The Jefferson River Canoe Trail

Sustaining Our Montana Traditions

The Jefferson River Canoe Trail is a conservation and recreation project to establish a network of multipurpose backcountry campsites on private and public lands along the entire length of the Jefferson River. The public will be able to float into these sites for primitive camping along the river. At each camp, as appropriate, there will be opportunities for such activities as bird watching, mushrooming, hiking, and fishing.

The Jefferson River is rich with wildlife and scenery, great floating opportunities, and an essential stake in our nation's history. Almost all land along the river is in private hands and development is encroaching everywhere. Yet, when you get into a canoe and experience the river from the viewpoint of Lewis and Clark, you discover how much the view-shed remains intact from the river. Most existing development is away from the river enough that you only experience the cottonwood ecology along the river, against a backdrop of undeveloped mountains in the distance.

With the addition of strategically chosen backcountry campsites, floaters will be able to take the Lewis and Clark experience from the water to the land, by camping and recreating in remote sites where the land seems nearly unchanged from 200 years ago.

Much of the scenery along the Jefferson River remains virtually unchanged from the days of Lewis and Clark.

This kind of open space and open access has been a critical part of the Montana tradition throughout our history. People who have lived here all their lives are accustomed to hiking, fishing and hunting for miles and miles along the rivers and through the woods, across public and private lands alike. But with increased migration into the state and development pressure, people find that they no longer have access to places they have always used, especially along the river corridors. Hope is not lost, however.

All that is needed to improve the Jefferson River experience is a few good sites that will allow floaters a quality place to get out and stretch their legs, have lunch, or stop and camp. The Jefferson River Canoe Trail Association is working to acquire backcountry campsites along the river that are accessible only by water, or if by land, then only by non-motorized travel. We wish to avoid the maintenance problems and trash associated with roads and vehicles. Individuals who take the time for multi-day backcountry floats generally have a much greater conservation ethic, and are more likely to pick trash up than leave it.

All Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks Fishing Access Sites along the Jefferson River are presently closed to camping. Camping is allowed only within the ordinary high water mark (as allowed for by the Montana Stream Access Law), and on fragments of BLM lands, which are high-lighted on this map. This lack of designated camping areas discourages users from experiencing extended float trips down the river. Users are allowed to float the river and walk or camp on the gravel bars, but freedom ends at the ordinary high water mark.

Rainstorms can be sudden and frigid, so be prepared for the worst.

The grassy meadows and cottonwood groves are part of the river experience, with the potential for camping, hiking, bird-watching, mushrooming or fishing from the bank, but floaters have no access to it. Local Montanans, as well as history buffs following the Lewis and Clark Trail, lack the opportunity to fully experience the Jefferson River ecosystem.

Increasing the number of campsites along the river will provide users with greater opportunities for a quality floating and camping experience—without the need to trammel across private lands. Campsites for the Canoe Trail are being chosen such that floaters will have a half or full day float in between each site. Our organization is working to establish campsites on suitable sites on existing state and federal lands, while purchasing land or negotiating recreation easements for additional campsites where necessary. Ownership of the land or easements will be placed with FWP or a nonprofit entity, while the full burden of site maintenance and management will be the responsibility of the Jefferson River Canoe Trail Association.

It is our hope that the Jefferson River Canoe Trail will lead to greater public interest in sustaining not just the access, but also the quality of open space along the Jefferson River. We seek to work with landowners to secure conservation easements along the river in a way that will protect the natural character of the view-shed from the river, while helping to keep family farms intact and free from development.

Population growth trends in southwest Montana suggest that now is the time to make long-term decisions to sustain our traditions of open space and open access. Either we will pull together as a community to do what is necessary to sustain a way of life along the Jefferson River corridor, or we won't.

