



WET AND WILD

See record-book bighorn rams? Nap on a beach? Leap into crystal-clear water? Whatever your fancy, a visit to Flathead Lake State Park should be on everyone's list of must-do summer adventures. **BY PEGGY O'NEILL**

A COUPLE JUMPS FROM A DOCK INTO FLATHEAD LAKE. PHOTO BY CHUCK HANEY



On a warm summer day a few years ago, I set a personal best for running the 50-yard dash.

Not bad for a person in her 40s, wearing hiking boots and sprinting uphill on Flathead Lake's Wild Horse Island, one of the six units that comprise Flathead Lake State Park.

My husband and I had spent the previous night in a rustic cabin (I'm lucky to know one of the island's 31 cabin owners), and we woke early to explore the 2,160-acre island. Our goal was to hike to its highest point, Eyeglass Peak, 900 feet above lake level. We filled our water bottles, packed a lunch, laced our boots, and headed out the screen door.

Wild Horse Island, on the southwestern arm of the massive 122,560-acre lake, has a small trail system that takes you to the Johnson homestead, a cabin built in the early 1910s by a Norwegian immigrant. Visitors are also free to explore the entire island off

trail except for the private lots that dot the shoreline.

People reach the island by motorboat, kayak, sailboat, canoe, or commercial launch. After landing on any of several sandy beaches, most visitors wander the island among stately conifers and colorful fields of arrowleaf balsamroot, larkspur, yarrow, nodding onion, and owl-clover.

In addition to its beautiful flora, Wild Horse is well known for its abundant and diverse wildlife. The island is home to bighorn sheep, mule deer, songbirds, bald eagles, wild turkeys, loons, ospreys, and mergansers. A few mountain lions live there, too, as do black bears and the lake's five wild horses (more on those later). While hiking through its Palouse prairie, a grassland native west of the Continental Divide, it's easy to envision how the island's history played out.

There are several stories of how horses first reached the island. The one most commonly told is that, in the 18th and 19th cen-

turies, Kootenai Indians swam their best horses to the island, via Cromwell Island, to protect them from Blackfoot raiders who roamed the lake shoreline. When explorer John Mullan, part of the Isaac Stevens party, recorded the lake's numerous islands in his 1854 journal, he wrote that one was "called the 'Wild Horse' island."

Among the hundreds of non-native landowners who tried to make a living on the island, several devised grand plans that either failed or never got off the ground. Resorts proposed in the 1950s and '60s featured golf courses, airstrips, and even a ski slope. Fortunately none of those were built. One grand structure that did arise was the Hiawatha Lodge. Built for wealthy tourists, it operated during the 1930s until its owner drowned in the lake.

CLOSE CALL

But on that summer day in 2014, my husband and I felt like we were the only two

people on the island. An osprey circled slowly in the blue sky, and western meadowlarks sang in the tall grass. While searching for the island's namesake wild horses—five mares, descendants of feral herds brought to the island decades ago from Bureau of Land Management property—we passed a Montana heritage apple orchard, still producing fruit a century after it was planted.

Descending into a meadow, we startled two gigantic mule deer bucks. To this day, those are the largest racks I have ever seen. Wildlife biologists note that the lack of hunting allows the island's deer and bighorn sheep to live long enough to grow massive headgear. A half hour later, while heading up a hill, we encountered a dozen or so of those enormous rams. I wouldn't be surprised if one was the world record designated by the Boone and Crockett Club in 2018. Before dying of natural causes, the nine-year-old ram, which scored 216½ points, lived its

entire life on Wild Horse Island.

It was at that point that I set my own record. While trying to sneak up to get a closer look at the rams, I stepped on a rotted tree stump. Since I was in stealth mode, moving slowly and quietly, I was startled when my husband suddenly screamed, "Bees!" As I turned to give him a look for ruining our encounter with the sheep, I saw he was pointing to where I stood with a horrified look on his face. I looked down and saw a swarm of yellowjackets enveloping my foot.

I don't really remember what happened next, but within seconds I was 50 yards away and, luckily, yellowjacket free and sting free. But unfortunately I was also bighorn-photo free.

WATER, WATER EVERYWHERE

Wild Horse Island is just one stopping point on a tour of Flathead Lake State Park's six units. Driving clockwise from Polson around

the lake, you'll also hit Big Arm, West Shore, Wayfarers, Yellow Bay, and, finally, Finley Point. Each offers spectacular scenery, lake access, and camping.

The largest natural lake west of the Mississippi River, Flathead is 27 miles long, from north to south, and about 15 miles wide. It covers 191 square miles, and its deepest point reaches down to 371 feet.

