

Cabinet Mountains Wilderness 101

From the Wilderness Ranger

Massive shelves of rocks lining a spectacular gorge on the Clark Fork River running along the southwestern flank of the mountains that now carry its name inspired French-Canadian voyageurs in the employ of David Thompson to call it the Cabinet Gorge.

The Cabinet Mountains are a relatively small range in the remote northwest corner of Montana. Pacific maritime air drop up to 100 inches of moisture per year on this glacially sculpted terrain. Richly forested slopes rise steeply from valleys at 2,000 feet elevation to rocky, snow-covered peaks at nearly 9,000 feet.

Established by the Wilderness Act of 1964, the Cabinet Mountains Wilderness is a tiny, pristine jewel 35 miles long, varying in width from 8 miles to less than 1/2 mile. In places, timber harvests have traced the wilderness boundary, and two other locations along its edge are the focus of plans for future mining operations. These efforts by humans to wrest a living, and necessary raw materials, from the land lend an air of precious fragility to the Cabinets. The valleys below have often been embroiled in political turmoil over land use issues regarding the wild country. Meanwhile, the Cabinets endure, the high snows melt, and the rushing cascades play their music for those who will come to hear.

In the northern portion of the wilderness, long valleys shelter old-growth forests of giant cedar, hemlock, and grand fir. Trails carpeted with moss and tiny hemlock cones pass under cathedral-like canopies that shelter ferns, devil's club, and queneup-bead lily. The ethereal call of the varied thrush and the omnipresent sound of rushing water are constant companions in this world of moisture and shade.

The trails through these northern rainforests lead into higher elevations, and spruce, white pine, and sub-alpine fir. Alder and Rocky Mountain maple compete for space in the chutes that winter avalanches have torn through the big timber. The glorious palette of an alpine meadow, bathed in morning sunlight, is a sight to gladden a hiker's eyes. The brilliant gold of glacier lilies, the deep pink of alpine laurel, and the lavender-blue of mountain penstemon provide vivid contrast to the subdued greens of the valley below.

Trails in the southern section of the wilderness climb quickly through lodge-pole pine and bear grass into the high country. The more open aspects of this part of the Cabinets offer expansive views and greater opportunities to see wildlife such as moose, bear, deer, and elk. Generally speaking, routes are shorter here, and some of the southern lake basins are the earliest to open in the spring.

Over 50 lakes lie nestled in high valleys and glacial cirques along the length of the Wilderness. For some hikers, these lakes offer destinations for camping and fishing, while others see them as sparkling jewels along the way to high divide trails or mountain summits. Each of these lakes has its own unique characteristics and beauty, and they all offer great opportunities for photography or just quiet contemplation. These hidden basins are some of Montana's last best places, where hikers can enjoy real solitude.

Charlie Clough — Wilderness Ranger, Cabinet Mountains Wilderness, 1985 to 2008

A Naturalist's View

The Kootenai National Forest and the Cabinet Mountain Wilderness are as unique in biological aspects as they are in history and geological features. From the ancient cedars of Ross Creek and glacial till-dyed turquoise waters of the Kootenai River — rich in legends of native people's vision quests and explorations of David Thompson — to the higher peaks of the mountains, diversity is the key term.

Set on a foundation of Pre-cambrian Belt Supergroup stone and carved by Pleistocene glaciation, the peaks rise in sharp contrast with lower elevation valleys. Some parts of the Cabinets accumulate more snow than anyplace else in Montana! This helps the area provide habitat for selectively adapted snow-dependent creatures that add to the special flavor of the area.

Wolverine den in multi-chambered portals through the snow and rock formations. Canadian lynx cooperatively hunt pika in tallus and sree slopes. Rocky Mountain goats and bighorn sheep thrive. Up high, falcons, hawks and eagles patrol the skies while Clark's nutcracker helps both whitebark pine and grizzlies survive. Boreal owls voice their falsetto calls in late winter.

Mid range zones are frequented by grizzly and black bear, mule and whitetail deer, cougar, bobcat and marten. In lower elevations, moose, fisher, mink and beaver enjoy a living among waters teeming with westslope cutthroat, rainbow and brook trout. And, with air just as clear as the water, astronomic views of stars, planets and northern lights are common.

The friendly folks of our unique area welcome you to visit! Please be respectful of our wild environs, and enjoy the peace it may bring to you, as it does to us.

