

“Now Everybody Smile!”

While taking pictures of state parks across Montana, a photographer finally figures out why everyone is so happy.

Photos and story by Kenton Rowe



In 2008 Fish, Wildlife & Parks hired me to photograph the wildlife, scenic beauty, and people in state parks across Montana for one year. (The Parks Division needed the images for posters, brochures, web pages, and interpretive displays.)

During the assignment, I drove 6,000 miles across the state, from Whitefish Lake in the west to Medicine Rocks in the east. Shown here are some of my favorites of the 7,000 photographs I took, along with thoughts on the parks, visitors, and staff.

One thing that struck me during my park visits was the enormous range of recreational opportunities—from kayaking at Flathead Lake to trout fishing at Lake Elmo to foling at Makoshika. I was also surprised that so many state parks were historically and culturally significant, such as Chief Plenty Coups' home and Lewis and Clark's

campsite at Travelers' Rest. No wonder FWP recently hired an archaeological expert to care for artifacts at state parks.

One of my most exciting visits was in mid-July during the annual Bannack Days celebration. The park, about 20 miles west of Dillon, is in the middle of nowhere, so I wasn't prepared for the crowds of visitors or

Clockwise from facing page: Cooling off in Grasshopper Creek, at Bannack; sliding at Lake Elmo, in Billings; photographing the rambunctious residents of Greycliff Prairie Dog Town, south of Big Timber; marveling at the eerie underground formations during the annual holiday candlelight tour at Lewis & Clark Caverns, between Bozeman and Butte.



the wide range of activities: old-time dances and mandolin players, families panning for gold and garnets, and craftspeople demonstrating pioneer skills like horseshoeing and candle dipping. Eating—bison burgers, bratwurst, Indian bread, and

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more—was one of the more popular activities. I watched one boy tear into a cob of corn like it was the last food he'd ever eat. The men just had to try shooting the big 19th-century rifles on display. More than a few walked away from the firing range grimacing in pain from a bruised shoulder. Every hour or so there'd be some new inci-

dent on the main street, like a gunfight or a stagecoach robbery. Kids seemed to love every bit of it. Some sneaked over to Grasshopper Creek and splashed water at each other in the afternoon sun. I'll bet pioneer kids played in that same stream on hot summer days 145 years ago.

Every park posed a challenge or a sur-

prise. At Lake Elmo, a busy urban park in Billings, I spent hours trying to photograph a family of foxes that had become adept at avoiding people. At Lewis & Clark Caverns, I hadn't realized that wearing a backpack full of photography gear can make it nearly impossible to crawl through some of the tighter tunnels. In one spot I actually got

Bannack Days visitors tackling plates of biscuits, barbecue pork, and corn on the cob.



This page, clockwise from top left: Inspecting a limit of crappies at Tongue River Reservoir, near the Wyoming border; Helena area parks manager Craig Marr, Oryana Sparks of the Montana Conservation Corps, and Montana First Lady Nancy Schweitzer planting trees at Spring Meadow Lake in Helena.

stuck. An even funnier episode was at Sluice Boxes, on Belt Creek about 25 miles southeast of Great Falls. While looking for anglers or hikers to photograph, I came to a spot in the trail where I needed to ford the creek. As I stood there deciding whether to continue, a fellow came down the trail on the opposite side. Assuming no one was

around, he stripped to his boxers and waded across. When he reached my side of the creek, we both laughed when I showed him the shots I had taken as he crossed.

Everywhere I went, I met managers and other staff proud of their parks. For example, Makoshika manager Ryan Sokoloski couldn't wait to show me what turned out

to be the most remarkable sight of my entire assignment—northern scorpions that actually glow fluorescent blue under a black light. Sokoloski's seven-year-old son, Hunter, was equally excited to show me fossils. I asked him where we should begin looking. He grinned at my ignorance and replied, "They're all over the place." He was

right. Just a few minutes later, we found a rock the size of a dinner plate that contained a perfectly formed leaf fossil. (We left that fossil and others where we found them, as required by state park regulations.)

