

The Lower Yellowstone's Untapped Potential

New funding and growing interest are fueling unprecedented recreational opportunities for this remote, scenic stretch of Montana's longest free-flowing river. **By Marla Prell**

THE GLORIOUS ROCHE JAUNE Blue skies, abundant sunshine, and stunning scenery show why the lower Yellowstone River, pictured here near Rosebud, is such an attraction. Local leaders are working to find ways to bring more visitors to the river—and more tourism dollars to nearby communities.

PHOTO BY JOHN LAMBING

For years, southeastern Montana's lower Yellowstone River has been one of the state's last great recreational secrets. Stretching 175 miles downstream from the Bighorn River confluence, Montana's longest free-flowing river glides past scenic limestone bluffs, towering cottonwoods, rugged badlands, and vast stretches of prairie little changed from when Captain William Clark and his men traveled here more than two centuries ago. The area's relatively few kayakers and canoeists often see more deer, mink, otters, and beavers than other floaters. Dozens of bird species use the riparian habitats, including chattering belted kingfishers that keep paddlers company as bald eagles and ospreys soar overhead.

Surrounding lands beckon visitors with Native American cultural sites, battlefields from the Indian Wars, and world-renowned paleontology digs. And the fishing! Catch rates for smallmouth bass, sauger, northern pike, walleye, shovelnose sturgeon, and channel catfish are so good that some anglers swear an oath of silence.

Now the lid has been lifted on the river 19th-century French trappers named Roche Jaune ("Yellow Rock," for its abundant chalky bluffs). And the spotlight isn't only on what the river and surrounding lands offer today, but also the additional recreation—cycling and hiking trails, interpretive routes, improved campsites, and additional river access—they could provide in the future.

The 2021 Montana Legislature kicked things off by approving an initial \$4 million investment by FWP into the lower Yellowstone River corridor to bolster the river's wildlife habitat and water access. Then, this past year, a new regional citizen committee provided FWP with carefully considered guidance and recommendations.

Local businesses and supporters are thrilled with the new attention. "It's so great

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to see more focus on this other part of Montana and all we have to offer," says Mandy Hoffman of Glendive, who manages a river floating guide business with her husband Justin, a member of the Lower Yellowstone River Corridor Advisory Committee. Adds Joel Krautter of Sidney, an attorney, former legislator, and committee member, "Western Montana has made investments into public access and state parks and trails, but eastern Montana's natural beauty and opportunities have been overlooked. That's changing now."

Yet even with the infusion of money and energy, adding outdoor recreation amenities may be as challenging as canoeing the big river during its frequent windy spells. Ironically, the biggest

ICE BULLDOZERS
A challenge for any effort to add boat ramps and other amenities along the lower Yellowstone is the river's destructive power during winter and spring.



challenge could be the Yellowstone itself. In spring the river can swell with massive runoff that carries mobile-home-size ice floes able to wipe out boat ramps, pit latrines, campsites, and parking areas. "We definitely need new recreational infrastructure in this region," says Brad Schmitz, FWP regional supervisor in Miles City. "But we need to be mindful of appropriately placing it where it doesn't get washed away."

Rapid report

Both the river's vast recreational potential and possible hazards were on the minds of committee members when they met throughout much of 2021. Representing agricultural, recreational, conservation, and economic interests, the 12-member group was sponsored by Governor Greg Gianforte and convened by FWP to help the department determine the most effective way to spend the funding authorized during the last legislative session. Several committee members came from the Lower Yellowstone River Coalition, an earlier group of regional community leaders and recreation advocates who promoted the river's economic potential.

The new committee's main task was to develop a way for FWP to evaluate opportunities to acquire additional public river access. Members were also asked to identify where the state could invest in protecting critical wildlife habitats while still enhancing water access and recreation.

FWP director Hank Worsech says it was

important to maintain continuity with the previous lower Yellowstone coalition so that recommendations for spending the \$4 million and managing the recreation corridor represented local concerns and aspirations. "I didn't want our department to just go out and buy a few river access sites and call it a day," he says. "I wanted to see the committee's vision for their region of Montana."

FWP officials and committee members agree that the most pressing recreational needs are access sites in key areas along the river (see map, pages 26-27). Though the lower Yellowstone currently contains more than a dozen access areas—most of them at FWP fishing access sites (FAS)—several stretches contain access gaps of 19 to 41 miles. That means most canoeists and kayakers, who can paddle only 10 to 15 miles in a day, can't use those portions of the river.

Committee members visited or evaluated 20 sites along the corridor, talking with landowners and community leaders. They identified two dozen existing or potential opportunities for public access and habitat conservation. They also recommended installing river safety warnings; increasing accessibility for people with disabilities; and posting signs and kiosks with historical, agricultural, tribal, cultural, geological, and environmental information.

Members developed criteria to rank water access sites and produced a 20-page

report, "Recommendations for Improving Public Access, Habitat Conservation, and Management of the Lower Yellowstone River Corridor." FWP has the final say on considering, accepting, and carrying out any of the recommendations, and that process will be subject to public review.