Brian Baxter, wildlife researcher, hunter and naturalist, Libby, Montana,

Celebrating 50 Years of the Wilderness Act

In honor of the 50th anniversary of the Wilderness Act, this map and the information with it were put together by a joint effort of Montana Wilderness Association, Friends of Scotchman Peaks Wilderness, US Forest Service, and Clearwater Montana Properties, whose generosity paid for the downloadable map of the Cabinet Mountains Wilderness found at www.wildmontana.org/cabinethikes



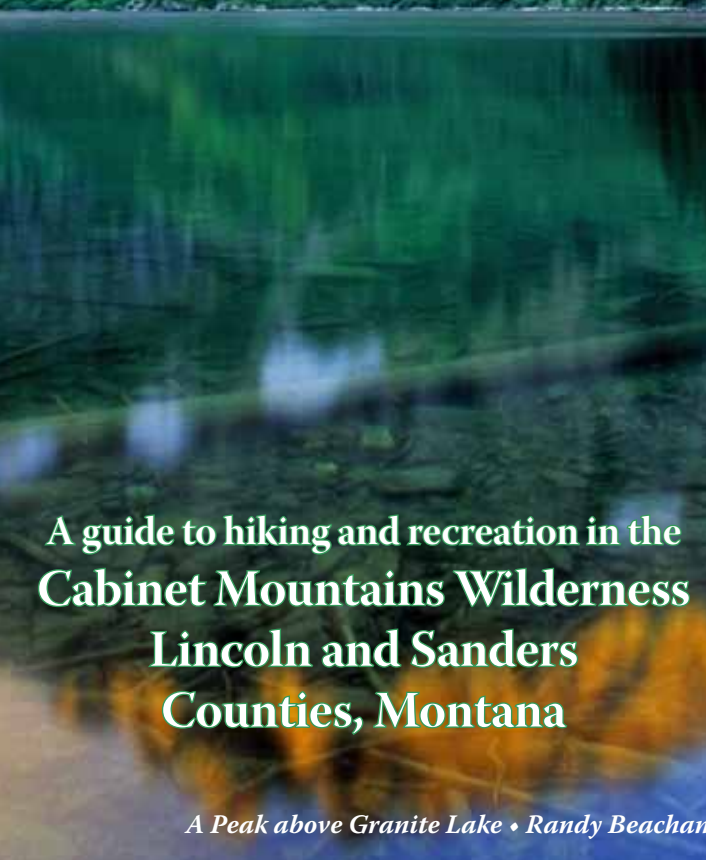
Cliff Lake • Randy Beacham

As you use this map to enjoy and learn about the CMW, stop and just be for part of your visit. And please practice the Leave No Trace principles.

Leave No Trace Principles

1. Plan Ahead and Prepare
2. Travel and Camp on Durable Surfaces
3. Dispose of Waste Properly
4. Leave What You Find
5. Minimize Campfire Impacts
6. Respect Wildlife
7. Be Considerate of Other Visitors

Learn more at www.lnt.org



A Peak above Granite Lake • Randy Beacham

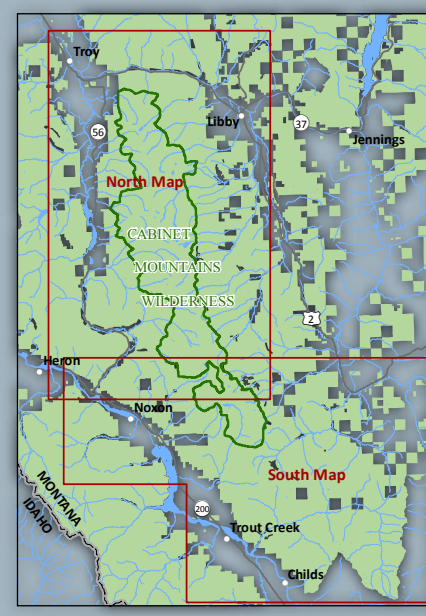
A guide to hiking and recreation in the Cabinet Mountains Wilderness Lincoln and Sanders Counties, Montana

The Cabinet Mountains Wilderness

(CMW) was designated Wilderness with the signing of the Wilderness Act in 1964. The CMW comprises 94,272 acres in Lincoln and Sanders Counties, Montana. It is administered by the US Forest Service and lies within Kootenai National Forest, headquartered in Libby.

The CMW lies between two great western rivers, the Kootenai on the north and Clark Fork on the south. Snowshoe Peak, 8736 feet, is the highest between the Cascade and Mission Ranges.

US Highway 2 on the north and Montana 200 on the south are connected by Montana 56 on the west side of the CMW. Highway 56 provides spectacular views of the CMW from outside the boundary, and access to many trails running into the Wilderness.



Resources

- US Forest Service: Kootenai National Forest Supervisor's Office, Libby • 406-293-6211 • www.fs.usda.gov/kootenai
- Local History: www.behindthesemountains.com
- Comprehensive Hiking Guide: *Trails of the Wild Cabinets*; Dennis Nicholls and Jim Mellen • Keeokee
- Wilderness education & advocacy: Montana Wilderness Assn: www.wildmontana.org
- Friends of Scotchman Peaks: www.scotchmanpeaks.org
- U of M Wilderness Institute: www.wilderness.net
- Downloadable geopdf: www.wildmontana.org/cabinethikes
- Chambers of Commerce: Libby: www.libbychamber.org
- Troy Chamber: www.troymtchamber.org
- Thompson Falls: www.thompsonfallschamber.com



