

Survival Guide for Driving the Bitterroot-Big Hole Road

The road between Sula Ranger Station and Gibbons Pass is a narrow one-lane road, and is not suitable for vehicles longer than 25 feet, trailers, or those with low clearance.

The recommended route (see map) is also a narrow one-lane dirt road and is suitable for most vehicles with the following precautions:

Don't cut curves. Drive slowly enough that you could stop in 2 1/2-car lengths, in case another vehicle is coming toward you around a curve.

Watch for soft shoulders (especially near those 100 foot drop-offs!), falling rocks, and fallen trees or rocks on the road.

Keep track of pull-outs as you drive... you may need to back up a distance to one of them to let another vehicle pass. Vehicles traveling uphill have the right-of-way, so the downhill driver has to back uphill to a safe spot for passing.

Additional care must be taken with RVs or motor homes more than 25 feet long, as overhanging branches, brush, and trees can knock air conditioners or other equipment off the tops of vehicles. Protruding rocks along the narrow road can gouge and scrape vehicles' sides.

Be prepared! Take along a **good spare tire**, not just a temporary one.

The nearest services are at Sula on Highway 93, Wisdom in the Big Hole Valley, and Gibbonsville in Idaho.

For current road conditions, contact Sula Ranger District at 406-821-3201 or Wisdom Ranger District at 406-689-3243.

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DRIVING GUIDE

Bitterroot – Big Hole Road



Road #106 north of Gibbons Pass

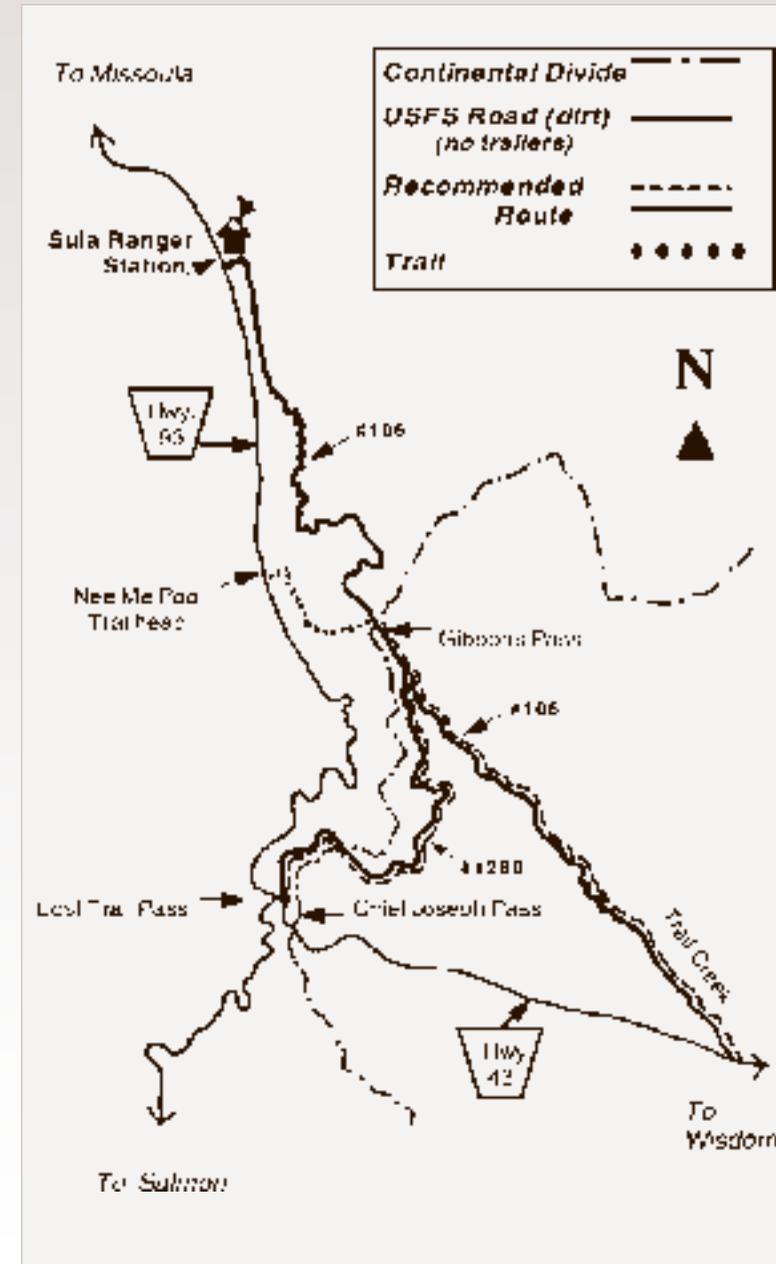
Beaverhead-Deerlodge and Bitterroot National Forests





The Bitterroot-Big Hole Road, locally known as Gibbons Pass Road, provides a relatively low elevation route (6,941 feet) over the Continental Divide. The pass played a significant role furnishing easy access through the Bitterroot Mountains for Native Americans, explorers, trappers, traders, and settlers.