One recommendation was to manage the entire lower Yellowstone as a single entity while highlighting the unique amenities and

“We’ve never had all these pieces line up before. I think we’re on a wave, so we’d better ride it as long as possible.”

history of its three separate zones: the Bighorn River confluence to Miles City, Miles City to Glendive, and Glendive to the North Dakota border near Sidney. To protect and interpret historical sites, the report suggests developing a Lower Yellowstone River State Park containing anchor destinations in each of the three zones. Modeled after the multi-unit Flathead Lake State Park in western Montana, the new park could have potential units at Myers Bridge/Howrey Island (near



HOOKED ON FISHING Anglers use ocean surf-casting rods and large treble hooks to land prehistoric paddlefish below Intake, one of several diversion dams on the lower Yellowstone. The river also offers top-notch angling for smallmouth bass, sauger, northern pike, walleye, and channel catfish.

Hysham), Powder River Depot (near Terry), and Intake Dam FAS (near Glendive). Powder River Depot in particular is a historical gem. Now managed by the Bureau of Land Management, it's the site of military activities before and after the Battle of the Little Bighorn, as well as stagecoach traffic, steamboat landings, and frontier trade (see sidebar, page 29).

Another committee recommendation: Create and promote hiking, biking, and water-based trails for their health benefits and potential to boost local

economies. The report specifically calls for purchasing, from willing landowners, four parcels along the stretches with limited river access for new public access sites. "It would be a dream come true just to get those four properties," says Angie Grove, former chair of the Montana State Parks and Recreation Board and current chair of the Lower Yellowstone committee.

Schmitz agrees, noting that FWP has been trying for two decades to increase access on the lower Yellowstone. "We've never had all these pieces line up before," he says. "I think we're on a wave, so we'd better ride it as long as possible."

Worsech reviewed the report in November 2021, and just a week later authorized FWP staff to look into purchasing recommended access sites.

Local interests

Committee members spent much of their time discussing the potential for recreation to boost and diversify the region's agriculture-based economy. Members heard from Christine Whitlatch, former director of the Glendive Chamber of Commerce, who a year earlier led the Lower Yellowstone River Coalition. "There's a huge level of excitement here over finally sharing the beauty of Montana's prairie and expanding a vision of the state that goes beyond just ski hills and mountains," Whitlatch says.

Committee member Brenda Maas, marketing director for Visit Southeast Montana,

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Montana Moss Agate



Paddlefish



Kayaking



Evelyn Cameron



Calypso Bridge



Bald Eagles



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Terry Badlands



Smallmouth Bass



Makoshika State Park

LOWER YELLOWSTONE RIVER

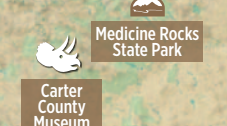
Existing and potential recreation amenities in one of Montana's last best places

HERE AND NOW

The lower Yellowstone River is one of the Treasure State's best-kept secrets. The unimpounded warmwater river offers vast stretches of **solitude** for **canoeists and kayakers**; great **fishing** for **bass, sauger, northern pike, paddlefish**, and other species; gravel bars containing stunning **Montana moss agates**; and **scenery little changed** from when **Captain William Clark** traveled these waters. The surrounding region includes vast **prairies, historic battlefields, Native American cultural sites**, and **world-renowned paleontology digs**, as well as **pronghorn, mule and white-tailed deer, wild turkeys, sharp-tailed grouse, raptors, songbirds**, and other wildlife on **vast public lands** open for **wildlife watching** and **hunting**.

DREAMING BIG

Yellowstone River advocates and local boosters **envision a wide range of possible infrastructure and recreational improvements** to make the waterway even **more attractive to visitors**. Foremost are **river access sites at key gaps** between existing sites (see red zones in map below and at right). In addition, local and regional coalitions and committees have identified these **possible enhancements: improving boat ramps, roads, camping opportunities, and water supplies** at several existing access sites; establishing **portage trails around diversion dams**; building **hiking and cycling trails with interpretive signs and information kiosks**; and even developing **visitor centers**.



Powder River Depot

Located near the confluence of the Yellowstone and Powder rivers, the historic Powder River Depot could someday be part of a Montana state park. Lower Yellowstone advisory committee members envision it as one of a three-unit heritage state park with camping facilities, trails, and an interpretive center.

It's an ideal place for cultural and historical interpretation. The scenic area was the site of Native American encampments for centuries, military activities during the Sioux War of 1866-67, fur trapper trade, and pioneer movement. A gravel road off West Old Highway 10 leads to the site, southwest of Terry, where an ornate iron fence with silhouettes of buffalo hunters surrounds graves from the late 1800s. Interpretive signs share tales of frontier people who traveled these lands and waters, including Captain William Clark, fur traders, missionaries, cattlemen, and railroaders.

