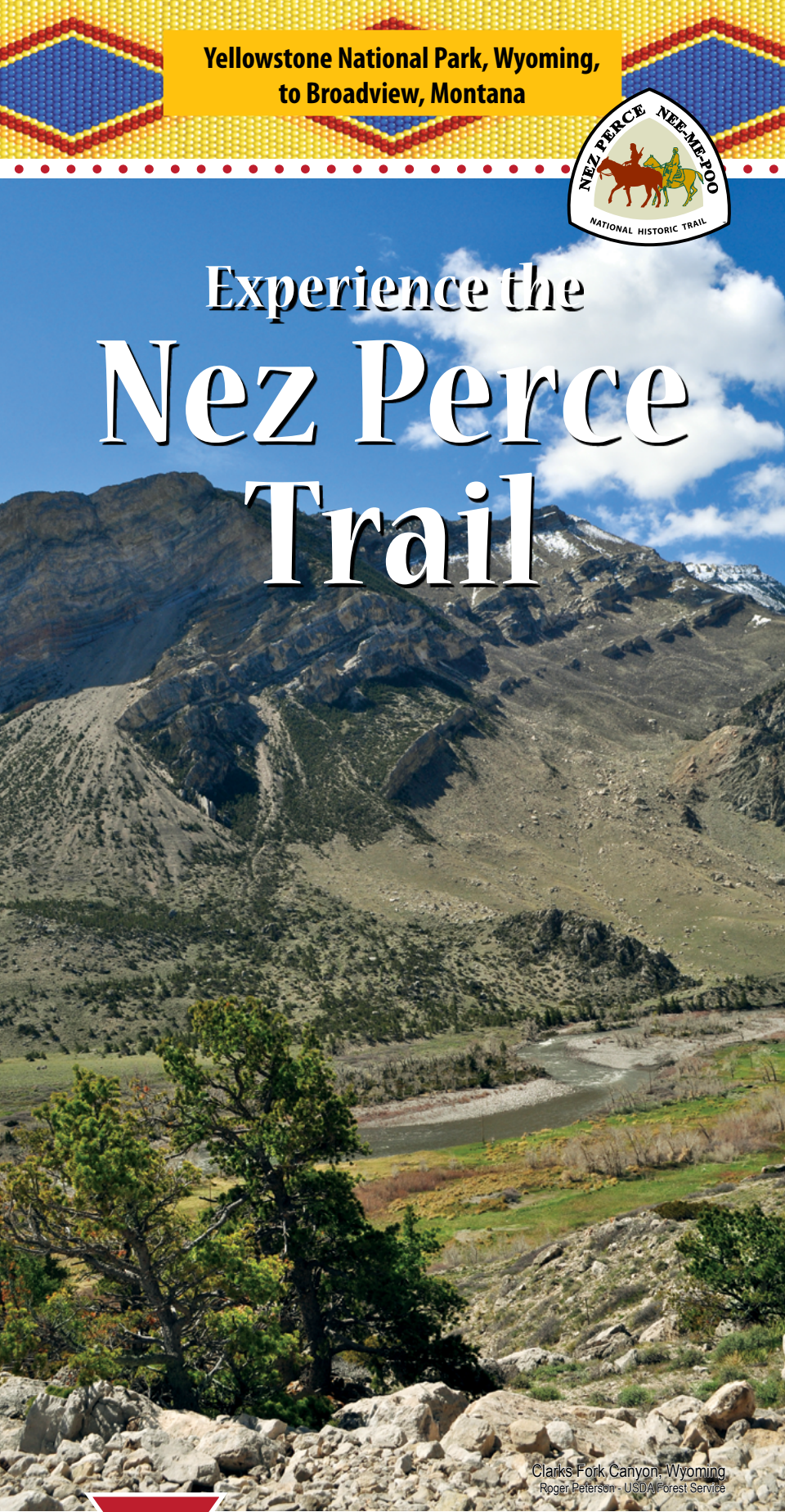
Yellowstone National Park, Wyoming,
to Broadview, Montana

NEZ PERCE NEE-ME-POO
NATIONAL HISTORIC TRAIL

Experience the Nez Perce Trail



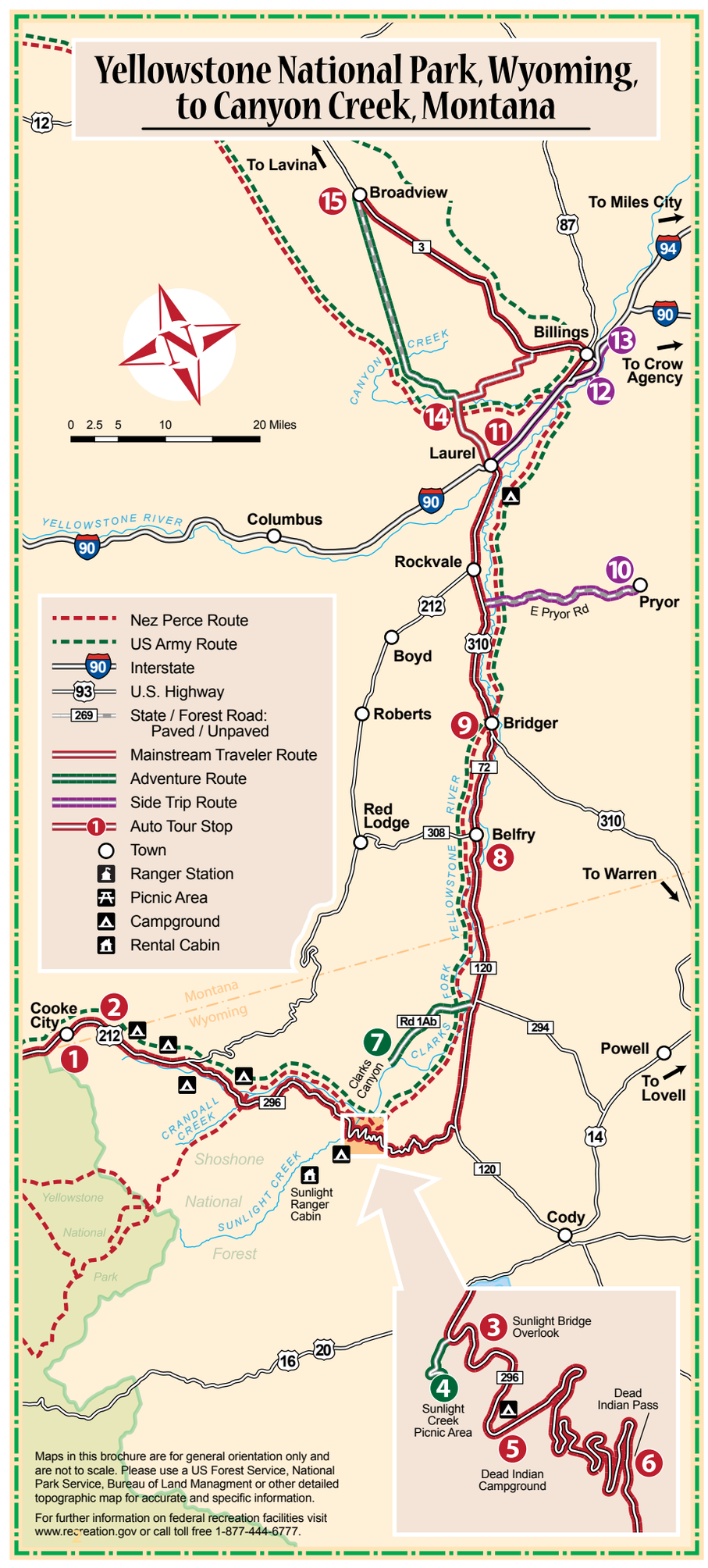
Clarks Fork Canyon, Wyoming
Roger Peterson - USDA Forest Service

7

AUTO TOUR

FOREST SERVICE
USDA
DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

Yellowstone National Park, Wyoming, to Canyon Creek, Montana



Maps in this brochure are for general orientation only and are not to scale. Please use a US Forest Service, National Park Service, Bureau of Land Managment or other detailed topographic map for accurate and specific information.

For further information on federal recreation facilities visit www.recreation.gov or call toll free 1-877-444-6777.

