

## Trip Report: Upper Missouri Breaks – Fall: September 19 - 27, 2024

Five boaters – Debbie (solo canoe), Natalie (solo canoe with kayak paddle), Micki & Bob (tandem canoe) and Kathryn (solo sea kayak) – ran the Missouri River in late September from Coal Banks Landing to Kipps Recreation Area – Mile 41.5 to mile 149 of the Upper Missouri Breaks National Monument. Following a two-day drive, which we delayed by one day because of anticipated rain, and a further one-day delay in our shuttle, because of an expected (and epic) downpour, we launched on September 19th. Most of us used the extra day in the Fort Benton area to tour the town and visit the excellent museums in the area. After a heavy rain on the 18th, we camped at Kipps and met Missouri River Outfitters (MRO) late morning on the 19th. We and our boats were driven to the put-in at Coal Banks in their transport van pulling a boat trailer as far as their store in Fort Benton and then with an extra 4x4 truck to Coal Banks. Two-wheel drive was discouraged to the put-in because of the bentonite soils of the access road. The shuttle worked well, splitting its typical 6-hour duration into the two days and leaving our vehicles at the take-out for easy access at the end. MRO was very helpful and flexible in the two last-minute changes we made to our arrangements. The shuttle cost \$475 for the boater + boats shuttle (up to 10 people). Our extra mud truck added \$125. Typical vehicle shuttles would have cost \$350/vehicle. MRO also provided a water cache at Judith Landing (\$5/5 gallons) to lighten our loads. The BLM voluntary permit fee, payable at Coal Banks, was \$4/person/day.

Starting late in the afternoon, we boated only ~6 miles to Big Sandy camp, which we shared with three other small groups (most delayed in their launches), including other RMCCers on their private trip journey. Most of our camps (Little Sandy, Eagle Creek, Hole-in-the-Wall, Slaughter River, Wood Duck, Greasewood Bottom, Gist Bottom, Hideaway) were sharable with multiple fire rings (which we did not use), outhouses (in the section between Coal Banks and Judith Landing), and a couple of very nice sun/rain shelters. Our only small, primitive camp was Wood Duck at mile 96 (thanks to the Hays trip report of Spring 2022). Except for two camps, already occupied by another group when we arrived, we had our pick of tent sites. Most campsites had small but decent landings although we had to tie up with long ropes at Wood Duck and Slaughter River. Hole-in-the-Wall had nicely built shade shelters (or for rain or wind as needed) it also had benches around the fire ring. Cows were evident on private and public lands for the upper two-thirds of the river, but not particularly annoying. Some campsites had wooden fences around them to keep the cows out. Only our Greasewood camp had cow pies to avoid. Camps we might try next time were across the river from Hagadone homestead and the Steps camp at mile 142.4 (approx).

Our landscape featured the beautiful White Cliffs of our upper section (Coal Banks to Judith Landing), multiple igneous intrusions, and grey/black formations in the lower breaks area (Judith Landing to Kipps). We planned our 10-day (shortened to 9-day) trip to enjoy multiple hikes, historic homesteads, and Lewis and Clark historic markers. Our favorites were the slot canyon up Neat Coulee out of Eagle Creek camp (go down both sides of the trail for 2 great slot canyons), Daughter-of-Hole-in-the-Wall (took a wrong, but delightful turn on an amazing hike) about a mile downstream of our Hole-in-the-Wall camp (float down and land at the single, large

cottonwood, river right), and the Hagadone homestead. We left many more to explore on a future trip.

Our fall, low-water flow of 6,230 to 4,580 cfs gave us about a 4 mph current and minor waves through several named 'rapids'. After the rain, our weather was typically hot days (upper 80s to low 90s), cold nights (some down to the lower 40s – Bob measured 35 one morning – and little wind. The exception was at Eagle Creek camp with ripping winds in the afternoon, a five-minute hail storm, and about ten minutes of sprinkles. Thankfully, most days on the water had a tail-wind except for our 8th day when we had to paddle carefully to counter some cross- and head-winds. We encountered only one motor rig during our trip – a ranger boat on that windy day.

Multiple bald eagles were the stars of our wildlife sightings. We also had incredible coyote howling, a fox observing us from bluffs high above with his magpie companion, bighorn sheep, a porcupine, deer, a couple mice and squirrels, great blues, owls, turkey, pelicans, multiple hawks, a few songbirds and ducks, and some amazing and unusual (to Coloradans) insects, and very few mosquitos.

Bottom line – Paddling/hiking the Upper Missouri Breaks in the fall can be fantastic – if you are a bit flexible.

Trip planning, report and photos (next pages) by Debbie, Micki, and Kathryn.  
Thanks to Tracy and Janet Hays, Fran Rulon-Miller, and Mat Bozek for their informative trip reports and helpful suggestions.











