

The Greatest Hunting Trip Ever?

Stalking Montana's amazingly abundant wildlife with Lewis and Clark

By Ben Long
Paintings by John F. Clymer



HUNTING ONE NOVEMBER MORNING, I pulled myself up a snowy, forested ridge in northwestern Montana. Having never ascended this part of the mountain, I felt the gut-level excitement of stepping into the unknown.

I also felt a gut-level hunger. I'd burned off breakfast long before reaching timberline, and my stomach growled. Fortunately, I had an energy bar in my pack. But considering that I'd seen no game all day, I knew that if I had been a true explorer, my lack of hunting success would put me in deep trouble.

An army travels on its stomach, and so does an expedition. For the Lewis and Clark Expedition, the situation was simple: Hunt or starve. Returning to camp empty-handed was rarely an option.

Though Lewis and Clark were happy to barter with Native Americans for corn and squash, they procured most of their protein by hunting. Over the course of their 28-month journey, they and their men hunted and ate bison, bears, elk, deer, pronghorns, prairie dogs, coyotes, and beavers. They ate birds, including common waterfowl, prairie and forest grouse, and shorebirds. Hunting was as essential to the journey as navigating a route and finding shelter. Without hunting, the Corps of Discovery never would have reached today's Montana, much less the Pacific Ocean.

Nevertheless, the arduous daily need of hunting was far more to the expedition than simply another chore. Meriwether Lewis, William Clark, and the other Corps of Discovery members knew that hunting could be fun and exciting, and that they had embarked on what was likely the greatest hunting trip of their lives. They also knew hunting could get them killed.

MEAT EATERS

The 30-plus young, athletic, hard-working members of the Lewis and Clark Expedition

HUNTING FOR SURVIVAL In the Bitterroot Mountains, during fall 1805, expedition members nearly starved for lack of game. Yet just a few months earlier they had seen land "covered with herds of Buffalo, Elk and Antelope."

were fueled almost entirely by red meat, each consuming an estimated 8 pounds per day (provided they could get it). Wrote Clark: "It requires 4 deer, or an elk and a deer, or one buffalo to supply us for

24 hours." That meant the hunters had to continually find, stalk, kill, and butcher game animals.

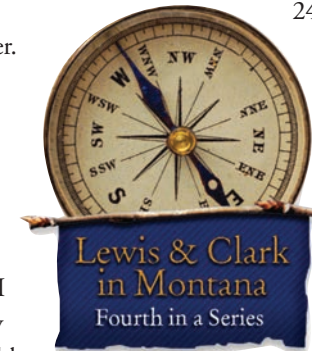
A typical day might go like this: While most of the crew hauled the expedition's equipment up the Missouri River in a keelboat or the smaller pirogues, the best hunters foraged ahead, afoot, looking for game. Their goal was to shoot a fat elk or bison

and afterwards hang the meat along the riverbank for the crew members downstream. Timing was important. If the meat was left untended overnight, wolves would devour it before the other members arrived.

Compared to today's high-powered scoped rifles that can accurately and quickly place three bullets in a 6-inch-diameter target at 400 yards, the firearms used by the Corps of Discovery were slow and unreliable. However, the explorers toted the finest firearms available, both rifles and smoothbore muskets (see sidebar, page 9). Each of the captains also carried a ceremonial spear called an esponentoon. This 6-foot-long staff, tipped with a spear point, came in handy as a walking stick, a rifle rest, and a weapon—which Clark proved one day by running his through a wolf, downstream of today's Loma.

Expedition crew members were prohibited from shooting animals they didn't need for meat—a standing order from the captains designed to conserve ammunition, not wildlife. That must have been a difficult order to enforce, for the prairies along the Missouri and Yellowstone rivers teemed with game. The captains struggled to express their awe, knowing the skeptics back home would scoff at their reports.

