



FOREVER *Free* TO FLOW

Celebrating the 50th anniversary of the National Wild and Scenic Rivers Act—in the state where it all began. BY BECKY LOMAX

STILL MOVING The sun sets on the Middle Fork of the Flathead River near Essex, along the southern border of Glacier National Park. Wild and Scenic designation has prevented the river from being dammed.

PHOTO BY MEGAN JOHNSON

In three turbulent drops, whitewater slices through Spruce Park Canyon in the Great Bear Wilderness. At high water in late June, the upper Middle Fork of the Flathead River roars with savage hydraulics through lurking boulders burly enough to upend a rubber raft and send its paddlers flying.

The Spruce Park Canyon Class IV rapids, about 20 miles south of Glacier National Park, are renowned among big-water rafters. Commercial operators take visitors down Montana's closest equivalent to Idaho's Salmon River on multiday trips through the stunning scenery of pristine mountain wilderness that remains relatively untouched by humans.

Yet if not for twin brothers who later became famous for their grizzly bear research, this wild stretch of river might instead be only a dry, rocky channel.

The upper Middle Fork's survival is a legacy of the National Wild and Scenic Rivers Act, which celebrates its 50th anniversary this year. "No other country on Earth has a law that permanently protects rivers in their free-flowing condition," says Scott Bosse, Northern Rockies director of the conservation group American Rivers, in Bozeman. "The real testament to just how much Montanans and others value their

rivers is shown by their support of this federal legislation that proactively identifies and protects these aquatic resources before they are threatened by development."

BIRTH OF RIVER PROTECTION

Montana became the birthplace of the National Wild and Scenic Rivers concept almost by accident. In the late 1950s, the Army Corps of Engineers proposed building a 405-foot-high dam on the upper Middle Fork. At the time, Frank and John Craighead were conducting survival training on western whitewater rivers for the federal government. They visited Spruce Park and recognized the impending threat the proposed project posed to native westslope cutthroat trout as well as wildlife migration routes and habitat. The Corps's plan was to dam the river then divert it down a 12-mile-long underground tunnel to a power-generating facility at Hungry Horse Reservoir. For the rest of its length downstream from the

proposed Spruce Park Dam, the Middle Fork would be reduced to a trickle. The South Fork of the Flathead had already been dammed in 1953, and hydropower developers also had their eyes on the North Fork, which flows from Canada along Glacier's western boundary.

For years, conservationists and congressional leaders in Washington, D.C. had been discussing the need for federal wilderness protection. The Craigheads agreed, but believed that wilderness proposals wouldn't protect wildlife habitat along river corridors at lower elevations, such as the Middle Fork. In 1959, the year the brothers began their famous study of grizzly bears in Yellowstone National Park, they wrote a widely distributed article for *Naturalist* magazine proposing a classification system that would designate rivers as wild, semiwild, semi-harnessed, and harnessed. Classification, the brothers reasoned, would allow people to see just how scarce wild rivers truly were and how their protection was linked to that of wilderness lands. "Rivers and their watersheds are inseparable, and to maintain wild areas we must preserve the rivers that drain them," they wrote.

WILD AND SCENIC RIVERS ACT

Four years after enacting the Wilderness Act, Congress passed the National Wild and

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"In spite of the durability of rock-walled canyons and the surging power of cataracting water, the wild river is a fragile thing—the most fragile portion of the wilderness country."

—JOHN CRAIGHEAD

RIVER GUARDIANS Above: John (left) and Frank Craighead on the Idaho River in 1970. Below: President Lyndon B. Johnson signs the National Wild and Scenic Rivers Act into law on October 2, 1968.



Scenic Rivers Act in 1968. Congressional leaders of the effort included Montana's Senator Lee Metcalf and Idaho's Senator Frank Church. The legislation protects designated rivers from dams and other development that would change their beautiful or untamed nature—protections the Wilderness Act had not secured. Designation does not affect private property rights.

Ironically, the original version didn't include the three forks of the Flathead or any other Montana rivers, which continued to be threatened by commercial interests promoting hydropower dams. Finally, in 1976, passage of the Omnibus Wild and Scenic Rivers Act designated the three forks and the Upper Missouri between Fort Benton and Fort Peck Reservoir as Wild and Scenic Rivers. No Montana rivers have received this designation since.

Those four Montana rivers are among a total of 208 designated rivers nationwide, most managed by the U.S. Forest Service. Protections maintain their clean water and free-flowing nature. "Once a river is designated as Wild and Scenic, we no longer have to fight the same battles against proposed mines, dams, and other threats over and over again," Bosse says. Most recently in Montana, the Wild and Scenic River status of the North Fork of the Flathead was used as international leverage by Senator Jon Tester and others in negotiating against future mining and energy development in the river's headwaters in British Columbia.



HERE WE GO! Cutting through the Great Bear Wilderness, the upper South Fork of the Flathead is run by experienced solo rafters and thrill-seeking tourists guided by expert commercial operators.

