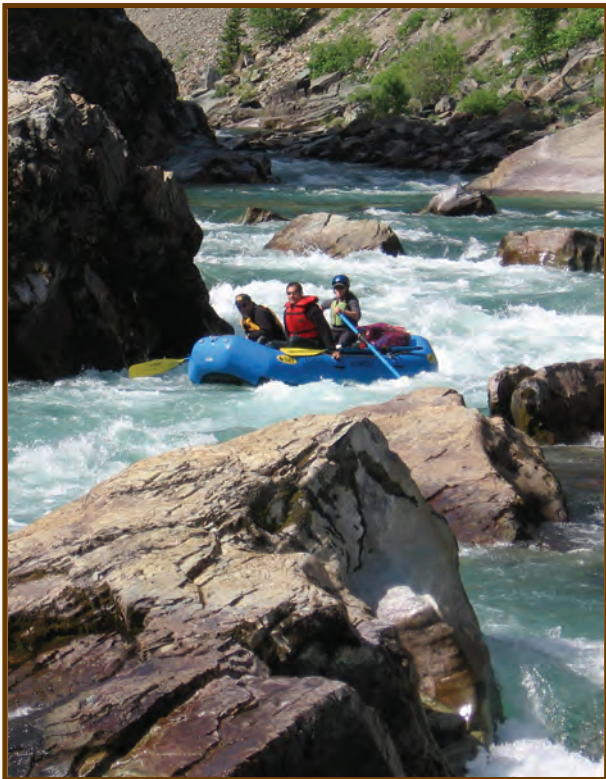


Flathead National Forest

*Three Forks*  
*of the*  
*Flathead*

**Wild & Scenic River**



Montana

2015

**FLOAT GUIDE**



United States Department of Agriculture  
Forest Service





## *The Flathead River System*

You are about to take advantage of a unique opportunity to experience a Wild and Scenic River. For a short time you will be sharing the land and the water with a variety of plant and animal species.

The Flathead River system is a fragile environment of clear mountain streams, vast forests and home to the threatened grizzly bear and bull trout. The river possesses such outstanding qualities that in 1976 Congress added 219 miles of the Flathead to the nation's Wild and Scenic River System. Wild and Scenic Rivers are designated by Congress for water quality and outstanding natural, cultural or recreational values. The designation preserves a river's free flowing condition. There are three classifications to a protected river: Wild, Scenic, and Recreational. **Wild** river areas are accessed by trail or a few backcountry airstrips and show limited signs of human activity. The areas are free from roads and motorized and mechanized use. **Scenic** sections show limited development along their shorelines, and are accessed by trail and in places by road. **Recreational** river areas are accessed by road and there is some development along the shoreline.

The North Fork, Middle Fork, and South Fork have different origins and personalities, each a different river until they merge to form the main stem of the Flathead River. The three forks offer opportunities for day floats from vehicle accessed sites, thrilling white-water stretches, and permitted guided trips for day and overnight experiences.

# *Flathead River Management*

The raw power and quiet beauty of the Flathead River system humbles visitors with the grandeur of the surrounding mountains, pure water, and abundant wildlife and fish. The 1976 Wild and Scenic designation aims to safeguard the solitude, scenic beauty, and overall quality of the river experience through management by Flathead National Forest and Glacier National Park.

The two agencies have developed a river management plan. The plan evaluates the characteristics of the river system, determines visitor needs, and develops ways to preserve Wild and Scenic qualities while providing a recreational experience for the public.

River users have an impact within the river corridor, whether they access it by vehicle, stock, on foot, or by aircraft. Impacts include litter, human waste, campfire scars, and large numbers of people. River managers determine 'limits of acceptable change' and develop ways to manage, minimize, or eliminate impacts to keep within those 'acceptable limits'. River users also have a role in helping to reduce impacts in the river corridor. River managers have several options to reduce impacts in the corridor. Options include limiting the numbers of users at one time, protecting the resource through regulations, and managing access to the river corridor.



# *User Responsibilities*

## **MOTORIZED RIVER USE**

Most sections of North, Middle and South Forks are designated non-motorized. The exceptions are the portion of the North Fork from the Camas Bridge down river to the confluence with the Middle Fork; the Middle Fork from Essex to the confluence with the South Fork; and the South Fork River from Spotted Bear River to Hungry Horse reservoir and the section below Hungry Horse Dam. These sections are restricted to a maximum of 10 horse power engines.