"The whol face of the country was covered with herds of Buffalo, Elk and Antelope," Lewis wrote near today's Montana-North Dakota border, "...so gentle that we pass near them while feeding, without appearing to excite any alarm among them and when we attract their attention, they frequently approach us more nearly to discover what we are."



"LEWIS AND CLARK IN THE BITTERROOTS" © JOHN F. CLYMER, COURTESY OF MRS. JOHN F. CLYMER AND THE CLYMER MUSEUM OF ART



"CAPTAIN CLARK—BUFFALO GANGUE" © JOHN F. CLYMER. COURTESY OF MRS. JOHN F. CLYMER AND THE CLYMER MUSEUM OF ART

Though the explorers nearly starved in the Idaho mountains later and had to trade with Indians along the Columbia for dogs to eat, they feasted in 1805 along what they called "the fat plains of the Missouri." Wrote Lewis near the confluence of the Missouri and Yellowstone rivers: "We can send out at any time and obtain whatever species of meat the country affords in as large quantity as we wish."

Most astonishing were the bison that mowed the prairie grass short and filled the night with the noise of their rutting. Historians estimate North America supported 60 million bison at the time. Near the Great Falls, Lewis estimated he could see 10,000 bison from one spot, along with "their faithful shepherds," the wolves. While descending the Yellowstone the next summer, near today's Billings, Clark had to wait on the riverbank for an hour while a steady stream of bison stampeded across the river ahead of him.

Often, the expedition members hunted game they had never seen before—or even heard of. Pronghorns, bighorn sheep, coyotes, and prairie dogs were new to science.

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Near the mouth of the Sun River, Lewis saw a "tiger cat." He fired and missed and was left scratching his head. It was likely a wolverine—a creature utterly foreign to the captain's home state of Virginia.

The Corps's hunters wounded a moose near today's Lincoln, but never killed one. They saw mountain goats in the Lemhi Range, but never close enough to kill. Bighorn sheep, however, were more accessible. At the time, the animals lived as far east as today's western North Dakota badlands, and the expedition members killed nearly three dozen of the muscular animals for food.

Feeding the Corps

The intense labor required of the Corps of Discovery crew members required a constant supply of meat. According to *The Natural History of the Lewis and Clark Expedition*, edited by Raymond Burroughs, the expedition's hunters killed the following during the journey:

Deer (whitetail, mule, blacktail)	1,001
Elk	375
Bison	227
Pronghorn	62
Bighorn sheep	35
Grizzly bear	43
Black bear	23
Beaver	113
Various geese	104
Various ducks	45
Various grouse	46
Wild turkey	9

The crew hunted many familiar animals, as well. At the time, both bison and elk were common on both sides of the Mississippi. Bison were popular targets with the crew, who particularly enjoyed eating the animal's tongue. They consumed the entire beast, however, including boiled guts (which they called "pudding") and bone marrow.

Elk were a top prize, not only for the meat but also the hides, which were flexible enough to be made into clothing and rope. However, crew members ate so many elk, particularly lean animals in late winter, that some thoroughly tired of it.

THE GREAT BEAR

Though meat was essential, that wasn't the only reason crew members went hunting. The captains were under instructions to collect animal specimens. So they shot animals such as badgers, plovers, and coyotes and sent the dried bones, feathers, and pelts back to their insatiably curious boss, President Thomas Jefferson.

Of all these new "discoveries" (Indians of course had known of these animals for centuries), none were more exciting than the grizzly. Before even seeing the great bear, Lewis and Clark knew its fearsome reputation. Through the winter of 1804–05 in the Mandan villages of today's North Dakota, Indians wearing necklaces of 3-inch-long bear claws showed the explorers their scars and told frightening tales of battling with grizzlies.

Firearms of Lewis and Clark

By Tom Dickson

If required to use the firearms of Lewis and Clark, most modern Montana hunters would have a hard time filling their doe tag, much less stopping a charging grizzly bear.