LEFT TO RIGHT: NICK FLICCI; CRAIGHEAD FAMILY PHOTO; NATIONAL ARCHIVES; MAP BY LUKE DURAN/MONTANA OUTDOORS



A HANDFUL OF RIVERS In total, 368 miles of Montana's rivers have been designated as Wild and Scenic Rivers, roughly two-tenths of 1 percent of the state's total. The North Fork of the Flathead is subdesignated as Scenic; the upper South and North Forks of the Flathead are subdesignated as Wild, and the Upper Missouri River—famous for its White Cliffs stretch—is subdesignated as Recreational, as are the lower stretches of the other three.



REST AREA Under a fiery sky, floaters make camp on the Missouri River near Hole in the Wall on the White Cliffs, made famous by Lewis and Clark.

PHOTO BY ROLAND TAYLOR

In total, 368 miles of Montana’s rivers gained recognition as Wild and Scenic Rivers, roughly two-tenths of 1 percent of the state’s 170,000 total river miles. The rivers are classified as Wild, Scenic, or Recreational, according to the extent to which they have been developed. They are used for floating, angling, scenery appreci-

ation, camping, and wildlife watching. Licensed guide companies lead whitewater, scenic, and fishing float trips on all four.

MONTANA’S WILD RIVERS

Two of these Montana rivers are subclassified as Wild, which means they must remain primitive, roadless, and unpolluted. Cutting

through upthrust rock slabs in the Great Bear Wilderness, the upper Middle Fork of the Flathead churns up several miles of thrilling (though potentially dangerous) whitewater. Class IV rapids punctuate this remote river that amps up to dangerous Class V water during runoff in Spruce Park Canyon. A steady string of raft-flipping

holes make this stretch popular with skilled solo rafters and thrill-seeking tourists who consign their fate to the calloused hands of experienced guides.

The South Fork of the Flathead is a much tamer river that rambles north through the Bob Marshall Wilderness into Hungry Horse Reservoir. Shallow riffles

alternate with sapphire-blue and emerald-green pools containing native mountain whitefish, westslope cutthroat trout, and bull trout. In fact, the South Fork is the only river in Montana where anglers can fish for the federally threatened bull trout. “The Wild and Scenic River designation preserves the natural river corridor, which in

turn provides a measure of protection for the fishery,” says Matt Boyer, FWP regional fisheries science program supervisor in Kalispell. “With no land use or development along the river’s edge, plus limited road access, the South Fork offers more opportunities for solitude to enhance the angler’s experience.”



WILD RIDE Clockwise from top: Canoeing the North Fork of the Flathead River; colorful rocks in the Middle Fork of the Flathead River near Blankenship Bridge; sandstone formations on the Upper Missouri River near Big Sandy; sunrise at Coal Banks Landing on the Upper Missouri River; exploring the White Cliffs of the Upper Missouri River; the South Fork of the Flathead River above Hungry Horse Reservoir.



SCENIC AND RECREATIONAL

From the Canada border, the North Fork of the Flathead saunters through wolf, moose, and grizzly bear habitat below Glacier National Park's rugged peaks. The upper stretch is Montana's only river subdesignated as Scenic, with a mostly primitive and undeveloped shoreline. Peppered with logjams and braided channels, the river patters along with small rapids, making for lazy-day paddling in canoes, kayaks, and rafts. These waters are also plied by driftboats carrying anglers casting dries or drifting nymphs for westslope cutthroat trout.

All three forks of the Flathead are designated as Recreational in their lower stretches. Due to easier road access, FWP fishing access sites here are packed on summer weekends. Rafters and kayakers tackle the occasional whitewater, canoeists and paddleboarders float flat water, and anglers drift slowly over deep holes.

East of the Continental Divide, the Upper Missouri River slices through sage-scented prairie and the weather-beaten White Cliffs

of the Missouri Breaks. Squadrons of American white pelicans soar along this ancient aquatic highway, first used by Native Americans, later by the Corps of Discovery, and then by flotillas of commercial steamboats. These days, the river is run by all manner of watercraft—rubber rafts, canoes, sea kayaks, motorboats, and even motorized party barges. Starting in spring, amid a cacophony of songbirds, they make their way along the scenic stretch, made famous by Lewis and Clark and the late Helena author Stephen Ambrose's *Undaunted Courage*. The muddy water provides good fishing for channel catfish, freshwater drum, and the occasional shovelnose sturgeon. Each fall, the river is used as a travel route by deer and elk hunters looking for big game on adjacent Bureau of Land Management tracts.

There's no lack of ways to spend a summer weekend or week in Montana. But this year, on the 50th anniversary of the National Wild and Scenic Rivers Act, a trip down one (or more) of Montana's four designated waters seems especially appropriate. 🐻

TOP TO BOTTOM: ERIC HEIDLE; ERIK ARGOTTI



A bipartisan bill to designate 20 miles of East Rosebud Creek, southwest of Billings, as a Wild and Scenic River unanimously passed the U.S. Senate in December 2017 and may come before the House later this year.



MERIWETHER WAS HERE Above: Cruising past the Grand Natural Wall. The volcanic dike is a prominent landmark on the White Cliffs of the Upper Missouri River. Below: Floating the Middle Fork of the Flathead River.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: NELSON KENTNER; LINDA MARTIN; STEVEN AKRE; TIM CADDY; SUMIO HARADA; JOHN LAMMING