## **MOTORIZED VEHICLE USE**

Motorized vehicle travel below the high water line is allowed to launch and retrieve boats at the following sites:

- Paola River Access Site on the Middle Fork,
- West Glacier River Access Site on the Middle Fork,
- Blankenship River Access on the Middle Fork,
- Polebridge River Access site on the North Fork.
- Roads to the Burlington Northern railroad

tracks are closed to public motor-vehicle use.

Contact any Forest Service office for current information about motorized use in the river corridor.

## **RESCUE**

Flathead County Sheriff's office is responsible for river rescue. The river corridors have very limited emergency communication services; keep in mind there is limited cell phone coverage. Be prepared, wear the required life jackets, know your abilities, have proper safety gear on board such as flip lines, z-drags, and throw bags and know how to use them. Treat the rivers with respect. The water is very cold, the hydraulics are strong, and logjams exist throughout the river system. Be safe and enjoy the river.



# Quality Habitat for Bears and Fish

The Flathead River provides quality habitat for the threatened grizzly bear and bull trout and several sensitive species including the wolverine and west-slope cutthroat trout.

The successful conservation and recovery of the grizzly bear involves minimizing human/grizzly bear conflicts. When a bear becomes habituated to humans, displays aggression towards people or becomes conditioned to human



WESTSLOPE CUTTHROAT TROUT

food, the result is capture and relocation or removal from the population.

The three forks of the Flathead have some of the purest waters in the continental United States. Bull trout and westslope cutthroat trout need pure, cold water and clean gravel to spawn and survive. State fishing regulations related to bull trout and westslope cutthroat can be obtained from Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks, or from any Forest Service office.

As a river user you have a responsibility to minimize your impacts to help protect this quality river habitat.



# Storing Food in Bear Country

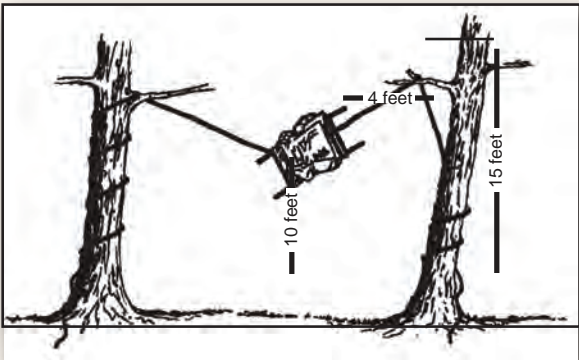
A special regulation on the Flathead National Forest requires that all attractants (food, beverages, garbage, pet food) need to be stored in a manner that bears cannot access them. Attractants include all food (frozen, fresh, canned, dried or packaged), beverages (canned or bottled), cookware, and all garbage. None of these materials can be buried, discarded, or burned in an open campfire.

**There are several ways river users can meet this regulation:**

1. Store all attractants inside a hard sided vehicle when not using them or when more than 100 feet away from camp,
2. Hang all attractants between two trees at least 10 feet high and 4 feet away from the trunk of the tree,
3. Store all attractants in an approved bear resistant container; most coolers and traditional dry boxes are not approved bear resistant containers, OR
4. Keep a person in camp. An adult must be within 100 feet of all attractants during daylight hours or 50 feet at night with no physical barrier between the attractants and the person, such as a tent. This means a river user must remove and properly store all attractants from their boat or stay with the boat at all times.

Visit [www.igbconline.org](http://www.igbconline.org) for a list of certified bear resistant products.

Glacier National Park has different food storage regulations; contact them for more information.



# Leave No Trace



## Plan Ahead & Prepare

- Human waste containment, fire regulations and party size limits apply on most of the waters in this guide. Know the regulations on the section you intend to float.

## Travel & Camp on Durable Surfaces

- Gravel bars make excellent campsites and can be easily naturalized at the end of your stay.
- Use existing campsites rather than creating new sites in pristine locations.

## Dispose of Waste Properly

- Solid human waste containment systems are required on the Middle Fork and North Fork; they are recommended on the South Fork, see regulation tables.
- On the upper South Fork human waste must be buried in a “cathole” at least 6” deep and 200 feet from water.
- Pack out all trash, food and litter.

