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# 3 Forks of the Flathead Wild & Scenic River

## *Information Toolkit*



### *Overview of the 3 Forks of the Flathead Wild and Scenic River*

From remote, wild settings in the Crown of the Continent, to the backyard of northwestern Montana neighborhoods, the 3 Forks of the Flathead Wild and Scenic River flow, with opportunities for all who wish to make their splash. The free-flowing waters start in Canada and deep within Montana’s Bob Marshall Wilderness Complex, revealing grand views of Glacier National Park; where historic sites and stories are waiting to be discovered, and connections to traditional uses and conservation legacies endure. With critical wildlife and fish habitat, around any bend in the river awaits the thrill of recreating in bear country, the excitement of catching native fish, and the chance to gaze upon a mountain goat perched above the river. River recreationists are rejuvenated by way of pack-in, fly-in, catch-a-shuttle, grab-a-guide, or do-it-yourself trips; from multi-day challenges to afternoon escapes. With clean waters illuminating multi-colored cobble and sparkling glacial-till turquoise hues, the 3 Forks of the Flathead River connect us all to the spirit of the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act, on its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary.



### *Overview of Each Fork of the 3 Forks*

**North Fork** – With headwaters in Canada (British Columbia), this designated river starts at the Canadian border and ends at its confluence with the Middle Fork of the Flathead River (58.3 miles). The upper North Fork is classified as Scenic (40.7 miles) and the lower North Fork is classified as Recreational (17.6). The break in segments is at the Camas Bridge. As the river flows south through the North Fork valley, the Flathead National Forest and the Whitefish Range are to the west and on river right,



and Glacier National Park and the Livingston Range are to the east and on river left. The boundary between the Flathead National Forest and Glacier National Park is the center of the deepest, active channel, which inevitably changes over time due to the free-flowing river character and the alluvial floodplain. There are several developed and dispersed river access sites spread along the river on the Flathead National Forest side to enjoy via the primitive North Fork Road. The North Fork is known for its breathtaking views and the sense of solitude which recreationists can experience without traveling deep into wilderness.

**Middle Fork** – Starting in its headwaters, at the confluence of Strawberry Creek and Bowl Creek and ending at its confluence with the lower South Fork River, below Hungry Horse Dam (100.6 miles). The upper Middle Fork is classified as Wild (46.6 miles) and the lower Middle Fork is classified as Recreational (54.0 miles). The break in segments occurs at Bear Creek, with a short section of Wild classified river occurring outside of the Great Bear Wilderness (~ 0.5 miles long). The upper Middle Fork corridor is entirely within the Flathead National Forest and within both the Bob Marshall Wilderness and the Great Bear Wilderness, while the lower Middle Fork corridor is non-wilderness and has a shared corridor between Flathead National Forest on river left and Glacier National Park on river right, with the boundary between the units being at the high-water mark on river right. The upper Middle Fork is only accessible by trail or via the Schafer Meadows Airstrip, a rare feature within the Wilderness Preservation System. The lower Middle Fork is highly accessible along U.S. Highway 2, through John F. Stevens Canyon, with numerous access sites and hike-in locations on the Flathead National Forest side, and via the South Boundary Trail in Glacier National Park. Burlington Northern Santa Fe Railway also follows the lower Middle Fork. The Middle Fork is known for its whitewater and dramatic mountain settings.



**South Fork** – Starting in its headwaters, at the confluence of Youngs Creek and Danaher Creek, and ending at the upper end of Hungry Horse Reservoir, at approximately the Log Landing recreation site (60.1 miles). The upper South Fork is classified as Wild (51.3 miles) and the lower South Fork is classified as Recreational (8.8 miles). The break in segments occurs at the Spotted Bear Ranger Station, with a section of Wild classified river occurring outside of the Bob Marshall Wilderness (~ 11 miles long). The entire South Fork corridor lies within the Flathead National Forest. The upper South Fork is only accessible by trail with its most remote stretches of river being over 20 miles from the nearest road. The lower South Fork is accessible in several locations after a 2 hour drive from Hungry Horse, MT along forest roads. The South Fork is known for its excellent native fisheries (bull trout and westslope cutthroat trout), and the challenges and adventures associated with accessing the remote river.



## Facts and Figures

The 3 Forks of the Flathead Wild and Scenic River contain all three types of classified Wild and Scenic Rivers, a tribute to wide variety of landscape which these rivers flow through. Please refer to the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act for more information on classification and other key components.

