

# Indian Reservations

## Understanding autonomous nations within Montana's borders

The seven Indian reservations in Montana make up nearly 10 percent of the state. It's understandable that anyone traveling to or through these lands might want to know how reservations came about and what life there is like. After all, it's not every day you drive into a sovereign nation.

Before European-Americans arrived, Indigenous tribes claimed all this region. For millennia they had told stories centered on the land and water, raised their families, honored forebears, buried loved ones, and established sacred sites. They didn't "own" the land as we use the word—with legal claims, titles, and deeds. Instead, tribal nations recognized territorial boundaries marked by buttes, rivers, and other landmarks. And they fought to protect these places



Above: Children play near their homes in Browning, on the Blackfeet Indian Reservation. In many ways, life on reservations resembles that in much of rural Montana, though with tribal cultures and languages still a part of everyday life.

PHOTO BY REBECCA DROBIS

Left: A Cheyenne couple in front of a tepee near Billings in 1918.

PHOTO FROM BILLINGS PUBLIC LIBRARY



According to the Smithsonian's Museum of the American Indian, "Native Americans," "American Indians," and "Native people" are all acceptable names for the people living in Montana whose forebears are the original inhabitants of this land. But Native people prefer to be called by their tribal name, such as "She is Kootenai," whenever possible.



and concentrated mainly in government, education, and health services. On reservations, those jobs are funded mainly by federal funds secured under treaty arrangements. Services and payments the federal government provides to Indians in Montana and nationwide are like a lease or rent—rent for use of the entire country of the United States that was previously occupied.

Federal payments are not so different from Montana's state budget as a whole in recent years. According to the Montana Budget and Policy Center, federal funds accounted for 49 percent of the Montana state budget for 2022 and 2023.

Other reservation revenue comes from tourism, arts, food services, timber harvest, transportation, construction, manufacturing, and utilities.



Above: A herd of horses crosses the Little Bighorn River on the Crow Indian Reservation.

Some Montana reservations operate modest casinos. But because they compete with roughly 16,000 non-reservation video keno, bingo, and poker machines in gas stations and restaurants across gambling-

friendly Montana, tribal casinos struggle to make much money.

Despite limited employment opportunities, many tribal members say they prefer reservation life with its deep relationship



Above left: Leading a robotics class at the Boys & Girls Club of the Northern Cheyenne Nation in Lame Deer. Above right: Members of the Arlee Warriors basketball team on the Flathead Reservation embrace their heritage on and off the court. Below: Ethan David, Blackfeet, helps his son, Josh, prepare for the dummy roping competition at the summer youth rodeo. Children compete in events such as roping, sheep riding, and goat tying held on the reservation throughout the summer.

with the land and cultural strongholds, where traditional beliefs, ceremonies, and languages that are thousands of years old are still in practice.

Perhaps most important for tribal residents is that reservations are places of self-rule, though with some limits. Tribes are autonomous nations that make laws, hold elections, administer funds, and interact with other governments. Each tribal nation has its own unique culture, language, identity, and history. Tribes have some powers that supersede those of state government, such as the right to operate casinos. But they are subject to laws passed by the U.S. Congress and regulations administered by the Bureau of Indian Affairs.

That sovereignty, even with limitations, means that tribes must be treated by states and the U.S. government as equals. Tribal leaders say this gives Indigenous people an immeasurable sense of pride and independence. 🐾



Above: Montana State University graduate student Kendall Rae Edmo, a member of the Blackfeet Nation, earned a National Science Foundation Graduate Research Fellowship to study a high-elevation bison drive line on the Rocky Mountain Front. Historically, Blackfeet tribes constructed these complex drive line systems, using rock cairns to funnel the animals toward cliffs and embankments where the large mammals could be killed.

## FWP and tribes

Because fish and wildlife don't recognize borders between state and tribal land, managing those resources can be complicated. Tribes often partner with FWP to share information and help cooperatively manage fish and wildlife. For instance, the department works with the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes to restore native bull trout and westslope cutthroat trout in Flathead Lake and with the Blackfeet Tribe on swift fox restorations and reducing conflicts between people and grizzly bears. FWP also partners with the Crow Tribe on managing Chief Plenty Coups State Park.