The Jefferson River Canoe Trail is a significant step to preserve what we have left and to guarantee recreational access to keep future generations of Montanans connected with the land and its history. We are a grassroots organization of local volunteers. To join the effort to make a lasting difference, please check out our website or contact us at:

Jefferson River Canoe Trail Association
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Silver Star, MT 59751
www.JeffersonRiver.org

Floating the Canoe Trail

Floating and Camping on the Jefferson

The Jefferson River Canoe Trail retraces by water an essential segment of the Lewis & Clark National Historic Trail from the three forks of the Missouri at Headwaters State Park up the Jefferson River to its origin at the forks of the Big Hole and Beaverhead Rivers near Twin Bridges.

Most present-day travelers will prefer to follow the trail in reverse, floating down the Jefferson River, instead of towing their canoes upstream. Floaters can choose a fast pace, paddling the trail in three to four days, or a slower pace, paddling half days to experience more of the available backcountry campsites and riverside activities along the way.

This is a "no-trace" canoe trail. Use the map to locate a suitable campsite where public use is allowed (or camp within the ordinary high water mark of the river), then apply appropriate backcountry etiquette to leave the area as nice as you found it.

The Jefferson River Canoe Trail is all Class I water, suitable for beginning paddlers, except during runoff season in the spring of high water years. Be especially wary of downed trees in the water, called "sweeps". The force of the river moving through the branches can trap a person under water even with a life jacket on. Each year several people die floating on Montana rivers, mostly during the spring runoff, so make sure you scout the river ahead of time and know what you are getting into.

Low water in mid- to late-summer may require extensive dragging of watercraft over shallow riffles. Be sure to plan on longer float times when the water is low, and some sections may not be floatable at all during extremely low flows.

Before you Go

Be prepared. Ask questions about current river conditions, and be sure to carefully scout the Parson's Bridge Diversion Dam, if you will be traveling that part of the river. Conditions throughout the river fluctuate considerably from year to year.

Mean monthly water flows on the Jefferson River near Twin Bridges

During normal years flow levels may be hazardous from late May through most of June and inadequate by August.

Wear your life jackets. Montana law requires that a watercraft must have a suitable flotation device for every person on board. Children under twelve must wear life jackets at all times when on the water. We recommend that adults wear life jackets at all times as well; it sets a good example, and you won't get separated from it in a sudden accident.

Be prepared for the weather. Montana is a land of extremes, and a pleasant day can quickly change to severe conditions with scorching heat or frigid rain or even mid-summer snow storms. Bring sunblock and layers to protect exposed skin. Bring warm and dry clothes, and make sure you can keep them dry until you need them. Bring a quality rain poncho or tarp for wet weather.

Bring lots of drinking water, and be sure to drink it. Dehydration is a concern at any time of year. You may not feel thirsty when exercising in cool, damp weather, or when playing in the water in hot dry weather. Under some conditions you may need to drink 1 1/2 gallons or more of water per person per day. Remember, if you are not peeing, then you are not drinking enough!

To avoid the crowds, try canoeing before the spring runoff in April or early May.

Bring a first aid kit and a cell phone, if available. Pack cell phones and cameras in water-tight bags attached to the watercraft.

Pack smart drinks and foods with minimal packaging, and be prepared to haul out any trash you generate. The Jefferson River is mostly a clean river, but there is occasional rubbish along the banks. Please bring a trash bag and pick up anything that has been left behind.

Plan your shuttle in advance, so you have a way of getting back to your vehicle, and don't take on more than you can in the allotted time.

And finally, please volunteer time or money to help guarantee the future of the Jefferson River as a quality place for all to enjoy. Together we can make a difference!

Soaking at Point of Rocks Hot Springs. Please bring a trash bag to pick up after yourselves and other people.

Principles of No-Trace Camping

Leave the land as Lewis and Clark would have found it 200 years ago.

Adapted from the 7 Leave No Trace Principles from the Leave No Trace Center for Outdoor Ethics (www.lnt.org).

Please do your part to leave the Jefferson River as natural and pristine as Lewis and Clark first encountered it 200 years ago. Leave no trace of your passing so that other explorers can feel as if they are first ones to come this way.

