

USDA United States Department of Agriculture

# Nez Perce (Nee-Me-Poo) National Historic Trail

Oregon • Idaho • Montana • Wyoming-



This Trail is a Sacred Trust for all Americans

*"We the surviving Nez Perce, want to leave our hearts, memories, hallowed presence as a never ending revelation to the story of the events of 1877. These trails will live in our hearts."*

*"We want to thank all who visit these sacred trails, that they will share our innermost feelings. Because their journey makes this an important time for the present, past and future."*

Frank B. Andrews, Nez Perce Descendant



Roger Peterson - USDA/Forest Service

Big Hole National Battlefield, Wisdom, Montana

Congress enacted the National Trails System in 1968 to establish a framework for a nationwide system of scenic, recreational and historic trails.

The Nez Perce (Nee-Me-Poo) National Historic Trail was authorized in 1986. Commemorating the 1877 war and flight, the trail extends about 1,170 miles from the vicinity of Wallowa Lake, Oregon to Bear Paw Battlefield near Chinook, Montana.



Bear Paw Battlefield, Montana  
Joni Packard - USDA/Forest Service

Since aiding the Lewis and Clark expedition in 1805, whites knew the Nez Perce Indians as friends. The Nez Perce (in their language, Niimípuu, meaning "the people") lived in bands, welcoming traders and missionaries to a land framed by the rivers, mountains, prairies, and valleys of present day southeastern Washington, northeastern Oregon, and north central Idaho. They moved throughout the region including parts of what are now Montana and Wyoming to fish, hunt, and trade.

Fifty years after the Corps of Discovery, Washington Territorial Governor Isaac I. Stevens met in council with Nez Perce leaders. The resulting 1855 Treaty with the U.S. Government guaranteed the tribes rights to their ancestral homeland in perpetuity, and set aside a Nez Perce reservation of some 5,000 square miles.

In 1860, encroaching prospectors struck gold in Idaho. Thousands of miners, merchants, and settlers overran Nez Perce land, seized resources and committed depredations against tribal members. In 1863 the federal government responded with new treaty talks. This time the U.S. wanted most of the Nez Perce reservation – including their treasured Wallowa region of northeastern Oregon and the Payette Lake region.

