



*Following the
Road to the Buffalo
on the
Helena National Forest*

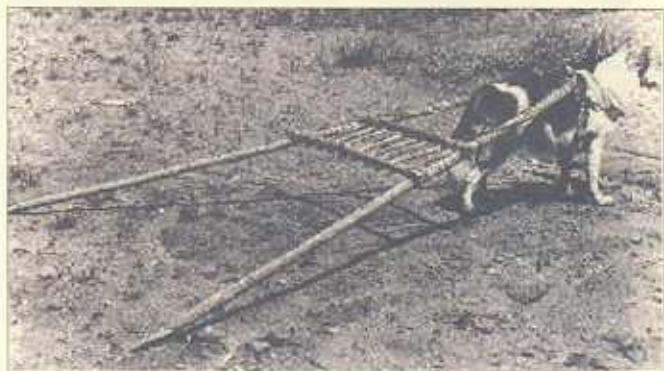


*Along the
Lewis and Clark
National Historic Trail*

“Qoq’aalx ’Iskit” *The Ancient Road to the Buffalo*

For at least 10,000 years, American Indians have lived in this part of Montana. The Kootenai, Salish, Nez Perce, Blackfeet, Crow, and Shoshone Indians traveled through this area on a trail the Nez Perce called “Qoq’aalx ’Iskit”, or the *Road to the Buffalo trail*. One branch of the trail led them over a low mountain pass to hunting grounds east of the Rocky Mountain Continental Divide. Salish Indians crossed the mountains as many as three times a year, usually in the summer and the fall. All were in search of the buffalo.

Buffalo were often the difference between survival and starvation. Its meat, both fresh and preserved, fed people throughout the year. Its hide served as clothing and shelter, its bones were used for tools, and other parts of the animal were important for ceremonial rituals. The importance of the buffalo to all area tribes meant that the network of trails leading over the mountains were open to all who wished to travel them.



Dog-pulled travois

*Western History Collections, *University of Oklahoma Library*

Traditionally, Indian people traveled the *Road to the Buffalo trail* on foot. They used dogs to carry goods and supplies, to drag tipi poles, and to pull travois. A travois consisted of several poles tied together to form a sled. One end of the travois rested on the back of a dog; the other poles dragged along the ground. Untold generations of Indian groups crossed and re-crossed the ancient road, dragging travois along with them, wearing depressions deep into the earth.

Meriwether Lewis: A Man in a Hurry

Captain Meriwether Lewis passed this way in the summer of 1806. He and his co-leader Captain William Clark of the Corps of Discovery worked well as a team, as the even-tempered Clark often balanced the moods of the more mercurial Lewis.

However, in the summer of 1806, the captains divided their expedition into two groups to explore more territory, leaving both Lewis and Clark alone in command of their respective parties. When the commanders parted at Travelers' Rest on July 3, 1806 (near present-day

Lolo, Montana), Lewis confided in his journal that he hoped the separation from Clark, his "worthy friend and companion," would be "only momentary."

Lewis and a party of nine men set out for the Missouri River from Travelers' Rest. However, they were unsure of the best route across the mountains. Lewis and Clark often consulted with Indian leaders to learn about the countryside ahead; on this occasion, Nez Perce Indians told Lewis about the *Road to the Buffalo Trail*. In his journal, Lewis translated the Nez Perce word for the trail as "Cokahlarishkit." The Nez Perce assured the captain that this route would lead the group easily and quickly across the Continental Divide to the Missouri River. Lewis also learned that although many area tribes used it, the trail ran through Blackfeet territory.

On July 6, 1806, Lewis and his men traveled swiftly east along the Blackfoot River valley (past present-day Lincoln, Montana) on the *Road to the Buffalo trail*.

It was simple for the Corps members to find; they merely followed the ruts made by generations of hunters, their families and their travois.

Lewis and his men wasted little time exploring this area. They longed to return to the familiar Missouri River territory, and in a larger sense, to their friends and family in the United States. They anxiously avoided any contact with the Blackfeet, who were traditional enemies of the Nez Perce and other area tribes who had befriended the Corps. Lewis surmised that the Blackfeet, who had been trading with



Buffalo Hunt with Wolf Skin Mask—George Catlin—1845

Canadian companies for more than twenty years, would not be pleased with this intrusion by the Expedition members, no matter how short it might be.

Consequently, Lewis and his men did not linger in this area. Lewis

wrote little in his journal about this portion of his journey. He may have been battling one of his frequent bouts of depression.

Yet at the top of a windswept, treeless saddle between two hills, Lewis' mood changed as he looked to the east and wrote that "from this gap which is low and an easy ascent on the W. side the fort mountain bears North Eaast, and appears to be distant about 20 Miles." This was the first recognizable landmark for Lewis' party since leaving Travelers' Rest. They were back in familiar territory.

Lewis' map of this portion of the journey contains little information and was hastily drawn. The map marks where they crossed the Continental Divide with the single word "Gap." Ironically, today it is called Lewis and Clark Pass, even though William Clark never saw it.

The Road to the Buffalo after Meriwether Lewis

In the years immediately following Lewis' visit to the area, life continued for Indian people much as it had been before the Europeans arrived. Horses had long replaced dogs as the beasts of burden. Family groups or entire villages journeyed along the *Road to the Buffalo trail* and crossed the mountains to buffalo hunting grounds.