During my photographic journey, I met and watched people of all types enjoying state parks. I saw kids catch sunnies and

This page, clockwise from top left: Putting new paint on the fee collection box at Pictograph Cave, near Billings; kayaking at Frenchtown Pond, northwest of Missoula; stomping the wooden floorboards of Bannack's Masonic Lodge during an old-fashioned hoedown.



Clockwise from top left: Filling a water bottle at Lost Creek, near Anaconda; taking an outdoor shower at Cooney, south of Columbus; identifying snake species at Pictograph Cave, near Billings; eating a sno-cone at Bannack; enjoying the view from a hiking trail at Makoshika, near Glendive.

perch at Lake Mary Ronan. I joined other visitors in puzzling over the mysterious Indian symbols at Pictograph Cave. At the new Lone Pine Visitor Center, I watched people learn from interpretive displays how to avoid conflicts with bears. And I was constantly impressed by the professionalism and sunny disposition of managers, naturalists, and maintenance crews. In park

after park, grounds were tidy, toilets clean, and front desk staff polite and informative. What amazed me most about all the state parks I visited was how much fun everyone was having. I wondered: Do good-natured people visit and work in state parks? Or do state parks just make people happy?

Based on my observations at state parks across Montana, I'd have to say both. 🐾

MONTANA STATE PARKS EVENTS

Take Your Best Shot

Looking for opportunities to photograph people, scenery, and historic and cultural sites? A sample of Montana state parks events this summer where you might find suitable subjects:

FIRST CHILD IN THE WOODS

Beavertail Hill State Park, Children in Nature Walks, Fridays, 8 p.m. The park ranger will lead one-hour tours of this small, scenic park and its birds, flowers, trees, and other natural features. Call (406) 542-5500.

CAVE KNOWLEDGE

Pictograph Cave State Park, Saturdays, 7 p.m. This series of evening talks includes topics such as wildflowers, recent archaeology in the Billings area, stargazing, the "Leave No Trace" ethic, geocaching, and pioneer and Native American history. Call (406) 245-0227.

JUST FOR KIDS

Giant Springs State Park, Sundays, 2 p.m. Fun topics for these youth programs include petting porcupines, learning sign language, and understanding bison. Call (406) 454-5840.



FRIDAYS AT THE CAVERNS

Lewis & Clark Caverns State Park, Fridays, 8 p.m. Fascinating speaker topics include night wildlife, Indian culture, homesteading, saddle making, and understanding Montana through poetry. Call (406) 287-3541.

RIVER STORIES

Missouri Headwaters State Park, Saturdays, 7 p.m. Speakers at this year's summer lecture series and marshmallow roast social will talk about steamboating, fishing, Indian astronomy, historic highway bridges, and more. After the talks, celebrate summer with the popular marshmallow roast. The park provides marshmallows and lemonade. Bring a blanket or lawn chair. Call (406) 994-4042.

ACTION AT THE PISHKUN

First Peoples Buffalo Jump State Park, summerlong. *Ulm Buffalo Days:* On Friday, June 12, musician Greg Keeler will play following a gourmet bison dinner; on Saturday, June 13, there will be a fun run, walk, 5K run, car show, remote-control airplanes, vendors, and other activities. *Summer lecture series:* Saturday and Sunday afternoons. *Youth sleepover camp:* For ages 9 through 12, Saturday nights June 13 and August 8. *Atlal workshop:* August 28, 29, and 30. Call (406) 866-2217.

SATURDAYS IN A GHOST TOWN

Bannack State Park, Saturdays, times vary. Fun activities for families, including gold panning, bear education, Bannack Days, black-powder shoots, learning about raptors, presentations by historical reenactors, live music, stargazing, and campfires. Call (406) 834-3413.

THE TWO GENTLEMEN OF MAKOSHIKA

Makoshika State Park, July 9, 7 p.m. This year Shakespeare in the Park performs *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, a classic comedy by the famous playwright featuring love, treachery, deceit, more love, and reconciliation. Call (406) 377-6256.



Learn what's happening this summer in your local Montana state park by visiting fwp.mt.gov/parks