

Driving to Saddle Mountain

The 6-mile road to Saddle Mountain (Road #5734) starts at the turn-off to Lost Trail Powder Mountain Ski Area, then goes behind the lodge (to the left) before climbing uphill. It is a narrow mountain road that passes through a burned forest. This means you'll face several hazards as you drive it. We advise:

No trailers. Besides being a narrow road with few turn-offs, the turn-around at the end won't accommodate trailers or long vehicles.

High clearance vehicles only. This road is steep in places, making it a challenge for passenger cars.

Avoid driving this road when it's muddy. You don't want to be sliding around on such a narrow road.

Don't cut curves. There might be another vehicle just around that corner.

Watch for soft shoulders and keep track of good pull-outs. You may need to pull over or back up to let another vehicle pass.

Burned forest means falling trees. Avoid this area on windy days. Consider carrying a saw.



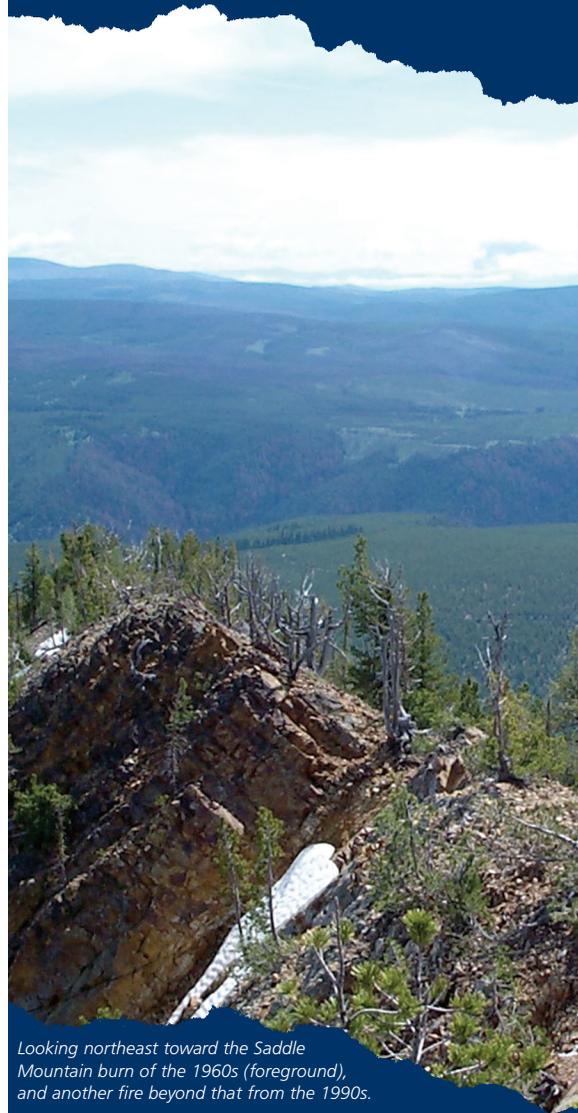
Talk about narrow! The Saddle Mountain Road will take you to great views, but only if you get there. Use caution.

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R1-05-104

Saddle Mountain

A 360° View



Looking northeast toward the Saddle Mountain burn of the 1960s (foreground), and another fire beyond that from the 1990s.



Bitterroot National Forest
Salmon-Challis National Forest

Welcome to Saddle Mountain

After a 0.3-mile hike up a steep hill from the parking area, you'll arrive at the site of a former fire lookout. From here, you can see 360° into a land of varied history, geography, and vegetation.

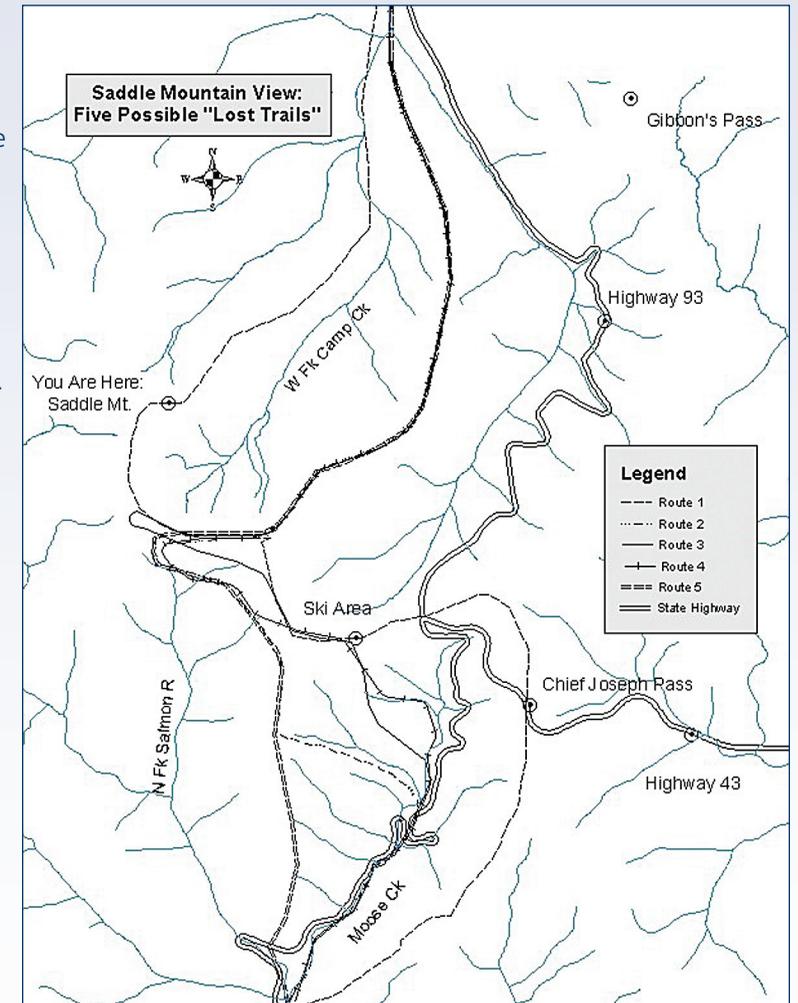
Historical Views

You may be standing in the footsteps of Lewis and Clark—or maybe not. Although Saddle Mountain is surrounded by ancient tribal trails, Lewis and Clark didn't follow any of them. Experts disagree on the exact route taken by the Corps of Discovery as they traveled over Lost Trail Pass in early September, 1805.