	WILD miles	SCENIC miles	RECREATIONAL miles	TOTAL miles
North Fork	0	40.7	17.6	58.3
Middle Fork	46.6	0	54.0	100.6
South Fork	51.3	0	8.8	60.1
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>97.9</b>	<b>40.7</b>	<b>80.4</b>	<b>219.0</b>

The 3 Forks of the Flathead Wild and Scenic River are administered by United States Forest Service, Flathead National Forest, and the North Fork and a portion of the lower Middle Fork are managed in cooperation with the United States Park Service, Glacier National Park.

### Acreege for the 3 Forks of the Flathead WSR\*

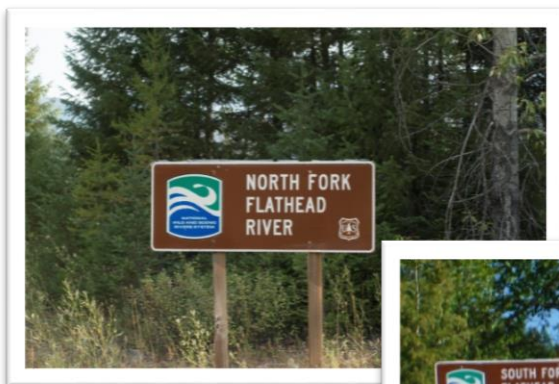
- Flathead National Forest – 35,000 acres
- Glacier National Park – 11,800 acres – Lower Middle Fork and North Fork River
- Private Land – 9,700 acres
- State of Montana – 900 acres

**TOTAL – 57,400 acres**

\* River corridor is generally ¼ mile on each side of river

### Boundary between GNP and FNE

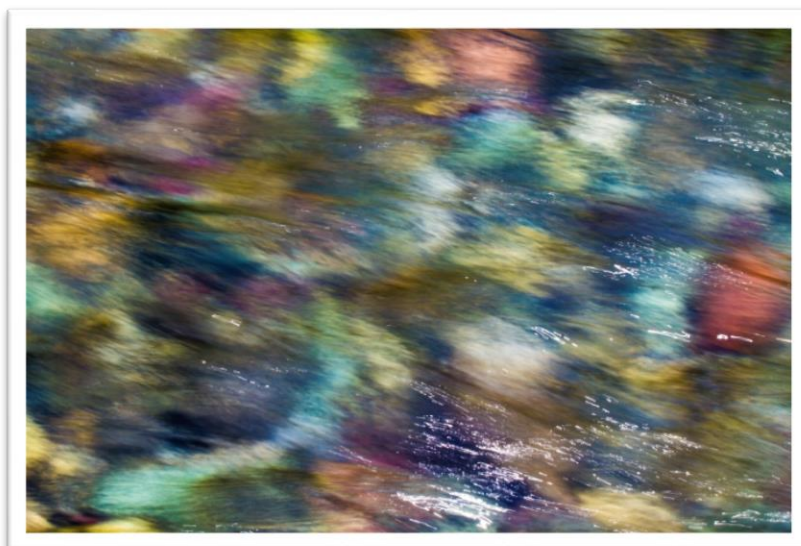
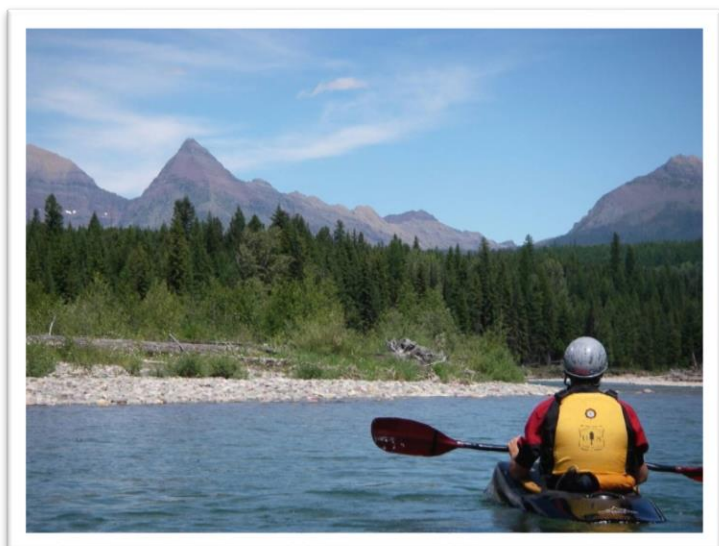
- Middle Fork – High water mark on the park side, river right
- North Fork – Center of the deepest, most active channel