The Nez Perce (Nee-Me-Poo) National Historic Trail

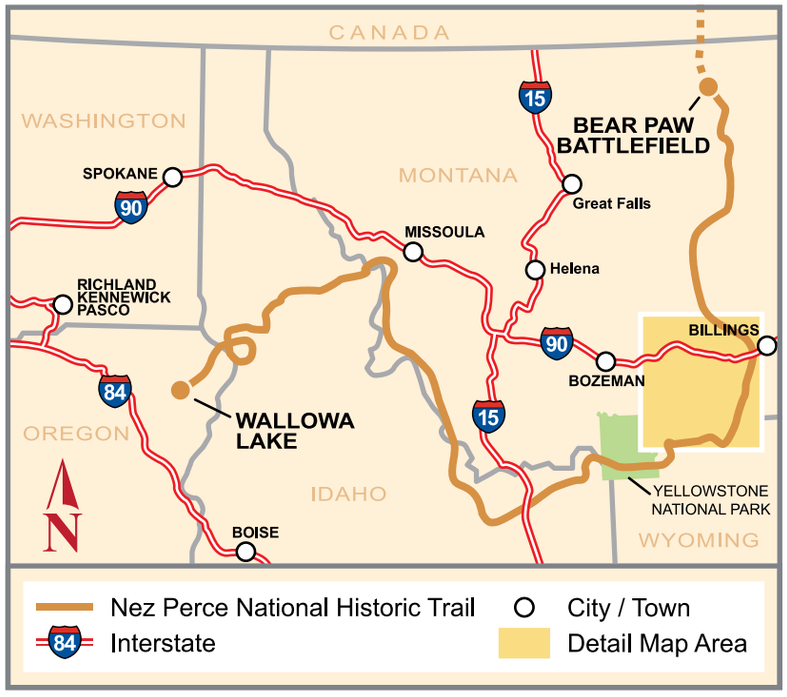
Designated by Congress in 1986, the entire Nez Perce National Historic Trail (NPNHT) stretches 1,170 miles from the Wallowa Valley of eastern Oregon to the plains of north-central Montana. The NPNHT includes a designated corridor encompassing 4,161 miles of roads, trails and routes.

This segment of the Nez Perce National Historic Trail from **Yellowstone National Park to Broadview, Montana** is one of eight available tours (complete list on page 35). These are available at Forest Service offices and other federal and local visitor centers along the route.

As you travel this historic trail, you will see highway signs marking the official Auto Tour route. Each Mainstream Auto Tour route stays on all-weather roads passable for all types of vehicles. Adventurous and Rugged Routes are an alternative for those seeking the most authentic historic route. They are often on gravel or dirt roads, so plan ahead.

Many locations along all Auto Tour routes may not have cell phone coverage. Designate a contact person at home to communicate through.

Check weather and road conditions before embarking on your journey. Call 511 for road condition reports on major routes. For road condition information on Adventurous and Rugged routes inquire locally.



Experience the Nez Perce Trail

How do I get there?

This Auto Tour begins in Cooke City, Montana just northeast of Yellowstone National Park.

Cooke City, MT, is located northeast of Yellowstone National Park just north of the Montana - Wyoming border.

From Livingston, MT, head south on U. S. Hwy 89 for 54.7 miles. In Gardiner turn right to stay on U. S. Hwy 89 and continue for 5.5 miles. Turn left onto Grand Loop Road. In 18.1 miles turn left onto U. S. Hwy 212 and continue for 32.2 miles to Cooke City.

As you exit Yellowstone through the Northeast Park Entrance, toward Cooke City on US Highway 212, you will follow the military thread of the story. The Nez Perce, avoiding miners in Cooke City, exited the Park 10 to 15 miles south of here at an unknown location.

Soda Butte, near Cooke City, Montana
Roger Peterson - USDA / Forest Service

Two companies of troops positioned themselves to overtake the Nez Perce. Those of General Oliver Otis Howard approached from the north and Colonel Samuel Davis Sturgis, from the south, to trap the Nez Perce between them as they exited Yellowstone. The Nez Perce evaded both groups and headed north up Clarks Fork of the Yellowstone River.

Mainstream Traveler

(Passable for all types of vehicles.)

Staying on all-weather roads, this Auto Tour route allows visitors to experience the Nez Perce National Historic Trail from a distance and will diverge from the routes actually traveled.

Chief Joseph Scenic Byway, Wyoming
Roger Peterson - USDA / Forest Service

The Mainstream Route follows Wyoming State Highway 296 approximating the route taken by Howard's troops south across Clarks Fork Canyon. It then swings north on Wyoming State Highway 120 to follow the Clarks Fork to where General Howard and Colonel Sturgis finally met, and continues north into Montana on U.S. Highway 310 to Laurel. From there, travelers can take a side trip to Billings, then head back to Laurel and north to the site of the eventual encounter between the Nez Perce and Sturgis' troops at Canyon Creek.

Adventurous Traveler

(Not recommended for motor homes or vehicles towing trailers; usually passable from July to October.)

For those who want to see the more authentic historic route, a couple of Adventurous Route side trips allow the traveler to visit more closely the route travelled by the five bands of Nez Perce people in 1877.

Notes on Nez Perce National Historic Trail Preservation:

To the Niimíipuu, the Trail is part of the Nez Perce sacred land. Use the Trail with respect, remembering that it is part of our heritage. If we want those who come after us to have a sense of the history, it is up to us to preserve and protect the Trail. This land is an important source of spiritual strength for all people including the Nez Perce. Natural and historic sites should be left undisturbed by all who visit.

Prelude to the Flight of the Nez Perce

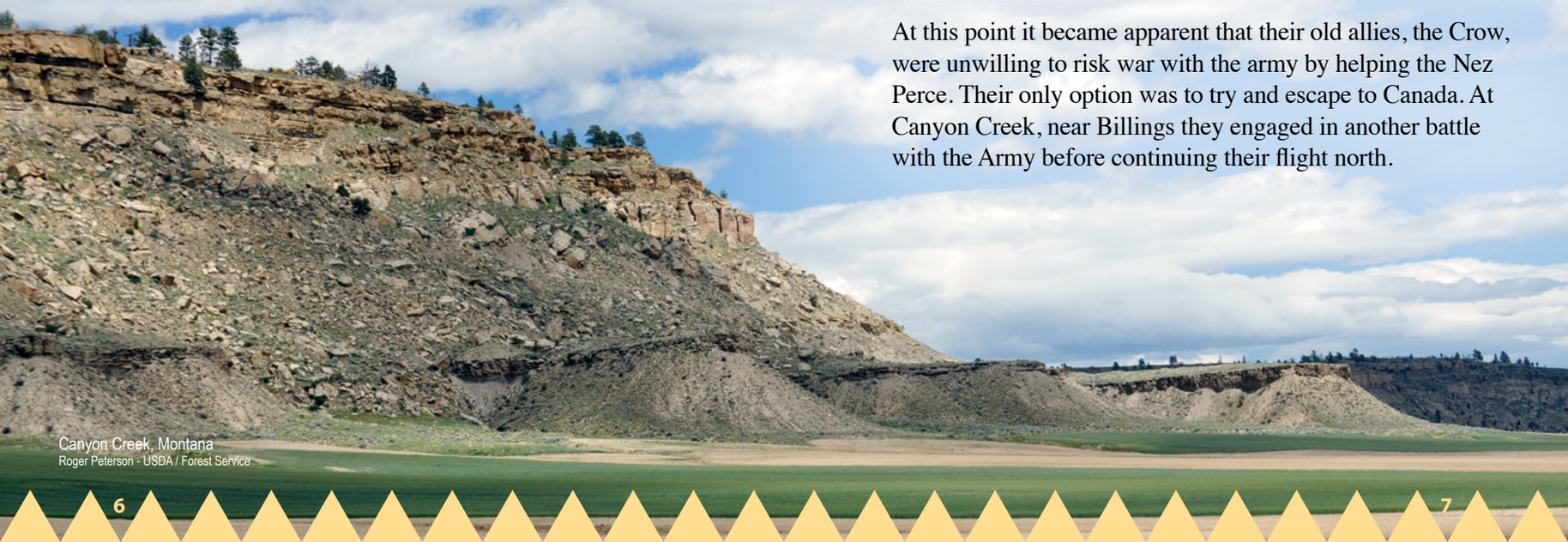
Prior to 1855 the Nez Perce (or, in their language, Niimíipuu, meaning "the real people" or "we the people") homeland extended throughout much of north-central Idaho, northeastern Oregon and southeastern Washington. Tension mounted as whites moved west and settled in the Nez Perce territory. In that same year, the United States government made a treaty that established an approximately 7,500,000-acre Nez Perce Indian Reservation encompassing most of their traditional homeland.