Plan Ahead and Prepare

* Know the regulations and special concerns for each place you visit. Lands along the Jefferson River fall under several different federal, state, and private jurisdictions.
* Prepare for extreme weather, hazards, and emergencies. Always wear life jackets, and keep in mind that hypothermic situations are possible at any time of the year in Montana.
* Schedule your trip to avoid times of high use, but make sure there is enough water to float the river.
* Visit in small groups. Split larger parties into groups of 4-6 at campsites.
* Repackage food to minimize waste, and please bring a garbage bag to pick up any trash left behind by others.

Travel and Camp on Durable Surfaces

* Durable surfaces include established trails and campsites, rock, gravel, dry grasses or snow—sites that will not be damaged by use.
* Good campsites are found, not made. Altering a site is not necessary.
* Protect riparian areas by camping at least 200 feet from lakes and streams.

In popular areas 1) concentrate use on existing trails and campsites, 2) Walk single file in the middle of the trail, even when wet or muddy, 3) Keep campsites small. Focus activity in areas where vegetation is absent.

* In pristine areas: 1) Disperse use to prevent the creation of campsites and trails, 2) Avoid places where impacts are just beginning.

Dispose of Waste Properly

* Pack it in, pack it out. Inspect your campsite and rest areas for trash or spilled foods. Pack out all trash, leftover food, and litter.
* To wash dishes, please carry water 200 feet away from the river and use small amounts of biodegradable soap. Scatter strained dishwater.
* Use a portable toilet to pack out human waste, or bury solid waste in cat holes dug 6 to 8 inches deep at least 200 feet from water, camp, and trails. Cover and disguise the cat hole when finished.
* Pack out toilet paper and hygiene products or use natural toilet paper alternatives such as leaves or smooth stones.

Leave What You Find

* Preserve the past: examine, but do not touch, cultural or historic structures and artifacts.
* Leave rocks, plants and other natural objects as you find them. If you harvest wild edible plants or mushrooms, do so sustainably, taking only a few and leaving the rest to propagate.
* Avoid introducing/transporting non-native species.
* Do not build structures, furniture, or dig trenches.

Minimize Campfire Impacts

* Campfires can cause lasting impacts to the backcountry. Use a lightweight stove for cooking and enjoy a candle lantern for light.
* Where fires are permitted, use established fire rings, fire pans, or mound fires, and keep fires small. Only use sticks from the ground that can be broken by hand.
*Do not dispose of any trash other than paper and cardboard in the fire.
* Burn all wood and coals to ash, put out campfires completely, then scatter cool ashes.
* Dry conditions and sudden high winds along the Jefferson River can be a dangerous combination. A small fire can blow up into a major wildfire in a matter of minutes. Avoid using campfires in dry conditions, or keep a shovel and bucket of water handy for an immediate response if you do have a fire.
* Keep in mind that if you do accidentally start a fire, you may be required to pay for the expense of putting it out!

Look, but don't touch!

Respect Wildlife

* Control pets at all times, or leave them at home.
* Never feed animals. Feeding wildlife damages their health, alters natural behaviors, and exposes them to predators and other dangers.
* Protect wildlife and your food by storing rations and trash securely.
* Avoid wildlife during sensitive times: mating, nesting, raising young, or winter.

Be Considerate of Other Visitors

* Respect other visitors and protect the quality of their experience along the river. Take breaks and choose campsites away from others to allow them their privacy.
* Let nature's sounds prevail. Avoid loud voices and noises, and leave radios at home.

Montana's Stream Access Law

Rights and Responsibilities of Landowners and Recreationists

Montana's Stream Access Law was passed by the Montana legislature in 1985 after a landmark Montana Supreme Court case determined that our rivers and streams were open to public use up to the ordinary high water mark. The Stream Access Law helped to define the rights and responsibilities of landowners and recreationists. But note that the law does not apply to lakes or to man-made diversions, such as ditches.

