

Reversing History on the Upper Missouri

Paula MacKay

When a friend back East invited my husband, Robert, and me to paddle the Missouri River with a group of fellow adventurers, my initial reaction was to dismiss the idea. Robert and I had already begun planning a spring trip to Jasper National Park, where we'd hoped to watch grizzly bears wandering sublime alpine meadows. For me, grizzlies are the essence of wilderness, and I was craving the inspiration and solitude that only wilderness could bring. Besides, I knew nothing about the Missouri River, which sounded a little...tame.

"Where will the float begin?" I asked John on the phone, picturing a put-in next to a crowded ice cream stand in suburban St. Louis. This proposal seemed so out of character for John, who had trekked through most of the wildest landscapes in North America to raise awareness for conservation. Maybe he wanted a bit of Midwest hospitality after a long winter in the Adirondacks, or he'd scheduled a business meeting in Missouri and figured he'd do some birding while he was there.

"Near the headwaters in Montana," John answered, adding something about scouting the river as a potential movement corridor for cougars and other wildlife. *Montana? Does the Missouri River even run that far north?* Clearly, I needed to brush up on my geography. But my curiosity was piqued.

Turns out Thomas Jefferson was curious about the Missouri River, too. In 1801, the year he became the third U.S. president, his executive powers ended at the Mississippi, whose confluence with the Missouri was a gateway to who-knows-what. Jefferson's hunger to explore the *terra incognita* between the Mississippi and the Pacific would seal the fate of the American West, and of the indigenous peoples and wildlife who had lived there for millennia.

Two years later, on July 4, 1803—the same day he announced the Louisiana Purchase—Jefferson officially sanctioned Meriwether Lewis to lead the Corps of Discovery, which was ultimately known as the Lewis and Clark Expedition.

Lewis and Clark reached the Upper Missouri in May 1805, a year after departing Camp Dubois. Unlike most contemporary canoeists, the expedition's crew then rowed, poled, and pulled

their boats *against* the river's current, which typically ran at five miles per hour. Nearly four-dozen men traveled in two dugout canoes and a 55-foot keelboat loaded with tons of food, whiskey, guns, and other supplies. Amazingly, the crew progressed 10 miles or more each day, occasionally doubling this speed if strong winds worked in their favor.

The more I read about the expedition, the more I became intrigued by the Upper Missouri—and also intimidated. Robert and I had paddled plenty of lakes when we'd lived in Vermont, spent our month-long honeymoon exploring the wild waterways of eastern Ontario. But neither of us had ever paddled a major river, and we'd sold our canoe when we moved to Washington to study carnivores in the North Cascades. Plus, our husky-mix, Alder—sidekick on all of our backcountry trips—had been in a canoe only twice, and both times he'd howled at passing boaters like we were under siege. And wouldn't the headwaters of the Missouri be cold in May? As in, Rocky Mountain snowmelt?

Still, I thought, if Lewis and Clark could travel upstream in a monster rowboat overloaded with gear and liquor, how hard could it be to paddle downstream in a spiffy new Kevlar canoe?

“Okay, John. We're in!”

107 miles.

This is the distance between Coal Banks Landing and James Kipp Recreation Area, where we planned to conclude our journey after paddling the lower two sections of the Upper Missouri River Breaks National Monument—called White Cliffs and Missouri Breaks (or Badlands). Flanked by sandstone cliffs and steep canyon walls, these are generally considered to be the more wild and scenic segments of the Upper Missouri National Wild and Scenic River, which begins 42 miles upstream.

There were 10 of us total, plus Alder. We were an eclectic clan of conservationists, several of whom had rafted Utah's Green River together four years back. I was admittedly nervous about that trip, too, which had marked my first time running rapids. But then, like now, our group possessed a secret weapon whose presence helped assure me that I would be safe—a weapon for whom Lewis and Clark would have no doubt traded a year's supply of whiskey: Captain Crumbo.