However, the discovery of gold on Nez Perce land triggered an influx of settlers and fueled more conflicts. A new treaty in 1863 shrank the reservation to one-tenth its original size. Some bands of Nez Perce refused to sign the treaty and became known as the "non-treaty" Nez Perce.

The government, responding to pressure from settlers, called on the military to force the "non-treaty" Nez Perce onto the new reservation in Idaho Territory. General Oliver Otis Howard, a Civil War veteran, was to carry out the task.

From June to October of 1877, *Hinmatóowyalahtq'it* (Chief Joseph), *Hototo* (Lean Elk), *'Elelímyete'qenin'* (Chief Looking Glass), Chief *Ollokot* (Frog), Chief *Piyóop'yoo ẋayẋáyẋ* (White Bird) and others led between 750 - 800 Nez Perce men, women and children along with approximately 2,000 horses over 1,170 mountainous miles to what they hoped would be safety with their friends to the east.

The 1877 Flight of the Nez Perce from their homelands while being pursued by U.S. Army, General Howard and Colonels Samual Davis Sturgis, John Gibbon and Nelson Appleton Miles is one of the most fascinating and sorrowful events in Western U.S. history.



Canyon Creek, Montana
Roger Peterson - USDA / Forest Service

The Story So Far

Rather than risk conflict by continuing to resist relocation, the "non-treaty" Nez Perce gathered their livestock and belongings and began a painful and difficult journey to the new reservation.

On June 3, 1877, the Nez Perce bands reached a familiar camas-gathering site at Tolo Lake near Grangeville, Idaho.

That night several young warriors, angered by past atrocities and injustices at the hands of white settlers, set out to avenge their people. Their raid left a number of local settlers dead. The Nez Perce decided to flee.

After a battle at White Bird Canyon, they were pursued by General Howard across Idaho and Montana. Following the well-worn Lolo Trail across the rugged Bitterroot Mountains, they entered Montana near Lolo Pass. They moved without conflict south through the Bitterroot Valley to the Big Hole Valley, where the Army caught them by surprise killing Nez Perce men, women and children. After that, the Nez Perce moved as quickly as they could through the Rocky Mountains and Yellowstone National Park hoping to enlist the help of the Crow people.

While in Yellowstone National Park, the Nez Perce encountered several parties of tourists. By this time they were in need of supplies and many of them were intent on revenge for the earlier battles. Some of the encounters ended in death for those they met.

By September of 1877, Colonel Sturgis and his men joined in the pursuit, waiting for the Nez Perce to emerge from the Park on the east side of the Absaroka Mountains (originally known as Snow Mountains). The Nez Perce eluded Army troops, passing through the deep, narrow canyon of the Clarks Fork River.

At this point it became apparent that their old allies, the Crow, were unwilling to risk war with the army by helping the Nez Perce. Their only option was to try and escape to Canada. At Canyon Creek, near Billings they engaged in another battle with the Army before continuing their flight north.

The Flight of the Nez Perce in 1877 symbolizes the dramatic collision of cultures which continues to shape America and its people. A native people were forced to flee their homelands in a futile attempt to avoid war and save their traditional ways. European immigrants found themselves fighting neighbors who had been their friends for many years. Traditional trails, which had long been a source of joy and sustenance, became trails of flight and conflict, trails of sorrow.

Chronology of Events

The events in this timeline coincide with the sites seen on this auto tour:

September 1 – Colonel Sturgis stages his command near Clarks Fork Canyon. 7

September 6 – Colonel Sturgis moves his camp closer to Heart Mountain.

September 7 – General Howard passes Cooke City, Montana. 1

September 8 – General Howard's scouts meet Colonel Sturgis's couriers. Sturgis heads to the Shoshone River. The Nez Perce descend into Clarks Fork Canyon. 7

September 9 – General Howard camps at the foot of Dead Indian Hill. Colonel Sturgis reaches the Shoshone, near Cody, Wyoming, does not find the Nez Perce, and heads north into the Absaroka Mountains.

September 10 – General Howard descends into Clarks Fork Canyon. 7

September 11 – Colonel Sturgis catches up with General Howard near Belfry, Montana. 8

September 12 – The Nez Perce cross the Yellowstone River near Laurel, Montana. 11

September 13 – Nez Perce warriors take control of a stagecoach. The Battle of Canyon Creek occurs when Colonel Sturgis catches up with the Nez Perce. Sturgis camps on the battlefield. 14

September 15 – Colonel Sturgis camps on the Musselshell River, Montana and decides not to continue pursuing the Nez Perce.

Yellowstone River near Laurel Montana
Roger Peterson - USDA / Forest Service

— AS YOU TRAVEL THE TRAIL—

The trail memorializes not only those who died during the flight, but those who survived.

Their tragic journey marked the end of freedom for the Nez Perce and opened their lands to settlement.

As you travel this historic trail between Yellowstone National Park and Canyon Creek whether you drive, ride or walk, you will gain an understanding of and appreciation for the difficulty of their journey and the tremendous odds the Nez Perce had to face and overcome.

Nez Perce Dreamers in Traditional Dress.
courtesy of WSU L.V. McWhorter Collection

1 Cooke City, Montana

On September 7, General Howard and his men, passing through Cooke City, noted that miners had armed themselves and manned a stockade, to barricade themselves against the Nez Perce. The events that unfolded in Yellowstone had everyone on edge, but the Nez Perce were actually making their way through the rugged Absaroka Mountains 10 to 15 miles south of Cooke City.

Colonel Sturgis positioned his troops near the mouth of Clarks Fork Canyon hoping to catch the Nez Perce as they emerged from the park. General Howard, approaching from the northwest, hoped to trap them between their two forces.

"Chases after Indians in so vast a country where we must go with a limited quantity of supplies is but a chance in a thousand to hit the mark you are aiming at. Tis terribly hard on horses and men – and but poor satisfaction at best should you gain the end."

– Captain Frederick Benteen, August 11,1877

"Every white man in those mountains could be counted our enemy."

– Hímiin maqsmáqs (Yellow Wolf)

Colonel Samuel D. Sturgis
by Mathew Brady, Courtesy Library of Congress

"In case I should learn that the hostiles had moved up the East Fork of the Yellowstone [Lamar River], then I would move up the cañon of Clark's Fork, going on if necessary until we should encounter them in the Soda Butte Pass; otherwise I would establish my camp near Heart Mountain, and from that central point observe the outlets both on the Stinking Water and Clark's Fork, all depending on the information I might receive in the mean time."

– Colonel Samuel D. Sturgis

Yellowstone National Park near Cooke City, Montana
Roger Peterson - USDA / Forest Service

❷ Nez Perce National Historic Trail Interpretive Site

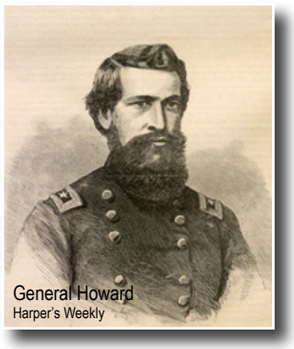
Chief Joseph Campground

Head east from Cooke City, MT, on U.S. Hwy 212. In about 3.3 miles, a Nez Perce National Historic Trail interpretive site lies on the north side of the highway. Chief Joseph Campground is just 0.1 miles further on the south side of the highway.

Attempts by General Howard and Colonel Sturgis to communicate were interrupted and met with disastrous results as the Nez Perce had killed the messengers. This left Colonel Sturgis wondering if he had missed the Nez Perce and should have been stationed instead on the Stinking Water (Shoshone River) to the south. He left the Clarks Fork and traveled south, second guessing the earlier conclusion about where the Nez Perce would emerge.

Interpretive site near Cooke City, Montana.
Roger Peterson - USDA / Forest Service

In the meantime General Howard's troops were also moving south. When Gen. Howard crossed Crandall Creek on September 8, he intersected the trail of the Nez Perce.


General Howard
Harper's Weekly

"Dead couriers, miners, and prospectors were found in this vicinity in fearful frequency, showing how difficult it had been for Sturgis and me to communicate."

– General Oliver O. Howard

"The Indians' big trail, now in plain view, swept down the valley, and not a soul was in sight for ten miles and more."

