The Author

Paddling the Missouri River Breaks

July 9 - 19, 2008

By Dick Dieckman

It was Larry Kline who proposed and led the trip down the Missouri River from Loma, a point about 20 miles northeast of Fort Benton, Montana, to Kipp State Park, 130 miles farther east. It was Larry's second, and perhaps last, trip down the Missouri and a first for George Ottenhoff and me.

Area of the trip is outlined in red

Larry and I left for Montana on July 9th, Larry in his car and I in mine. I picked up George in Kersey, CO and we proceeded northwest to Ft. Benton. MT. We were out of touch with Larry as his cell phone wasn't working, but we all met up in Harlowtown, Montana, and spent the night at the local campground.

We found ourselves in Ft. Benton late in the morning of the second day. It's a beautiful little town right on the banks of the Missouri river. It was the terminus for the steamboats that ran the river from 1859 to 1890 and the jumping off point for early adventurers seeking gold and silver in Idaho and Montana. We spent the rest of the morning in the BLM operated museum in town, found our hotel, and then spent the afternoon exploring the town and arranging for shuttling our cars to Kipp State Park. We purchased our perishable food and got water for the trip. There were few places to get water downstream, none after the second day, so we carried enough for a gallon a day per person.

The river is polluted with agricultural run-off

Web photo: Jamie Ann

Volcanic dikes

The next morning we awoke to strong winds, cloudy skies and 50 degree temperatures. After breakfast we loaded up our gear and drove to Loma, our put-in point, about 20 miles east. Loma is near where the Marias River merges with the Missouri. It was there at Decision Point that Lewis and Clark had to decide which fork to take on their voyage of discovery to the west coast of the continent in June of 1805.

We packed our kayaks and started downriver with strong tailwinds. I had a hard time steering as my boat has no rudder. Larry and George

(Continued from page 11)

fared better. Later that afternoon we found ourselves at Coal Banks Landing, a developed public access site, complete with water, fire-pits, toilets, and trash bins. We all cooked something and ate like pigs. The winds let up and the sun came out.

Our next stop was Eagle Creek, another developed boat camp where we spent two nights. The afternoon of the second day we took a hike a few miles up Eagle Creek Canyon, a beautiful area, but the biting flies were awful.

George in the canyon

The river had peaked a few days before our arrival, so landing and getting into and out of our boats proved to be a mucky mess. The mud would be with us for the rest of our trip. Campsites became more and more primitive the farther downstream we went.

Photos by Larry Kline

It was the fourth or fifth night that remains strongly in my memory. We camped under a large single cottonwood tree in the middle of a meadow. Larry was bent on camping there as it was getting late and the cows had already laid claim to a group of cottonwoods downriver from the this spot.

Ours was a primitive campsite, and many had camped there, but time had taken its toll and it was overgrown with grass and bushes. We ate a dinner of Ramen spaghetti prepared by George. We were now out of fresh food, but the spaghetti was pretty good. It must have been, as I asked George for a second helping. About dusk, dark clouds appeared upstream. They were moving from west to east and didn't seem to be much of a threat even though they were moving rapidly with lots of lightening. They were still so far away there was no thunder. They didn't seem to be coming in our direction, yet! It was getting dark and even darker because of the clouds. Larry and George had turned in and I sat watching the wonderful storm make its way southeast toward us. I made sure my tent pegs were secure and everything was inside the tent when the first drops hit. Nothing much at first. Just a sprinkle. I got into my tent as all hell broke loose. Tremendous winds and driving rain. After about a half hour of this the storm moved on and I fell asleep.

The paddling portion of our trip was supposed to last eight days. On day six we had a parting of the ways. It was getting hotter and the bugs more ferocious; George and I decided to make it only one more day on the river, but Larry wanted two more nights out. Larry dropped back and found a campsite while George and I continued paddling. It was beastly hot and little black flies found their way into our eyes, ears and noses. It was still about twenty miles from the take-out at Kipp, but George and I thought we could make it before six pm.

"...our trio of pests still invade
and obstruct us on all occasions,
these are the musquetoes,
eye knats and prickley pears..."

Meriwether Lewis; July, 1805

(Continued from page 12)

We made it. The mosquitoes and flies were still biting and it was still hot. We were supposed to camp at the park campground, but it was full of Boy Scouts. George and I packed up our gear in my car (the shuttle service had come through) and we were about to pitch our tents and cook one last meal. But as we sat in the car I turned on the air-conditioner…

BAM! Suddenly our plans changed, and we were on our way to Lewistown, a motel room, hot showers, food somebody else cooked, and a good night's sleep. We were home the next day—George in Kersey before dark, and I before Letterman. Larry was back the following day as he cut his extra two nights out to one. Although his night was idyllic, the bugs and heat had gotten to him, too.

I look back with great fondness on our adventure going down the muddy Missouri. I think we all do. Would I do it again? Well, maybe someday.

The author in the wooden kayak he made himself

Citadel Rock, downstream from Eagle Creek Canyon

Related Websites

- Get guidebooks for your Missouri River trip: http://rockymountainmaps.com/item/371/montanas-wild-and-scenic-upper-missouri-river
- BLM website for Missouri River trip planning: http://www.blm.gov/mt/st/en/fo/lewistown_field_office/UM/planning_trip.html
- An account of a Missouri River trip with the same accelerated ending because of the bugs: http://www.voyageofrediscovery.com/part6/trail/index.shtml
- Another account of a Missouri Breaks trip with a sweet suggestion for black gnat control: http://windsourceii.blogspot.com/2007/08/upper-missouri-river-montana.html
- Control the gnats by going in December: http://www.paddling.net/places/showReport.html?2261