



# CULTURAL CLASH

Growing recreational use challenges Lewis and Clark and Indian history preservation and interpretation at Travelers' Rest State Park. **By Susie Wall**

**M**aci MacPherson still winces when she thinks of how terrible the collision could have been. The near miss occurred in April 2021, while the Travelers' Rest State Park manager was repairing an outdoor exhibit. She noticed a group of senior visitors stopping along a paved trail to read interpretive signs. Then she saw, on a hilltop above the trail, a group of local boys on bicycles begin their descent. Despite MacPherson's loud warning, the boys bombed down anyway, narrowly missing the older visitors.

This potentially dangerous encounter

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exemplifies the challenges that MacPherson, her staff, and park volunteers face each year: how to protect and interpret a National Historic Landmark while managing the park's growing recreational use. "We're trying to educate these new visitors about not harming the park's historical and cultural resources and also about valuing those resources," MacPherson says.

## CULTURAL CROSSROADS

Travelers' Rest, on a clear mountain stream near U.S. Highway 12, a few miles west of Lolo and 15 miles south of Missoula, was established as a National Historic Landmark in 1960 and a Montana state park in 2001.

The 65-acre site contains a visitor center and museum with Corps of Discovery and American Indian culture exhibits, picnic tables and shelters, a half-mile paved trail that encircles the Lewis and Clark Expedition's historic campsite, and two gravel trails to Lolo Creek and the Bitterroot Trail along nearby U.S. Highway 93.

The scenic spot has long attracted travelers. The site is a trail junction within the expansive aboriginal lands occupied by the Salish, Pend d'Oreille, and Nez Perce peoples, who moved through here following seasonal food sources, from bison to camas roots. Many traditional place names in the Bitterroot Valley are among the oldest words

in the Salish language. The spot where Lolo Creek flows into the Bitterroot River is called *Tmsmli*, translated as "No Salmon."

All Montana state parks emphasize understanding and respecting the land's significance to indigenous people. MacPherson and her staff have built a close relationship with the Salish-Pend d'Oreille Culture Committee. The park's visitor center contains exhibits on the area's long Indian history, and MacPherson ensures that Native American culture is the focus of many educational programs for visitors and local school kids.

Travelers' Rest is also an extremely important stop for history buffs following the route of the Lewis and Clark Expedition. Members of the expedition, led by Shoshone guide Toby, arrived here on September 9, 1805, exhausted from their trip over snowy Lost Trail Pass. They made camp near Lolo Creek, on a spot Meriwether Lewis dubbed "Travellers Rest."

"It's the only place along the entire Corps of Discovery route where visitors can say with certainty that they are walking in the footsteps of Lewis and Clark," MacPherson says.

During their stay, Lewis and Clark were visited by Salish who told them of the stream's "No Salmon" name. It was a momentous meeting. The explorers had wondered whether continuing north (downstream) on the Bitterroot would eventually lead them to the Columbia River and then the Pacific. But the lack of salmon in Lolo Creek meant none in the Bitterroot, which Lewis correctly reasoned was caused by a waterfall somewhere downstream blocking upstream migrations of the ocean-running species. With the long delay

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caused by the Great Falls of the Missouri still fresh in their minds, the expedition leaders decided on a different route.

Based on Toby's recommendation and their knowledge that the Pacific Ocean lay to the west, the expedition left Travelers' Rest on September 11 and headed over the rugged Bitterroot Mountains for a near-fatal, 11-day crossing. Remembering the site as a good place to camp, they returned to Travelers' Rest on their journey back east in 1806 from June 30 to July 3.

For years, historians estimated that the campsite was approximately 1.5 miles from the current site. After Greg E. Moulton published the 13-volume *The Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition* in the 1980s, historians and archaeologists began to reexamine the location based on the explorers' maps and written descriptions in the journals. Missoula archaeologist Daniel S. Hall led an extensive survey starting in the late 1990s to determine the true location. He and colleagues uncovered fire-cracked rock that indicated the campsite's hearth, and lead used to repair and manufacture firearms.

Even more conclusive was discovery of mercury-laced soil in what was determined to be the expedition's latrine. In his journal, Lewis noted that Corps members commonly used Dr. Benjamin Rush's Biliious Pills for a range of ailments. Dubbed "Rush's Thunderbolts," the mercury-rich

medication caused an unfortunate side effect of instant diarrhea.

These and other findings led researchers to the campsite's true location. Travelers' Rest remains the only archaeologically verified Lewis and Clark campsite along the expedition's entire route from St. Louis to the Pacific and back.

## BEAUTIFUL PLACE TO PLAY

The stream, vistas, wildlife, and open forests that made the site such an appealing place to camp throughout history make it a wonderful recreation destination today. Visitors fish and swim in Lolo Creek on summer days, walk their dogs or ride bikes on the well-maintained paths, and search for some of the 138 bird species recorded within the park boundaries.

Just a few minutes from Lolo and only a half-hour drive from downtown Missoula, the park's recreational use has skyrocketed over the past decade. When the coronavirus began sending even more people outdoors, visitation increased by 50 percent over two years, from 2019 to 2021. Some came to see the famous Lewis and Clark campground, but most were there to recreate in beautiful, natural surroundings.