– General Oliver O. Howard

❸ Crandall Creek Bridge and Sunlight Creek Bridge, Wyoming

Head southeast from the Nez Perce National Historic Trail interpretive site on U.S. Highway 212. In 1.3 miles you will enter Wyoming. Continue for 9 miles and then turn right onto Wyoming State Highway 296 / Sunlight Basin Road. In 7.6 miles you will reach Crandall Creek Bridge.

Near Cooke City Montana
Roger Peterson - USDA / Forest Service

From Crandall Creek Bridge continue east on Wyoming State Highway 296 for 13.6 miles where a pullout on the north side of the road offers an exceptional view of the Clarks Fork Canyon.

Continue for 1.6 miles to Sunlight Creek Bridge and the viewpoint on the east side of the bridge. The highway here bridges a 350 foot deep chasm created by Sunlight Creek.

This gorge was a formidable obstacle for the Nez Perce. A short side trip, detailed on the next page, to the Sunlight Picnic Area presents a more accessible crossing of the creek.

General Howard's troops took the Lodgepole Trail from Crandall Creek and probably crossed Sunlight Creek about 5 miles upstream from here. Colonel Sturgis, however, could not find a trail leading from the Park and was convinced that the immediate country was impassable.

Near Crandall Creek, Wyoming
Roger Peterson - USDA / Forest Service

Troops, gathering intelligence from the top of a nearby mountain, had seen the tribesmen moving and had assured Colonel Sturgis, "…that from the point where the Indians had disappeared behind the mountain range, it was altogether impossible for them to cross over to Clark's Fork, and that they must necessarily debouch on the Stinking Water." This led him to move south to the Stinking Water (Shoshone River) in hopes of intercepting the Nez Perce.

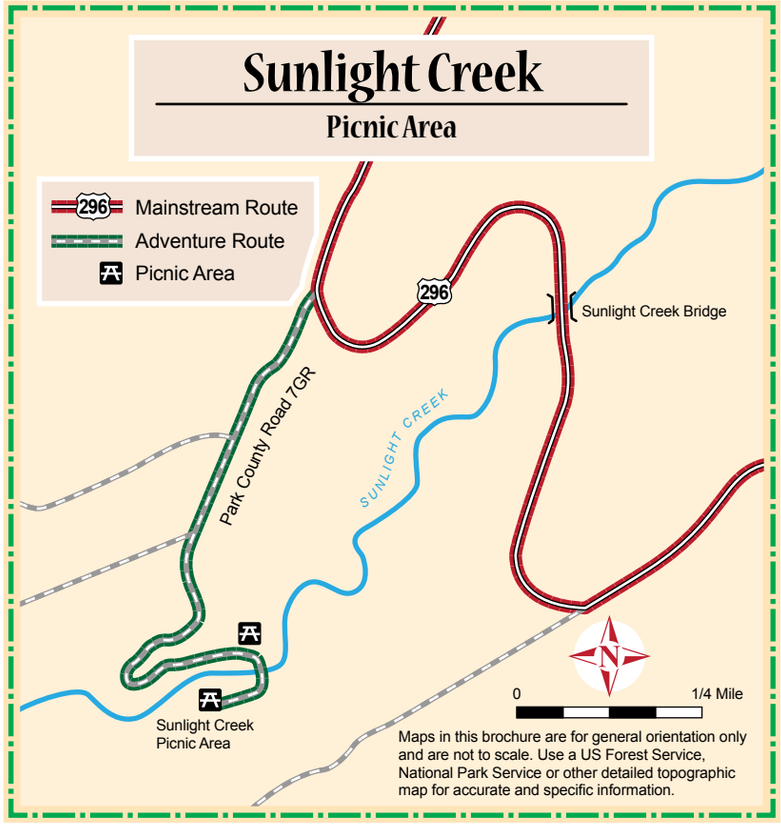
4 Sunlight Picnic Area Side Trip

(2.8 mile round trip)

Backtrack by driving west on the Chief Joseph Scenic Highway for 0.5 miles. Turn left on Park County Road 7GR and in 0.3 miles keep to the left at the "Y" in the road. The road switchbacks down to cross Sunlight Creek in 0.5 miles. The Sunlight Picnic Area is just 0.1 miles farther on your right. Return to Chief Joseph Scenic Highway at Sunlight Creek and continue with the Mainstream Traveler.

This quick little side trip affords the traveler a chance to see Sunlight Creek up close. Though the exact route the Nez Perce took through this area is unknown, they undoubtably crossed many rivers and terrain similar to this.

Sunlight Creek, Wyoming
Roger Peterson - USDA / Forest Service



5 Dead Indian Campground

From the Scenic Area east of the bridge over Sunlight Creek, continue east on Wyoming State Highway 296 for 2.2 miles to Dead Indian Campground.

The site of Dead Indian Campground has always been a popular camping area just as it was for the Nez Perce and the scouts that sought them that September.

"On the 10th we came to a hostile camp which had just been abandoned, at the base of the last mountain necessary to climb before reaching the buffalo plains at Heart Mountain."

– Frank Parker (scout and war correspondent), September 16, 1877

Dead Indian Campground, Wyoming
Roger Peterson - USDA / Forest Service

A wounded, elderly Nez Perce man remained behind and was discovered by the scouts a short distance up the creek from the campground. Although the soldiers had been instructed not to kill prisoners, one of the scouts disobeyed.

Brady, Northwestern Fights and Fighters

"Got there just in time to see a Nez Perce breathe his last. He had been wounded in the hip and had been left by his comrades who had evidently left here this morning… Sumner said he rode up near where he lay and the Indian threw the robe off that covered him and raised up in a setting posture. Sumner waited no longer but jerked his pistol and shot him through the chest."

– Stanton G. Fisher (scout), September 9, 1877

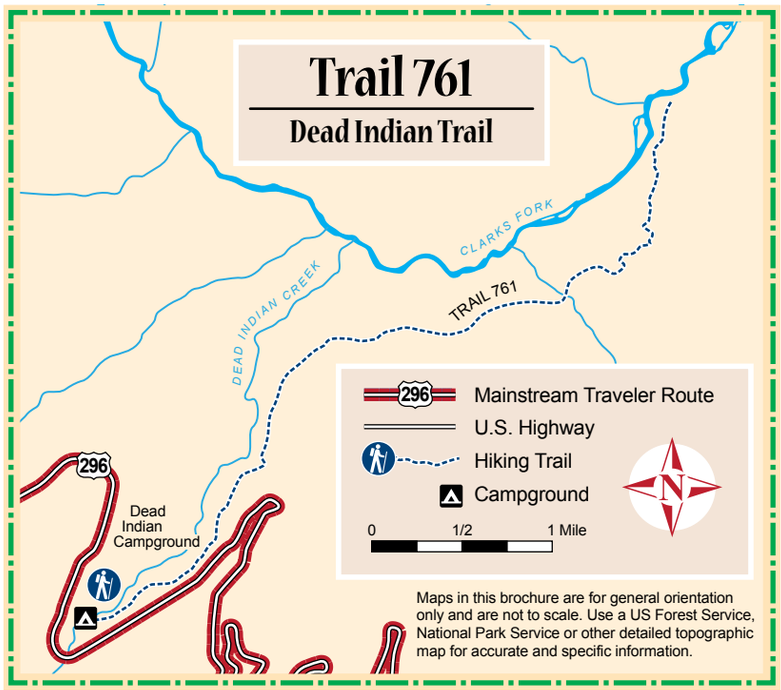
For Hikers: Trail 761

Dead Indian Trail

This portion of the Nez Perce Trail begins at Dead Indian Campground and travels north, northeast for about five miles to the bottom of Clarks Fork Canyon. The first two to three miles of this trail make for an easy to moderate day hike with views into Clarks Fork Canyon after which you should return the way you came.

This is not a loop trail. Beyond the first few miles, the trail becomes much more difficult and takes a steep drop into the canyon at which point one must either return the way they came or ford the river to the Morrison Jeep Trail.

There is an abundance of wildlife along the Nez Perce National Historic Trail. All wild animals need to be treated with caution and respect. If you are planning to hike, check with the nearest land management agency for information on local wildlife. Know how to be safe in wild country.



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Dead Indian Summit, Wyoming
Roger Peterson - USDA / Forest Service

6 Dead Indian Pass

From Dead Indian Campground, continue east on Wyoming State Highway 296. In 7.5 miles you will reach the summit of Dead Indian Pass. An overlook with wayside signs tells the origin of the name of the pass and the events that occurred here.

