



Lewis and Clark on Lolo Creek

"... verry bad passing ..." Westbound, the trip up Lolo Creek was the start of a remarkably arduous and life-threatening part of the expedition's journey. Eastbound, the passage down Lolo Creek represented victory over one of the most formidable barriers to cross-country travel they had encountered.

In Search of a Westward Passage August-September 1805

When Meriwether Lewis reached the Continental Divide south of the Bitterroot Valley on August 12, 1805, he expected to see a plain descending toward the Pacific Ocean; instead, the dream of a Northwest Passage was shattered when he saw *"immence ranges of high mountains still to the West of us."* He soon learned from the Shoshone that there was no navigable river route to the sea. Clark scouted ahead to confirm what the Shoshone had told them and learned that the Salmon River was indeed impassable. The captains then enlisted the services of a Shoshone guide they called Old Toby, who told them of an Indian road through the mountains. Although Old Toby warned them the trail was rugged and offered little in the way of game, they decided to give it a try.

Led by Old Toby, the Corps of Discovery traveled on horseback north up the Bitterroot Valley, headed for Lolo Creek and the difficult trail across the Bitterroot Mountains. As they traveled,

the party no doubt glanced up at the fortress of peaks towering high on their west flank. The captains had planned to be at the Pacific by this time, and they must have felt a growing sense of urgency when they saw the snow-covered mountains. The expedition was about to face the last and most intense test of their abilities before reaching the ocean.

The Corps made camp on the south side of Lolo Creek, just west of the present town of Lolo, at a place Lewis named Travelers' Rest. There they made moccasins, repaired clothing, and rested their horses in Preparation for the next leg of their journey. During the expedition's stay at Travelers' Rest, a party of three Nez Perce Indians arrived from the west and told them that crossing the mountains would require "five sleeps." But the trip that took the three Nez Perce just five days became an arduous, eleven-day ordeal for the expedition.

Heading West Over the Bitterroots

September 11-22, 1805

The expedition left Travelers' Rest on September 11, 1805, following a trail the Nez Perce called *K'useyneisskt* (the "Buffalo Trail"), known today as the *Lolo Trail*. They traveled along the north side of Lolo Creek, mainly on ridges above the brush-choked creek bottom. Clark's journal entry on September 12, 1805, described the road as "*verry bad passing over hills & thro' Steep hollows*" and noted that "*the Indians have pealed a number of Pine for the under bark which they eate at certain Seasons of the year.*" (These trees may have also helped mark the route over the mountains.)

The next day, the expedition passed Lolo Hot Springs, of which Clark wrote, "*I found this water nearly boiling hot at the places it Spouted from the rocks ... I put my finger in the water, at first could not bare it in a Second.*" They didn't stop for a soak. By September 14, 1805, the trail had deteriorated into a steep and stony path strewn with fallen timber. Unable to find game, Clark related, they were "*compelled to kill a Colt for our men & Selves to eat for the want of meat.*"

In the days that followed, a number of their horses slipped and, as Clark wrote, were "*verry much hurt*" rolling down "*Steep hills.*" Snow fell, almost obliterating the trail and turning what had been a difficult journey into a nightmare. On September 16, 1805, Clark wrote, "*I have been wet and as cold in every part as I ever was in my life ... men all wet cold and hungary ... to describe the road of this day would be a repetition of yesterday except the Snow which made it much wors to proseed.*"

They killed and ate a second colt and then resorted to eating "portable soup," an emergency ration they had brought along but had never had to use. Members of the expedition were plagued by diarrhea, skin rashes, lethargy, and other symptoms of malnutrition. Finally, on September 22, 1805, they emerged from the mountains into what Lewis described as "*a leavel and fertile country,*" the home of the Nez Perce, who generously assisted the expedition with their journey west.