Recreational Use

While the land under the water may belong to a private individual, the public has a right to use it for water-based recreational purposes. Recreational use includes fishing, hunting, swimming, floating, boating and other related or incidental uses, such as camping when suitable alternatives are not available. Merely hiking down a riverbed does not constitute recreational use of the water, and therefore does not fall within the scope of the law. Similarly, recreational use of dry streambeds isn't covered by the law either. For these activities, or other uses not directly related to the water, such as riding all-terrain vehicles, the user must obtain permission from the landowner.

The Ordinary High Water Mark

The ordinary high water mark is the line that water impresses on the land by covering it for sufficient time to cause different characteristics below the line. This nebulous definition is open to some interpretation.

Sand and gravel bars, devoid of vegetation from repeated flooding, are clearly within the high-water mark. Farm fields and flood plains next to streams, on the other hand, are considered to be above the ordinary high water mark. Other zones between the gravel bars and farm fields may be more difficult to determine. Willow thickets, plus certain grasses and sedges, often grow on older gravel bars that remain below the ordinary high water mark. Pay attention to your local rivers and streams to see how high the water comes up in ordinary years, and use your observations to guide your judgement on similar waterways throughout the state.

Access to Rivers and Streams

The Stream Access Law allows recreationists to use Montana's rivers and streams, but does not allow them to trespass across private property to reach those waterways. Access to our rivers and streams can be found at state Fishing Access Sites, other state and federal lands (unless regulated otherwise), as well as within state or county road right-of-ways at bridge crossings. However, access at some bridges may be restricted for public safety, or where the establishment of the right-of-way did not allow access to the water.

Portaging Around Obstacles

The Stream Access Law allows water users to go above the ordinary high water mark if necessary to portage around artificial barriers, but must do so in the least intrusive manner possible, avoiding damage to the landowner's property and violation of his or her rights. Artificial barriers include any man-made object in or over the water that totally or effectually obstructs the recreational use of the surface water. The law does not address portaging around natural barriers and does not make such a portage either legal or illegal.

If a landowner puts a fence or other structure across a stream, such as a float-over cable or a float-through gate, and it does not interfere with the recreational use of the water, the public does not have the right to go above the ordinary high water mark to portage. In all cases, recreationists must keep portages to a minimum, and should realize that landowners may place fences and other barriers across streams for purposes of land or water management or to establish land ownership, if otherwise allowed by law.

Camping within the Ordinary High Water Mark

The Stream Access Law allows for overnight camping within the ordinary high water mark on the states larger rivers, including the Jefferson, but only when camping is considered necessary for the enjoyment of the water resource AND it is done out of sight of, or more than 500 yards from, any occupied dwelling. Any camping done within sight of or within 500 yards (whichever is less) of an occupied dwelling requires landowner permission.

If you must build a fire, choose a safe location, and if possible, use a fire pan or an existing fire ring. Attend to the fire at all times and be sure it is completely out and reclaimed to its natural condition before leaving. Remember that you have no right to gather firewood above the ordinary high water mark.

Montana's Stream Access Law allows recreationists to use private lands within the ordinary high water mark of the river. Please use these lands responsibly.

Hunting

The Stream Access Law allows for waterfowl hunting within the ordinary high water mark, but does not allow big game hunting, hunting of nongame or predators, or trapping of fur-bearing animals, without landowner permission. For waterfowl hunting, keep safety in mind at all times. Do not discharge firearms near dwellings or livestock, and ask permission to retrieve game from above the ordinary high water mark. Permanent duck blinds, boat moorage or other permanent objects are not allowed without landowner permission. Seasonal blinds and temporary boat moorages are allowed on larger rivers like the Jefferson, but only if required for enjoyment of the water resource, and only if placed out of sight of, or more than 500 yards from occupied dwellings.

Liability

The legislature has limited the situations in which a landowner, manager, or tenant may be liable for injuries to people using a stream flowing through their private property, such that they are liable only for acts or omissions that constitute "willful or wanton misconduct."

