

Tours - Pioneer Mountains Scenic Byway

(Note: mileages provided are not posted along the road. Watch your odometer!)

The Pioneer Mountains Scenic Byway, designated in 1989, cuts through the middle of the Pioneer Mountains in Southwest Montana's Beaverhead County. The route goes from the town of Wise River, south along the stream of the same name, and then crosses into the historic valley formed by Grasshopper Creek. *(Along the Pioneer Mountains Scenic Byway. Photo by Jim Hughes)*

To reach the byway from the north, leave Interstate 15 at the Divide Interchange (Exit 102), which is about 17 miles south of the junction of Interstates 90 and 15. Follow Montana Highway 43 west to Wise River, and



then just past the main part of town, the scenic byway begins on the left and goes south.

To reach the byway from the south, take Interstate 15 to the Highway 278 turn off (Exit 59), three miles south of Dillon. Follow this road about 23 miles to the turn off for the byway and Maverick Mountain Ski Area.

If you're traveling from the west from either Idaho or the Bitterroot Valley, take Montana Highway 43 to Wisdom. From there you can either continue on Highway 43 to just west of Wise River, or you can follow Highway 278 to the byway/ski area turnoff.

This tour relies on the informational signs along the byway, and will take you from north to south on the route. Enjoy your trip!

Stop 1. (Mile 10.1)

George Pettengill

The "Wild Man" of Wise River

First came the fur trappers, then miners, following the trails that Indians had used for centuries. Last came homesteaders who settled this valley--people like Charlie Lambrecht, Joe Maurice, George Palmer.



Few were as colorful as the legendary George Pettengill. With a tall, slender frame, piercing dark eyes, a rugged, weather-beaten face framed by long, reddish hair and beard, George wandered through the woods and

along this creek that bears his name.

Reportedly a fugitive from a love gone sour, he came here to be alone, asked little of others and lived off the land, sometimes in dugouts and caves. He had few friends, perhaps the best of whom were the horses he fed by hand. Despite his gentle voice and eloquent speech, some people were frightened of this mysterious man--they called him "Wild Man" of Wise River.

This area's name was until recently spelled "Pattengail," but when research for the byway uncovered how "Mr. P" really spelled his name, the U.S. Board on Geographical Names approved the change in spelling. (George Palmer grave. This grave lies 1/4 mile before the first stop. *Photo by Deb Gale*)

Stop 2. (Mile 14.8)

PERSEVERANCE and FAITH

The Homesteader's Legacy

Looking out over the Gold Creek drainage in front of you, it is hard to imagine how life in such a place could be anything but peaceful and good. But when Joe Maurice arrived here in 1883, life was hard, desolate and often short. Survival meant battling drought, floods, insects and blizzards. It meant riding horseback 60 miles to summon the doctor returning home only to find loved ones already dead.

Thanks to their perseverance, early homesteaders like Joe and his family left a legacy of courage, adaptability and faith, and paved the way for those to come.

Stop 3. (Mile 15.0)

Joe Maurice

Husband, Father, Homesteader

Joe Maurice arrived from Belgium in 1883 at the age of 13. He married young and established a homestead here in the Gold Creek drainage. A horse kicked the sight out of his right eye, but still he scratched out a living, raising some cattle and panning a little gold.

During the harsh winter of 1905 his wife died of diphtheria, that spring, his two little children died of typhoid fever. It is believed he buried them all in the graveyard up the hill in front of you. His remaining eyesight steadily dimmed, but he stuck it out here, close to his loved ones, until 1963 when friends persuaded him to move to a nearby rest-home. Joe Maurice passed away in 1967 at the age of 97.

Stop 4. (Mile 16.5)

GLACIERS

Master Mountain Carvers

Imagine rivers of ice so big, so heavy that, like a monstrous bulldozer, they move slowly but relentlessly ahead--grinding, scouring, gouging everything in their path.

10,000 to 18,000 years ago, these rivers of ice, called valley glaciers, covered much of this area. They carved the vista in front of you, including the glacial cirque, or semi-circular headwall of Bobcat Mountain between the two mountains in the distance.

As the glacier flowed downward, it gouged the U-shaped valley below the headwall. The majority of debris transported from the sculpting process was left behind in a mound of earth, or moraine, between the forest in front of you and Bobcat Mountain.

Bobcat Mountain

As massive amounts of snow



collected in this valley, pressure from the weight of the snow compacted it into ice and a glacier was created.

