



# CONNECTING PEOPLE TO GREAT PLACES

For the past 50 years, the National Trail System Act has created a network of trails across the United States. Those and locally created routes in Montana benefit communities, residents, and visitors.

BY TOM DICKSON

**W**hen Kathy Schoendoerfer and her fishing guide husband Travis opened a fly shop in Ovando in 2000, the town's economy looked grim. "People here were saying Ovando was about to dry up and blow away," she says. But today the town of 75 is booming, at least during the summer, thanks to the roughly 1,000 bicyclists who stop by while riding the Great Divide Mountain Bike Route or Lewis and Clark Bicycle Trail on nearby U.S. Highway 200.

Cyclists can now camp for free in the town park; pay \$5 per night to stay in a tepee, the original town jail, or a sheepherder's wagon; or splurge on a real bed at the 100-year-old Ovando Inn. Also available: toilets, showers,

**OUT IN IT** Above left: Hikers wade through wildflowers on Glacier National Park's Piegan Pass Trail, part of the Continental Divide Trail system. At right: Montana contains more than 22,000 miles of equestrian, snowshoeing, mountain biking, hiking, cross-country skiing, and off-highway vehicle trails.



laundry, two cafes, a grocery store, and a travelers' message board. "We're now known from Banff to Belgium as a Montana destination," Schoendoerfer says of Ovando, named the Montana Office of Tourism and Business Development's 2018 Community of the Year (the smallest town ever to receive the honor). "Cyclists breathed life into Ovando. We would have been crazy not to do everything we could to welcome them here."

A 2014 University of Montana study found that bicycle tourists contributed nearly \$377 million annually to Montana's economy. That's no surprise to merchants in Twin Bridges. For years, cyclists traversing the TransAmerica and Lewis and Clark Bicycle Trails blew right through town,

D. LYNNEL BLANK INSET PHOTOS BY SHUTTERSTOCK



**BUCKS FROM BIKES** Small communities like Ovando (left) and Twin Bridges (above) lure cyclists by offering camping, showers, food, and other essentials. “If you’re on a bike, you rely on the small communities that people in vehicles drive right through,” says one bicycle touring advocate.

population 400. Then, in 2009, local resident Bill White got the okay to build a cyclists-only campground in the town park. The two-wheeled tourists began stopping—and spending. “All the bike riders passing through were like gold going by in a river,” White, who died in 2012, told a *Montana Quarterly* reporter in 2010. What’s now known as Bike Camp offers showers, toilets, a screened eating area, and grass to pitch a tent. “A group might spend a couple hundred dollars over a day or two,” says Roger Hutchinson, owner of the Main Street Market. Town leaders estimate the camp attracts roughly \$10,000 in new business each year.

Cyclists aren’t the only trail users fueling local economies. Hikers, backpackers, horse riders, snowmobilers, and others spend millions of dollars annually to experience Montana’s world-renowned scenery, open space, and wildlife. All that visitation wouldn’t happen without designated routes. “Trails are essential to Montana’s entire recreation economy,” says Bob Walker, chair of the Montana Trails Coalition. “They take people to places in Montana they could never see or experience if they stayed on the interstate.”

Trail use is increasing in Montana and nationwide, fueled in part by growing visitation to trail-rich national parks (Glacier continues to break attendance records every year), the aging population’s desire for low-impact exercise, and the 2014 movie *Wild*, a story of self-discovery on the Pacific Crest Trail

starring Reese Witherspoon.

In 1968, Congress passed the National Trails System Act to meet increasing demand for scenic and recreational routes. Today, on the act’s 50th anniversary, communities, residents, and visitors across Montana recog-