### Outstandingly Remarkable Values

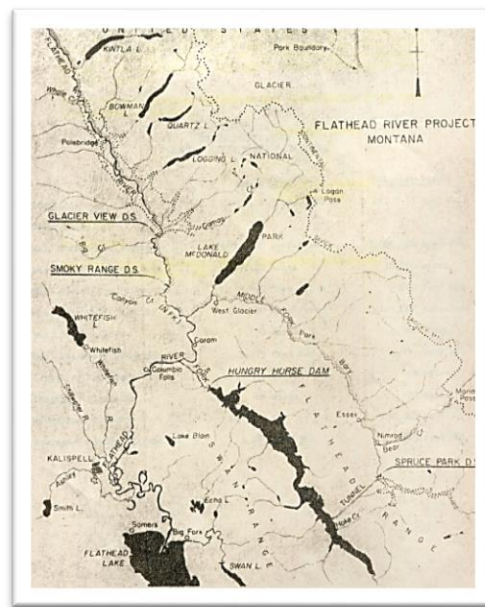
The 3 Forks of the Flathead Wild and Scenic River have many outstandingly remarkable values which are to be protected for the benefit and enjoyment of present and future generations. To learn more about the river’s outstandingly remarkable values, please see *Flathead Wild and Scenic River Outstandingly Remarkable Values Assessment (USDA, 2013)*.

RIVER SEGMENTS	OUTSTANDINGLY REMARKABLE VALUES							
	Fisheries	Geologic	Wildlife	Botanic	Recreation	Scenic	Historic	Ethnographic
Upper North Fork – Scenic	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Lower North Fork – Recreational	X	X	X		X		X	X
Upper Middle Fork – Wild	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	
Lower Middle Fork – Recreational	X	X	X		X	X	X	
Upper South Fork – Wild	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Lower South Fork – Recreational	X	X	X		X	X	X	X



## ***Conservation Legacy: Inspirational Rivers***

The 3 Forks of the Flathead each helped inspire the idea of a national protected Wild and Scenic River system, and the citizens who advocated for this law. The damming of the lower South Fork of the Flathead by the Hungry Horse Dam (completed 1953), for hydroelectric purposes, was generally very popular at that time as it served to help build industrial capacity in the northwestern United States. However, over time, as proposals to also dam the Middle Fork (Spruce Park area) and North Fork (Glacier View Mountain and Smokey Range areas) gained momentum, some people, including a number of local Flathead area citizens, began to fear for what would be lost, as was lost with the damming of the lower South Fork – habitat for large wild animals and migratory fish, such as bull trout, and opportunities for primitive and wild recreation. And at the same time others contemplated the big picture: with continued damming of rivers, there might not be any truly wild rivers left. John Craighead, a conservation leader and University of Montana professor, embarked on several float trips in the upper Middle Fork, through where the Spruce Park Dam would be built, and came to the conclusion that some special rivers should be protected as wild, and kept free flowing. This divergence from great support for development, industrialization, and dam building to also valuing the need for protection of wild places and limiting development was occurring all through the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. The Wilderness Act (1964) was inspired by similar thinking. John Craighead and his twin brother, Frank, worked to gain support for the idea that became the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act (1968) with many Montana citizens also supporting and using the story of the 3 Forks of the Flathead as examples of what had been and could be lost, and what needed protection for the future. In this sense, the upper Middle Fork, and really all 3 Forks of the Flathead, helped inspire the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act. Read about John Craighead’s original idea in “Wild River” [here](#) (Craighead, John. 1957).



## ***Wild and Scenic River Designation: An Evolution in Conservation***

At the passage and signing of the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act, Oct 2nd 1968, by President Johnson, the 3 Forks of the Flathead was designated as a study river, in which the U.S. Forest Service was directed to study the rivers and make a recommendation within 10 years to the Secretaries of Agriculture and Interior as to whether the river should be designated. Glacier National Park and the Montana Governor’s office participated in the study, which also included public involvement and testimony, and a



citizen’s advisory committee. By October 1976, the Forest Service was in the final stages of recommending the river be designated, when an amendment to the original Wild and Scenic Rivers Act was passed by Congress and signed into law on Oct 12, 1976, by President Ford, designating the 3 Forks of the Flathead, as well as the Upper Missouri (MT) and the Obed (TN) rivers. Montana Senator Lee Metcalf was one of the sponsors of the bill, and his action in itself is a fascinating study in the evolution of the conservation ethics of a politician of that time, as he was on record as pro-dam building earlier in his career. Sen. Metcalf’s act to support designation the 3 Forks of the Flathead River as a Wild and Scenic River is notable and his legacy endures through Montana’s two wild and scenic rivers, and several wilderness area designations.

