

Following Lewis and Clark

July 6-17, 2015

July 6, 2015: Travel to Great Falls

We flew in a day early due to frequent schedule changes by Delta. The first night, we walked to the river, which turned out to be a lot farther than we expected. By the time we made it back to the Holiday Inn, we were tired and sweaty and just called it a night.

July 7, 2015: Benton Lake NWR, on to Fort Benton

With time on our hands in Great Falls, we decided to rent a car and drive out to Benton Lake NWR, trumpeted as the best birding around. We could have saved ourselves a lot of trouble by renting the car at the airport in the first place, but we thought we would be able to walk to the river.

The refuge didn't look that promising at first, but we were soon rewarded by the sight of a singing Grasshopper Sparrow. His strange insect-like trill is unmistakable. Our favorite sighting of the tour was this Eared Grebe in full breeding plumage with a chick on its back, something we had never seen before for this species.

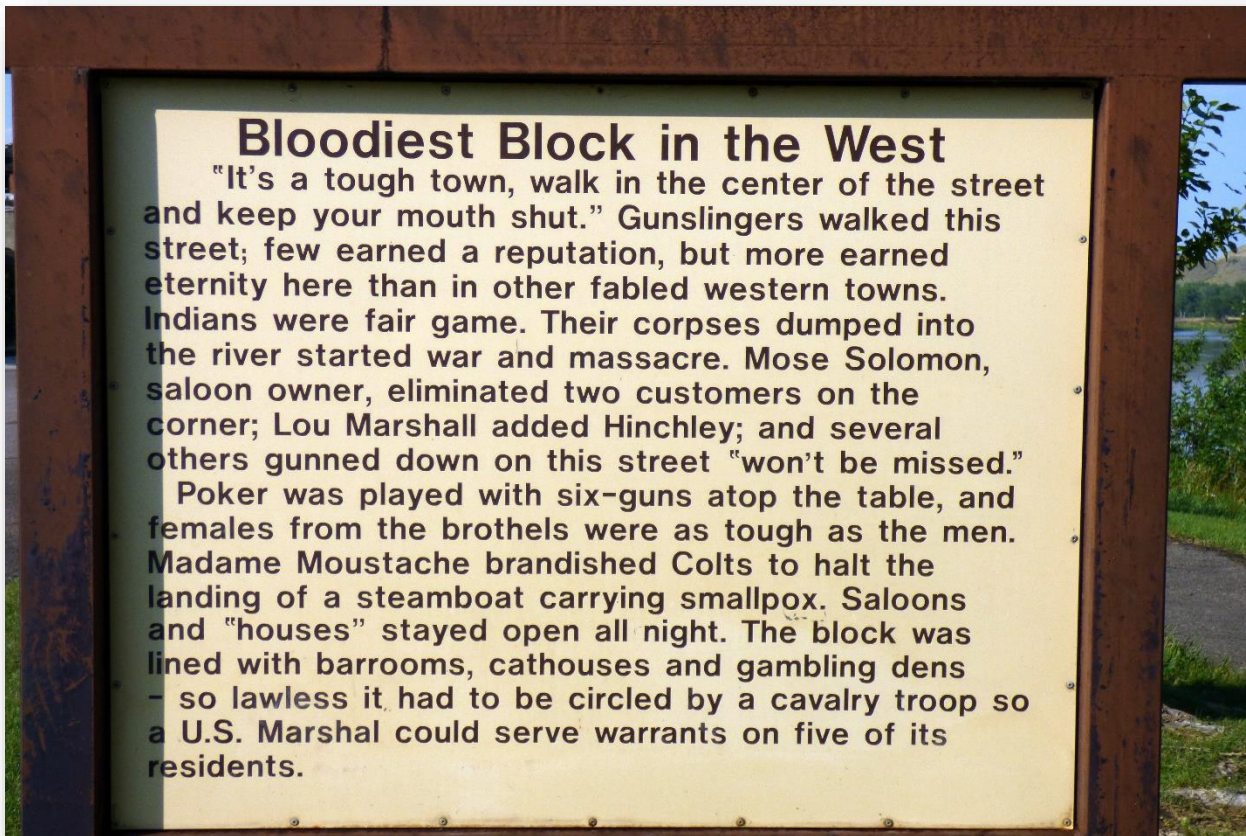


We had planned to catch the late shuttle to Fort Benton at 5:00 pm, but it started to rain, so we opted instead for the early one. We ate a quick lunch at Dimitri's, a Greek place on the way, and met some of the group at the airport.

