

Lewis & Clark Paddle Trail

Paddle Put-In Total Trail approximately 6.25 miles:

The put-in for the Lewis and Clark Paddling Trail is located at the White Bear Fishing Access on the Missouri River. From I-15, take Exit 0. Follow the exit to the light at Fox Farm Road and turn right. Follow Fox Farm Road for approximately 4 miles to left on Highwood Drive. Follow Highwood Drive to Hawk Drive. Address: 163 Hawk Drive, Great Falls MT. Allow about 2.5 hours for this float.

Short Alternative: For a short 2 mile paddle alternative, put in at the White Bear Island put-in which is located 0.75 miles upriver from the intersection of River Drive South (aka Lower River Road) and Overlook Drive. You will enter the river at Park Island from this point.

Paddle Trail 1: White Bear Island Camp and the Iron Boat (1.5 miles)

The Corps of Discovery camped near this location from June 18, 1805 until June 25th and again July 10, 1806 until July 14th. At this camp, they cached supplies for making an iron frame boat after a failed attempt to construct a floating prototype on their journey west. Their journal records that they found the frame on their return east, but doesn't indicate if they transported the iron back home, making this one of the great enduring mysteries of the expedition. Several attempts have been made to find the vessel in the river.

The journals record that a herd of buffalo crossed at this location and the crew successfully harvested a buffalo. As they were retrieving the meat, a white grizzly bear charged A. Willard and chased him back to camp. Initially undeterred by the men in camp, the bear chased one crew member into the river before breaking off the attack. Journals also recorded a "great abundance" of wolves "howling around us" at this location.



Paddle Trail Take-Out: West Bank Park or Gibson Park
Exit the river in the city parks on the west or east shore of the river. Paved bike trails exist on both sides to transit back to the car by foot or boat. Uber is another convenient option to return to the car.



*Caution: Motorboats and other types of boats use this trail as well, so take care and watch for wakes.

Equipment Rentals:

Bighorn Sports

206 5th St South

406-453-2841

Missouri River Outfitters

923 10th Ave North

406-761-1677



Great Falls International Airport Authority

2800 Terminal Drive | Great Falls, MT 59404

406-727-3404

www.genuinemontana.com

Paddling
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GREAT FALLS HISTORIC LEWIS AND CLARK PADDLING TRAIL

Welcome to Great Falls and the Historic Lewis and Clark Paddling Trail. In 1805 and 1806, the Corps of Discovery spent several weeks hunting and scouting the river valleys of Great Falls as they prepared to portage the great falls of the Missouri, one of the seminal stories of their expedition. This paddle trail traverses several camps and other historic points recorded in the Corps' journals. The paddle trail does cross under three bridges. Take care to avoid the bridge footings on the three bridges on this trail. There is also a small section of fast water prior to and under the railroad bridge in downtown Great Falls. Be aware the water in this area is shallow and quick. Watch for trees and debris that may be caught in the footings here.

Paddle Trail 2: Lewis and Clark Campsite and 10 Thousand Buffalo (1.2 miles)

On their return trip, the Captain Lewis party crossed the river and camped on shore near this location on July 11-12, 1806. The journals record that the party recognized this location as being near where the crew was chased by the white bear. The party records that the area was crowded with buffalo, estimating “there were not less than 10 thousand buffalo within a circle of 2 miles”.

Paddle Trail 3: Park Island (0.8 miles)

This large island is a great place to stop, explore and have a picnic.