How did the hunting firearms of 200 years ago compare with the modern scoped rifles used today? Gene Hickman, an expert on early American weapons who lives in Helena, says expedition members used two main types of guns for hunting: muskets (smoothbores) and rifles. The longer muskets—with a barrel similar to a 14-gauge shotgun only much longer—included the fusil (or "fuzee"), a British-made firearm favored by trappers and Indians, and the Model 1795 Springfield. The .69-caliber muskets fired a round ball the size of a marble through a smooth barrel up to 48 inches long (a modern rifle's barrel is roughly 24 to 28 inches long). The longer barrel was thought to increase accuracy and burn powder more completely, Hickman says. With these guns, an experienced shooter could reliably hit a pie plate—a general measure of a big game animal's kill area—at 50 to 75 yards, and sometimes farther.

Historians disagree over exactly what type of rifle (a gun with a grooved spiral inside the barrel) the expedition members carried. The expedition members called them "short rifles" because the barrels were

only 33 inches long. These .50- or .54-caliber (meaning the bullets were .50 or .54 inches wide) firearms sent a bullet spinning from the muzzle (like a football thrown in a spiral) much straighter than the smoothbores. Hickman says an experienced shooter could easily hit a pie plate at 100 yards and sometimes even 150 yards with these guns.

The rifles were lighter and more accurate than the muskets but took longer to reload. The barrel grooves (rifling) slowed the ramrod used to pack powder and the lead bullet. Hickman says an experienced soldier or hunter could load and fire a smoothbore musket in roughly 45 seconds, while it took about twice that for a rifle.

Both types of guns had iron sights (the musket a front sight only) and used a piece of flint in the hammer to ignite a small amount of powder (held in a pan near the hammer). This in turn ignited the main powder charge in the gun's firing chamber (breach). "There was a lot that could go wrong," says Hickman. "Powder got wet, the flash holes got plugged, flint wore out, and the barrels often were clogged with residue."

Keeping the guns in working order was a constant chore for John Shields, the expedition's "artificer" (a combination gunsmith and blacksmith).

Crew members killed geese and ducks with the smoothbore muskets, loaded with



THE RIGHT ARMS FOR BEAR? The Model 1795 Springfield, used by expedition members for hunting grizzlies and other big game.

"swan shot" (made by dripping molten lead from several feet high into a bucket of water).

Considering that grizzlies are one of the most formidable North American animals, many modern hunters may wonder how expedition members were able to fend off the big bears, killing 43. As noted western conservation writer Paul Schullery writes in *Lewis and Clark Among the Grizzlies*: "It amazes me that no one got killed, or even seriously injured."

Hickman, an experienced big game hunter who has used replica early 19th-century firearms to kill both deer and bison, agrees.

"It's remarkable what the expedition could do with the firearms they had," he says. "They were good hunters, and they likely didn't take too many risks, especially with grizzlies. I think they really knew what they were doing."

HUNTING FIREARMS: Now and Then

	TODAY	LEWIS & CLARK ERA
Range and accuracy	With scopes, accurate to 400 yards or more.	Muskets accurate to 50–75 yards, rifles to 100–150 yards.
Barrel length	24–28 inches.	Muskets: 36–48 inches. Rifles: 33 inches.
Firepower	Depends on the caliber.	Both guns used to kill bison, elk, grizzlies, and other big game.
Speed of loading	Semi-automatics can issue 5 shots in 3 seconds.	Load and fire 1 shot every 45–90 seconds.
Weight	Average 7–9 lbs. with scope.	Average 8–10 lbs. with bayonet.
Reliability	Machined steel, engineered parts, rarely break down. But repairs usually can't be done in the field.	Hand-ground steel parts. Guns commonly misfired or clogged. But parts were interchangeable and could be fixed in the field.

Reckless Shot

Perhaps the most notorious of the Corps's hunting episodes occurred just outside of present-day Montana. In August 1806, near the confluence of the Missouri and Yellowstone rivers, Pierre Cruzatte fired at the elkskin-clad Lewis, whom he mistook for an elk, and struck the captain in the upper left thigh. Cruzatte, nearly blind, blamed Indians. But Lewis had the evidence in his britches—a .54-caliber rifle ball that Indians unlikely would have carried—and the wild-firing Frenchman eventually confessed.