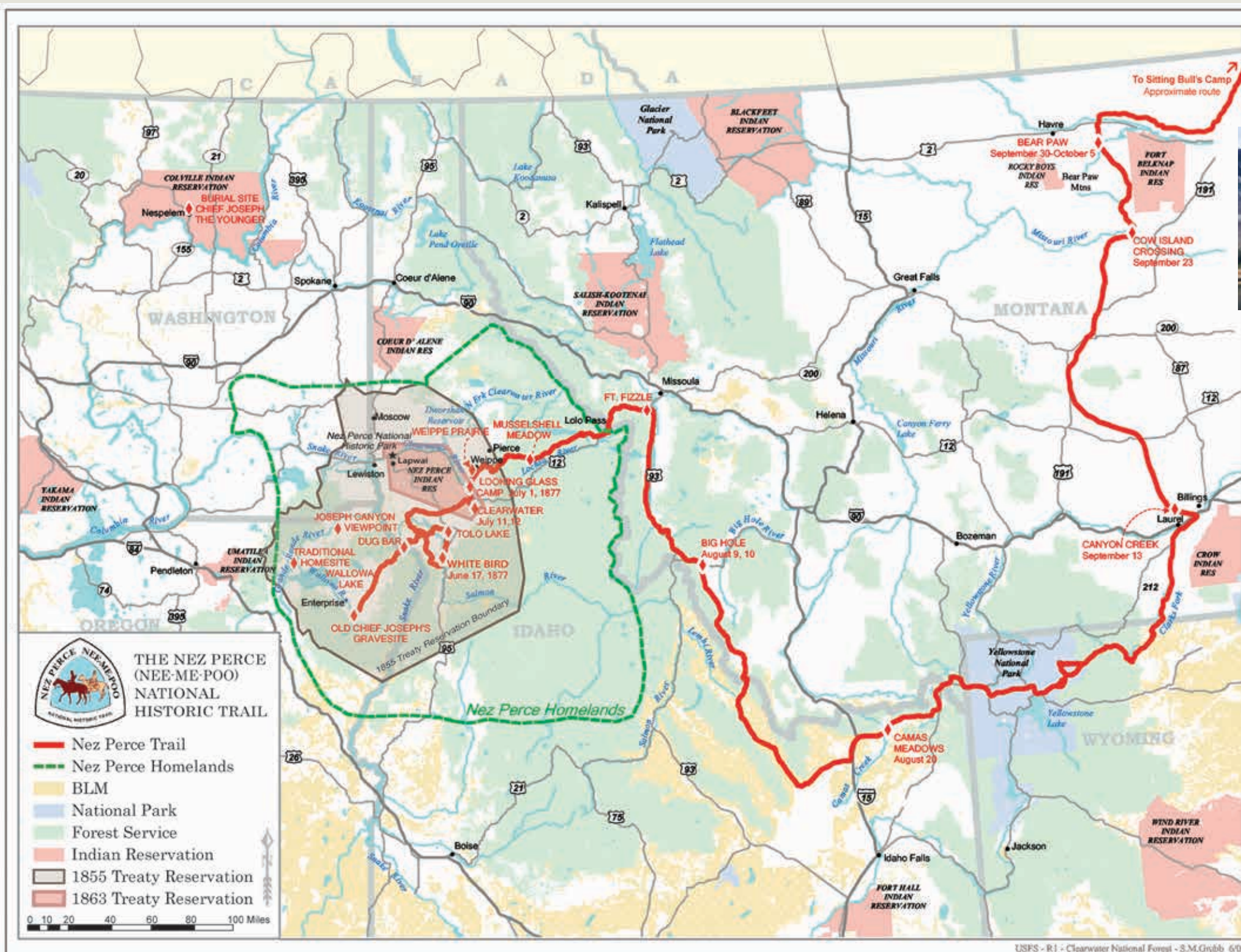
Many chiefs refused and angrily departed. Amid uncertainty, pressure, and promises, the remaining chiefs reluctantly agreed to a reservation 90 percent smaller than that of 1855. Without authority they ceded lands of Nez Perce who left the council in a document thereafter called "the Thief Treaty."

Non-Indians distinguished those who signed as "treaty" Nez Perce and those who had not as "non-treaty." The 1863 Treaty divided the tribe and foreshadowed a war with repercussions that are still felt today.



White Bird Battlefield, Nez Perce National Historical Park, Idaho

Roger Peterson - USDA/Forest Service



For some years non-treaty Nez Perce continued to live in the Wallows and other locations within traditional homelands. But conflict with newcomers increased, particularly in the Wallowa region, home of *Hinnmatóowyahtq'itnim* (Thunder Rolling over the Mountains - Chief Joseph) and his band. Settlers petitioned the government to relocate the Nez Perce to the reduced 1863 Treaty reservation in Idaho, and in 1877 the U.S. Army was commanded to do so.



Roger Peterson - USDA / Forest Service  
Mountainous terrain along the trail, Crandall Creek, Wyoming

In May, 1877, General Oliver Otis Howard and the non-treaty Nez Perce chiefs held a council at Fort Lapwai, in Lapwai, Idaho. Howard summarily ordered them to bring their families and livestock to Lapwai in 30 days – or the army would make them comply, by force. The chiefs argued the time was inadequate to gather the people and their horses and cattle and asked for an extension, which Howard brusquely refused.

Years of high-handedness and mistreatment, and the prospect of losing their homelands, provoked several young warriors to vengeance. Riding from camp at Tolo Lake, Idaho, they avenged past murders of relatives by killing some white settlers.

The Nez Perce flight began June 15, 1877, and intensified on June 17 after they defeated a cavalry force at the Battle of White Bird Canyon. Two weeks later, an unprovoked army attack brought 'Elélimyete' qenin'm (Wrapped in the Wind - Chief Looking Glass) and his band into conflict. The village had sought to avoid any involvement in it whatsoever.

Swept into a fight they did not seek, nearly 750 Nez Perce desperately fled for their lives. Only 250 were warriors and the rest were women, children, elderly, and sick. Leading a herd of 2,000 horses, they fought masterfully in some 20 battles and skirmishes with the U.S. Army, and repelled a devastating army attack on their sleeping village at the Big Hole on August 9.