Although occasional American fur trappers visited this area in the years following Lewis, the next recorded visit by Europeans was not until nearly forty



Horses replace dogs
*Western History® Collection**

years later. Fathers Point and De Smet, two missionaries, traveled to the Rocky Mountains to establish missions among the Indians. Father Point recorded in his diaries month-long journeys he made with the Salish along the *Road to the Buffalo trail*. On one journey, Point wrote that they reached a summit of a mountain "from which one could see a horizon more than a hundred leagues in circumference". He may have been at the summit of Lewis and Clark Pass.

Use of the trail declined over the next thirty years. As European-Americans decimated the free-roaming herds of buffalo, Indian people resorted to other forms of subsistence. The Indians' nomadic way of life ended as many were relocated to reservations.

The *Road to the Buffalo trail* soon became a part of the lives of newcomers to the area. Military parties recognized the importance of the well-traveled network of trails. In 1855, territorial governor Isaac Stevens recommended the Alice Creek Valley as suitable for wagons and wrote that the pass would make an excellent railroad route. His proposed route never developed. Miners, and settlers arrived in the Blackfoot River and Alice Creek valleys when gold was discovered near Lincoln in 1865. When maps of the area were made between 1877 and 1911, many of the roads and trails shown on these maps likely represented Indians trails. For example, the trail shown passing through homesteader John Patterson's yard in the Alice Creek valley is actually the *Road to the Buffalo trail*.

Preservation and Management

In 1999, the Helena National Forest enlisted the aid of the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes to locate and document the ancient trail network in the Alice Creek Valley. Using oral traditions, historic maps, and current technology such as Global Positioning Satellite equipment, tribal members and Forest staff identified trail remnants and significant heritage sites along the ancient Road. Information



Tim Ryan, of the Salish-Kootenai tribes, maps a rock cairn along the ancient trail.

from this project helped the Confederated Tribes supplement tribal histories. The Helena National Forest used information from the project to develop methods to preserve and protect the ancient travel route for future generations to enjoy.

Have a Safe Visit

The Alice Creek and Lewis and Clark Pass areas are home to grizzly bears, and are designated as a Grizzly Bear Recovery Zone. This Zone includes critical habitat for whitebark pine. Grizzlies frequent the area in mid-summer and early fall in search of the pinecone's seeds, which are an important source of protein. Most bears will avoid people and leave areas where people are present, but use caution when hiking and make noise as you walk, so bears are aware of your presence. Hike in groups if possible.



The Helena National Forest manages the upper Alice Creek Valley and the west side of Lewis and Clark Pass. Visible remains of the *Road to the Buffalo* trail lie within this area. The Forest Service strives to preserve this ancient trail and the surrounding cultural and natural landscape.

The *Road to the Buffalo* is part of the 3,700-mile Lewis and Clark National Historic Trail. This trail crosses the Continental Divide National Scenic Trail (CDNST) at the top of Lewis and Clark Pass. For more information about these trails and other area landmarks, please contact the Lincoln Ranger District.

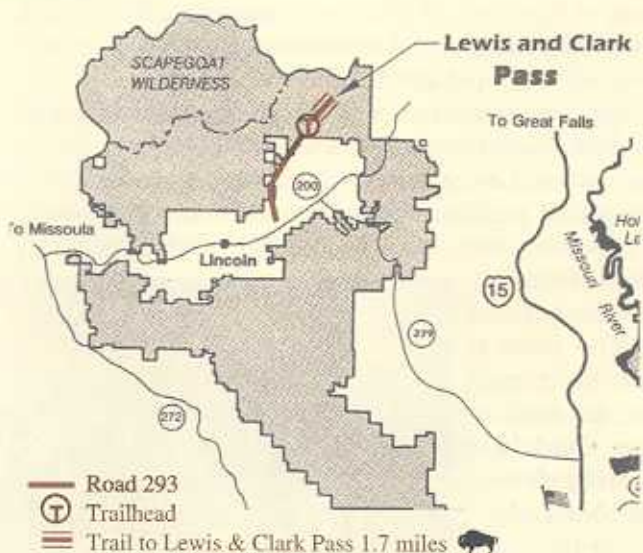
The road to the Lewis and Clark Pass trailhead is narrow and unpaved. Because the trailhead is located adjacent to an established Roadless Area, vehicles are restricted to designated routes. Additional early season travel restrictions may also be implemented to protect water quality.

Outfitter/guide permits are necessary for commercial tours to Lewis and Clark Pass trailhead and/or Lewis and Clark Pass. Information regarding permits can be obtained by calling the Lincoln Ranger District.

Free, special use permits are required for non-commercial groups of 25 or more. Group permits may be obtained by contacting the Lincoln Ranger District.

Lincoln Ranger District
1569 Highway 200
Lincoln MT 59639

Phone: 406-362-4265



Take the time to linger where Meriwether Lewis did not. The beauty and hidden secrets of this area that Lewis and his companions missed are still here for the modern traveler to discover. The Alice Creek Valley and Lewis and Clark Pass look much as they did in 1806. Deer, moose and elk still frequent the area. Plants such as biscuit root and camas that Indian people used to survive continue to grow here. However, the area is now used for a variety of purposes, including ranching and recreation. Visitors should respect boundary markers and private property.



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