"HASTY RETREAT" © JOHN F. CLYMER. COURTESY OF MRS. JOHN F. CLYMER AND THE CLYMER MUSEUM OF ART

In the Dakotas, the explorers saw grizzly tracks "3 times as large as a mans track," wrote Clark. Though expedition members had regularly encountered—and killed—black bears, this was the first sign of the grizzly. Then, near today's Wolf Point, Montana, they encountered the great bear itself. On October 20, 1805, the partially blind Pierre Cruzatte shot at what the Indians called the "white bear"—named for the grizzly's often light brown coat—before the wounded animal chased him off.

Grizzlies proved more awesome than expedition members could have imagined. The first one they actually were able to kill absorbed ten large bullets, several fired through the animal's lungs. Time after time, irate, wounded grizzlies turned on their attackers, chasing the men into the river. Lewis called them "a furious and formidable animal...it is astonishing to see the wounds they will bear before they can be put to death."

The grizzly bears usually weren't killed in self-defense. The explorers went after them for specimens and for useful products such as pelts and bear fat, which they used for cooking oil.

The men took to hunting the bears in squadrons. Several crew members would stalk a bear together. Half would take aim and shoot, while the others held fire. A second volley followed, while the first gunners reloaded. They found that only a lucky shot to the brain could reliably kill a grizzly.

Though they'd been eager to test their weapons and skills against the legendary bear, the explorers became increasingly less keen after just a few encounters with the real thing. Wrote Lewis: "I find the curiosity of our party is pretty well satisfied with respect to this animal."

RARE AND PRECIOUS

Back in the modern mountains of northwestern Montana, I fought the snow until I broke timberline. Looking west into the Cabinet Mountain Wilderness, I saw a scene unchanged from Lewis and Clark's time and before. A small band of elk—my main quarry—crossed a saddle half mile away. By the end of the day, I would encounter moose, as well as white-tailed and mule deer. Above me, I glassed the alpine haunts of mountain goats and bighorn sheep. Grizzly bears and wolves were somewhere out there, too.

As I have many times, I thought then how rare and precious it is that hunters can still encounter all the game animals that Lewis and Clark's crew hunted 200 years ago and American Indians hunted for centuries before that. Of all the states on the Lewis and Clark Trail, only Montana can make such a claim.

Our state's wealth of wildlife is no accident, but the result of a hard-fought conservation movement. In the first century after Lewis and Clark's journey, America hosted a great orgy of killing, difficult today to

fathom. Within a few years after the railroads came, the millions of bison on the northern plains were reduced to a few hundred. Elk, pronghorns, bighorn sheep, and beavers were shot and trapped to just fractions of their former populations. Thrill-seekers and market hunters left the once-teeming prairies a silent wasteland of bones. Less than a century after Lewis and Clark witnessed great seas of bison, scientists from the Smithsonian Institution searched for just one specimen. After three weeks of trying, they were unable to find a single bison.

But beginning in the early 1900s, hunter-conservationists reversed the course of wildlife population declines. They ended the slaughter, regulated harvest, and demanded that federal and state agencies conserve species using the sound biological principles of wildlife management.

We will never again see the five Great Falls run free. And much of the wilderness witnessed by Lewis and Clark is today either gone or diminished. But Montana's wild heritage lives on. By promoting and supporting science-based conservation, those who value the state's wildness can ensure it remains for another two centuries and beyond.

Unlike the Corps of Discovery members, I was fortunate to have a kitchen and stocked cupboards waiting at the end of my day. But like those explorers and fellow hunters, I was also fortunate to have the chance to hunt for game more diverse and abundant than almost anywhere else in the modern world. 🐻

Proof They're Bear Proof

Can a garbage container save a bear's life? Bear experts in Montana are hoping a new program that tests bear-resistant products will reduce conflicts between bears and humans that too often result in dead bears.