In Fort Benton, we checked into the historic Grand Union Hotel, first built in about 1880 and lovingly restored. The rooms, as in virtually all historic hotels, was smaller than we are used to, but had all the essentials.

We had time to wander along the river, reading interpretive signs and doing a bit of birding before dinner. We crossed a footbridge over the Missouri and stumbled onto a family of Pacific Wrens, which was a treat. Even better, we saw a House Wren nearby and so had a comparison to make sure we had the ID right.

Here's our favorite sign:



July 8-10: On the Missouri River

With preliminaries out of the way, we set off to retrace a small part of Lewis and Clark's amazing expedition. Our first stop was at Decision Point, where L&C had to decide which branch of the river to follow in their quest for the headwaters of the Missouri. Here's a view from the overlook:



John Boles, a renowned Rice History Professor related the problem faced by Lewis and Clark. They had to decide which river to follow. The men all thought they should follow the muddy branch, as it looked like the Missouri. Lewis was sure that the clear water branch was correct as it resembled what a river flowing off mountains, as he assumed the Missouri did. In the end, the Corps, in a tribute to the leadership of Lewis and Clark, accepted the decision.

We had a much easier time than the two captains, as we knew that the branch shown on the right in this photo is the Missouri. The left branch is the Marias River. Fortunately, the captains made the correct choice..

We proceeded along a dirt road to the spot where we met the canoes for a trip downstream. We almost had our first, and likely only, lifer of the trip when we spotted what were probably Gray (Hungarian) Partridges flying off. Alas, despite repeated shouts of "Stop!" the bus driver kept going. When the bus finally stopped, we were able to show the entire group some Burrowing Owls and Prairie Dogs, but the Partridges were long gone.

We met [ROW Adventures](#) on the Missouri and set off after a brief safety talk in two large canoes and several smaller ones. Our gear, packed into waterproof bags, went on a separate pontoon boat. We arrived after a leisurely trip downstream at our first campsite, a place called Eagle Creek. Along the way downriver, we were treated to readings from the journals and other historical documents. Lewis waxed lyrical over the white cliffs that lined portions of the river.



This wasn't hard camping. We arrived to find tents already set up, ready for us to move in. Then, after a brief dip in the river to cool off, we were treated to a fabulous meal. In fact, all the meals on the river exceeded any reasonable expectations. One morning, breakfast featured Eggs Benedict, with real poached eggs and hollandaise sauce on top of English muffins and ham with fresh asparagus. We were impressed.

American White Pelicans were fairly common along the way, as were Common Mergansers. The latter consisted solely of females with many chicks following.



Some species of Fritillary Butterflies showed up in the weedy fields near our campgrounds. We were able to snap a decent photo of this beautiful specimen:

We spent the second night at Slaughter River campground, where Lewis thought the Indians had a “Buffalo Jump.” Not so, according to analysis of the site. Although there were many bison skeletons in the area, it was likely due to a flash flood rather than an organized stampede. However, the name stuck, at least for the campground.



We canoed serenely past the White Cliffs, huge sandstone structures that are much paler than what we are used to seeing. Many of these cliffs has *intrusions* of igneous rock, which as it is harder than the sandstone remains when the cliffs erode. This left some shapes that left plenty of room for imagination to turn them into castles, cities, and great walls.

The courteous, industrious, young employees made the trip pleasant and not too tiring.

2 ½ days on the river proceeded mostly without incident, though there was an unplanned swim by the Sinclairs, who paddled their own canoe. As we neared the end of the trip, Ann Arnett suffered a mashed thumb that looked serious at first but turned out to be only a bad bruise. Barbara Batey, our tour leader from Criterion

Travel, *sunlights* as a PA in emergency rooms, so she was up to the task for first aid. She made a splint from a thick emery board and some duct tape. That, plus a bag of ice, kept the swelling down, just what Ann needed.



July 11, 2015: Around Great Falls

We returned to Great Falls and the Holiday Inn. On our own for dinner, we tried Dante's Creative Food, which handled our group of 10 easily.

Excellent food, with the option of smaller portions, a nice plus as Montana portions are gargantuan. The next day, we spent learning more about the portage around the falls of the Missouri. These were much more impressive when the Corps dealt with them. Today, the dammed up river provides hydroelectric power to the surrounding area.



We went first to the Lewis and Clark Interpretive Center. Built for the 200th anniversary of the trek, the center has many exhibits about the expedition, but none more impressive than a diorama with a reproduction of the men hauling their boat, converted into a makeshift wagon, up a steep incline.