As the glacier melted and moved downslope, it plucked out blocks of bedrock and the cavities filled with ice.

When the glacier receded, bedrock basin-like cavities, called "kettles" remained. Several small lakes and ponds on Bobcat Mountain are water-filled kettles. (Upper Wise River Valley. *Photo by Jim Hughes*)

Stop 5. (Mile 19.7)

Grand Vista

HABITAT



No Place Like Home

(The Pioneer Mountains. *Photo by Jim Hughes*)

Would you expect to see a trout working its way across the rocky cliffs at the top of the Pioneer Mountains facing you? How about a mountain goat swimming below in Wise River? Of

course not - fish can't survive out of water and goats need food and shelter found in higher elevations.

As you gaze out over this grand vista, you are actually looking at several different "homes" or habitats. Each supports a unique community of plants and animals. Like the fish and goat, every species needs just the right environment to thrive. Unlike us, if their environment changes, it's not as easy for plants and animals to simply pack up and move.

ALPINE PEAKS

Cold, harsh environment, home to only the hardiest of plants, like alpine bluegrass and lichen, and animals such as mountain goat and pika.

SUB-ALPINE FOREST

Narrow zone, where stubby, windblown whitebark pine and subalpine fir help define the timberline. Wolverine hunt for squirrels and hoary marmots scramble over rock slides in this zone.

MONTANE FOREST

Broad, moist, upland slopes covered with Douglas-fir and lodgepole pine, where elk graze and jays chatter.

MONTANE MEADOW

A lush and wet environment, nourishing an amazing diversity of plant and animal life. Here ducks dip for food and dragonflies hover above Wise River.

Stop 6. (Mile 19.7)

RIPARIAN HABITAT

Wet, Wild and Wonderful

Below you lies the richest home of all, a wet and wonderful riparian meadow, chock full of water and willows, bugs and beavers, moose and mallards. These plants and animals need this riparian area for food, shelter, hiding and nesting places.

But they also need each other. Like pieces of a puzzle, they are all interdependent, and together form a complete picture. If you take away the bug or the beaver, the picture is left with a piece missing. Because the riparian "picture" in front of you has all its pieces, it is an indication that the larger ecosystem supporting this habitat is healthy. (Upper Wise River

Valley. Photo by Jim Hughes)

The stream bank is like a sponge, absorbing flood waters in the spring then slowly releasing them into the stream throughout the year.

Overhanging stream banks, held together



by plant roots, shade the water and provide hiding places for fish.

Healthy riparian habitats are good for us all.

Riparian areas provide recreational opportunities and inspire us with their beauty.

Lush vegetation keeps the streambank from eroding.

Plants like willow and sedge store sediments and nutrients, and filter the water clean.

Ecosystem: The origin for "Ecos" comes from the ancient Greek word for house, oikos.

**At Mono Campground (Mile 21.3),
you can turn off onto a side road to
the Coolidge Ghost Town and Elkhorn Mine and Mill:**

MONTANA SOUTHERN RAILWAY From Boom to Bust



in Coolidge. Photo by Deb Gale)

(One of the buildings

You're standing on the bed of the old Montana Southern Railway, built to transport silver ore from the nearby Elkhorn Mine at Coolidge to Divide, 40 miles northeast. From there, the crushed ore was transferred to the Oregon Short Line and shipped out of state. Believed to be the last narrow-gauge railroad constructed in the Lower 48, the Montana Southern debuted in November 1919 to a great local fanfare. The railroad operated several times a week for only eight short years before the Pettengill Dam ruptured, flooding company facilities at Allentown and washing out major sections of the railroad.

It was the last straw for the Montana Southern's financially troubled parent company, the Boston and Montana Mining Company, which owned the surrounding claims. Despite efforts to refinance and reopen both the mines and the railroad, the Montana Southern never ran again.

The Montana Southern: An Impressive Achievement



The Montana Southern Railway was an expensive, difficult undertaking. In just 40 miles, it had to negotiate the narrow, winding Wise River Canyon, dozens of stream crossings along Wise River and steep rolling

terrain that marked the last five miles from Mono Creek to Coolidge. Built at a cost of \$1.5 million, the railway's 200-foot-long-tunnel, four major trestles and numerous deep cuts and fills represented state-of-the-art engineering.