### ***How to Enjoy the 3 Forks of the Flathead River***

*Maps* – Purchase a 3 Forks of the Flathead Wild and Scenic River Float Guide at any Flathead National Forest office, local sporting goods stores.

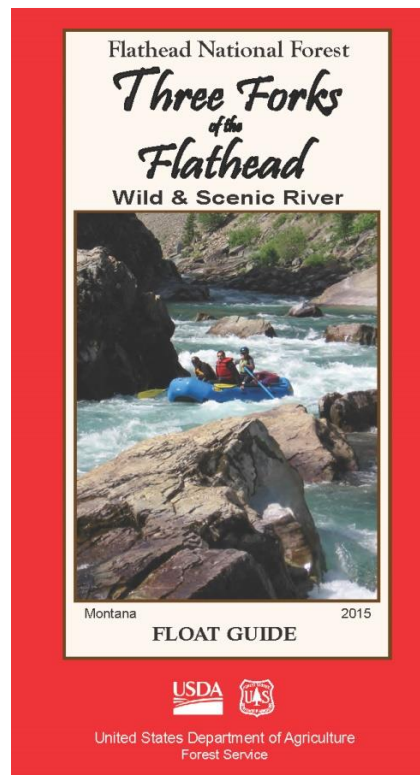
*Basic Rules and Regulations* – Various forest rules and regulations apply within the river corridor, including camping stay limits, camp fire restrictions, human waste containment, and bear attractant storage requirements. To camp in Glacier National Park, a backcountry permit is required. Additionally, hunting and fishing regulations are established by the state of Montana. Regulations vary between Flathead National Forest and Glacier National Park, and visitors need permission to be on private property. Learn more about basic forest rules and regulations [here](#) and park regulations [here](#).

*Social Media* – Follow along with current events and information sharing here, [www.facebook.com/discovertheflathead](http://www.facebook.com/discovertheflathead).

Use the following hashtags to share your adventures on the 3 Forks of the Flathead Wild and Scenic River.

#MakeYourSplash | #WSRWednesday | #3ForksFlathead | #Rivers50

*Outfitter and Guides* – There are a number of outfitter and guides permitted by the Flathead National Forest to operate on the river. While users can recreate on all of the stretches of the river self-supported, some prefer to rely on the technical expertise and access to gear and equipment, which outfitters can provide. Full service outfitters and drop float providers can also provide livery and some shuttling service. Outfitter and guides are permitted to operate in specific sections of the river. Contact the Flathead National Forest for more information on permitted outfitter and guides.



**River Outfitters and Guides Permitted to Operate on the 3 Forks of the Flathead River**

North Fork and Middle Fork	South Fork	
Full Service Outfitters	Full Service Outfitters	Drop Float Providers
Glacier Guides/Montana Raft: <a href="http://www.glacierguides.com">www.glacierguides.com</a>	Montana Wilderness Lodge: <a href="http://www.wildmontana.com/">www.wildmontana.com/</a>	Big Salmon Outfitters: <a href="http://www.bigsalmonoutfitters.com/">www.bigsalmonoutfitters.com/</a>
Glacier Raft: <a href="http://www.glacierraftco.com">www.glacierraftco.com</a>	Paws Up: <a href="http://www.pawsup.com/">www.pawsup.com/</a>	Bob Marshall Legacy Outfitters: <a href="http://www.bobmarshalllegacyoutfitters.com/">www.bobmarshalllegacyoutfitters.com/</a>
Great Northern Guides (Middle Fork only): <a href="http://www.greatnorthernresort.com">www.greatnorthernresort.com</a>	Spotted Bear Ranch: <a href="http://www.spottedbear.com/">www.spottedbear.com/</a>	Bob Marshall Wilderness Outfitters: <a href="http://www.bobmarshallwildernessoutfitters.com/">www.bobmarshallwildernessoutfitters.com/</a>
Wild River Adventures: <a href="http://www.riverwild.com">www.riverwild.com</a>	Wilderness River Outfitters: <a href="http://www.wildernessriver.com">www.wildernessriver.com</a>	Bob Marshall Wilderness Outfitters: <a href="http://www.bobmarshallwildernessoutfitters.com/">www.bobmarshallwildernessoutfitters.com/</a>
Wilderness River Outfitters (upper Middle Fork only): <a href="http://www.wildernessriver.com">www.wildernessriver.com</a>		Bulls Eye Adventures: <a href="mailto:jlguideak@gmail.com">jlguideak@gmail.com</a>
		Cheff Guest Ranch: <a href="http://www.cheffguestranch.com/">www.cheffguestranch.com/</a>
<b>Drop Float Providers:</b>		Lazy J Bar O Outfitters: <a href="http://www.lazyjbaro.com">www.lazyjbaro.com</a>
Snowy Springs Outfitters (upper Middle Fork only): <a href="http://www.snowsprings.com">www.snowsprings.com</a>		Mills Wilderness Adventures: <a href="http://www.millswildernessadventures.com/">www.millswildernessadventures.com/</a>
		Rich Ranch: <a href="http://richranch.com/">richranch.com/</a>
		Wilderness River Outfitters: <a href="http://www.wildernessriver.com">www.wildernessriver.com</a>
		406 Wilderness Outfitters: <a href="http://406wildernessoutfitters.com/">406wildernessoutfitters.com/</a>