Brigadier General George Crook and General Alfred Terry established military camps here. Visible across the river is Sheridan Butte, used by soldiers for signaling. It is named for General Philip Henry Sheridan, who went on to become general in chief of the U.S. Army. Sheridan is said to have climbed the butte to watch for the arrival of his subordinate, Lieutenant Colonel George Armstrong Custer. Not long after, Custer met his fate at the Little Bighorn.

In addition to all that history, vast wildlife-rich state and federal lands surrounding the site could expand a new state park's recreational offerings. As could the Terry Badlands Wilderness Study Area's extensive trails and scenic outlooks, and the Evelyn Cameron Heritage Center in nearby Terry, which highlights the celebrated frontier photographer. ■



Angie Grove, chair of the Lower Yellowstone River Advisory Committee (pink coat), discusses the Powder River Depot's rich history with other committee members.



LAST LONELY PLACE The lower Yellowstone, shown here flowing through badlands near Fallon, provides floaters, anglers, and others with solitude that's becoming increasingly rare in Montana. A major challenge for those boosting the river's recreational potential is finding ways to also preserve what makes the river and surrounding region so pleasurable today.

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says more boat ramps, especially, are key to the region's recreation-based economic growth. "The reason the lower Yellowstone is not more of a destination is directly related to the inability of visitors to access the river," she says. "The time is right for this project—the new funding, the growing interest in outdoor recreation created by the pandemic. Residents and visitors want to be outdoors and have more access to public lands and waters."

Stewardship, too, is part of the economic vision. "Data and economic research show us that places that care for their public lands and waters and invest in their recreation infrastructure have the chance to achieve greater prosperity than those that do not," Lance Kalfell, committee member, rancher, and chair of the Prairie Country Economic Development Council wrote in a summer 2021 *Billings Gazette* opinion piece.

Major challenges

Despite their excitement over the region's potential recreational and economic growth, committee members also recognized sober-

ing challenges to making the lower Yellowstone anything like a Madison River or upper Yellowstone River tourist magnet. Increased visitation may mean more money streaming into the region, but it also means more people, too. "Members want to share their region with others, but they still want the solitude and space they treasure," Grove says. "We talked a lot about maintaining that balance."

Jamie Hould, FWP regional Fishing Access Site Program manager in Miles City, echoes that desire. "I hope that, at the end of this process of creating more water access, a person who wanted to get lost on the river still could."

Another challenge is acquiring and maintaining access to one of the state's most powerful rivers. During some winters, sheets of ice over 10 feet tall flow down the Yellowstone, tearing out concrete boat ramps, fences, and pit toilets like bulldozers.

Then there's the fact that when an ideal public access spot is identified—one less prone to flood damage and between two existing access sites—the landowner may not want to sell. And even with willing sell-

ers, the time it takes for the state to complete an acquisition can be too long for landowners receiving other offers. "We've lost a half-dozen opportunities over the years because of those delays," Schmitz says.

That's another reason the FWP regional supervisor is so excited about these new possibilities: "We can't let them slip by, because they might not come back for another 25 years."

People take to the river

Like so many other outdoor recreation destinations, the lower Yellowstone saw a flood of new visitors during the past two summers. "We were not prepared for the amount of interest we received about floating the river," float guide business co-owner Mandy Hoffman says. "The Travel Channel called, bloggers called."

According to Schmitz, FWP boat ramps in the region received more use in 2021 than ever before. "We sense an increase of anglers and boaters on the horizon, and we need the infrastructure in place to handle it," he says.

Duncan Bartholomew, president of the Miles City chapter of Walleyes Unlimited,



A sandy beach near Miles City

TOP TO BOTTOM: JOHN LAMBEING, ABC-FOX MONTANA; MONTANA FWP

says he and other chapter members experience the burgeoning number of floaters and anglers firsthand. "We're out on the river all the time and see not only the growing interest but the need for additional access—especially for families," he says.

FWP deputy director Dustin Temple is well aware of the access deficiencies. He has family in the Glendive area, enjoys fishing the lower Yellowstone, and was instrumental in helping FWP get legislative authorization for using department funds to boost access and wildlife habitat. Temple stresses that building boat ramps and other amenities won't happen overnight, "but we're hoping to put pieces on the ground in the coming year, and

over time leverage additional funds to stretch the dollars we do have," he says.

Grove says she's thrilled that FWP is moving quickly to acquire the four properties, but she's not afraid to dream bigger. Like Temple, she wants to help attract additional funding for more of the committee's recommendations, such as establishing a heritage

state park. Grove also anticipates more landowners coming forward, which could open new possibilities for public access. "That's one of the many advantages of a local advisory committee—neighbors talking to neighbors," she says.

Inspired by the momentum, Schmitz hopes that new access sites will engender even more legislative support. "If we can show legislators that we're accomplishing what they asked us to do, that here's an access site or two on the ground with more coming, then that could inspire even greater interest," he says. "Because there's sure a desire from the public, the committee, the governor, and our director to do a lot more out here." 🐾