Having gained the summit, the Nez Perce followed the trail south toward Stinking Water (Shoshone River) for about two miles. In an effort to confuse their pursuers they then rode about randomly, crisscrossing their horses' tracks. They then doubled back on their trail heading north again and following along the steep canyon.

"The scouts scattered out in every direction to hunt for their trail. I finally stumbled on it. Instead of going out of the bason on the open plain, they had turned North, passing along the steep side of the Mountain through the timber for several miles…The trail led us through a rough canyon very narrow in places."

– Stanton G. Fisher (scout), September 10, 1877

Dead Indian Pass, Wyoming
Roger Peterson - USDA / Forest Service

Watch the Weather:

Afternoon thunder and lightning storms are common in the mountains. Get to your car during electrical storms.

Stay Hydrated:

Experienced hikers carry plenty of water when day-hiking. Always purify lake or stream water to eliminate bacteria and parasites like Giardia.

Avoid Altitude Sickness:

Headaches, dizziness and nausea are serious warning signs. The best way to improve your condition is to descend immediately. Never leave an ill person alone.

7 Clarks Fork Canyon

Continue on Wyoming State Highway 296 for 13.1 miles to the junction with Wyoming State Highway 120. Just before you reach the junction, the southern portal to the Chief Joseph Scenic Byway lies on the north side of the road which features interpretive signs and a map of the route the Nez Perce took through this area.

Troops throughout Montana had been alerted to the movements of the Nez Perce, an all out effort was assembled to converge from several directions to halt their progress.

"The Nez Perce…….may continue down the River to the bridge at the forks, go up the East fork and so over into Clarks fork or one of several passes leading towards the Yellowstone or Bighorn. East of the Yellowstone River and Lake, elk and deer are plentiful and both are filled to quantities of large trout. Your best and surest plan is to cling to the trail to the last, as you may rest assured other troops will sooner or later get in front of these Indians hampered as they are with their wounded and large herds."

– Colonel John Gibbon to General Oliver O. Howard, August 26, 1877

Colonel Nelson A. Miles

Courtesy of Montana Historical Society Research Center - Photograph Archives, Helena, Montana (943-884)

"With six companies of your regiment and the Artillery Detachment [a bronze twelve-pounder Napoleon gun] with your command you will proceed by rapid marches, via the valley of the Yellowstone and Musselshell Rivers to the vicinity of Judith Gap, sending forward rapidly to Fort Ellis, M.T., to obtain possible information regarding the movements of the hostile band of Nez Perces…"

– Colonel Nelson A. Miles to Colonel Samuel D. Sturgis, August 12, 1877

Scouts gathered information about the movements of the Nez Perce and relayed that information back to the troops over rugged terrain. Hostile encounters made communication difficult. Ultimately it fell to the judgment and intuition of the army leaders to decide the best course of action.

"What hurt us worse than all else, was the discovery that the Indian trail entered the valley hardly more than a mile or two above the camp from which we had so recently started on that night march [September 8]. Had we remained where we were the Indians would almost have walked into our arms."

– Private Theodore W. Goldin, years later

Clarks Fork Canyon, Wyoming

Roger Peterson - USDA / Forest Service

Proceed north on Wyoming State Highway 120 for 12.8 miles to the junction with Park County Road 1AB.

Between Milepost 123 and Milepost 124 look to the west toward the mouth of Clarks Fork Canyon.

It was about half way between the current highway and the canyon that Colonel Sturgis and his men camped, waiting to intercept the Nez Perce before they turned south to the Shoshone River.

"Waiting a full day longer than the time agreed upon for the return of our scouts, the Colonel became anxious, and dispatched two scouting parties... with orders to penetrate into the range and try and discover traces of our overdue scouts."

– Private Theodore W. Goldin

Just after crossing the Clarks Fork on Wyoming State Highway 120, turn west at milepost 128 on Park County 1AB to see where the Nez Perce made their daring escape.

After traveling 3.3, miles keep left onto Canyon Rd / Park County 8VC. Continue 7.9 miles to the dead-end at the Clarks Fork Canyon.

Return the way you came to Wyoming State Highway 120.

Near Clarks Fork Road 1216, Wyoming
Gene Merrell

"My command, discovering Joseph's ruse, kept the trail which Sturgis had been so near, but had not seen, and, finally, slid down the canyon, many a horse, in his weakness, falling and blocking the way. The mouth of this canyon, which debouches in to Clark's Valley, was not more than twenty feet across from high wall to high wall. And one may imagine the scene of cavalry, infantry and pack-mules crowding through it, and admire the quick wit of an Indian who had the hardihood to try the experiment, and break the almost impassable roadway."

– General Oliver O. Howard

8 Belfry, Montana

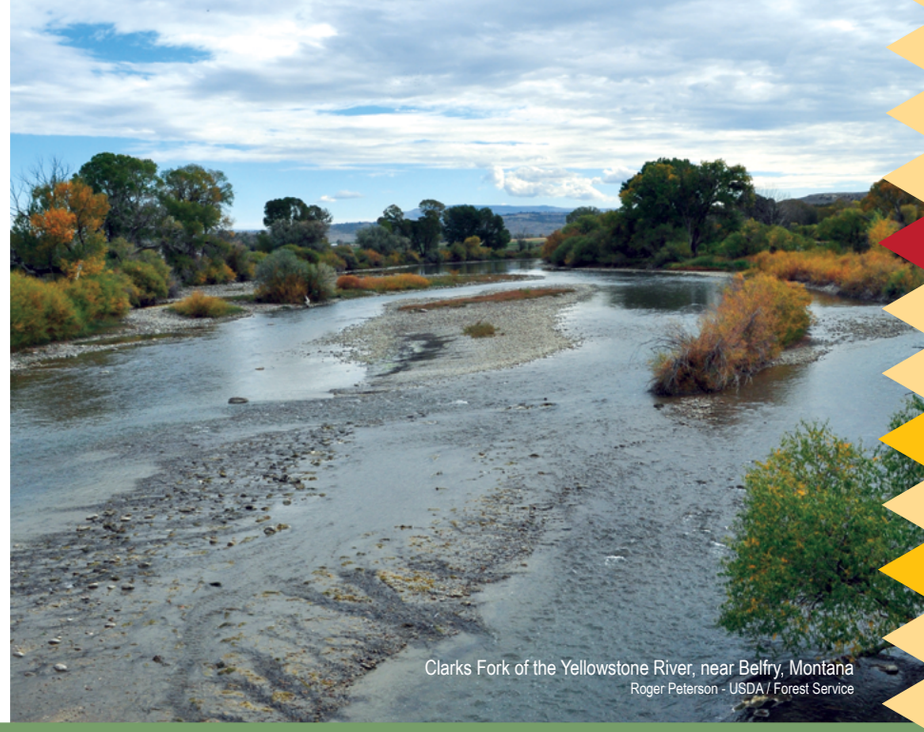
From the junction of Wyoming State Highway 120 and Park County 1AB, proceed north on Wyoming State Highway 120. In 8.0 miles you will enter Montana and Wyoming State Highway 120 becomes Montana State Highway 72. Continue for 10.5 miles until you are in the outskirts of Belfry, MT.

On the evening of September 11, General Howard was camped on the Clarks Fork of the Yellowstone River just a few miles south of Belfry when he was finally joined by a frustrated Colonel Sturgis. According to a witness, "[Sturgis was] so bitterly chagrined at the escape of the Indians from one of the best laid traps of nature and man that he exclaimed: - 'Poor as I am I would give $1,000 if I had not left this place.'" Perhaps to make up for his error in judgment, Colonel Sturgis roused his hungry men early the next morning and set off on a quick march up the Clarks Fork to the Yellowstone after the Nez Perce.

"We had nothing to eat, so we merely drew our belts one hole tighter, took a drink of water, threw the saddles on our horses… and hit the trail."

– Unnamed trooper

By the time Colonel Sturgis' men made camp for the night they had been in the saddle for 18 hours and covered more than 60 miles.



Clarks Fork of the Yellowstone River, near Belfry, Montana
Roger Peterson - USDA / Forest Service

9 Bridger, Montana

From the junction of Montana State Highway 308 with Montana 72 in Belfry proceed north on Montana 72 for 11 miles to the junction with U.S. Highway 310. Turn north on U.S. Highway 310 continuing for 1 mile to the highway historic sign in Bridger, which mentions the Nez Perce retreat.