## Leave What You Find

- Do not disturb or remove any historic or archeological features.
- Do not damage or remove natural features.
- Avoid introducing non-native species by cleaning equipment between trips.

## Minimize Use & Impact of Fire

- Minimize campfires by using a camp stove whenever possible.
- Fire pans or fire blankets are required or recommended.
- Burn all wood and coals to ash, put out campfire completely, and then scatter cooled ash; pack out unburned debris.

## Respect Wildlife

- Never attempt to feed, approach or pursue wildlife.
- A Special Order requires that all food and attractants be stored in a bear resistant manner.
- Control your pets or leave them behind.

## Be Considerate of Others

- Select a campsite out of sight and sound of other camps.
- Allow plenty of space when passing shore parties and other floaters.



# *Other Rules and Regulations*

## **TWO DIFFERENT AGENCIES, ONE RIVER SYSTEM**

Both the North Fork and lower Middle Fork Rivers have shared boundaries between Flathead National Forest and Glacier National Park. The Forest Service was delegated administrative responsibilities for the management of the river system. There are differences in river use regulations for each organization and the respective lands.



## **PRIVATE LANDS**

The lower Middle Fork and North Fork Rivers run through several stretches of private property. Under the Montana Stream Access Law, the public may use rivers and streams for recreational purposes up to the ordinary high water marks. Respect private property. Ask first before crossing private property to access a stream or river.

## **BOATING REGULATIONS**

Montana law requires there must be one U.S. Coast Guard approved life jacket for each person on board a boat. Life jackets must be within easy reach and must fit the intended wearer. Children under 12 must wear their life jackets when boating.

## **FISHING REGULATIONS**

General fishing season in Western Montana streams and rivers open the third Saturday in May and runs through November. A valid fishing license is required for all types of fishing in state waters. Current Montana Fishing Regulations are available at all Forest Service and Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks offices. Contact Glacier National Park for a copy of park fishing regulations.

**Firewood gathering is prohibited in the Wild and Scenic corridor.**



















# River Difficulty Rating









Rapids in this guide are classified using the International River Scale of Difficulty. However, some hazards, especially trees, logs and logjams often change and move from season to season. Do not rely exclusively on ratings. Be constantly vigilant to river hazards in all difficulty classes. Be prepared to scout and portage any rapid you are not confident you can run safely.


<b>CLASS</b>	<b>SKILL LEVEL</b>	<b>CHARACTERISTICS</b>
<b>I</b>	<b>VERY EASY</b> <b>practiced beginner</b>	small, regular waves, few obstacles, little maneuvering required
<b>II</b>	<b>EASY</b> <b>intermediate</b>	easy rapids, eddies, and bends, some maneuvering required
<b>III</b>	<b>MEDIUM</b> <b>experienced</b>	numerous waves, narrow passages, maneuvering required, may require scouting
<b>IV</b>	<b>DIFFICULT</b> <b>highly skilled</b>	difficult rapids, abrupt bends, narrow passages, scouting often necessary, precise maneuvering required
<b>V</b>	<b>VERY DIFFICULT</b> <b>team of experts</b>	long rapids with wild turbulence and extremely congested routes, complex maneuvering, scouting is difficult
<b>VI</b>	<b>LIMITS</b> <b>OF NAVIGATION</b>	nearly impossible and very dangerous, a definite hazard to life

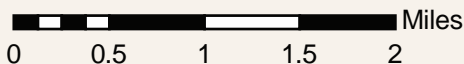
**Rapids may also be designated in more than one class, such as II-III or III-IV. This indicates that the difficulty is variable, generally as a result of flow, more difficult in high flow, less difficult in low flow.**

# Legend

	River Access		Campground (Forest Service)
	Rapids		Campground (Park Service)
	River Milepost (RM)		Forest Service Facility
	Direction of Flow		Information
	Bridge		Trailhead
	Forest Supervisor's Office		Lat / Long Tick (1.5 minute grid)
	Ranger Station (Forest Service)		Lookout Station
	Ranger Station (Park Service)		Lookout Station with control
	Rental Cabin		Elevations, <i>feet / meters</i>

	Wilderness Boundary
	Wild & Scenic River Corridor
	Primary Highway
	Secondary Highway
	County Road
	Road (surface type unspecified)
	Trail
	Railroad

