

(WILD COUNTRY COLUMN FOR MONTANA MAGAZINE, SUBMITTED BY BILL CUNNINGHAM ON 3/2/00 FOR THE JULY, 2000 ISSUE)

THE CRAZIES

--Largest and wildest of Montana's montane islands--

The wind was picking up but the brilliant sky remained clear and blue. After carrying a backpack uphill for most of the day we paused only briefly at the high lake, frozen solid. How thick is the ice, I wondered, gingerly testing it 20 feet out from shore. Far enough, as the "uh oh" feeling kicked in. We still had a 1,200-foot climb to a 10,000-foot high pass. As we reached the top we were suddenly engulfed in swirling mist with driving sleet that quickly turned to snow. To reassure the others I yelled above the wind, "this can't last long!" I was right. It got worse, a lot worse. Visibility was reduced to 50 feet and already snowdrifts were forming on the lee side. It was impossible to find, let alone follow, the buried trail as we plunged into the fog bound head of Big Timber Creek. Suddenly, half of the party had disappeared! Where had they gone? After several forays up and down the snowy slope several of us were able to find the others, who by this time were so disoriented they were dropping into the wrong basin. Exhausted and close to hypothermia we finally staggered into camp just before dark. What made this winter expedition all the more incredible was that it took place in mid-July! We learned the hard way that July in the lofty Crazy Mountains of south central Montana is no guarantee of summer weather.

From the low benches of the Yellowstone River to the serrated 11,214-foot apex of Crazy Peak, the land rises some 7,100 feet in Montana's most dramatic transition from prairie to mountains. These are the Crazies, where the stark forms of 34 rugged peaks exceed 10,000 feet, and where glaciers forced these crags in different directions simultaneously. Plutonic in origin, the core of the range is possibly the planet's largest exposed mass of igneous rock. A dazzling array of 56 alpine lakes, 15 of which are named, are sparkling jewels set deep in hidden cirques. Most of the range is free of roads and development, an oval-shaped core roughly 13 miles from east to west and 25 miles south to north, encompassing a wild expanse of nearly 137,000 acres beyond the roads. Of this, almost 100,000 acres are national forest with the remainder in private ownership. This majestic montane isle rises in the midst of a triangle bound by Livingston, Big Timber and Harlowton, seemingly out of place because of its abruptness, and yet so perfectly framed in its surroundings.

WHY THE CRAZY MOUNTAINS ARE MOUNTAINS

These mountains are youngsters, perhaps only half the age of the main Rockies. A mere 50 million years ago a huge igneous intrusion called the Big Timber stock, invaded the soft, water saturated sand and mud of the Fort Union formation. Heat and mineral water escaping from the white hot magma, baked and transformed the soft shales and other sediments into incredibly hard rocks. This soft sedimentary blanket was probably as high as the crest of today's Crazy Mountains. Eons of erosion have since removed the blanket, leaving resistant igneous rock and hard baked sedimentary rocks jabbing the sky in the dramatic erosional relief we see as today's mountains. Some of the igneous rock escaped from the core through cracks and are seen today as spectacular wall-like dikes radiating outward.

Unlike other central Montana island ranges the Crazies are high enough to have held large glaciers during the last Ice Age. As such, the range is a convoluted maze of nearly vertical peaks, sawtooth ridges, aretes, fields of talus and scree streaming from broken cliffs, and lush alpine basins nestling snow-fed lakes. Indeed, lushness is both a hallmark and a bit of illusion. In this otherwise barren mountainscape of gray rock water seems to be everywhere. Water that isn't just moving, but rushing in a frothing, roaring torrent of foaming white punctuated with rocks and bound by chasms. Big Timber Canyon with its waterfalls will convince you of this if anyplace can. Some of these cascades form the headwaters of the Musselshell to the north, and the Missouri to the west. Other streams, notably the Shields River and Sweetgrass Creek, emanate from opposite sides of the mountains to feed the Yellowstone.

A CLOSER LOOK

Although the dominant impression one has of the Crazies is one of bare rock the range hosts surprisingly dense pockets of diverse tree species. Douglas fir dominates the forest in the lower north end, and in surrounding foothills where slopes face north and east. Hardy conifers are even found as high as

9,000 feet in sheltered subalpine basins where stunted spruce, subalpine fir, and lodgepole pine cling tenaciously to cracks in the granite, upon which intricate displays of multi-colored lichens are showcased. Years ago I did my own survey of how high trees can grow in the Crazies when I took a nasty tumble on loose scree high on the east slope of the Crazies. By the time I came to rest I was piled up in a tiny twisted whitebark pine. This lone pine stopped a fall that could easily have continued to the bottom. My altimeter read 9,250 feet, a reading exceeded only by my heart rate.

But back to the bare rock. The goat rocks of the Crazies are literally that--rocks without end, interspersed with a stable and seemingly thriving population of non-native mountain goats. Manys the time I've come across these nimble cliffhangers and wondered in awe how they can possibly make a living in this elevated lunarscape. The goats have certainly had their ups and downs, no pun intended, from fewer than 50 from the mid-70s to late-80s, to somewhere around 250 to 280. They were first introduced during the 1940s from the Sun River. Nowadays the state sells 18 goat permits to hunters by special drawing, another indication that the population is healthy.