Look for remnants of one of the railroad trestles at Happy Creek, less than a quarter-mile's walk east along the old railroad bed from behind Mono Campground. (Coolidge. Photo by

Fred Bridenstine)



**William R. Allen:
The Man Behind The Mine**

The Montana Southern Railway was

the brainchild of Montana native William R. Allen, who served as the state's Lt. Governor from 1909-1913. It was he who purchased 80 claims and 1,000 acres around Coolidge, including the Elkhorn mine. It was also Allen who named the town for the nation's future president. Allen, too, had a namesake town: Allentown, later known as Wise River. (Elkhorn Mill, late 1980s. *Photo by Butch Selway*)

Back on the Byway:

Stop 7. (Mile 25.4)

RAISING PIONEERS

A Mountain-Moving Experience

(Cattle Grazing near Pioneer Mountains Byway. *Photo by Jim Hughes*)

As you drive along this byway, have you wondered why the mountains to the west have round, subtle ridges but to the east you see rugged, magnificent peaks?



Around 70 million years

ago, mountains in this part of the world were on the move--uplifting, shifting, faulting, buckling. Sandstone was thrust over the top of newer sediments and molten magma rose up to solidify as intrusions of granite in these layers of sediments.

From the west, enormous slabs of 1-billion-year-old sandstone were thrust more than 25 miles east, coming to rest over younger sediments here in the Wise River Valley.

During all this commotion, molten granite rose from deep within the earth, intruded the thrust sediments and the Pioneers were born.

A fault through the Wise River Valley occurred 70 million years ago, and the western part of these mountains dropped one-half mile in elevation.

Today the West Pioneers appear more gentle, because their intrusions remain buried under slowly weathering sandstone. Intrusions left at higher elevations in front of you have eroded more dramatically and are now exposed as the granite peaks of the East Pioneers.

A result of erosion, the erratics or boulders in this meadow broke off from the high country around you and were transported here by ice and mud-flows over 10,000 years ago.

**Stop 8. (Mile 26.3)
CRYSTAL PARK
Digging just for the fun of it!**

You're now passing one of the most unique places in the National Forests of the United States! Crystal Park has been set aside for



everyone to enjoy digging around for lovely quartz and amethyst crystals.

Open during daylight hours from about May 15 to about October 15 (depending on the snow), Crystal Park yields six-sided clear, white, gray or purple quartz crystals, most of them around one to two inches long. Bring your shovel or hand trowel, and enjoy



discovering these sparkling momentos.

(Crystal. Photo by Jim Hughes)

(Sorting for Crystals. Photo by Jim Hughes)

Those wanting to spend the night near Crystal Park

can camp nearby Price Creek Campground. Other campgrounds, both public and private, lie to the south, in the Grasshopper Valley, and north, along the scenic byway.

Stop 9. (Mile 28.0)

GRASSHOPPER OVERLOOK

A Window on Living History

(Ranch Scene at south end of Byway.
Photo by Deb Gale)

Grasshopper Creek flows for nearly fifty miles from the top of the Pioneer Mountains, past Elkhorn Hot Springs and through the broad, pastoral valley below you, to join the Beaverhead River.



Traversed by Indians, picked over by gold prospectors, tamed by generations of ranchers and cherished by modern recreationists the year 'round, life today in Grasshopper Valley is rich in the romance of Western history.

Montana's first great gold discovery in 1862 near Bannack, 25 miles south of here, brought over 5,000 people to this valley in less than a year. Many raised food for the mining camps, and those who stayed after the rush was over found cattle ranching a more secure venture than gold mining.



(Beaver Slide Haystacker. Photo by Deb Gale)

Today, ranching remains much the same in Grasshopper Valley as it was more than a hundred years ago when cattle first grazed these rich meadows. Cowhands ride horseback to move cattle

from summer to winter ranges and beaver slides are still used to pile hay.

The Grasshopper Valley was once favored by Shoshoni Indians for its soothing hot springs, and for an important source of food, the sweet bulbs of its abundant blue camas plants. Look for their deep blue, lily-like flowers blooming from May to June.

Ascending the Beaverhead River in August of 1805, Lewis and Clark passed the mouth of Grasshopper Creek and named it for Alexander Willard, a member of their party. When miners and settlers began arriving in the early 1860's, a local plague of locusts made "Grasshopper Creek" a more appropriate name.

Farther down the creek lies Bannack, Montana's first territorial capital, and now a state park. Here a gold rush in 1862 started large-scale European settlement in the land that in 1889 became the 43rd state.



(Fourth of July Campground, at Mile 11.3. Photo by Jim Hughes)