	National Forest		State of Montana
	National Park		Private



1: 63,360

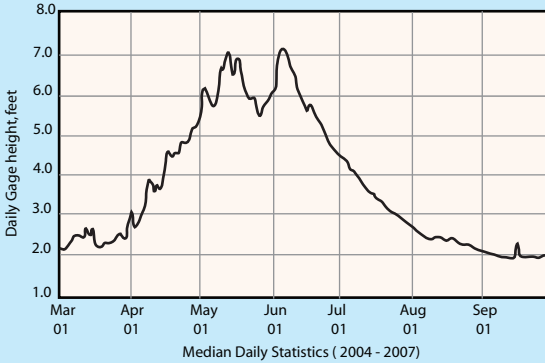
Contour Interval 100 feet

## ***How to read this map:***

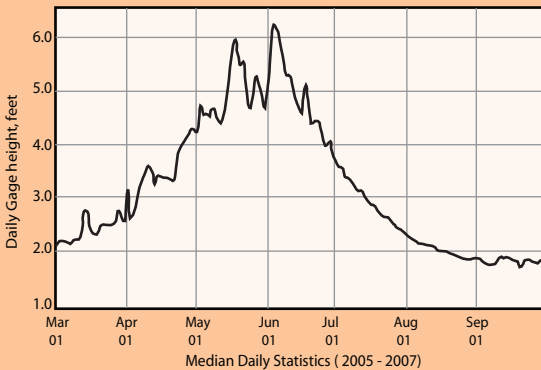
***The maps and interpretive text read from the bottom up on each page, as if you were in a boat facing downriver. As you float down river, the mileposts count down to zero at the river's confluence.***

# Hydrographs

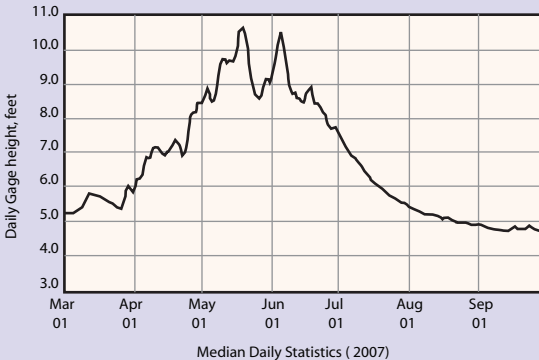
## North Fork Flathead River - North of Columbia Falls



## Middle Fork Flathead River - Near West Glacier



## South Fork Flathead River - Twin Creek



Charts generated from USGS provisional data  
<http://waterdata.usgs.gov/mt/nwis/rt>

# *Contact Information*

## **EMERGENCY - 911**

**Flathead County Sheriff Dispatch**  
(406) 758-5610

### **Flathead National Forest**

650 Wolfpack Way  
Kalispell, MT 59901  
(406) 758 - 5204  
[www.fs.usda.gov/flathead/](http://www.fs.usda.gov/flathead/)

### **North & Middle Forks Hungry Horse/Glacier View Ranger Districts**

10 Hungry Horse Drive,  
Hungry Horse, MT 59919  
(406) 387-3800  
[www.fs.usda.gov/flathead/](http://www.fs.usda.gov/flathead/)

### **Middle & South Forks Spotted Bear Ranger District**

10 Hungry Horse Drive,  
Hungry Horse, MT 59919  
(406) 758-5376 (summer)  
(406) 387-3800 (winter)  
[www.fs.usda.gov/flathead/](http://www.fs.usda.gov/flathead/)

### **Glacier National Park Park Headquarters**

West Glacier, MT 59936  
Information: (406) 888-7801  
[www.nps.gov/glac](http://www.nps.gov/glac)

### **Montana Fish, Wildlife, & Parks**

490 N. Meridian Rd.  
Kalispell, MT 59901  
(406) 752-5501  
<http://fwp.mt.gov/default.html>

### **Montana Department of Natural Resources & Conservation**

2250 Hwy. 93 N  
Kalispell, MT 59901  
(406) 751-2240  
<http://www.dnrc.mt.gov/>

# Vicinity Map



**Department of Agriculture  
Flathead National Forest**



**Department of Interior  
Glacier National Park**

*Constructed in 2008 using digital methods, by the  
Flathead National Forest Geospatial Section, Kalispell, MT,  
from Flathead National Forest geospatial data. Edited in 2015.*

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