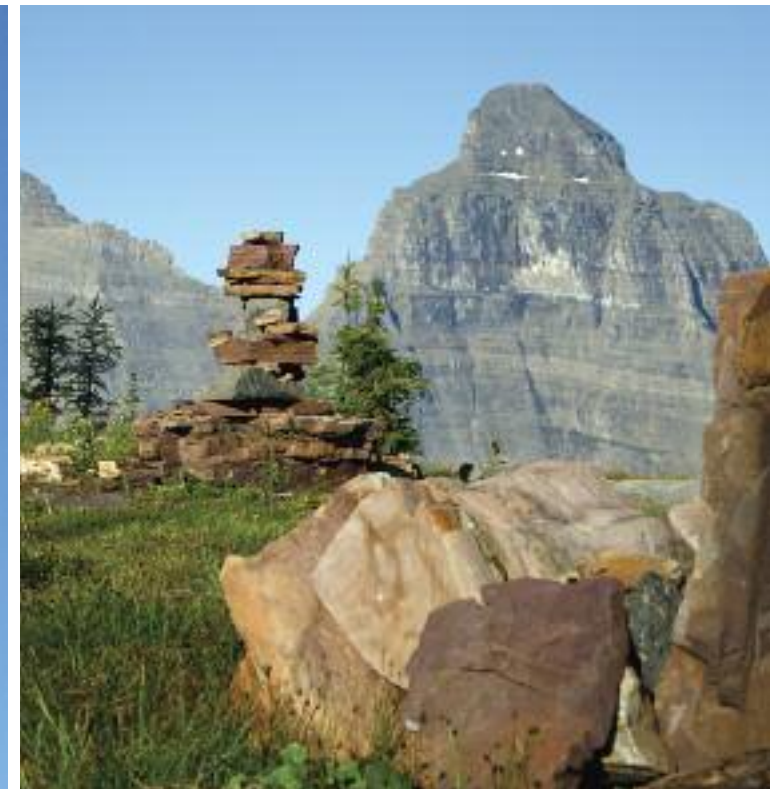
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nize the value of trails to local economies and quality of life. “The act was what started federal involvement in trail designation,” says Beth Shumate, head of the Parks Division of Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks. “From that we’ve seen an amazing growth not only in national trails but also state and community trails that provide recreation and health benefits for Montana residents and visitors.”

**CONGRESS TAKES A BIG STEP**

Trails have crisscrossed North America for as long as animals and people needed to move from one place to another. The first, created by wildlife, were expanded by American Indians, fur trappers, and settlers. The United States didn’t get serious about trails until the post-World War II recreation boom of the 1950s and ’60s. Possessing more free time and spending money, Americans wanted more opportunities to enjoy the outdoors. The 1968 National Trails System Act was designed “to promote the preservation of, public access to, travel within, and enjoyment and appreciation of the open-air, outdoor areas and historic resources of the nation.” Initially, Congress authorized creation of National Scenic and National Recreation Trails. It amended the act in 1978 to add National Historic Trails, like the Nez Perce National Historic Trail from Idaho to north-central Montana.

The nation’s 11 National Scenic Trails, like the Continental Divide Trail from southern New Mexico to Glacier National Park’s northern boundary, each are 100 or more miles long and designated mainly for nonmotorized use. The 19 National Historic Trails follow travel routes of national significance, such as the Lewis and Clark Trail that connects 11 states. The roughly 1,200 National Recreation Trails are shorter. In Montana, these range from the 32-mile-long Garnet Winter National Recreation Trail south of the Blackfoot



**NATIONAL TRAILS** Montana is home to several renowned national trails (see map on page 32). Clockwise from top left: Trail marker on the Continental Divide National Scenic Trail; a rock cairn on the Pacific Northwest National Scenic Trail; a marker commemorating Chief Joseph at Bear Paw National Battlefield on the Nez Perce National Historic Trail; Decision Point above the confluence of the Missouri and Marias Rivers, on the Lewis and Clark National Historic Trail.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: FAR OUT WANDERINGS; CRYSTAL BAE; STEVEN AKRE; NELSON KENTER; CHUCK HANEY; JOHN LAMBING

River, which is used by snowmobilers, cross-country skiers, and dogsledders, to the half-mile-long Prairie-Marsh Boardwalk, a wheelchair-accessible trail at Benton Lake National Wildlife Refuge north of Great Falls.

In 1983 Congress amended the National Trails System Act to allow unused rail corridors to be converted to trails. Montana now has 19 rail-trails totaling 228 miles, including the Route of the Hiawatha Scenic Bike Trail near Lookout Pass along the Idaho border.

### ECONOMIC DRIVERS

Whether taking snowmobilers to scenic winter vistas, allowing backpackers to explore wilderness, or providing places to walk the dog, trails provide endless health and recreation benefits. They also foster local community pride and identity, generate spending, and create jobs.

The Whitefish Trail covers 36 miles of natural surface around Whitefish Lake in northwestern Montana. A recent study by Bozeman-based Headwaters Economics found that hikers and mountain bikers using the trail system contribute \$6.4 million annually and support 68 additional jobs in Whitefish. “Outdoor recreation is the number one reason people live in or visit Whitefish,” says study author Megan Lawson. “The Whitefish Trail is a huge part of that attraction.”

