park; relaxing by a campfire near Hyalite Canyon; gathering wiener and marshmallow sticks at Upsata Lake Campground near Ovando.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: WILDMESTPHOTOS.COM; BECKY LOMAX; JIM R. HARRIS; PAUL QUENEAU

cookbook *Cooking Backyard to Backcountry*.

Rittel says everyone in the family can help prepare and grill meats and vegetables, cook stews in foil pouches, and bake foil-wrapped potatoes. Kids can roast hotdogs and marshmallows with little assistance. Campfire cooking tools can be as basic as roasting sticks, long tongs, leather gloves, and aluminum foil.

“Kids are like sponges. They want to learn, and they want to be involved,” says Rittel. “The best way to get them involved is to give them a task. Start them off by teaching them how to build the fire, or stir ingredients, or husk corn. Then expand the responsibilities from there.”

When kids help out, cooking becomes more than just a fun family project. “Children involved in the cooking process are more likely to want to eat the final product, because they helped,” says Rittel. “It’s a great way to interest young children in foods they might otherwise reject.”

Campfire cooking can even provide opportunities to teach kids a bit of pioneer history. “A lot of cooking methods, such as using a Dutch oven, were used long ago before kitchens,” says John Rittel. Far too heavy for backpacking, Dutch ovens are ideal for car or RV camping. Made of heavy cast iron with a tightly fitting lid, these simple, portable cooking vessels have been used worldwide for centuries. After food is placed inside, coals are set around the sides and atop the lid to produce heat from all directions, as in a home oven. Campers use Dutch ovens to make stews, roasts, and casseroles as well as for baking biscuits, bread, and even cakes. “With no television or other distractions, you and your family can actually take the time to enjoy the cooking process and then sit down to a fabulous meal around the campfire,” Lori Rittel says.

Just two words summarize the advice I have for campers: slow down. Stay in one place for a few days. Spend time hanging around the campsite. Take a few hours to cook dinner. Even if it’s just for a weekend, a camping trip can rejuvenate your spirit and restore your soul—but only if you let it. 🐾



GOURMET GRUB Cooking meals at camp—whether in a traditional Dutch oven or on a modern propane grill—forces you to slow down and savor the process of preparing food for yourself, friends, and family. After a good meal, there’s nothing to do but stoke the fire, relax, and wait for the stars to come out.

TOP TO BOTTOM: CASTRONIDAHO.COM; JIM R. HARRIS; LINDA KELLY

9 Campgrounds Not To Miss

Montana is packed with great campgrounds. Here are nine I think every camper should visit at least once. Though most lack RV hookups, all contain plenty of scenery and recreation.

1 Avoid crowds in Glacier National Park by heading to **Two Medicine Campground**, where hiking trails rim Two Medicine Lake and climb to high passes. When the big lake is covered in whitecaps, paddlers and anglers can enjoy calmer waters on nearby Pray Lake. This is one of the few campgrounds in the world from which campers can spot distant black bears, grizzly bears, mountain goats, and bighorn sheep.

2 **Flathead Lake** is ringed by five small and secluded state parks: Big Arm, West Shore, Wayfarers, Yellow Bay, and Finley Point. The lake also contains a state park, Wild Horse Island, right in its middle. All parks contain camping sites, water, and picnic areas. The lake is known for its clean, clear water and is popular for swimming and kayaking.

3 **Big Therriault Lake Campground** defines quiet. The campground is next to Ten Lakes Wilderness Study Area in the Kootenai National Forest outside Eureka, at the end of a dirt road. Motorized boats aren’t allowed on 45-acre Big Therriault Lake, so you can hear waves lapping the shore and an occasional loon. Hikers and horseback riders can choose from several routes that include alpine lakes, lookouts, and scenic high ridge traverses.

4 **Holland Lake Campground** sits under thick conifers in the Swan Mountains of the Flathead National Forest north of Seeley Lake. The site is popular with anglers, water-skiers, boaters, paddlers, and hikers. Trails starting at the campground lead to waterfalls, lakes, a lookout, and the Bob Marshall Wilderness.

5 In the Bitterroot National Forest, **Lake Como** offers two campgrounds—one for tenters and one for RVers. Spacious sites spread out under a deep forest canopy. The dam-controlled lake is best before mid-July for fishing, boating, swimming, and paddling. (After that, dam releases drop lake levels too low for some water recreation.) A hiking trail circles the lake into the Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness.

6 Set in the otherworldly badlands of far eastern Montana, just outside Glendive off I-94, **Makoshika State Park** offers campers great cycling, hiking, and, at the wonderful visitor center, dinosaur fossil gawking. The park contains 15 RV spots as well as six primitive tent sites that have spectacular sunrise and sunset views.

7 In the Lewis and Clark National Forest, hillside campsites above Gibson Reservoir make **Mortimer Gulch Campground** a great base from which to explore the Sun River Wildlife Management Area.

Day hikers might see peregrine falcons, golden eagles, bighorn sheep, elk, and even grizzly bears at this popular entrance to the Bob Marshall Wilderness. Other activities include mountain biking, fishing, and boating (though paddlers need to be cautious of big winds).

8 **Cliff Point Campground**, set on Cliff Lake in the Gravelly Range of the Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest, contains campsites spread around a peninsula. Swimming is excellent in the lake’s shallow turquoise waters and clean, sandy bottom. The site is quiet because motorized boats are not allowed on the lake. Campers might spot bald eagles and beavers, and a hiking trail climbs to an upper campground.

9 Tucked on Rock Creek at the base of the Beartooth All American Road in Custer National Forest near Red Lodge, **Greenough Lake Campground** loops through a pine forest dotted by boulders dropped by ancient glaciers. Reaching the tiny lake requires only a quarter-mile hike on a National Recreation Trail. Drive just a few miles on scenic dirt and paved roads to reach the vast Beartooth Plateau for hiking, mountain biking, fishing, and sightseeing.

—Becky Lomax



Two Medicine Campground in Glacier National Park tucks against Two Medicine Creek as it winds between two lakes.

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