As people build homes and cabins farther and farther into the countryside—what resource managers call the "urban-wildlife interface"—many unknowingly attract hungry black and grizzly bears. The animals find easy pickings in garbage cans, dumpsters, compost piles, pet food dishes, and even bird feeders.

It's dangerous for bears to hang around places where people live—dangerous for people and bears. In some cases, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks personnel scare away garbage-grubbing bears. But in other situations, where bears grow addicted to garbage, state officials may have to give landowners citations and even kill bears that are repeat offenders.

To help prevent the problems from occurring, wildlife officials look for ways to keep bears from getting hooked on human and pet food. Recently, the Interagency Grizzly Bear Committee (IGBC), Montana FWP, the Living With Wildlife Foundation, and the Grizzly and Wolf Discovery Center jointly conducted a study to determine which of the many available products are truly bear proof.

Patricia Sowka, executive director of the foundation, conducted tests in 2004 at the Grizzly and Wolf Discovery Center in West Yellowstone in conjunction with the center's staff. Many of the center's grizzly bears were captured after repeatedly breaking into human food and garbage containers.

"These bears were perfect for the tests because they'd already learned to access various types of containers," Sowka says.

The hungry, determined bears tried to

pry food from 30 different containers. To pass the test, a food locker or garbage bin had to keep animals from reaching the food inside for at least 90 minutes.

According to Sowka, one goal of the testing program is to keep ineffective products off the market. "Putting out bear-resistant containers that don't work is a bad deal all around," she says. "Bears get in trouble, people get mad, and everybody loses."

Jamie Jonkel, one of FWP's five bear management specialists, says he has been receiving a growing number of requests to handle delinquent bears lured to homes, ranches, and cabins. He says many home owners don't know how to store their food and garbage properly.

"There's a big learning curve here in western Montana," says Jonkel, who works out of Missoula. "Most native Montanans are used to running a tight ship when it comes to keeping food away from wildlife, but many of the people moving here aren't. They come to Montana out of a love of wildlife, but some don't have a clue how

By Kerry Brophy

to live with wildlife."

Jonkel, who worked on the study with Sowka, says bear-resistant containers provide one solution to the growing conflicts. "It's been shown again and again that bears can live with people," Jonkel says. "The way to solve the problem is really pretty simple—make it impossible for bears to get to food or garbage."

Companies in Canada and Alaska are also developing bear-resistant products and techniques. One Alberta company's garbage bins, certified by the recent IGBC-sponsored study, are a residential version of the larger, metal bins used in the province's national parks. In Alaska, where small communities of people live within vast tracts of wildlife habitat, one approach is to use community transfer stations. People take garbage to the stations, where it is stored in large bear-proof containers that are surrounded by a tall, bear-proof fence.

Sowka, whose foundation works to identify and reduce conflicts between people and wildlife, understands that some people don't like bears. They would prefer to have FWP simply remove the animals instead of dealing with the food and garbage problem themselves. "But they make a choice when they move to bear country," she says. "This is the bears' environment, and people are sharing it with them. When there's an easy solution, like storing food and garbage in bear-proof containers, I want people to know about it." 🐻

For results of the study and a list of certified bear-proof containers, go to lwwf.org and look for the Bear-Resistant Products Testing Program under "Projects." Also, the IGBC website (fs.fed.us/r1/wildlife/igbc/) then "Bear Safety" contains a list of additional certified food containers based on tests done in 1989. The Missoula-based Predator Solutions, Inc. (406-249-7241 or predatorsolutions.com) works with the Living with Wildlife Foundation to purchase the most effective bear-proof containers in bulk to sell for a reduced rate.



PHOTO COURTESY OF LIVING WITH WILDLIFE FOUNDATION

EXPERT TESTERS Researchers used bears experienced in robbing garbage and food bins to learn which products could truly foil the bruins' efforts.

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