Travelers' Rest is used by Missoulians, vacationers making a quick detour off U.S. Highways 12 or 93, and Lolo residents, whose town lacks a city park. "Many resi-



**MIXED USE** Above left: A marker indicates the park's National Historic Landmark status. Above right: A family visits Lolo Creek. Growing recreational use from nearby communities puts pressure on historical sites and threatens to overwhelm the park's original preservation and interpretation mission.



DIGITAL ILLUSTRATION USING ARTWORK FROM E.S. PAXSON

LEFT TO RIGHT: VICKI CORREIA; ANDY AUSTIN/MONTANA STATE PARKS





**NO MOTORS ALLOWED** Cyclists ride past the meadow where Captains Meriwether Lewis and William Clark and their men camped next to Lolo Creek, one of the most significant sites of the Corps of Discovery expedition. Park manager Maci MacPherson says she has seen tracks of after-hours ATV and motorcycle riders running across the historic location. “I think they see it as just this big open space,” she says.

dents there have adopted this state park as a place to fill that void,” MacPherson says.

The park manager welcomes the new visitors. “Part of our mission as a state park is to promote outdoor activities and their associated physical and mental health benefits,” MacPherson says.

But she’s concerned that many newcomers don’t recognize the park’s other mission: to protect and interpret historical and cultural landmarks. She, her staff, and the park’s many volunteers worry that people who venture off trails could disturb or damage significant sites. Or that unleashed dogs



**DIGGING DOGS** Another concern: off-leash pets disturbing historical sites.

could dig up historically or culturally important areas. “There’s only been one archaeological survey here, so we don’t know what else of significance is at the park,” says MacPherson. “We have a responsibility to ensure that anything that’s undiscovered is kept from being disturbed or stolen.”

In recent years, MacPherson has seen tire tracks of ATVs and motorcycles crossing the Lewis and Clark campsite. “I think they see it as just this big open space,” she says.

Another concern is the safety of older visitors, often there to learn about the park’s history, who could get knocked down by the growing number of cyclists, joggers, and enthusiastic dogs. “I’m not saying it’s a huge issue at this point, but I have seen it almost happen,” MacPherson says.

Travelers’ Rest isn’t the only state park where growing recreational use threatens historical preservation. “Recently we’ve had visitors carve their names into historical structures at Elkhorn, create erosion on archaeological deposits at Madison Buffalo Jump, and loot a bison skeleton from Makoshika,” says Rachel Reckon, who manages FWP’s Heritage Resource Program. “It’s definitely a growing concern across our state park system.”

**KEEPING THINGS SAFE**

The Travelers’ Rest parking lot gate shuts at 6 p.m., but there’s no way to close off the entire park. People regularly enter after hours to swim in the creek or run the trails when no staff or volunteers are there to monitor use.

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As in most Montana state parks, Travelers’ Rest lacks adequate paid staff to enforce rules: no unleashed pets, no motorized use of trails, and no off-trail walking or cycling. “For the most part, people follow the rules,” says Loren Flynn, FWP regional state parks manager in Missoula. “But there’s always a few who don’t. And with increased visitation, that number is growing.”

MacPherson, who also manages two other state parks in the Bitterroot Valley, is helped by an FWP park ranger and visitor center assistant. To manage the thousands

of visitors who arrive each week during the summer, she also relies on a legion of volunteers. Each weekend volunteers roam the park, greeting visitors and offering gentle reminders to follow rules. “All some people need is to be asked to slow down on their bikes or put their dog on a leash,” says Flynn. He says the park could add more signs warning people to stay on trails and follow other rules, “but they don’t have the same effect as someone giving the message in person.”

That thinking is behind the Bark Ranger Program, devised by the park’s two AmeriCorps volunteers. Patrolling volunteers bring their own dogs—on a leash, of course—which provides opportunities to more easily talk to

visitors with their own dogs about the importance of keeping all pets leashed.

Travelers’ Rest State Park is fortunate to receive support from Travelers’ Rest Connection (TRC), a “friends of” group that provides much-needed funding and volunteers and hosts public educational programs. Molly Stockdale, executive director, says most visitors using the park for recreation are from Lolo. She hopes to change that from a challenge to an opportunity.

“If you can foster pride in what they see as their community park, then they may want to protect it and set good examples for others,” she says. One example was TRC’s invitation for local families to paint benches in the outdoor classroom with images related

to the park, from native plant life to William Clark’s dog, Seaman. “The idea is that a kid who has spent time beautifying the park is a lot less likely to damage it later,” says Stockdale. “It’s all about pride, ownership, and stewardship.”

Nurturing stewardship, MacPherson adds, is the park’s ultimate goal. “What we’re trying to figure out now is the best way to engage all these new visitors—not just to protect the park but even more to help people understand why this place is so significant,” she says. “If they then take that insight back to their friends and family, I think we can grow support and stewardship for Travelers’ Rest beyond what we ever imagined.” 🐾



**PARK OF MANY USES** Clockwise from top left: Dog walking; a Salish elder giving a talk on local Native culture; teaching a family about Indian tools and lodging in the visitor center; walking across Lolo Creek.



FROM TOP: ANDY AUSTIN/MONTANA STATE PARKS; SHUTTERSTOCK  
ALL PHOTOS BY WICKI CORREIA EXCEPT VISITOR CENTER, ANDY AUSTIN/MONTANA STATE PARKS