At this point the Nez Perce were only a few hours ahead of Colonel Sturgis, camped on the Yellowstone River. The Nez Perce had long hoped they might find refuge with their old friends, the Crow, but it was evident by this time that the Crow had sided with the government. Politically, they could not afford to fight the U.S. Army. The Nez Perce had to keep moving. The only option now was to try to join Chief Sitting Bull and the Lakota Sioux in Canada.

Yellowstone River near Laurel, Montana
Roger Peterson - USDA / Forest Service

"A few Crow Indian warriors joined us at a point on Clark's Fork thirty or forty miles above where it empties into the Yellowstone…The Crows attached themselves to Fisher's little band of Bannock scouts. Other Crows arrived. Within a day or two they greatly outnumbered the Bannocks. The whole body of Indian special detectives were going here and there, in groups, presumably searching for the enemy. Most likely, they were searching for loose horses – or for anything else that was loose and desirable and conveniently transportable."

– Private William White

Hímiin maqsmáqs (Yellow Wolf)
L.V. McWhorter Collection Washington State University
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"I do not understand how the Crows could think to help the soldiers. They were fighting against their best friends!"

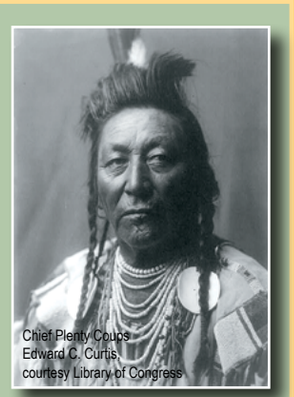
– Hímiin maqsmáqs (Yellow Wolf)

10 Side Trip: Chief Plenty Coups Memorial State Park

(34 miles round trip)

From Bridger, continue north on U.S. Highway 310 for 12.6 miles. Turn right onto Elwell Street and in 0.6 miles continue onto Pryor Road. In 9.9 miles turn right onto Edgar Rd / E Pryor Rd. Follow Edgar Road for 6.2 miles then turn left onto Plenty Coups Park Road and follow for 0.3 miles to Plenty Coups Memorial State Park.

Chief Plenty Coups



Chief Plenty Coups
Edward C. Curtis
courtesy Library of Congress

Also know as *Aleek-chea-ahoosh, or Many Accomplishments,* Chief Plenty Coups lead the Crow Tribe through a very tumultuous time. The population of his people had been decimated by Euro-American disease and war with the Plains tribes.

At a young age he had a vision that white people would inevitably control his land. He believed that by cooperating and aligning with the whites his people would benefit more than if he opposed.

While the Crow may have felt compelled to join the government, their sympathies may have still been with the Nez Perce.

"An old Indian woman and her daughter came across the trail of Joseph and his band and saw a horse tied in the brush and riding down there found a young woman had dropped out of Joseph's Band and confined herself and was trying to wrap her baby up and join the band. The old woman and daughter coaxed the woman to go home with them and not try to overtake Joseph, which she did. Three or four years afterwards the government learned that there was a Nez Perce renegade Indian among the Crows and ordered her sent in exile with the others."

- C.T. Stranahan (agent for Nez Perce Reservation)

11 Laurel, Montana

From Bridger, MT, continue north on U.S. Highway 310 for 16.2 miles to the junction with U.S. Highway 212 at Rockvale, MT. Turn north on U.S. 212 / U.S. 310 and continue for 10.5 miles.

Chief Joseph Monument, Laurel,Montana
Roger Peterson - USDA / Forest Service

Travelers who wish to visit the Sundance Lodge Recreation Area (details on the next page) will turn right onto Thiel Road. In 1.3 miles turn right into Sundance Lodge Recreation Area.

Otherwise, continue north for 1.6 miles and turn right onto E Main Street. On your right is the Laurel Chamber of Commerce where a statue of Chief Joseph stands along with three interpretive panels on the Chamber of Commerce lawn.

While most of the Nez Perce crossed the Yellowstone River near Laurel and headed north toward Canyon Creek, a couple of raiding parties followed the Yellowstone River to the small community of Coulson in present day Billings.

They burned some buildings and haystacks, stole a few horses, killed two men, and hijacked a stagecoach. When Colonel Sturgis and his men crossed the river several hours later they could see the smoke in the distance.

"Early in the forenoon we forded the river, where there was ample evidence that our wily foes had crossed, apparently many hours before… The old colonel [Sturgis]…gave the order to go into camp….

Captain Benteen…picked out the most desireable place possible, and we swung into line, dismounted and were just preparing to unsaddle, when one of our scouts came galloping into camp, shouting at the top of his voice: "Injuns, Injuns! Big fight and fire down river!" One hasty glance confirmed his report, as dark clouds of smoke could be seen rolling up, and now and then came the faint, distant sound of rifle shots to our ears."

– Private Theodore W. Goldin

Sundance Lodge Recreation Area

Located near the confluence of the Clarks Fork and the Yellowstone River about 10 miles west of Billings, MT, Sundance Lodge was a working ranch before the Bureau of Land Management acquired it in 1997. It is now designated a Special Recreation Management Area and provides a dispersed recreation experience near the communities of Laurel and Billings as well as ensuring public access to the Clarks Fork, and protecting wildlife habitat.

Sundance Lodge Recreation Area, Laurel, Montana
Roger Peterson - USDA / Forest Service

Laurel High School students recommended the name of this site based on historical research. According to the research, the Crow name for the Clarks Fork River is *Ashkisshipouoo*, translated as "Where the Sun Dance Lodge was run over." This refers to an incident in which an abandoned lodge was run over by a herd of buffalo.

Sundance Lodge Recreation Area is also the location where The Nez Perce National Historic Trail and the Lewis and Clark National Historic Trail converge.

Recreational opportunities include wildlife viewing, environmental education, photography, hiking, biking, and horseback riding. Day use only.

As you leave the recreation area you may want to turn right and follow Thiel Road for 0.6 miles to a bridge where you can view the confluence of the Clarks Fork and Yellowstone rivers.

Return to U.S. Highways 212 / U.S. 310 and head north for 1.6 miles before turning right onto E Main Street. On your right is the Laurel Chamber of Commerce where a statue of Chief Joseph and three interpretive panels stand nearby.

Continue on to Canyon Creek Monument on page 29.

⑫ Side Trip: Billings, Montana

Riverfront Park and Cochran Ranch

From Laurel, MT, head east onto Interstate 90. In 8.8 miles you will cross Canyon Creek between mileposts 442 and 443. In 4.6 miles take exit 447, S. Billings Avenue. Continue south on S. Billings Avenue for 0.6 miles to Riverfront Park on the bank of the Yellowstone River. Turn left into the park and at the "Y" turn left and follow the road around little Josephine Lake for 0.6 miles to an information plaque on the right side of the road (no pullout) and the site of the Cochran Homestead.

Early on the morning of September 13, with the main party of Nez Perce camped near Canyon Creek, a group of warriors headed south into the Yellowstone Valley to forage for supplies.

Joseph Cochran had farmed here less than a year. While he was upriver logging, two trappers, Clinton Dills and W.M. Sumner, were camped at his place eating dinner when six Nez Perce raiders rode up. Thinking these were friendly Crow, the trappers made no move to protect themselves and were shot and killed.

"The damage done by the Nez Perces on the Yellowstone is as follows: Stone & Rouse's stage station, hay and corrals burnt; Ed. Forrest's hay burned and stock stolen; at Josephine Tree two men killed (Clinton and Sumner), camp burned and fourteen head of horses stolen; near McAdow's mill the houses of Egestone and Ralson were burned, no damage done the mill or property of McAdow excepting the loss of three ponies."

– Rocky Mountain Husbandman, October 4, 1877

Riverfront Park, Billings, Montana
Roger Peterson - USDA / Forest Service

If you wish to continue on with the Coulson Park side trip, skip ahead to the next page.

Return the way you came to Interstate 90. Merge onto Interstate 90 westbound, back toward Laurel, MT. Join the Mainstream Traveler in Laurel, MT, on page 29.

⑬ Side Trip: Coulson Park, Montana

(4 miles round trip)

Travelers who take this side trip will see the site of the town of Coulson, where the Nez Perce raiders burned a saloon and a house.