A short walk took us to Giant Spring, where water bubbles up from limestone formations into a large pool before emptying into the Missouri. The short distance from the pool to the confluence with the Missouri earns this the title of “Shortest River in the Country.” It may hold the title for the entire world. The water in the pool is remarkably clear, though signs warn not to drink it as birds and fish have used it for their own purposes. That didn’t stop Clark from marveling at the quality when he saw it the first time. The clear water is evident next to the Muddy Missouri for almost a mile.



54Here’s what the Great Falls look like today, which is quite a bit different from Lewis’s description in his journal. We drove around the area of the portage, 18 miles or so, that took the Corps almost a month to complete. We visited Portage Creek, where they began the arduous task of hauling the boat/wagon out of the water and onto the bluff. We ended up at Portage Camp, where they rested before continuing their journey. We only needed a few hours for all that.



In the pool below the falls, we had an unusual treat: an immature gull that we could identify. Normally, we don’t pay too much attention to these, but today we had some adults nearby to make it easy. This is a first year Ring-billed Gull in very nice plumage.

July 12, 2015: Helena and Three Forks

We left early from Great Falls heading toward Gates of the Mountains. When Lewis first saw this area, he was impressed by the sheer cliffs on both sides of the river, “There was no place where one could put two feet on dry land.” Today, the river is a lake, so we had a much easier ride. We saw many Bald Eagles, which were common along all the rivers, and our only Golden Eagle of the trip.

The highlight of the trip was a stop at the site of the Mann Gulch Fire, where 13 smokejumpers died in a famous incident. Wag Dodge escaped when he had the brilliant idea of lighting a fire to create a safe area. Today, this is taught both as a technique to use in a wildfire, but as an example of deep insight. [There is even a song about it.](#)



Then, it was on to Helena, capital of Montana, where we had a private tour of the Capitol building and the Missouri Historical Society museum across the street. We showed some polite interest in the statues and murals in the halls of the Capitol, but we knew why we were there: The

famous mural of the meeting at Camp Fortunate.

Our guide pointed out several interesting aspects of the painting characteristic of Russell:

- The white horse at the apex of the triangle, which draws the eye immediately to the Indians in the picture.
- Lewis and Clark are small figures at the right edge of the painting.
- The wolf front and center is positioned so that it seems to be threatening whomever stands at the podium, usually the Speaker of the House, whom Russell didn't like.

The visit to the Missouri Historical Society was too short to see everything we wanted to., but had a marvelous exhibit of Charlie Russell art.

We stopped at the point where three rivers, named by Lewis as Jefferson, Madison, and Gallatin, combine to form the mighty Missouri, one definition of the headwaters of the Missouri, before heading to our hotel in Three Forks, Sacagawea Inn, another historical hotel with rooms even smaller than those at the Grand Union. Dinner conversation with our fellow travelers was lively and interesting.

July 13, 2015: Beaverhead Rock, Camp Fortunate, Lemhi Pass

The next day, we explored the area where the Corps finally met up with the Shoshone tribe, where Sacagawea recognized the chief as her brother, one of the many improbable events leading to the success of the expedition.

Sacagawea recognized a rock formation as the place where the Hadatsa tribe captured her. The formation allegedly resembles a beaver. In the Lewis and Clark Interpretive Center, we saw an exhibit with a slide to superimpose on the rock to show you where the Beaver head is. We still couldn't see it. Tommy Laverne learned that according to a local, "We used to be able to see a beaver until the landowner blew the nose off." Locally, they don't even use the name "Beaverhead Rock," preferring instead, "Point of Rocks."

I thought it looked more like a beaver in the aft view. I can sorta see a tail, etc., in this photo.



After a lunch and shopping stop in Dillon, an artsy town nearby, we proceeded to the Clark Canyon Reservoir, to see the site, but no sight, of Camp Fortunate. The camp is now under water due to the dam that formed the reservoir.

Then, it was on to Lemhi Pass, where we, and the Corps, reached the Continental Divide. Our guide for this part of the trip dressed in his *Lewis and Clark Re-enactment* costume. Our group split into the hikers, who set off for a *moderate* climb to the top, and those who preferred to use mechanized transport to get there. Once at the top, we visited a Sacagawea memorial, stepped onto two states at once, and



saw the only Clark's Nutcracker of the trip. This curious bird, named for William Clark, was first thought to be a kind of crow, then a jay, before being classified as the only member of its genus.



The view from the top of the pass was spectacular, though undoubtedly different from what Lewis and Clark might have seen. You can see part of the road we snaked along for more than an hour as we made our way into Salmon, ID for the night.