In 2021, FWP created a tribal liaison position to improve relations between the state and tribes. The liaison helps bring Native voices into state government, assists in partnerships and projects between tribal fish and wildlife departments and Montana, and finds ways to bridge cultural gaps between FWP staff and tribal officials.



Left: Kqyn Kuka, FWP tribal liaison and descendant of the Blackfeet Nation. Right: Karlene Faulkner, a member of the Little Shell Band of Chippewa, is an interpreter at First Peoples Buffalo Jump State Park.



A round barn south of Brady, Teton County. Built mainly for dairy operations, round barns often contain a central silo around which cattle feed on silage. The circular structures are rare in Montana, where farmers favor square and rectangular barns that are easier to build and wire for electricity.

## Barns

After the family house, barns once were the most important structures on farms and ranches. Barns house livestock, animal feed, grain, and machinery. In recent years, four-wheelers have taken over for horses and steel grain bins have replaced barn storage areas, creating less need for barns. Though most wooden barns were built more than 100 years ago and are deteriorating, they remain as beautiful architectural features of rural Montana.

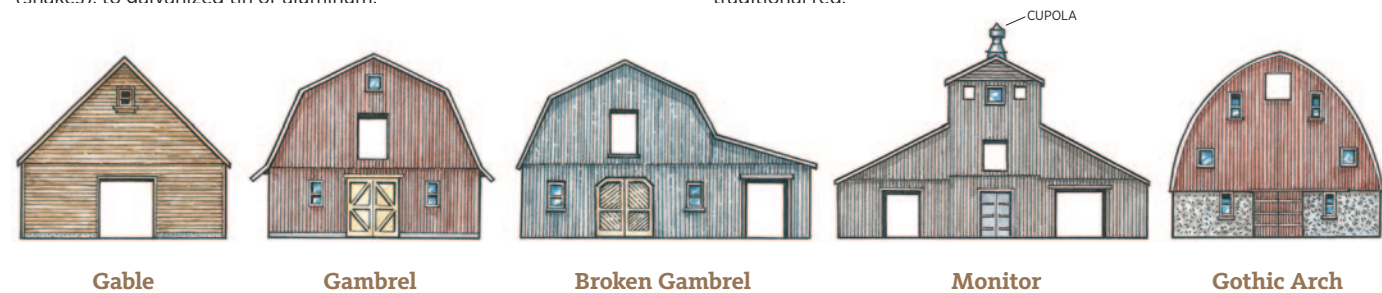
Older barns are usually timber framed, meaning they are built on a large frame of thick posts and beams held together with dovetail, peg, or mortise-and-tenon joints. Because it doesn't need interior walls for support, timber framing creates large, open spaces that farmers and ranchers need.

Barn roof materials have advanced from wood planks, to wood shingles (shakes), to galvanized tin or aluminum.

Atop many barns sit small metal cupolas or ventilators that allow moisture from hay to escape so it can cure and increase its nutritional value. Vents also allow humidity from cattle and other livestock and noxious gasses from animal dung and moisture to rise up and escape. And they bring in fresh air without having to open the main doors and lose heat in winter.

After Montana's rural electrification began in the 1940s and '50s, farmers began installing electric ventilation systems in their barns, reducing the need for cupolas.

Barns are traditionally painted red because years ago the only paint affordable in large quantities was made with iron oxide. After other colored paints became more affordable, many barn owners continued using the traditional red.



Barns come in a range of shapes and designs. The most basic is the **gable roof**, with two flat roof sides rising up at 45 degrees to a peak with triangular ends. The roundish **gambrel roof** creates extra space on a top level to store hay. The **broken gable** and the **broken gambrel** extend horizontally partway down to create a roof for an attached shed. The **monitor roof** barn raises the central roof and adds another set of vertical walls for windows and ventilation. The tall, handsome **Gothic-arch** (or rainbow-arch) barn has curved rafters. The roof may extend to the ground, making the roof and walls a complete arch, or is built with an arched roof atop traditionally framed or stone walls.