## ***Additional Information***

### **Websites**

Crown of the Continent information:

<https://crownofthecontinent.natgeotourism.com/>

Flathead National Forest information and pictures

<https://www.fs.usda.gov/detail/flathead/specialplaces/?cid=stelprdb5365630>

<https://www.fs.usda.gov/detail/flathead/recreation/?cid=fseprd539866>

<https://www.facebook.com/discovertheflathead/>

<https://www.flickr.com/groups/flatheadnf/pool/>

Flathead Watershed Sourcebook: A Guide to an Extraordinary Place

<http://www.flatheadwatershed.org/>

Glacier National Park information and pictures:

<https://www.nps.gov/glac/index.htm>

<https://www.nps.gov/glac/planyourvisit/river-camping.htm>

<https://www.flickr.com/photos/154325341@N02/>

Interagency Wild and Scenic River Council

<http://www.rivers.gov>

Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks – Region 1

<http://fwp.mt.gov/regions/r1/>

The River Management Society

<http://www.river-management.org/>

The Wild and Scenic Rivers Act

<https://www.rivers.gov/documents/act/complete-act.pdf>

Wild and Scenic Rivers Act 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary

<https://www.rivers.gov/wsr50/>

<http://wsr50.onlinepresskit247.com/>





## **Books and Documents**

Craighead, John. 1957. *Wild River*. Montana Wildlife: June 1957. Montana Fish and Game Department Official Publication. [https://www.fs.usda.gov/Internet/FSE\\_DOCUMENTS/fseprd570453.pdf](https://www.fs.usda.gov/Internet/FSE_DOCUMENTS/fseprd570453.pdf)

McKay, Kathryn. 1994. *Trails of the Past: Historical Overview of the Flathead National Forest, Montana 1800-1960*. Kalispell, MT: USDA Forest Service, Flathead National Forest.

Palmer, Tim. 1993. *The Wild and Scenic Rivers of America*. Island Press, Washington, District of Columbia.

Palmer, Tim. 2017. *Wild and Scenic Rivers, an American Legacy*. Oregon State University, Corvallis, Oregon.

Swanson, Frederick. 2015. *Where Roads Will Never Reach: Wilderness and Its Visionaries in the Northern Rockies*. University of Utah Press, Salt Lake City, Utah.

Swanson, Frederick. (Spring 2013). *Lee Metcalf and the Politics of Preservation Part I: A Positive Program of Development*. *Montana the Magazine of Western History*. 63 (1): 3-23, 89-91.

Swanson, Frederick H. (Summer 2013). "*Lee Metcalf and the Politics of Preservation, Part II: Conflict, Compromise, and the Art of Leadership*". *Montana the Magazine of Western History*. 63 (2): 58–75, 94–96.

USDA. 2013. *Flathead Wild and Scenic River Outstandingly Remarkable Values Assessment*. Kalispell, MT: USDA Forest Service, Flathead National Forest. [https://www.fs.usda.gov/Internet/FSE\\_DOCUMENTS/fseprd570451.pdf](https://www.fs.usda.gov/Internet/FSE_DOCUMENTS/fseprd570451.pdf)



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