Like many other large, deep lakes worldwide, Flathead has spawned unsubstantiated reports of a giant aquatic inhabitant. Since the late 1800s, dozens of people have claimed they've seen a large creature. The Flathead Lake Monster is described as between 20 and 40 feet long with humps on its back and a dark, snakelike body.

Fisheries biologists and anglers who have plied the lake for decades with nets and sonar have never seen such a creature. But the lake is *definitely* home to monster game fish. The state record lake trout (42.69 pounds) and lake whitefish (10.46

CLOCKWISE FROM LOWER LEFT: OPPOSITE PAGE: ELIZA WILEY; CRAIG MOORE; RON HOFF; JEREMIE HOLMAN



LAKE LIFE Clockwise from far left: Boaters beach on Wild Horse Island; a stand-up paddleboarder heads home at sundown; the island still houses five wild horses, progeny of animals brought from BLM property elsewhere; closed to hunting, the island is also home to mule deer with huge racks and bighorn sheep, some with record-book horns.





pounds) both came from Flathead Lake, and the lake's bull trout occasionally top 20 pounds. Other species attracting anglers include westslope cutthroat trout, rainbow trout, and kokanee.

Boaters find access via boat ramps at Wayfarers, West Shore, Big Arm, and Yellow Bay in all seasons but midwinter, when a few of the lake's bays freeze. Fishing heats up during the spring Mack Days tournament. Sanctioned by FWP and heavily promoted by local communities, the fishing contest is a management tool for the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes to reduce numbers of non-native lake trout in the lake and boost native bull trout and westslope cutthroat trout populations. The tournament offers a wide range of prizes as incentives for catching lakers, with a total payout of \$225,000.

In addition to its popular fisheries, Flathead Lake is breathtakingly beautiful, no

Peggy O'Neill is chief of the FWP Information Bureau.

matter the vantage point: from the highway, a boat, a paddleboard, an inflatable duck, or even behind a snorkeling mask. The water is so clear that when standing on shore you can see the multicolored rocks covering the lake bottom. The water is also cold, ranging from 36 degrees F. in mid-January to just 68 degrees F. in mid-August. Don't even try to ease in; get a running start.

Just as beautiful as the lake itself is Flathead's surrounding scenery. On a clear, calm day, when the sky is perfectly reflected on the water, you can see the snowcapped Mission and Swan Mountains to the east and the Salish Mountains far to the west.

AROUND THE LAKE

Those with strong arms and plenty of time can tour the lake and its six state park units by kayak. The Flathead Lake Marine Trail is a network of access points and stopover areas. Kayakers can spend a day on the "trail" (actually more of a concept than an actual signed route) or plan a trip that includes camping at one or several of the state

park units. The campgrounds are full all summer, so multiday kayakers need to make campsite reservations well in advance.

Big Arm, a popular jumping-off point for Wild Horse Island, features 217 acres with 41 campsites among mature ponderosa pine and juniper trees. A 1.75-mile hiking trail is a great route for watching birds at dawn and dusk, and the beach offers access to swimming, scuba diving, waterskiing, boating, or just lying in the sun with a good book. From mid-April to October, the unit also rents three large, round wall tents, known as yurts, for family gatherings and overnight stays.

West Shore offers 31 campsites among groves of Douglas fir, ponderosa pine, and American larch (tamarack) on its 129 acres. Glacially carved rock outcrops rise from the lake and provide fantastic views of the water and the mountains across the lake. Swimming, boating, and fishing are popular activities along the rocky beach.

Wayfarers unit is just south of Bigfork. A nature trail from the shore to a scenic



WATER WONDERLAND Above: Kayakers (with companion) paddle along the lake's scenic shoreline. Right: An angler holds a lake trout. Not native to Flathead Lake, the predator species outcompetes native westslope cutthroat trout and bull trout. The annual Mack Days fishing tournament aims at reducing lake trout numbers and helping the indigenous species. Left: A boater trailers his craft at the West Shore unit after a day on the water.



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: CHRIS ROBBITALLE/APLOREMAPS.COM; BILL MCDONALD; JEROME HOLLIMAN/ELIZA WILEY



TWO GREAT VIEWS Top: A dad and his daughter watch waves crash into their boulder seat. Bottom: Sailboats anchor off Wild Horse Island's Skeeko Bay.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: LEFT, ELIZA WILEY; JEREMIE HOLLMAN; ELIZA WILEY; JEREMIE HOLLMAN; MIKE HINES

overlook leads hikers through a carpet of wildflowers in midsummer. The unit offers 30 campsites on 67 acres, including a hiker-biker campsite with nine tent pads, convenient for cyclists traveling the nearby Continental Divide route. Swimming, boating, fishing, and picnicking are popular here.