Laura Crawford of the Missoula-based Adventure Cycling Association says small communities are especially positioned to reap a steady cash flow from cyclists. “For a 200-mile trip between, say, Kalispell and



Helena, a family in a vehicle might stop once for gas and maybe lunch,” she explains. “But cyclists biking 50 miles a day need four days of food, and places to sleep, preferably with a hot shower, in four different towns. If you’re on a bike, you rely on the small communities that people otherwise drive right through.”

Towns like Seeley Lake, Cooke City, and Troy benefit from motorized trail use, too. A University of Montana study in the early 2000s found that nonresident snowmobilers, using the Treasure State’s 4,000 miles

of groomed trails, spent an average of \$224 per day in the state, for a total of \$44 million annually.

Trails make communities more livable and add value to real estate. “The hospital, large manufacturers, and other businesses are attracting workers to Lewistown in part because we offer a trail system that people want,” says Kevin Myhre, development director for a construction company and for 14 years the Lewistown city manager. “We’ve now got a brewery that wants to locate right next to a trail here in town.” A \$2 million



**WINTER AND SUMMER** Above: Pausing to take in the scenery on Two Top Mountain Snowmobile Trail near West Yellowstone. Below: Mountain biking a spur of the River’s Edge Trail in Great Falls.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: LUKE DURAN/MONTANA OUTDOORS; KEN TAKATA; CHUCK HANEY; MONTANA WILDERNESS ASSOCIATION

### The great upkeep challenge

“Every community wants to build a new trail, but they also need to make sure there’s money for operations and maintenance down the road,” says Beth Shumate, head of the FWP Parks Division.

Trails require upkeep. Signs defaced by vandals need replacement. Routes must be cleared when blocked by rock slides, vegetation, and fallen trees. For instance, large stretches of the Continental Divide Trail need work to open up blockages created by wind-blown trees killed by pine bark beetles or forest fire.

To the rescue are volunteers who adopt trails and clear trees, shore up eroding routes, and do other maintenance. Among many other volunteer efforts statewide, the Montana Wilderness Association is working with the Continental Divide Trail Coalition this summer to repair areas of the national trail near Lewis and Clark Pass damaged by the 2017 Alice Creek Fire. Equestrians and OHV users keep trails clear, too.

Funding remains inadequate to meet the growing backlog of neglected trails. “Even though communities are asking for more trails, federal agencies are seeing huge budget cuts for trail development and management,” says Bob Walker, chair of the Montana Trails Coalition. “We need to restore that funding and find new sources of revenue to maintain the trails that people want here in Montana.” ■



MWA crews reroute a trail in a burned forest.



The National Trails System Act was signed into law by President Lyndon Johnson in 1968

**National Scenic and Historic Trails**  
11 National Scenic Trails  
19 National Historic Trails

These 30 trails run 55,000 miles through 49 states in wild, rural, suburban, and urban areas.

They connect and travel through 70 wildlife refuges, 80 national parks, 90 national forests, 100 Bureau of Land Management areas, 120 wilderness areas, numerous state and local parks, trails, other protected areas, and 100 major urban areas.

It takes over 1 million hours of volunteer labor to build and maintain these trails each year.

**National Recreation Trails**  
1,200 trails, including  
21 National Water Trails

26,000 miles

These trails run through all 50 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico.

**Rail-Trails**

A 1983 amendment to the National Trails System Act allows unused rail corridors to be converted to trails.

2,000 rail-trails exist in 50 states.

As of 2017, there were 22,000 miles of completed rail-trails and 8,000 miles of projects in progress.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: NELSON KENTER; STEVEN AKRE; DENVER BRYAN

home in the Spanish Peaks listed by Big Sky Real Estate boasts that the house is “just steps away” from hiking, cross-country skiing, and mountain biking trails.

You don’t need to be a millionaire to enjoy the hundreds of national, state, and local trails totaling 22,000 miles in Montana. The majority—roughly 85 percent—run through national forest property managed by the U.S. Forest Service in Montana’s western half. But central and eastern Montana have trails, too, often built by towns and cities working with state and federal agencies and civic-minded landowners. Billings-area residents use the Swords Rimrock Trail overlooking downtown or head south on weekends to the Pryor Mountain’s motorized and nonmotorized trails. After the flood of 2011, Roundup constructed two miles of trail along the scenic Musselshell River used by residents and tourists. Lewistown’s extensive trail system includes access to one of the most productive wild trout streams in Montana.