From Riverfront Park turn right and head back toward Interstate 90. In 0.6 miles turn right and merge onto Interstate 90. Continue east for 2.5 miles and then take exit 450 towards 27th Street. Turn right on 27th Street and then left onto Garden Avenue. Take a left onto Belknap Avenue and then the first right onto Charlene Street. In 0.3 miles the pavement ends at a railroad track beside the PP&L coal fired electric generating plant which is situated on the original site of Coulson. Continue for 1 more mile, alongside the Interstate, to the park entrance. At the farther (east) end of the park, 0.4 miles away, sits a boulder with a plaque that marks the townsite of Coulson.

At the Coulson settlement, Nez Perce warriors burned a shack and exchanged shots with residents secured in hastily constructed rifle pits. The Nez Perce continued on to near the present town of Huntley before returning back to rejoin the main assemblage moving up Canyon Creek.

Return the way you came to Interstate 90. Merge onto Interstate 90 westbound, back toward Laurel, MT. Join the Mainstream Traveler in Laurel, MT, on the next page.

Coulson, Montana

The town of Coulson was a stop for steamboats traveling up the Yellowstone River. When the Montana & Minnesota Land Company acquired land for railroad development in 1877, company officials ignored Coulson and platted the new town of Billings several miles to the west. As Billings flourished, Coulson died.

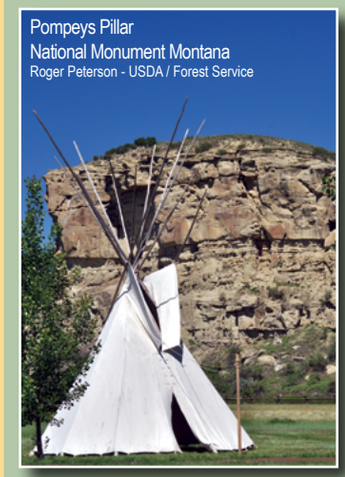
Coulson Park, Billings, Montana
Roger Peterson - USDA / Forest Service

Pompeys Pillar National Monument

From Laurel, MT, head east on Interstate 90 E for 22.2 miles. Keep left to stay on Interstate 94 E. In 22.8 miles take exit 23 toward Pompeys Pillar. Turn left onto Fly Creek Road. In 0.1 mile continue onto Old Highway 312. Continue for 0.8 mile and then turn right into Pompeys Pillar National Monument.

This imposing sandstone outcrop overlooks the Yellowstone River about 25 miles east of Billings, Montana. Being the only sandstone outcrop on the south side of the Yellowstone for many miles around, Pompeys Pillar has been a landmark for centuries.

Named by Captain William Clark after Sacagawea's son, Jean Baptiste Charbonneau, whom Cpt. Clark had nicknamed Pomp, Pompeys Pillar features the last surviving physical evidence of the Lewis and Clark Expedition. Cpt. Clark's signature is carved into the sandstone.


Pompeys Pillar
National Monument Montana
Roger Peterson - USDA / Forest Service

After the Canyon Creek Battle, wounded soldiers were taken 40 miles down the north bank of the Yellowstone River to Pompeys Pillar. There, they secured a wide-bottomed mackinaw. This riverboat, used to haul freight, took them to a hospital on the Tongue River. The entire trip took eight days.

Pompeys Pillar National Monument, Montana
Roger Peterson - USDA / Forest Service

14 Laurel to Canyon Creek Battlefield

Here the Mainstream Traveler follows the route taken by the Seventh Cavalry as they headed due north to intercept the Nez Perce caravan.

From The Laurel Chamber of Commerce, head west on Main Street and turn right onto 1st Avenue. At the stop sign take a right and quick left to stay on 1st Avenue. In about 1.6 miles 1st Avenue becomes Montana State Highway 532 / Buffalo Trail Road. Follow Buffalo Trail Road for 6.3 miles north to the junction with Lipp Road where you will find an interpretive pavilion detailing the events that took place here.

The main body of Nez Perce was moving up Canyon Creek while their scouts watched from the top of the bluffs as they passed. The warriors who had been in the vicinity of what is now Billings, Montana, were returning to the main party as the military headed north from Laurel.

Near Canyon Creek Battlefield, Montana
Roger Peterson - USDA / Forest Service

Just a little south of where Interstate 90 runs today, the stagecoach road, from the Tongue River (Miles City) and more eastern points, passed on its way to Helena, Montana. A stage station was located between the interstate and the river, west of Canyon Creek. In fact, a stagecoach had pulled in just moments before the Nez Perce raiders appeared.

"The stage had just arrived, when the lookout discovered a hostile war party dashing down the river, and everybody made a run for the thick willows with hostile bullets flying around them. There were half a dozen stage passengers, most of whom struck off afoot up the river, and eventually reached some settlement. One of the passengers was a dentist, and the hostiles scattered his gripsack full of store teeth and tools of torture all over the ground."

– John W. Redington (scout)

About four miles north of Laurel, as you crest a ridge you see the flat of Canyon Creek. It may have been from this vantage point that the troops saw the Nez Perce moving up Canyon Creek with the stagecoach about half a mile behind.

"Although the hostile trail led down the Yellowstone, we saw Indian scouts watching us from the bluffs to the north, and soon they charged down. But our outfit sent them to charging backward, and when they had driven them over the bluffs we caught sight of what was on the other side, and there was the whole hostile outfit right under us, strung along the benches and bottoms of Canyon creek….

Half a mile in their rear was a big stage coach with its four horses trotting along, and on the box was an Indian driver, with nearly half a dozen other Indians squatting on the roof, with their war horses hitched behind.

When these hostiles saw us they quickly unhitched the stage horses, mounted their cayuses, and dashed into skirmish line flanking their outfit, which had what looked like more than 2000 head of horses. The old stage was abandoned in the sagebrush."

– John W. Redington (scout)

Canyon Creek Battlefield, Montana
Roger Peterson - USDA / Forest Service

For the rest of that day the Nez Perce warriors and military battled while the women, children and elders managed to get themselves and the herd of horses out of the canyon and headed north.

"Other soldiers horseback, like cavalry, were off to one side. Away ahead of the walking soldiers. They tried to get the women and children. But some warriors, not many, were too quick. Firing from a bluff, they killed and crippled a few of them, turning them back."

– Hímiin maqsmáqs (Yellow Wolf)

"A Squad of Cavalry came up the gulch opposite where we were but did not stop long as the Indians opened a real hot fire on them and they retreated down the gulch. We still tried to hold the ground, but the reds got so thick in the rocks above us that we could not raise our head to shoot without a dozen shots being fired at us."

– Stanton G. Fisher (scout), September 13, 1877

The battle had resulted in three dead and 12 wounded soldiers. The next day Colonel Sturgis's command hurried after the Nez Perce but failed to catch them and a couple of days later gave up the chase.

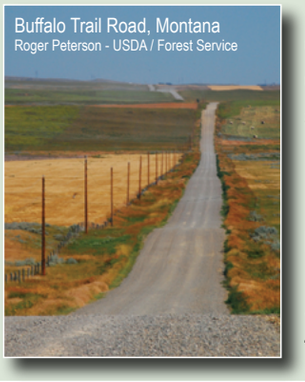
"Making our wounded as comfortable as possible and posting a strong guard, the idea of making night march in pursuit of our enemy having been abandoned….we rolled up in our blankets…, and we were soon sleeping soundly, but were awakened some time in the night by sharp challenges and loud talking near one of the outposts. Soon some two hundred young Crow warriors came dashing into camp, shouting and singing, and from that time on until early dawn sleep was an impossibility, as between the beating of their tom-toms, their shrill war whoops as they danced their war dances, pandemonium raged, but at the first peep of dawn they were off, vowing to overtake and annihilate the enemy."

– Private Theodore Goldin

15 Broadview, Montana

Adventure Route

This route to Broadview, MT, is more direct and better follows the route taken by the Nez Perce. However, it is on gravel roads and is therefore classified as an Adventure Route.


Buffalo Trail Road, Montana
Roger Peterson - USDA / Forest Service

The roads are generally in good condition and should not pose a challenge to most vehicles. An alternate Mainstream paved route to Broadview is detailed below.

From the Canyon Creek Monument, proceed north on Buffalo Trail Road. In 7.9 miles you will cross Montana State Highway 302. Continue north for 16.8 miles to Broadview.