Crumbo is no stranger to physical hardship, his background as a Navy SEAL rippling through his rock-solid body. Prior to two deployments in Vietnam with SEAL Team 1, our fearless friend trained near San Diego, where his “quality time in Camp Pendleton” included being dropped off in the scrubland for a week with “absolutely nothing.” That was apparently a vacation compared to the Hell Week of basic underwater demolition, during which he and the other sleep-deprived members of his cohort were required to jump into the bone-chilling bay if they nodded off under the December night sky. Five days floating the Upper Missouri? Crumbo could, well, do that in his sleep.

Captain Crumbo was accompanied by three top-notch first mates—his brother Mark and old buddies Denny and Don, all of whom, like Crumbo, had *Colorado River guide* on their résumés. Meanwhile, Crumbo’s friend Dave, a retired wolf biologist, had long since earned his stripes on the water, and our intrepid pal John had run many a Class 3-rapid in his inflatable pack raft. Add in ultra-fit Abbie and Karin the yoga teacher, and we had our shining crew.

When we rendezvoused at Coal Banks Landing after our respective road trips, some of us had to lay low while the others shuttled cars to Kipp. Weary from two days on the highway, I settled in for a long, sultry afternoon in the shade of a cottonwood, trying not to look too closely at the murky water zipping by just beyond the bank. The landing was named after the band of lignite coal passing through the surrounding hillsides—dry, rolling rangelands for as far as the eye could see, until they butted up against larger mountains to the south. Barn swallows flitted about in the soft breeze, which carried the courtship melodies of yellow warblers and other songbirds, along with the distant lowing of lonely cows. Crumbo and Denny lazily futzed with their boats, cold drinks in hand, while Karin practiced yoga amid a small clump of trees. Even Alder relaxed into the layover, snapping groggily at flies and occasionally dunking in the river to wet his thick husky fur.

At lunchtime, I sauntered up to the ranger on duty, a quiet man in his twenties who was taking a break from weed-whacking prickly plants on the periphery of the visitor’s center. “Do you think this river is really okay for beginners?” I asked, hoping for one last dose of reassurance. “You’ll be fine as long as you respect

the current,” he replied, adding that the water was flowing fast due to excessive spring run-off. Uh-oh, now he’d opened a Pandora’s Box! After barraging him with more questions, I prodded him to recount the details of last year’s sole rescue, involving a paddler and his dog who had run into a sweeper when they ventured downstream after dark. His boat pinned against a log, the canoeist had somehow managed to swim beneath the broken tree and climb safely to shore. He and the dog were cold but uninjured when the rangers picked them up the following day.

Check. No paddling at night.

As the afternoon came to a close, I approached a middle-aged couple hoisting their motorboat onto a trailer. “How was it?” I asked the gregarious woman, who wore a bulky walking cast over her otherwise bare foot. “Beautiful,” she answered, also affirming that this section of the Missouri was free of whitewater. Her enthusiastic expression changed, however, when I pointed to our paper-thin Wenonah resting in the grass. “Oh, I would *never* do this in one of *those*,” she said, shaking her head emphatically. “But that’s just me.”

The woman’s husband yanked on the trailer one last time before turning to join the conversation, his sunburned face looking disconcertingly serious. “Be careful out there,” he warned. “Have you heard about tomorrow’s forecast? We’re supposed to get 60-mile-an-hour winds.”

Is there anything more disorienting than a roaring wind? A once-peaceful place is instantly awash in chaos, the governing gale an all-out assault on your very constitution. Eyes battered by grit, mind fried in turmoil, your swarming thoughts circle around one primal, persistent message: *Get. Me. Out of here!* And so.

I didn’t last very long in the canoe that first full day on the river—maybe an hour, tops. Our 42-pound boat, such a pleasure to load onto the roof rack or paddle through smooth water, bounced around like a beach ball in the relentless headwind. Robert rapid-fired instructions across the bow—paddle left! draw right!—but from where I sat, we were totally at the mercy of the Upper Missouri, which seemed downright unmerciful under these conditions. Alder shared my sense of impending doom, punctuating each of Robert’s directives with a piercing, resoundingly appropriate, *Ruff!*

The other members of our crew were strung out behind us, struggling to keep their own boats on track as they fought the waves and the wind. Robert and I were flying by comparison, which meant we had to slow ourselves up every few minutes in order to stay with the group. These were the moments that really put me over the edge, as in order to stop moving forward, we had to rotate the canoe perpendicular to the river and try to hold steady, gunnels dipping precariously close to the surface as we rocked from side to side. I felt like a crayfish about to be thrown into the pot.