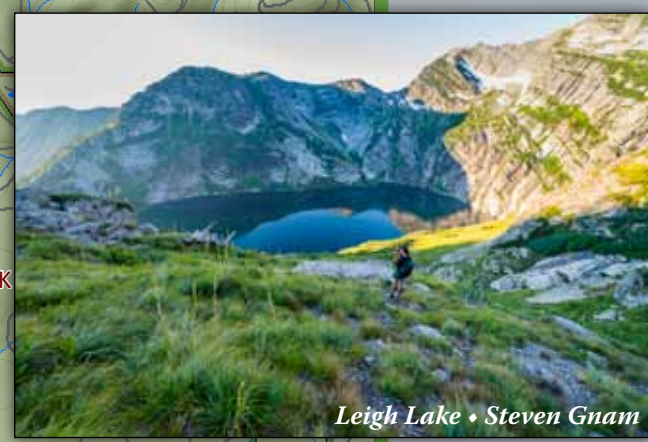
Hoary marmots • Donald M. Jones



Clark's nutcracker • Donald M. Jones



Skiiing to Rock Creek Meadows • Jim Mellen



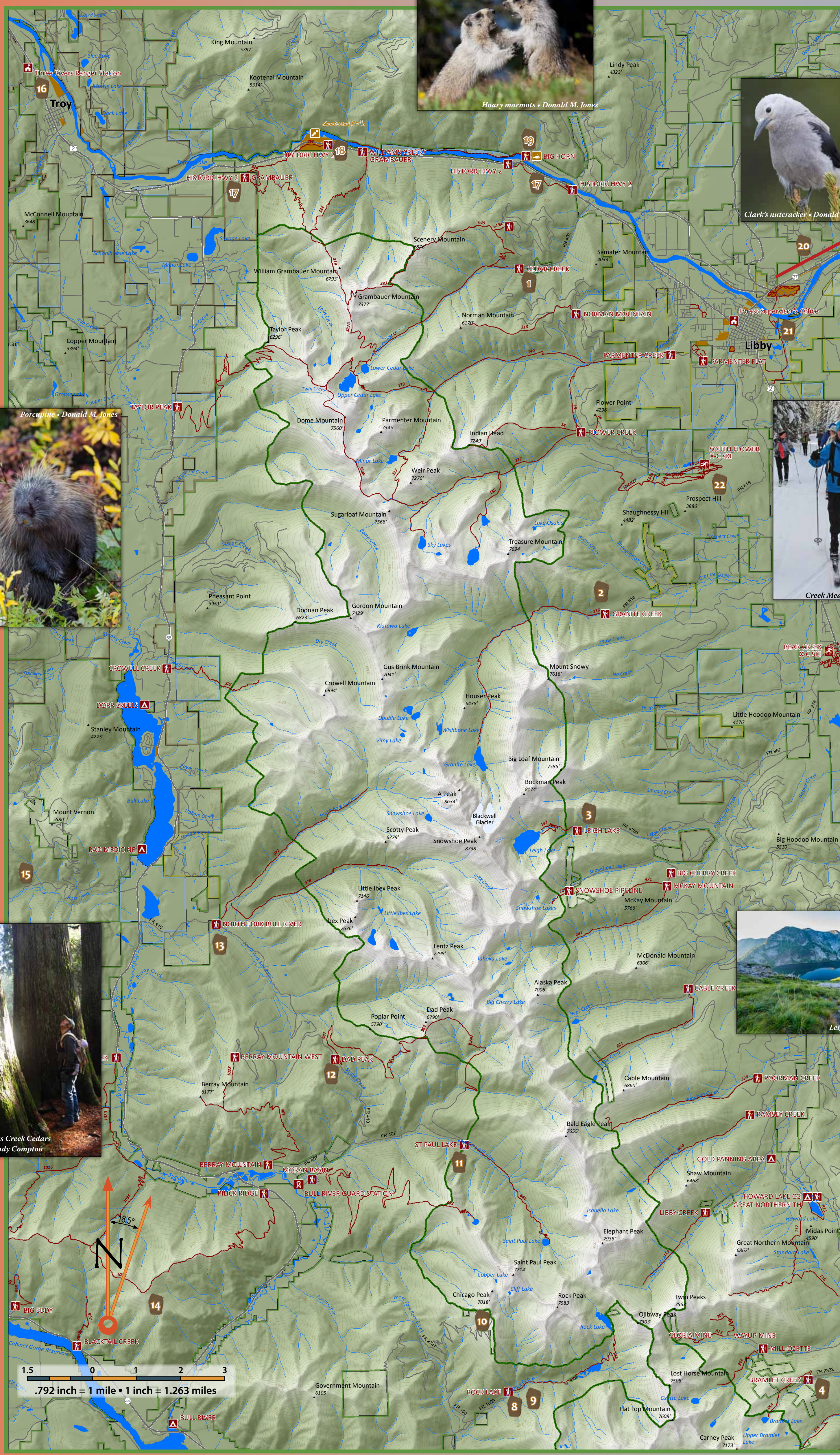
Leigh Lake • Steven Gnan



Porcupine • Donald M. Jones



Ross Creek Cedars Sandy Compton



1.5 0 1 2 3
.792 inch = 1 mile • 1 inch = 1.263 miles



Gateway • Steven Gnan