US Forest Service Image  
Steamboat Rock near Cow Island crossing of the Missouri River, Montana

The Nez Perce eluded more than 2,000 soldiers, civilian volunteers, and scouts from other Indian tribes on a circuitous route through four states. They sought safety among Crow allies on the eastern Montana plains. When this failed their last hope was sanctuary in Canada. After fleeing more than 1,100 miles they were trapped at Snake Creek, at the base of the Bears Paw Mountains in Montana, and forced to submit to Colonel Nelson A. Miles on October 5, 1877 – only 40 miles from Canada.

General William T. Sherman called the Nez Perce saga “the most extraordinary of Indian wars.” Today, their route is designated the Nez Perce (Nee-Me-Poo) National Historic Trail by act of Congress.

This historic route was used in its entirety only once, however, component trails and roads making up the Trail saw generations of travel prior to and after the 1877 conflict. Some became linked to modern road systems while other stretches were abandoned for more direct routes better suited to automobiles. In places, the original Nez Perce Trail can be experienced on the landscape today.



Nez Perce at Lapwai, Idaho

# Nez Perce in Exile



Fort Vancouver 1854 from a lithograph by Gustavus Sohon

## Fort Vancouver, Washington

In July of 1877 *Tim'ine 'ilp'ilpnm* (Chief Redheart's) band and other Nez Perce returned from a buffalo hunt in Montana to discover their homeland embroiled in conflict. Determined not to join the war, they believed General Howard when he promised them safe conduct to the reservation. Instead their horses were seized, their hair cut, and they were forcibly taken, all 33 men, women, and children, to Fort Vancouver. There they were held as Prisoners of War until April, 1878, when they finally returned to Idaho.

## Fort Walsh, Canada

Between September 30 and October 5, 1877, nearly 300 Nez Perce men, women, and children managed to escape the Bears Paw battle and make their way the last forty miles to Canada. Along the way some of the people stopped at Cree, Assiniboine, Gros Ventre, and Metis villages strung along the Milk River. At some camps the Nez Perce found refuge, at others, death.

For a time some Nez Perce found refuge with the Lakota who had also fled to Canada after the Battle of the Little Bighorn in 1876. The North West Mounted Police at Fort Walsh assured them they were welcome as long as they remained peaceful and stayed in Canada.



Colonel Nelson A. Miles  
Courtesy of Montana Historical Society Research Center - Photograph Archives, Helena, Montana (943-884)

In summer 1878 the U.S. government sent a delegation to persuade the Nez Perce refugees to return to American soil and rejoin Joseph's people. Some, like *Piyóop'yoó xayxáxnm* (Chief White Bird's) followers, chose to remain in Canada, while others opted to return on their own.



Ask Us About Our  
"Experience the Nez Perce Trail"  
Auto Tour Brochures

The Trail is sacred ground;  
please respect the  
resources during your travels.

## Ee Yak ish Pah ('iyeq'ispe) The Hot Country

The Nez Perce National Historic Trail ends at the Bear Paw Battlefield, but the story does not end there. Colonel Nelson A. Miles had begun implementing the terms of Chief Joseph's surrender when the army's senior commander, General William T. Sherman, announced an alarming change of plans. Rather than returning to Idaho as Miles promised, the Nez Perce were ordered to Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. From there they were sent on to Baxter Springs, then the Quapaw Reservation and Ponca Agency in Oklahoma. The conditions were so dire that most Nez Perce babies born in Indian Territory died and were buried there.



*Piyóop'yoó xayxáx*  
(Chief White Bird) led  
an escape into Canada,  
taking many who were  
able to travel.



"A worse place to put a camp of four hundred human beings, mostly women and children could not have been selected; in fact it would seem as if this spot had been selected for the express purpose of putting an end to Chief Joseph and his band....One half were sick.....All were filled with the poisonous malaria of the camp."

Council Fire, August 1878

"I cannot tell how much my heart suffered for my people while at Leavenworth. The Great Spirit Chief who rules above seemed to be looking some other way, and did not see what was being done to my people."

*Hinmatóowyahtq'it* (Chief Joseph)

In July, 1878, leaving an unknown number who had died and were buried near Fort Leavenworth, the Nez Perce were transported by rail car to Baxter Springs, Kansas, enroute to what would be their final "home in exile" at a reservation set aside for them near present-day Tonkawa, Oklahoma.