However, by today's standards, access isn't easy. *Road #106 from Sula Ranger Station to Gibbons Pass is a steep, winding, and narrow one-lane road with few turnouts.* If you meet oncoming traffic, be prepared to back up for some distance.



In places the side hill drops off several hundred feet, and driving can be nerve-wracking! **This section of road is NOT suitable for vehicles longer than 25 feet** (motor homes, trailers) or low-clearance vehicles.

For those who wish to visit historic Gibbons Pass, we recommend Road #1260 at Lost Trail Pass off of Highway 43 to Gibbons Pass, then follow Road #106 down Trail Creek to Highway 43. This route is also a single lane road, but has frequent turnouts.

Before freighter Jeremiah Fahey built the first road into the Bitterroot Valley in 1878, this route... "had tracks worn deep by the lodge poles of the travois hauling baggage on the winter buffalo hunt. These ruts were followed by the fur brigades and miners and, eventually, by the settlers. Due to the isolation from the rest of the population of the three communities, there was great dependence on each other for supplies, jobs in the mines and social contact. Improvements of trails and roads were of foremost interest."

— Western News, October 15, 1912.

Ancient Route Over the Bitterroot Mountains

For centuries, Nez Perce, Shoshone, Salish, and Kootenai tribes traveled across the pass to and from buffalo hunts on the plains. The Bitterroot Valley is the traditional homeland of the Bitterroot Salish, but they ranged hundreds of miles in all directions to hunt buffalo, fish for salmon, trade, and visit neighboring tribes.

The Salish named the Big Hole Valley "La-Im-Tse-La-Lik" which translates as "the place of the ground squirrel."

The Bitterroot-Big Hole Road follows part of the historic Nee Me Poo Trail, which roughly follows an ancient tribal trail.

For ease of travel, and to protect the old trail tread, the "modern" route of the Nee Me Poo Trail follows a series of old logging roads. If you hike the Nee Me Poo Trail, look for sections of the old trail along your way.

View of the Sula Basin from Bitterroot-Big Hole Road



Lewis & Clark

William Clark, returning to the East, crossed the Continental Divide here with Sacajawea and 21 others before reuniting with Meriwether Lewis on the Missouri River. Clark wrote in his journal about the route,

"Saturday July 5th 1806... Shields returned at dark and informed me that the best road turned up the hill from the creek 3 Miles higher up, and appeared to be a plain beaten path. as this route of the Oat lash shoots can be followed it will evidently Shorten our route at least 2 days and as the indians informed me last fall a much better route than the one we came out (Lost Trail Pass)."

On July 6 Clark wrote, "we Set out and proceeded up the Creek on which we camped 3 Miles and left the road which we came on last fall to our right and ascended a ridge with a gentle Slope to the dividing mountain which Seperates the waters of the Middle fork of Clarks river from those of Wisdom and Lewis's River... the timber is small and a great propotion of it Killed by the fires."

Gibbons Route and the Nee Me Poo Trail

In 1877, non-treaty members of the Nez Perce (Nee Me Poo) Tribe were forced from their homeland in eastern Washington, and crossed over this trail in their attempt to find freedom. Colonel Gibbon pursued the Nez Perce over the pass with soldiers and Bitterroot Volunteers. Needing speed and silent travel, he left behind the supply wagons and howitzer cannon.

Bitterroot settler Joe Blodgett guided them over what is now known as "Gibbons Pass" and down Trail Creek. According to battle survivor and Bitterroot Volunteer Tom Sherrill:

"You must remember that it was not the nice auto road they have up the hill now with its seven percent grade. It was an almost impassable mountain trail, and the men were compelled to help the mules by pulling on a good long and stout rope."



Photo courtesy of the Ravalli County Museum.

Original log arch over the newly constructed Bitterroot-Big Hole Road. The arch no longer exists.

Bitterroot-Big Hole Road

A merchant constructed the first wagon road over Gibbons Pass in 1878. To safely descend the steep grade, wagons would stop on top to chain a small log behind to serve as a brake. During the 1880s and 1890s, discarded logs ended up scattered over the foot of the mountain.

In 1914, the U.S. Forest Service built the 26-mile long Bitterroot-Big Hole Road on the old Gibbons Trail from Camp Creek, over Gibbons Pass to the Big Hole Battlefield at a cost of \$52,000. Big Hole and Bitterroot communities strongly supported construction of a better road. According to an October 15, 1912 article in the Western News:

"Big Hole ranchers were in Darby Monday, and all were unanimous in their condemnation of the Big Hole Road. They drove over here with four horse teams and even then had hard work to make the hill.

"The completion of the Big Hole road will bring thousands of automobilists to the Bitter Root valley every year, going from park to park, and besides the money that they will spend here, we will get the benefit of the personal advertising from those tourists as no man can go through the valley without being impressed with the wonderful fertility of the soil, the unsurpassed scenery and fine climate."