East Over the Bitterroots

June 24-30, 1806

After wintering near the Oregon coast at Fort Clatsop, the expedition began their return east. They spent most of May on the west side of the Bitterroots waiting for the mountain snow to melt. Anxious to return to St. Louis, they attempted to cross the mountains in mid-June but were turned back by twelve-foot-deep snow-banks and numbing cold. On June 24, 1806, led by Nez Perce guides, they started across the mountains again, at times riding over snow six to eight feet deep. After they finally crossed the Bitterroots and headed down Lolo Creek, they allowed themselves the luxury of a soak in Lolo Hot Springs and reached Travelers' Rest on June 30, 1806.

Their return to Travelers' Rest represented victory over one of the most formidable barriers to cross-country travel they had encountered. They rejoiced that they were, as Clark wrote,

"leaveing these tremendous mountains behind us, in passing of which we have experienced cold and hunger of which I shall ever remember."

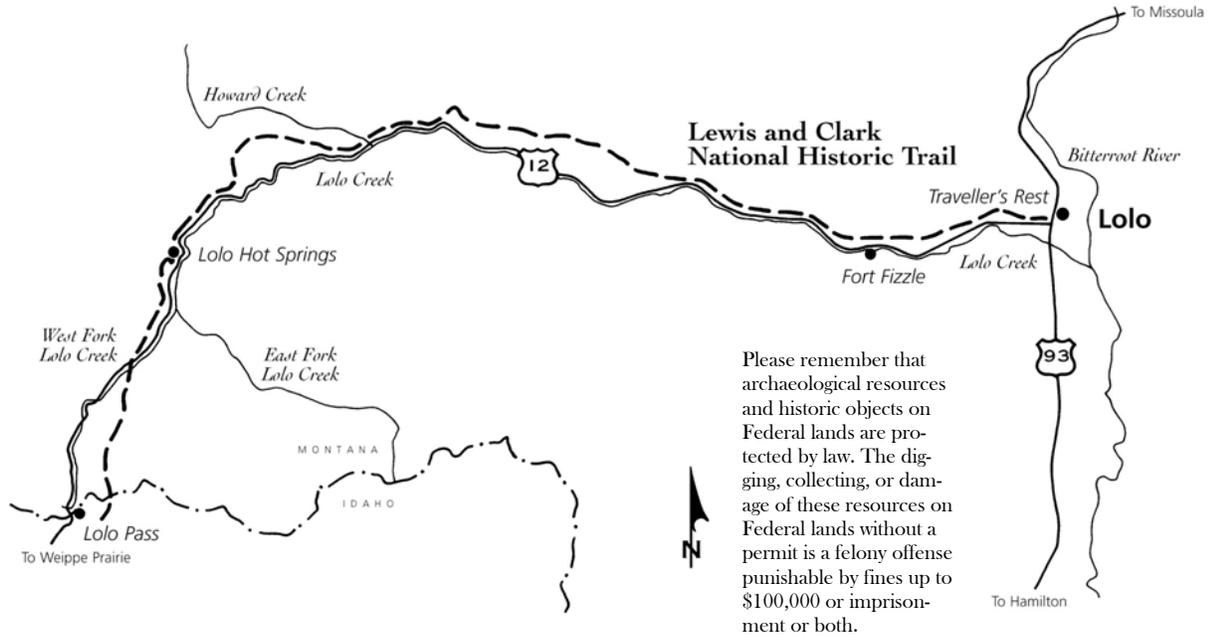
Proceeding On

July 1806

The captains had decided earlier to split the group into two parties at Travelers' Rest to explore more of the Louisiana Territory on their way home. On July 3, 1806, Captain Lewis led nine mounted soldiers, seventeen horses, and his Newfoundland dog, Seaman, north to the Clark Fork and up the Blackfoot River. Clark led the rest of the party south down the Bitterroot Valley. They promised to meet in a month at the confluence of the Yellowstone and Missouri rivers.

The Lewis and Clark National Historic Trail

This map shows the location of the original trail that the Lewis and Clark Expedition followed along Lolo Creek. Most of the Lewis and Clark National Historic Trail runs along the slopes on the north side of Lolo Creek.



**For further information, contact the
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