In 1885 these remaining people boarded a train at Arkansas City to start the bittersweet journey west, some to reservations at Lapwai or Umatilla and others who chose to go with Chief Joseph to the Colville reservation. Their hearts were heavy with the memories of those they had lost along the trail and those they were leaving behind in this country of exile.

## Experience the Nez Perce Trail...



The Nez Perce (Nee-Me-Poo) National Historic Trail stretches from the Wallowa Valley of Oregon to the Bear Paw Battlefield in north central Montana. Today, travelers can retrace the approximate route of the 1877 Nez Perce flight by following the Nez Perce Trail auto route. The auto route crosses three-season, all-weather

roadways ranging from high-standard gravel segments to Interstates. Nez Perce Trail signs, like the one shown here, mark the entire route.

For more information, contact

### Forest Service

**Nez Perce National Historic Trail**  
Administrators Office  
12740 Highway 12  
Orofino, ID 83544  
208-476-8234  
<http://fs.usda.gov/npnht>

**Nez Perce National Historic Trail**  
Public Affairs  
U.S. Forest Service  
26 Fort Missoula Road  
Missoula, MT 59804  
406-329-3540  
<http://fs.usda.gov/npnht>

**Nez Perce-Clearwater National Forests**  
903 3rd Street  
Kamiah, ID 83536  
208-935-4275  
<http://fs.usda.gov/nezperceclearwater>

**Wallowa-Whitman National Forest**  
1550 Dewey Ave. Ste A  
Baker City, OR 97814  
541-523-6391  
<http://fs.usda.gov/wallowa-whitman>

**Lolo National Forest**  
24 Fort Missoula Road  
Missoula, MT 59804  
406-329-3750  
<http://fs.usda.gov/lolo>

**Bitterroot National Forest**  
1801 North 1st Street  
Hamilton, MT 59840  
406-363-7100  
<http://fs.usda.gov/bitterroot>

**Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest**  
420 Barrett Street  
Dillon, MT 59725-3572  
406-683-3900  
<http://fs.usda.gov/bdnf>

**Salmon-Challis National Forest**  
1206 S. Challis St.  
Salmon, ID 83467  
208-756-5100  
<http://fs.usda.gov/scnf>

**Caribou-Targhee National Forest**  
1405 Hollipark Drive  
Idaho Falls, ID 83401  
208-524-7500  
<http://fs.usda.gov/ctnf/>

**Custer and Gallatin National Forests**  
10 E. Babcock Avenue,  
P.O. Box 130  
Bozeman, MT 59771  
406-587-6701  
<http://fs.usda.gov/custergallatin/>

### U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

**Dworshak National Fish Hatchery**  
P.O. Box 18  
Ahsahka, ID 83520  
208-476-4591  
[www.fws.gov/dworshak](http://www.fws.gov/dworshak)

**Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge**  
P.O. Box 110  
Airport Road  
Lewistown, MT 59457  
406-538-8706  
[www.fws.gov/refuge/charles\\_m\\_russell](http://www.fws.gov/refuge/charles_m_russell)

**Custer Gallatin National Forests**  
5001 Southgate Drive, Suite 2  
Billings, MT 59101  
406-255-1400  
<http://fs.usda.gov/custergallatin/>

**Shoshone National Forest**  
808 Meadow Lane  
Cody, WY 82414-6241  
307-527-6241  
<http://fs.usda.gov/shoshone/>

**Hells Canyon National Recreation Area**  
201 East 2nd Street  
P.O. Box 905  
Joseph, OR 97846  
541-426-5546  
<http://fs.usda.gov/wallowa-whitman>

**Snake River Office 2535 Riverside Drive**  
P.O. Box 699  
Clarkston, WA 99403  
509-758-0616

**Lee Metcalf National Wildlife Refuge**  
4567 Wildfowl Lane  
Stevensville, MT 59870  
406-777-5552  
[www.fws.gov/refuge/lee-metcalf/](http://www.fws.gov/refuge/lee-metcalf/)