How could this be the same river we paddled yesterday? I wondered, my confidence waning with each foaming whitecap. We'd launched from Coal Banks Landing late in the afternoon, brilliant sunshine overhead and a gentle breeze at our back. The swift current spooked me at first, but I had begun to find my rhythm by the time we arrived at our campsite five miles downriver. There, we'd received a small-town welcome from a Texan flint hunter I'd met at the landing, who'd coincidentally set up his camp at the same site we'd chosen. To the gentleman's chagrin, his "lady-friend" Lab pooped in our pathway while we were unloading our gear—an unfortunate faux pas for which he tried to make amends by lighting us a fire. His efforts were futile, and the pair quietly retreated to their tent while we prepared dinner.

Today was a different story, and one I knew wouldn't end well. "We need to pull over!" I hollered to Robert, daring to turn my head around briefly to make sure I was heard. Robert looked as battle-worn as I felt, his job at the stern made even more difficult by having to bark firm commands at Alder—who enjoyed nibbles of salmon jerky to keep him centered in the boat.

This section of the river couldn't have been more than a football field across, but it felt more like an angry sea. When we eventually got close enough to the bank to sense its salvation, we pulled a 180-degree turn and paddled upstream into the shallows. Alder, apparently satiated on salmon, ejected himself into the froth before we'd touched ground. Once he stood on solid mud, he pivoted toward me with a wild canid countenance that spoke louder than words: *There is no way in Hell I'm getting back in that boat.* I couldn't have agreed more.

“How you doing?” Captain Crumbo asked me rhetorically when I slunk up to his side, his tone of half-laughter helping to ease my embarrassment. I hated being the one to cry uncle, forcing everyone else to come off the river. Alder greeted Crumbo like a long-lost friend, then ran to meet our companions as they emerged from their boats. Watching them haul themselves ashore against the backdrop of blowing grass and raging water, I could almost imagine a scene from the Lewis and Clark Expedition two centuries past. If I *had* been a member of that historical crew, I probably would have received 50 lashes for my lack of courage. Instead, Crumbo gave my shoulder a quick squeeze and immediately kicked into problem-solving mode.

The next 30 minutes were a lesson in spirited cooperation. Since staying put wasn't an option given our timeline, we had to reorganize the cast so the show could go on. And quite a show it was:

John took over my role in the canoe, serving as Robert's power-paddler seated in the bow. They tackled those waves like there was no tomorrow, transforming my terror into two boys having fun.

John's river kayak, temporarily out of commission, was stored as oversized luggage on Don's mega-raft. The kayak was positioned crosswise on the back of the raft, which appeared to have been t-boned from the heavens above.

And me? I was the humbled guest of honor on Denny's dory—a luxurious red rowboat that had taken him and Abbie down the Green River during our prior trip together in Utah. Alder and I sprawled out like royalty on the dory's padded seats, basking in the generosity of a river gone wild. Would I have noticed that bale of snapping turtles resting on the rocks if I'd been floundering about in my canoe? Maybe. But I think I'll consider them a gift from the wind.

We covered 15 miles on that Windy Day, dragging ourselves into Hole in the Wall camp just in time for a late meal. You couldn't miss the site's dramatic feature from the river—a rough-hewn arch created by a cavity in the sandstone wall. Robert and I set up our tent in the grassland next to the water, our campsite separated from the others by a wire cattle fence. We wanted to give ourselves space in case Alder woke up woofing in the night. In hindsight, he was too exhausted to make a peep.

Needless to say, none of us was in the mood to sing campfire songs. Nor did anyone volunteer when the people camped beside us asked if we could take on an unhappy passenger from their party; the man had become anxious after seeing members of his group capsize in the river. I secretly empathized with the wannabe deserter, who could've easily been me if I hadn't been in such capable company. We encountered the group again a couple of days later, their canoes lashed together into one giant, grinning flotilla.