15 Broadview, Montana

Mainstream Route

From the Canyon Creek Monument, head east on Lipp Road for 2.8 miles. At the "T" junction, turn left onto 88th Street W. In 0.8 miles turn right onto Grand Avenue and continue for 5.9 miles. At the traffic circle, take the 3rd exit going north onto 40th Street / Shilo Road. In one mile turn right onto Rimrock Road and continue for 0.8 miles. Turn left onto Zimmerman Trail. Zimmerman Trail will climb the ridge and after 1 mile will reach Montana State Highway 3. Turn left onto Montana State Highway 3 and continue for 25.4 miles to Broadview, MT.

NOTE: Zimmerman Trail is steep, narrow and winding and may prove difficult for RVs and trailers. The best option for RVs and trailers is to return to Interstate 90 through Laurel, and head east on Interstate 90 for 15.8 miles. Take exit 450 for Montana State Highway 3 and turn left onto Montana State Highway 3. Continue for 3.5 miles and at the traffic circle take the third exit to stay on Montana State Highway 3. In 28.6 miles you will reach Broadview, MT.

The story of the Nez Perce Flight of 1877 continues at Broadview, Montana in Auto Tour 8.

"Some of us stayed back to watch the enemies. I looked one way and saw strange Indians… I rode closer. Eeh! Crows! A new tribe fighting Chief Joseph. Many snows the Crows had been our friends. But now, like the Bitterroot Salish [Flatheads], turned enemies. My heart was just like fire."

– Hímiin maqsmáqs (Yellow Wolf)

The Final Weeks

After the battle at Canyon Creek, the fleeing Nez Perce continued their push to Canada. Sadly, the Nez Perce flight ended only 40 miles south of the Canadian border. Along Snake Creek, just north of the Bear Paw Mountains, the Nez Perce engaged the combined forces of Colonel Miles and General Howard. During a six-day battle, many prominent Nez Perce leaders died, including Chiefs Looking Glass, Lean Elk and Ollokot. Chief White Bird led a group of nearly 300 Nez Perce to safety in Canada, where they joined Sitting Bull.

"It was in the night when I escaped with Chief White Bird and his band all afoot. The fight was over and nothing to stay for. ... We left that night before Joseph had given his gun to General Miles. We walked out, leaving many of our friends. Some were too bad wounded to travel and had to stay. Only about forty unwounded men stayed with Joseph and there were many women and children. Many more of them than men, both wounded and unhurt. ... It was lonesome, the leaving. Husband dead, friends buried or held prisoners. I felt that I was leaving all that I had but I did not cry."

–Watátonmay

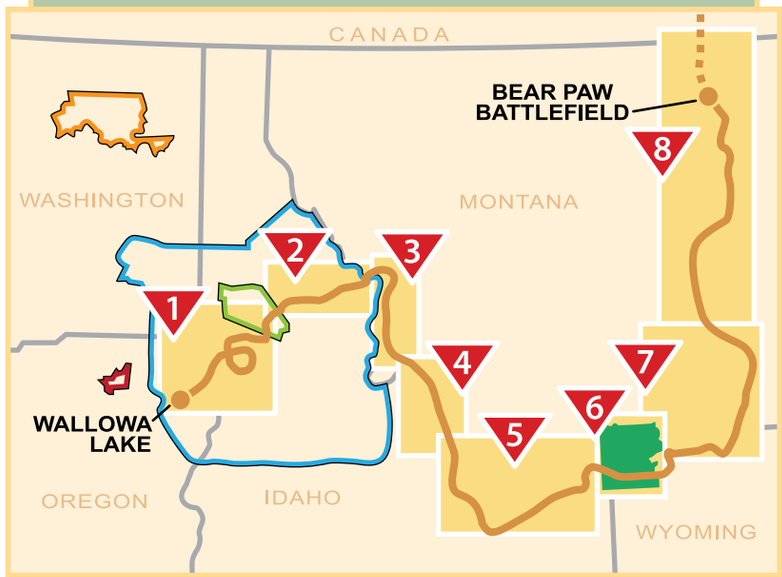
On October 5, 1877, Chief Joseph, believing the remaining Nez Perce would be sent to the reservation in Lapwai, Idaho, agreed to surrender. The war was over. Following their surrender, the Nez Perce faced eight years of exile in Kansas and Oklahoma enduring sickness, starvation and death before they were allowed to return to the Pacific Northwest.

Bear Paw Battlefield Monument, Montana
Roger Peterson - USDA / Forest Service

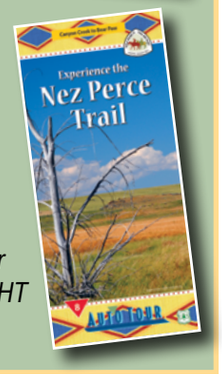
Notes

Nez Perce National Historic Trail Auto Tours

See the Auto Tour brochure for each trail segment indicated on the map below for specific route information.



1. **Wallowa Valley, Oregon to Kooskia, Idaho**
2. **Orofino, Idaho to Lolo, Montana**
3. **Lolo, Montana, to the Big Hole National Battlefield, Montana, through the Bitterroot Valley**
4. **Big Hole, Horse Prairie and Lemhi Valleys**
5. **Leadore, Idaho, to Yellowstone National Park, Montana**
6. **Through Yellowstone National Park**
7. **Yellowstone National Park to Canyon Creek, Montana**
8. **Canyon Creek to Bear Paw**



Auto Tour Brochures are available at local visitor centers, from the NPNHT Staff or from the NPNHT website at, www.fs.usda.gov/npnht/

For an interactive, Google Earth virtual tour of the trail please visit the Nez Perce Trail Foundation website at www.nezpercetrail.net

This Trail is a Sacred Trust for All Americans

"We, the surviving Nez Perces, want to leave our hearts, memories, hallowed presence as a never-ending revelation to the story of the event of 1877. These trails will live in our hearts.

We want to thank all who visit these sacred trails, that they will share our innermost feelings. Because their journey makes this an important time for the present, past and future."

– Frank B. Andrews, Nez Perce descendant

For more information on the Nez Perce (Nee-Me-Poo) National Historic Trail visit on the Web at *www.fs.usda.gov/npnht* or contact:

Nez Perce National Historic Trail
12730 Highway 12
Orofino, ID 83544
(208) 476-8334
npnht@fs.fed.us

Nez Perce National Historical Park
39063 US Hwy 95
Spalding, ID 83540
(208) 843-7001
www.nps.gov/nepe

Nez Perce Trail Foundation
www.nezpercetrail.net

Nez Perce Tribe
P.O. Box 365
Lapwai, ID 83540
(208) 843-2253
www.nezperce.org

Chief Plenty Coups State Park
PO Box 100
1 Edgar/Pryor Road
Pryor, MT 59066
(406) 252-1289
www.stateparks.mt.gov/chief-plenty-coups

Buffalo Bill Center of the West
720 Sheridan Ave
Cody, WY 82414
(307) 587-4771
www.centerofthewest.org

Bureau of Land Management Wyoming
Cody Field Office
1002 Blackburn Street
Cody, WY 82414
(307) 578-5900
www.blm.gov/wy

Bureau of Land Management Montana/ Dakotas State Office
Billings Field Office
5001 Southgate Drive
Billings, MT 59101
(406) 896-5012
www.blm.gov/mt

Custer National Forest
1310 Main Street
Billings, MT 59105
(406) 255-1400
www.fs.usda.gov/custer

Gallatin National Forest:
P.O. Box 130
Bozeman, MT 59771
(406) 522-2520
www.fs.usda.gov/gallatin

Laurel Chamber of Commerce
108 E. Main St.
Laurel, MT 59044
(406) 628-8105
www.laurelmontana.org

On Twitter @npnht

Little Bighorn National Monument
756 Battlefield Tour Road
Crow Agency, MT 59022
(406) 638-2621
www.nps.gov/libi

National Historic Trail Interpretive Center
1501 N. Poplar
Casper, WY 82601
(307) 261-7780
www.blm.gov/wy/st/en/NHTIC.html

Pompeys Pillar National Monument
3001 Hwy 312
Worden, MT 59088
(406) 875-2400
www.blm.gov/sbld

Shoshone National Forest
808 Meadow Lane Ave
Cody, WY 82414
(307) 527-6241
www.fs.usda.gov/shoshone

Western Heritage Center
2822 Montana Avenue
Billings, MT 59101
(406) 256-6809
www.ywhc.org

511 Travel Info

www.lnt.org

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U.S. Department of the Interior National Park Service

U.S. Department of the Interior Bureau of Land Management

U.S. Department of the Interior Fish and Wildlife Service

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