Other notable routes through Montana include the Ice Age Floods National Geologic Trail, and water routes like the Clearwater River Canoe and the Flathead Lake Marine Trails. Some trails are designated by private groups like Adventure Cycling, which mapped and promotes the Great Divide Mountain Bike Route from Alberta through Montana to New Mexico. Others, like the Bitterroot Birding Trail and Montana Dinosaur Trail, are not physical trails but conceptual routes connecting a series of

specialized recreation sites, in this case for bird watching and amateur paleontology.

Add to that the hundreds of miles of equestrian, snowmobile, and off-highway vehicle trails, and thousands of miles of mountain and streamside trails used by hunters and anglers to find game and reach fishing waters.

#### FUNDING TRAILS

Uncle Sam funds almost all trail development and maintenance. In 1992 Congress established the Recreational Trails Program, which provides funds to states to develop and maintain nonmotorized and motorized recreational trails and trail-related facilities. The money comes from an excise tax on motor fuel used by snowmobiles, all-terrain vehicles, off-highway motorcycles, and off-highway light trucks. (Hikers: Consider hugging an OHVer one of these days in gratitude.)

In Montana, the federal money is administered by the FWP Parks Division’s Recreational Trails Program, which makes grants to public agencies, communities, tribes, counties, nonprofit groups, and other entities. FWP collaborates with the citizen-based State Trails Advisory Committee to review applicants and award grants each year.

In 2018, FWP granted roughly \$1.5 million in federal money to 50 recipients including \$20,000 to Pondera HealthCare Foundation to build a mile-long multiuse path at Conrad; \$10,000 to the Troy Snowmobile Club to groom trails in the Kootenai National Forest; \$85,000 to avalanche education centers in Missoula and Hungry Horse; and \$90,000 to the Back Country Horsemen of Montana to improve multiuse trails across western Montana. “Based on project proposals, we’ve seen interest in trails in Montana double in the past decade,” says Shumate, the FWP Parks Division administrator. “Every community we hear from wants a trail system that connects people to public lands and outdoor recreation.”

Shumate adds that FWP and other Montana agencies are helping small towns develop trail systems through the state’s Building Active Communities project. “Small communities definitely get it,” she says. “They see that trails are all about livability, that they bring people together and strengthen the social fabric—not to mention draw money into the local economy.” 🐾



**FROM BACKCOUNTRY TO FRONTCOUNTRY** Above: Backpackers hike through a sea of fireweed in a burned section of the Continental Divide Trail deep in the Bob Marshall Wilderness Area. Left: Hunters rely on trails to penetrate deep into forests to find elk, deer, and other big game. Right: Just a few miles from bustling U.S. Highway 93 in the Bitterroot Valley, a ranger leads a bird-watching group on the Kenai Nature Trail in the Lee Metcalf National Wildlife Refuge.



## Trails, trail groups, and other information

A wide variety of books and websites offer information on federal, state, and local trails across Montana.

### Trails

**National Trails:** Locations of all National Historic Trails, National Scenic Trails, and National Recreation Trails in Montana are on the “Find Trails” page of the American Trails website. ([americantrails.org](http://americantrails.org))

**Montana Hiking Trails:** FalconGuides publishes guidebooks on Montana hiking and backpacking that are useful for both beginners and experts.

**Maps:** Find trail maps, including detailed U.S. Geological Survey topographic maps (essential for backcountry travel), at sporting goods stores and online.

### Organizations

**FWP Recreational Trails Program:** Learn how to apply for grants and see where federal funds are distributed in Montana. Program information is on the FWP website: [fwp.mt.gov](http://fwp.mt.gov). There you can also search for the comprehensive (though nearly two-decades-old) Montana State Trails Plan.

**American Trails:** This national group advocates for all types of motorized and nonmotorized trails. The organization’s website ([americantrails.org](http://americantrails.org)) has a Montana page listing dozens of links to trail information and advocacy groups.

**Montana Trails Coalition:** This new organization brings together a wide range of trail interests—from snowmobilers to the Montana Wilderness Association—who share a common goal of creating new trails in the backcountry, in the frontcountry, and between communities, and maintaining existing trails. Supported by an advisory committee of state and federal agencies, the group aims “to find alternative funding sources to manage trails,” says group chair Bob Walker. Learn more at [montanatrailcoalition.org](http://montanatrailcoalition.org).