Beyond the High Water Mark

Private lands above and beyond the ordinary high water mark may be available to public use unless designated otherwise by landowners or managers. According to Montana trespass legislation, the public has the privilege to enter or remain on private land by the explicit permission of the landowner or manager, OR because the landowner has chosen not to post a notice denying entry to the land.

Until recent times, most Montana landowners have chosen not to post their land, and many farmers and ranchers are still glad to see responsible people fishing along the bank. Keep in mind that even where private property is not posted, it is still good policy to ask permission to use it.

Notice denying entry must consist of a written notice or of notice by painting a post, structure, or natural object with at least 50 square inches of fluorescent orange paint. In the case of a metal fence post, the entire post must be painted. This notice must be placed at each outer gate and at all normal points of access to the property and wherever a stream crosses an outer boundary line. Where permission has been given to enter posted property, the landowner can revoke it at any time by personal communication. Please do not provoke landowners. There are too many "No Trespassing" signs already.

Courtesy and Respect

There was a time when Montanans could hike, fish, hunt, and camp almost any where they wanted, on public and private lands alike. Recreationists respected the land and landowners were generally glad to see people out having a good time engaged in constructive activities.

But some incoming landowners, unaware of Montana's tradition of openness, posted their lands to keep people out. A few recreationists also abused the privileges of using private lands. They cut fences, drove through pastures, and trashed the land. The result of this lack of respect was that in the span of about twenty-five years, Montana changed from being a culture without boundaries to a culture where nearly everything is posted.

To retain our remaining privileges of using private lands, and to regain the privilege of using lands that have been closed, recreationists must demonstrate good stewardship and courtesy towards landowners at all times. Please 1) respect the rights of landowners, 2) ask permission before straying above the high water mark, 3) leave all fences intact, 4) control your pets, 5) leave no trace of your passing, and 6) thank the landowners for being so accommodating if you happen to meet them in person.

By respecting private property, recreationists can earn a mutual respect, and maybe one day, when the "No Trespassing" signs decay and fall off the fences, landowners may not be in such a hurry to put them back up.

Winter Recreation

Remedies for Cabin Fever

Winter Hiking and Horseback Riding

Ever have that feeling like you just want to get out and go for a hike, but all the forest trails are snowed in for the winter? No need to be snowed in yourself. Get yourself and the kids out of the house and go exploring.

In mid-winter or early spring, when you cannot get up in the mountains, there are still many great hiking and horseback riding opportunities in the rolling hills closer to the river. It doesn't snow as much in the lower hills, and any snow that falls tends to melt off quickly.

Check the maps for the hiking and riding symbols that indicate good sites to access public lands. Don't expect developed trails or trailheads; these are undeveloped access points to some surprisingly interesting nooks and crannies on public lands.

Winter snows seldom stick for long in the low hills near the river.

It is part of our mission to continue enhancing trails opportunities along the Jefferson River, ultimately connecting many recreational sites by land as well as by water. We are especially interested in collaborating with private landowners to re-open portions of the old Chicago-Milwaulkee railroad bed for walking and biking. If you are a landowner willing to work with our organization, or a person with some possible leads, please contact us through our website at: www.JeffersonRiver.org

~Caution~

Outdoor recreation is potentially hazardous, and you could be seriously injured or killed while recreating along the Jefferson River. While the Jefferson River Canoe Trail Association has strived to include available hazard and safety information on these maps, the maps do not cover all possible hazards and cannot replace sound judgement and good decision-making skills. Only you can responsible for your own actions and safety. The Jefferson River Canoe Trail Association is not liable for your safety.

Also keep in mind that the river course is continually changing, as are the hazards, land ownership, and regulations that apply to private and public lands. While the Jefferson River Canoe Trail Association has worked to accurately represent the river course, land-ownership, and regulations, initial errors and changes over time are possible and should be expected. It is the user's responsibility to verify all information through other sources.