**Red Rock Lakes National Wildlife Refuge**  
27650B South Valley Road  
Lima, MT 59739  
406-276-3536  
[www.fws.gov/refuge/red\\_rock\\_lakes/](http://www.fws.gov/refuge/red_rock_lakes/)

### Organizations

**Nez Perce Trail Foundation**  
[www.nezpercetrail.net](http://www.nezpercetrail.net)

**Partnership for the National Trails System**  
[www.pnts.org/](http://www.pnts.org/)

### National Park Service

**Nez Perce National Historical Park**  
39063 US Hwy 95  
Spalding, ID 83540  
208-843-7009  
[www.nps.gov/nepe](http://www.nps.gov/nepe)

**Big Hole National Battlefield**  
P.O. Box 237  
Wisdom, MT 59761  
406-689-3155  
[www.nps.gov/biho](http://www.nps.gov/biho)

**Yellowstone National Park**  
P.O. Box 168  
Yellowstone, WY 82190-0168  
307-344-7381  
[www.nps.gov/yell](http://www.nps.gov/yell)

**Bear Paw Battlefield**  
P.O. Box 26  
301 Ohio St.  
Chinook, MT 59523  
406-357-3130

### State Agencies

**Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife & Parks**  
1420 East 6th Avenue  
Helena, MT 59620  
406-444-2535  
<http://fwp.mt.gov>

**Idaho Department of Fish & Game**  
P.O. Box 25  
Boise, ID 83707  
208-334-3700  
[www.idfg.idaho.gov](http://www.idfg.idaho.gov)

### Bureau of Land Management

**Vale District Office**  
100 Oregon Street  
Vale, OR 97918-9630  
541-473-3144  
<https://www.blm.gov/office/vale-district-office>

**Salmon Field Office**  
1206 S.Challis St.  
Salmon, ID 83467  
208-756-2215  
[www.blm.gov/idaho](http://www.blm.gov/idaho)

**Upper Snake Field Office**  
1405 Hollipark Drive  
Idaho Falls, ID 83401  
208-524-7500  
[www.blm.gov/idaho](http://www.blm.gov/idaho)

**Cody Field Office**  
1002 Blackburn  
P.O. Box 518  
Cody, WY 82414-8464  
307-578-5900  
[www.blm.gov/wyoming](http://www.blm.gov/wyoming)

**Lewistown Field Office**  
920 NE Main St  
Lewistown, MT 59457  
406-538-1900  
[www.blm.gov/montana-dakotas](http://www.blm.gov/montana-dakotas)

**Missoula Field Office**  
3255 Fort Missoula Road  
Missoula, MT 59804  
406-329-3914  
[www.blm.gov/montana-dakotas](http://www.blm.gov/montana-dakotas)

**Upper Missouri River Breaks Interpretive Center**  
701 7th Street  
Fort Benton, MT 59442  
406-622-4000  
[www.blm.gov/montana-dakotas](http://www.blm.gov/montana-dakotas)

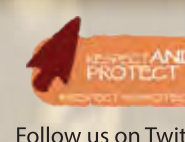
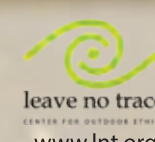
**Dillon Field Office**  
1005 Selway Drive  
Dillon, MT 59725  
406-683-8000  
[www.blm.gov/montana-dakotas/](http://www.blm.gov/montana-dakotas/)

**Billings Field Office**  
5001 Southgate Drive  
Billings, MT 59101  
406-896-5013  
[www.blm.gov/montana-dakotas](http://www.blm.gov/montana-dakotas)

**Cottonwood Field Office**  
2 Butte Drive  
Cottonwood, ID 83522  
208-962-3245  
[www.blm.gov/idaho](http://www.blm.gov/idaho)

**Havre Field Office**  
3990 Highway 2  
West, Havre, MT 59501  
406-262-2820  
[www.blm.gov/montana-dakotas/](http://www.blm.gov/montana-dakotas/)

**Malta Field Office**  
501 South 2nd Street East,  
Malta, MT 59538,  
406-654-5100  
[www.blm.gov/montana-dakotas](http://www.blm.gov/montana-dakotas)



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For an interactive, Google Earth virtual tour of the trail please visit the Nez Perce Trail Foundation website at [www.nezpercetrail.net](http://www.nezpercetrail.net)



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