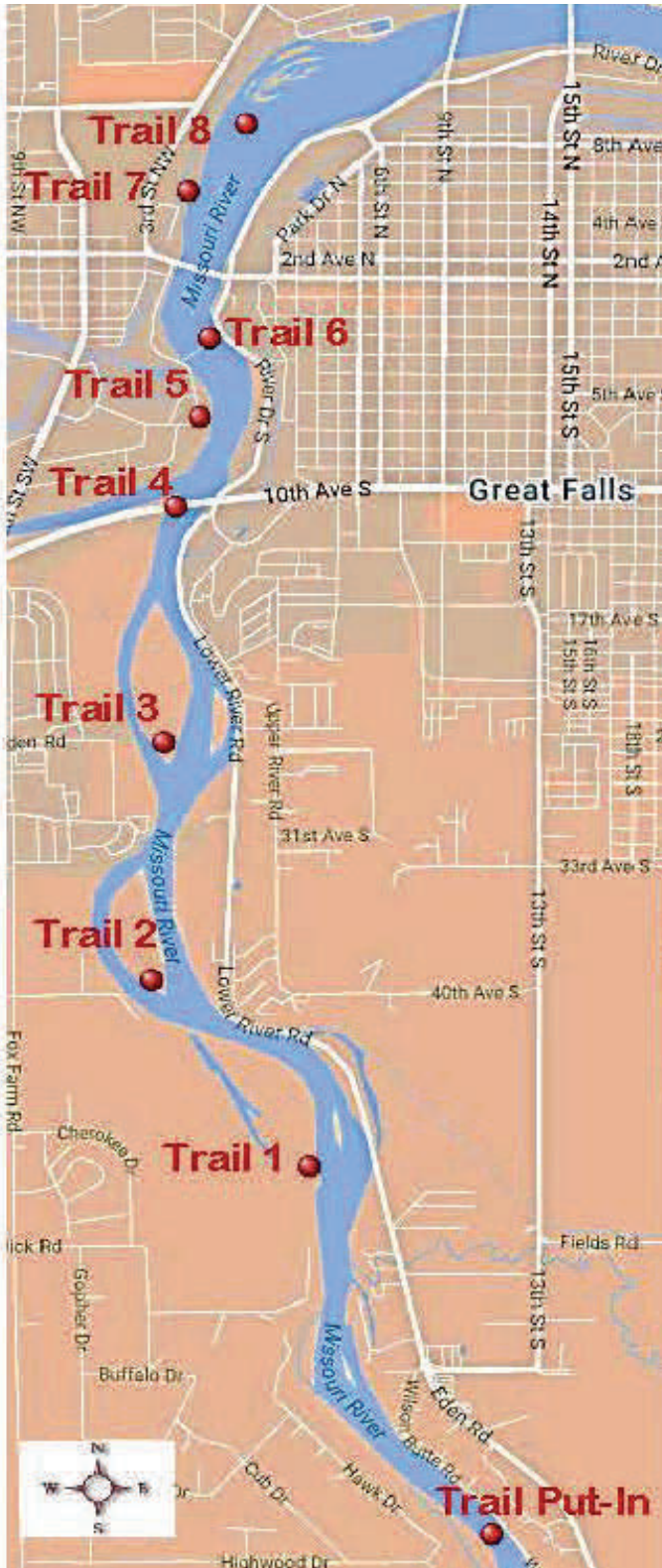
Paddle Trail 4: Convergence of Sun River and Missouri River (1 mile)

The Sun River was known by Lewis and Clark as the Medicine River. This point is significant because the Indians with whom Captain Lewis had consulted at Fort Mandan informed him that it entered the Missouri just above the falls. Finding the convergence of the rivers and the nearby Black Eagle Falls, ensure the Corps that they were on the right course. This point is also significant, because in 1806 on the return trip, Lewis and his party found and followed the Medicine River right back to the confluence just below their camp.



Paddle Trail 5: Captain Lewis and the Tiger Cat (0.3 miles)

Near this location on June 14, 1805; Captain Lewis recorded an encounter with a brownish-yellow animal that he first thought was a wolf. As he approached the animal it crouched defensively and prepared to pounce. The animal eventually retreated into its burrow. Journal accounts are unclear as to what animal this may have been, possibly a bobcat or wolverine. Lewis indicates it left cat-like tracks.



Paddle Trail 6: Downtown Railroad Bridge and Migratory Path (0.3 miles)

As you approach the downtown railroad bridge, visualize a funnel of 1,000 buffalo traversing the river banks to cross the shallows here. This section of river has the least depth for miles in both directions so it became an important point on the migratory path for the buffalo and consequently, a concentrated point for grizzly bears predation. Because the ford is relatively narrow, the buffalo frequently pushed members of the migration off to the north into deeper water. If they didn’t get out in time, they went over the waterfalls. Because of the abundant feeding opportunities, this stretch of river was concentrated with grizzly bears and wolves as noted in the Corps’ journals.

Paddle Trail 7: Within 20 Steps (0.2 miles)

At this point on June 14, 1805; Captain Lewis records a successful hunt in a herd of 1,000 buffalo. Unfortunately, he neglected to reload his rifle. In one of the most famous episodes of the expedition, a large grizzly crept with “20 steps” of Captain Lewis before charging. Captain Lewis was forced to retreat into the river where he was able to fight the bear off with his espartoon or flag. Although grizzly bears don’t roam the streets of Great Falls today, Captain Lewis’s journal will forever illustrate the wild heritage of the Great Falls area. This story is retold with two sculptures at the GTF Airport.



Paddle Trail 8: Unnamed Island (0.7 miles)

This unnamed island near West Bank Park is worth investigating. Paddlers can frequently see beavers on the island along with nesting shorebirds. Beaver frequently construct lodges on the downriver side of this island or on the adjacent Sacagawea Island.