PHOTO: TODD KLASZY; ILLUSTRATIONS BY ED JENNE

## Old wind pumps

Montana is home to more than 1,000 industrial wind turbines that produce electricity (see page 64) and hundreds more smaller, private turbines on rural homesteads across the state.

These machines differ from the dilapidated windmills (technically **wind pumps**) found on many old homesteads. Wind pumps use wind energy to rotate blades that cause a rod to move up and down, raising and lowering a piston in an underground pump to bring water to the surface.

Modern **wind turbines** have no direct connection to any mechanical process other than turning a drive shaft in a generator that produces electricity.

Wind pumps were used mainly in Montana from the 1880s to 1930s. The number declined as rural electrification programs extended power lines to farms and ranches to run electric-powered water pumps. Some ranches still use wind pumps to supply water for livestock in remote areas where stringing a power line is too expensive.



Old wind pump on a ranch near Hobson.



Adventure cyclists on the Great Divide Mountain Bike Route meet near the Canada-U.S. border.

## Touring bicyclists

In summer, you'll often see adventure cyclists (**bike tourers**) along Montana highways, especially U.S. Highway 287 between Yellowstone and Glacier national parks and scenic Montana Highway 200 west of Lincoln. These cyclists carry panniers (nylon saddle bags on either side of the wheels) or pull a burley (trailer) filled with gear.

A growing number of mountain bikers have also taken up "bikepacking" on the Great Divide Mountain Bike Route. Developed and mapped by the Missoula-based Adventure Cycling Association, the route is 90 percent off-road. **Bikepackers** ride mountain bikes and carry small packs that fit on handlebars, atop a rear rack, and within the bike frame, allowing them to navigate narrow routes of the Continental Divide Trail.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: DAVE RUMMANS; PARK COUNTY SHERIFF'S DEPARTMENT; SHUTTERSTOCK; WIKI APPROVED

## Law enforcement

If you speed, litter, or otherwise break the law while driving through rural Montana, you could get pulled over by a country sheriff's deputy, tribal police officer, town police officer, or state highway patrol officer.

**Sheriff's deputies**, who patrol entire counties, are hired by the county sheriff, an elected official. **Tribal police** enforce laws on reservations. **Police officers'** jurisdictions are the much smaller town limits. Many rural Montana towns are too small to hire even a single police officer, so they contract with the county or nearby larger town for their law enforcement needs. **Highway patrol officers** enforce highway traffic laws statewide as well as all state criminal, commercial, and wildlife laws.

Another enforcement officer you might spot is an **FWP game warden**. Wardens are responsible for enforcing hunting, fishing, and boating regulations and helping with the stewardship of Montana's fisheries, wildlife populations, state parks, and other types of outdoor recreation.



Montana Highway Patrol and Park County sheriffs and firefighters respond to a truck fire on I-90 near Livingston.



A Lewis and Clark Trail highway sign along U.S. Highway 2

## Lewis & Clark Historic Trail

Marked with brown highway signs showing the two explorers in buckskin, Meriweather pointing the way, the **Lewis and Clark National Historic Trail** is roughly 5,000 miles long, extending from Pennsylvania to the mouth of the Columbia River, near Astoria, Oregon.

The trail, administered by the National Park Service, follows the historic outbound and inbound routes of the Lewis and Clark Expedition as well as the preparatory section in eastern states. The park service maintains rest stops with information kiosks and a website with information on sites in each state. Visit [nps.gov/lecl/index.htm](https://nps.gov/lecl/index.htm).

**Lewis and Clark auto tours** are a series of driving loops within regions explored by the Corps of Discovery. Four tours exist in Montana, and you'll see signs for them occasionally on highways. For information on these routes, visit [experiencelewisandclark.travel/rocky-mountains/auto-tours/](https://experiencelewisandclark.travel/rocky-mountains/auto-tours/).