Rain, rain, and more rain. The wind didn't subside much that night, either, causing Robert and me to have a restless sleep. Lying in the dark, we recalled an experience we'd shared in Alaska many years before. We were camped above the ~~Denali~~ Teklanika River when a storm ripped through the region and broke our tent poles in half, the nylon fabric collapsing like a parachute around us. We wrapped ourselves in the tattered remains and sat there shivering until dawn, all the while keeping a watchful eye out for the grizzlies we'd seen hunting ground squirrels just before sunset. Windy nights in the backcountry have never been the same since.

I was nonetheless determined to resume paddling with Robert when I awoke the next morning, the thought of sitting out another day an affront to my ego. I'd also come to realize that watching the water from the comfort of the dory's deck was far less satisfying than *engaging* with it in the canoe, my hard-won strokes yielding a physical intimacy with the river itself. Even Alder seemed to prefer the Wenonah, flopping down on the floor and resting his head on the thwart within moments of hopping aboard.

The weather improved with each passing hour, and I was finally able to look around and appreciate the scenery. During the previous day's storm, we'd passed through the White Cliffs—massive, 300-foot bluffs chiseled by water and time. In his journal, Lewis compared the otherworldly spires and cathedral-like walls to “elegant ranges of lofty freestone buildings.” The towering galleries of rock impressed me, too, but I was being sufficiently buffeted by wind and worry that I couldn't internalize my awe.

Now, the sandstone hills permeated my psyche. With my brain no longer consumed by fight-or-flight, I found myself daydreaming about the bison, wolves, and grizzlies who once roamed this vast ocean of plains—animals who were the lifeblood of the Upper Missouri until European settlers came along. Lewis and Clark famously documented the expedition's offensive against

every grizzly bear they encountered, with Lewis himself expressing his dislike for “the gentlemen” that were “so hard to die.” As America expanded, grizzlies weren’t so hard to die after all.

The rest of the story is on river time, a slow meander of wildlife sightings and sensations of place.

Bald eagles, harriers, sandpipers, white pelicans—six of whom took flight in a v-shaped formation directly overhead.

The fragrance of sagebrush and desert flowers, the adamant *dee dee dee* of a killdeer protecting her nest.

The smack of a beaver’s tail against the water, warning all who would listen that something was amiss. In the beaver’s wake, a cloud-gray coyote stepped out from the brush, the sun’s rays illuminating her dog-like head.

Three-dozen bighorns on a precipitous slope. Someone in our group called out in excitement, prompting the creatures to arc across the cliff face like a school of baitfish. Lewis and Clark first documented bighorns—to them, a new species—on May 25, 1805. Our sighting came 212 years later to the day.

By the end of most of my wild adventures, I’m usually ready to return home; there’s nothing like a hot shower after roughing it for a while. So I was surprised by my own disappointment when I first saw the bridge at Kipp’s landing, the portal to so-called civilized life. My anxiety about the river was so far away, my assumption about tameness turned on its head. Soon, Robert and I would be saying goodbye to our friends and speeding along paved roads with the windows closed—impervious to the elements as we traversed an arid Western landscape forever changed by those who came after the Corps of Discovery.

But *would* this landscape be changed forever? Once again, nature’s tenacity gives me hope. The bighorns, the eagles, the wolves—they were gone because of us, and now they are slowly making their way back. John speculates that the Upper Missouri had already served as a corridor for cougars moving east from the Rockies, and that the small population that has reestablished itself in South Dakota’s Black Hills and North Dakota’s Badlands may well have traveled there in part along the river.

And there is this from the June 8, 2017, edition of Montana’s *Great Falls Tribune*, one week after we returned to Washington:

On June 1, a plucky pair of young grizzlies turned up at the mouth of Box Elder Creek, where it enters the south side of the

Missouri River, between Ryan and Morony dams. That's 12 miles northeast of Great Falls, a city of 60,000 residents—and the same vicinity where Pvt. Hugh McNeal, a member of the Lewis and Clark expedition, ran into a grizzly bear in July 1806, when the expedition passed through the area on its homeward journey.

Plucky grizzlies, indeed. With a little luck and human tolerance, these two courageous wanderers will be joined by more of their kind, and grizzlies will someday resume their rightful place on the banks of the Upper Missouri. A wild river redeemed.



TREASURE

h.e.b.