Smaller, but in no way inferior, are the Yellow Bay and Finley Point units along the lake's eastern shore. At 15 acres, Yellow Bay offers five tent sites that are first-come, first-served, plus a small beach perfect for sunbathing and swimming. Even with vehicles on Montana Highway 35 rolling by just a few hundred yards away, the sites nestled among tall trees feel far from civilization. Finley Point provides 27 secluded campsites on its 28 acres in mature pine forest. Activities include fishing, camping, hiking, swimming, and boating.

Those with a boat can head to Wild Horse Island. Camping is not allowed, but visitors can spend an entire day hiking around the island to discover its many treasures before heading back to one of the park units on the

main shore. For those without a boat, commercial launches shuttle people to and from the island.

LONG HUMAN HISTORY

Flathead Lake was once part of Glacial Lake Missoula, which covered much of western Montana until roughly 15,000 years ago. The southern part of the lake, including Wild Horse Island, occupies part of the Flathead Indian Reservation, established by the Hellgate Treaty in 1855. The reservation is home to three tribes—the Bitterroot Salish (Flathead), Upper Pend d'Oreille, and the Kootenai—who govern themselves collectively as the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes. Historically, territories of the three tribes covered all of today's western Montana and parts of Idaho, British Columbia, and Wyoming.

According to Sara Scott, the FWP Parks Division's Heritage Resource Program manager, the area still holds evidence of its original inhabitants, including "remains of pictographs, fire hearths, and campsites

where people made stone tools," she says. Most archaeological evidence has been removed or disturbed, usually unwittingly, by private landowners and state park visitors. A notable exception is a 300-year-old grove of ponderosa pines on Wild Horse Island that contains trees showing oval-shaped scars four or five feet up from the ground. The marks were made during the late 1800s when, each spring, "Native Americans would peel back the bark, which didn't kill the trees, and eat the sweet cambium layer," Scott says.

She adds that the lake is named for the local Salish Tribe, whom European settlers referred to as Flathead Indians, mistakenly thinking they employed a form of head binding or cranial deformation that was practiced by tribal people elsewhere.

PACKED PARK

Though humans have used the lake for millennia, visitation in recent years has pushed the infrastructure to capacity. Collectively, Flathead Lake State Park units receive



A PLACE OF PEOPLE Humans have been living along Flathead Lake for thousands of years. Clockwise from near left: pictographs, estimated to be 3,000 years old, along the western shore near the West Shore unit; scars on ponderosa pines on Wild Horse Island show where Native Americans in the late 19th century peeled back bark to expose the sweet cambium layer; edible apples in a Montana heritage orchard, planted on the island in 1918.



more than 323,000 visits each year. Wayfarers—the closest to Bigfork and Kalispell—takes in more than half of that visitation. The unit is packed with visitors on summer weekends.

July is the park's busiest month with more than 92,000 visits, followed by August with 69,000 visits, says Amy Grout, FWP park manager for five of Flathead Lake State Park's six units. Hoping to score a campsite during peak tourist season? You'll need to book a site on FWP's online reservation system several months in advance. "Our campgrounds are always full from the middle of June through most of August," Grout says. Cancellations occur, but it's wise not to plan a family weekend or vacation on the possibility.

That doesn't mean you can't park at any of the units for a hike, picnic, or other day-only use. But heads up: On summer weekends the lot at Wayfarers fills by 10 a.m. Weekdays are far less crowded.

Managing state park units on beautiful Flathead Lake might sound like a dream job, but it has its challenges, including aging and overused boat ramps, comfort stations, sewage systems, and other infrastructure plus a shortage of park rangers, Grout says. Still, the constant crush of park visitors is also the source of her greatest satisfaction. "I take a lot of pride in providing a safe place for so many people to visit and recreate. And I like helping them enjoy the outdoor activities on and around the lake that I love so much," she says.

Like all of Montana's state parks, it's hard to leave Flathead without a great story. Of how you gritted your teeth and dove into the icy water, or caught your biggest lake trout, or heard a loon's lonesome song for the first time.

The story of how I outran yellowjackets on Wild Horse Island has worked its way into my own family's lore. I've marked a date this summer for another visit to this wild, watery state park—maybe this time in a kayak—so I know there will be more stories to come. 🐻

To reserve a campsite at Big Arm, West Shore, Wayfarers, or Finley Point (reservations are not taken for Yellow Bay), or to learn more about Flathead Lake State Park, visit stateparks.mt.gov.



A WHOLE LOT TO LOVE
Clockwise from top: The largest natural lake west of the Mississippi River, Flathead Lake stretches 27 miles from north to south; wakeboarding and waterskiing are popular; playing along a pebble beach; the covered picnic area at Wayfarers; RV sites at Finley Point; a million-dollar view from a tent pad at West Shore.



ALL PHOTOS: ELIZA WILEY EXCEPT TOP AND FAR RIGHT: MIKE HINES