July 14, 2015: Salmon River, Lolo Hot Springs

After breakfast, we had a nice float down the Salmon River. Under some conditions, this would be a nice white water trip, but the drought has lowered the level so much that we had an easy time of it. We saw many Bald Eagles along the way.

We also saw many Lewis Woodpeckers in the trees along the river, but they are much harder to photograph than Bald Eagles. Our raft spotted several different families, including one feeding young at a nest. These woodpeckers are unique as woodpeckers: they cannot dig their own nest holes, relying on others to do that, and they catch their food by fly catching, not probing in the bark.

We hit some Lewis and Clark sites on the way to our final stop at Lolo Hot Springs, especially Travelers Rest, the only place they stopped both going and coming.

We learned how archeologists argued that the park was in the wrong place. Some research turned up a spot laden with mercury, a marker for the latrine used in the camp. Benjamin Bush, a supposed doctor, prescribed pills containing mercury in the form of [*calomel*](#) as the cure for whatever ails you. Mainly, the pills served as a powerful laxative, hence their common name, *Thunderclap*. Now, the park is in the right spot. Mercury was also used to treat syphilis, a common ailment among the corpsmen.

We arrived at Lolo Hot Springs to find the springs in great working order, just what we needed after a long day,



July 15, 2015: Lolo Trail



We like to prove to people that we care about more than just birds. Here's a photo of a magnificent moth that we found on the door to our room. Notice the pink and blue colors on the wings. This was not obvious at first.

Then, we were off to hike the Lolo Trail, a dangerous undertaking for the expedition, but an easy hike or horseback ride for us. We had the advantage of coming in the middle of summer, whereas the corpsmen attempted the crossing in October, when snow obscured the trail. They almost starved getting over the Divide and into the drainage of the Columbia River.

Those of us who opted for hiking rather than riding soon learned about huckleberries, which grew in profusion along the trail. We stopped several times to snatch a brief snack from the bushes. Barbara informed us that no one had managed to grow huckleberries commercially, but there are places that sell products made from huckleberries. We have a stop scheduled on the way back to Great Falls.

The berries look like blueberries, but with a distinctly different taste. We also came across some tiny red berries, [*Grouse Whortleberries*](#), which tasted somewhat like raspberries. They were so small that gathering a few tablespoons would have meant lots of work.



Here we are at the top of the Lolo Trail with our backs to the Bitterroots, range after range disappearing into the mist. These formidable peaks were not what the explorers, familiar with the Appalachians, were expecting. The remainder of the expedition to the Pacific was extremely challenging.

The hot springs felt especially good tonight.



We have reached the final day of the tour. We hit what passed as rush hour traffic in Missoula, a joke for Bay Area residents. It wasn't enough to prevent us from getting to the Smokejumpers training facility more or less on time. We had a guided tour of the place, gawking at all the equipment they carried when they jumped from a plane.

Here Diane Sinclair gawks at the equipment worn for a jump. If required, after battling the fire, the personnel have to hike out with all their gear. Usually, this is only a few miles, but occasionally as much as 20 miles, a long way with such a load in a mountainous area. Ten percent of the smokejumpers are women that somehow manage hoist all that gear.

After a picnic lunch at Aspen Grove SP, a lovely spot by the Clark Fork River, a tributary of the Columbia, we stopped at a famous kitsch shop to pick up huckleberry gifts, books, etc.

Later in the afternoon, we stopped at [First Peoples Buffalo Jump State Park](#), site of one of the largest such sites in the country. Several different tribes of Paleoindians used the site from 900-1500 C.E. by. After that date, horses changed the way they hunted

the buffalo. Still later, the white men arrived and almost extirpated the signature animal of the Great Plains, [Bison bison](#), a disaster for the indigenous people who depended on the bison for food, clothing, and shelter.

Then we drove to the Holiday Inn in Great Falls for the third and final time. We had an opportunity to clean up before transferring to the C. M. Russell museum for our farewell dinner. After an all too brief look at the museum, we enjoyed a delicious final dinner. Indeed, the food on the trip has been very good as a rule and exceptional at times, if often too copious. That seems to be a Montana tradition.

Finally, it was time for tears and hugs as we said goodbye to old and new friends.

This was a wonderful trip. Barbara Betey did a super job organizing a very full itinerary with numerous sights and varied experiences. Montana scenery was spectacular. The interesting lectures by Dr. Boles on L&C, Jefferson, and Edgar Odell Lovett held our attention.