In 1997, five leading Lewis and Clark scholars and other interested people met to try to analyze the route taken over Lost Trail Pass and the campsites used between September 2 and 4, 1805. According to James Fazio's *The Mystery of Lost Trail Pass*, "at the end of the workshop the experts failed to reach the kind of consensus hoped for." He went on to say, "Solving the mystery of Lost Trail Pass offers an invitation to follow in the footsteps of the explorers—on many of the same terms the men and one Indian woman faced as they challenged that desolate divide between two great rivers of the West."

Lewis and Clark hoped it would be an easy passage over these mountains to a water route to the Pacific. As you can see by looking at the series of mountains to the west, it wasn't going to be easy after all. It must have been a great disappointment. They were short on food and urgently needed to get over the mountains before winter, yet the mountains stretched on and on before them.

Even if you're not standing in their footsteps, from Saddle Mountain you can trace the possible 1805 routes from the North Fork of the Salmon River and into Ross' Hole, and their 1806 route over Gibbons Pass into the Big Hole.



The View from the Top



Looking north toward Ross' Hole from Saddle Mountain. Signs of fires and timber harvest are apparent.



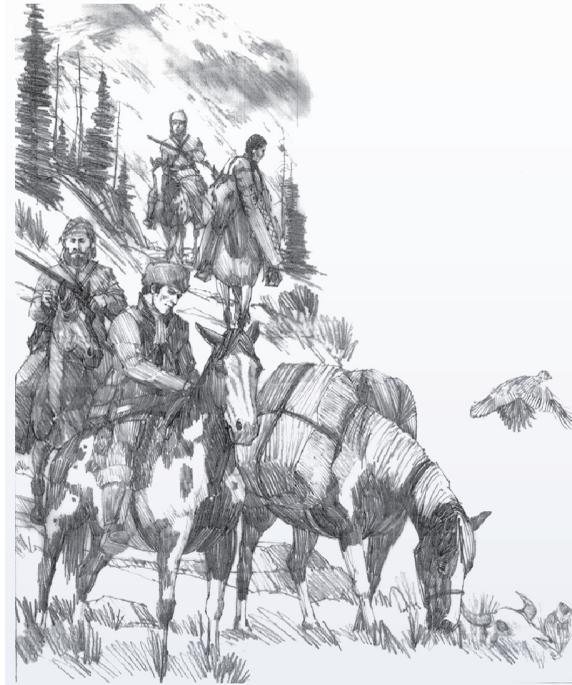
Looking south down the North Fork of the Salmon River drainage. One route Lewis and Clark may have followed is along the ridge on the left. The trees in the foreground are white-bark pine; the red needles indicate they have been infected by white pine blister rust.

Geographic Views

The Continental Divide is just two miles to the east of here. From there, waters either drain east into the Missouri River and on into the Gulf of Mexico and the Atlantic Ocean, or west into the Columbia River and on to the Pacific Ocean.

Even if you can't walk directly in the moccasin tracks of the Native American tribes and Lewis and Clark, you can set out on your own explorations. From here, you can see:

- Three national forests—the Bitterroot to the north and west, Salmon-Challis to the south, and Beaverhead-Deerlodge to the east.
- Two states—Idaho to the south and Montana to the north, west, and east.
- Two holes or large mountain valleys—Ross' Hole is the open area approximately 9 miles to the north and the Big Hole approximately 20 miles to the east. Ross' Hole is where the Corps of Discovery first met the Bitterroot Salish Tribe.
- 3.87 million acres of wilderness—the Selway-Bitterroot to the northwest, Anaconda-Pintler to the northeast, and Frank Church-River of No Return to the southwest.



Nature Views

Saddle Mountain is a rarity—a place just a few miles off a highway where you can drive into high elevation forests. One alpine inhabitant that will make itself known to you is the Clark's nutcracker.

On August 22, 1805, while Clark explored the Salmon River to see if it was navigable (it wasn't), he discovered the bird that now bears his name: "I saw to day Bird of the wood pecker kind which fed on Pine burs its Bill and tale white the wings black every other part of a light brown, and about the Size of a robin." The Clark's nutcracker particularly likes the seeds of the whitebark pine, the 5-needled pine surrounding Saddle Mountain.

Another high elevation plant is the alpine larch, a tree with short needles that turn golden in the fall before they drop. Look for it to the northeast off the end of the ridge. Alpine larches are



Clark's nutcracker

slow-growing trees, concentrating their energy in the early years to developing an extensive root system. A 150-year-old alpine larch might be only 4 feet tall.

From Saddle Mountain, you can see how management and nature have created a mosaic of timber types and ages. Wildfires have visited this area many times over the centuries. The most visible burns are the 1960s Saddle Mountain burn to the northeast, a fire from the 1990s across Highway 93 to the east, and around you are areas that burned in the 2000s. You'll also see evidence of various timber harvest activities, including old clearcuts to the north and east.

As you drive down, look at how the forest recovers from disturbances such as fires, insects, diseases, and timber harvest. This ecosystem is dynamic, sometimes changing quickly, while at other times the change is barely noticeable.