You'll see a lot more elk and deer in the north end of the range where lower elevations provide a good mix of thick hiding cover and grassy parks. And if you're really lucky you might hear the spine tingling howl of a wolf. About 2-1/2 years ago an experienced hunter made a reliable sighting of three wolves in the Cottonwood Creek drainage. Shortly thereafter two game wardens found wolf tracks in American Fork, close by but on the other side of the mountains. I'm reminded of a passage in *Forty Years' Gatherin's* in which its author and late Crazy Mountains rancher Spike Van Cleve wrote about seeing the last wolf in the country killed when he was a boy, and how he wasn't one bit sorry to see that happen. Spike, whose family still runs a guest ranch and owns considerable land in the Big Timber drainage, might not be overjoyed by the sporadic reappearance of wolves. But to him his beloved Crazies were a "good country" where "a man has to throw back his head to follow their abrupt shoulders up to the white crests of the peaks."

HOLiest OF ALL MOUNTAINS

Of all the mountains used by the Crow and other native plains tribes for fasting and vision quests, the Crazies have always been the most holy. The Crow people called them "Awazawipia", meaning the jagged and rugged mountain. According to Crow Tribe Cultural Director Burton Pretty On top the Crow would run back to "Awazawipia" during times of attack. "Once we entered into those canyons the enemy would retreat and leave because they knew this Mountain was our sacred protector."

In 1857, Plenty Coups, the last great pre-reservation Crow chief, realized a vision on top of Crazy Peak during his rite of passage into manhood. After purifying himself in a sweat lodge at the lake below he climbed and roamed the summit until he dropped from exhaustion. He lay there for four days until he had a dream in which the great buffalo herds were replaced by a strange spotted animal. Accepting the omen, the Crow avoided going to war against the subsequent wave of settlers. The wildness of these sacred mountains inspires present-day tribal members to practice traditional religion here--from lakeside sweat lodges to vision quests on pinnacles towering above the prairie. Early Native Americans made tools from argillites, quartzites and cherts from the Crazies, as evidenced from several known archaeological sites.

In 1889 some of the first white people to climb Crazy peak were two USGS geologists, John Wolff and Ranney Lyman. They marveled at their "birdseye panorama of surpassing grandeur" where changing light and shadow "emphasized the rugged detail of the rough terrain."

Under authority of the 1864 Northern Pacific Railroad land grant from the federal government every other section in most of the Crazies, totaling about 50,000 acres, was deeded to private ownership from 1913 to 1919. This accounts for today's unusual situation of a handful of private landowners holding title to some of the highest lakes and peaks, including Crazy Peak.

Stories abound as to how the Crazies got their name. The present epitaph has been shortened from Crazy Woman Mountains, the origin of which was popularized by the movie Jeremiah Johnson. You may recall the startling scene of a white woman going mad when Indians killed her family. Another version has it that a woman settler lost her way, and then her mind, in the isolation of this convoluted terrain. Which brings us to what may be the most plausible name origin--the "crazy" topography and geology of the range. Others attribute the name to the "crazy" location of a great bulge of earth popping up suddenly from unlikely surroundings. Of course, "crazy" winter weather in July can occur anywhere in Montana!

MANAGEMENT: A GIANT GAME OF CHECKERS

Much of the private land in the north end of the Crazies has been added to the national forest in a 1993 purchase of 14,500 acres from Louise Galt, including about 9,000 acres within the inventoried roadless area. Sadly, much of this acquired land was badly damaged from past logging. As a result, the Forest Service has reduced logging on adjacent national forest land to help compensate.

The higher, more rugged central and southern reaches of the range remain largely in a "checkerboard" ownership pattern, with alternate sections being private, as a continuing legacy of the 18th century railroad land grants. Spread out the forest map of the Crazies and you'll see a "checkerboard" of monumental proportions. As a result of this "crazy" checkerboard, public access to the national forest is a major issue. But support for more public access is mixed. Simply put, many folks like the Crazies just the way they are--hard to get to and even harder to get around in once you're there.

From Forest Lake on the north end, the next official public access along the eastside is an easement across private lands owned by the Van Cleve family--a distance of 35 forest boundary miles! This popular trail system, up Big Timber Canyon and over into the upper reaches of Sweetgrass Creek, are the only trails with deeded easements on the entire eastside of the Crazies. The Big Timber Canyon trail begins next to Half Moon Campground, closed for the summer of 2000 for reconstruction.

In 1994 the U.S. House passed a Montana Wilderness bill sponsored by former Rep. Pat Williams (D-MT) that included 130,000 acres in the Crazies in a mix of Wilderness and Wilderness Study Area. Unfortunately, the bill was not enacted so off-road vehicle use continues to be an issue, especially on the westside. On this sun set side of the range the Forest Service permits motorized recreation on all but Trail 260 to Sunlight Lake and a small segment of North Fork Elk Creek Trail 195 above Campfire Lake. The Forest Service recognizes religious concerns of Crow traditionalists for peace and quiet in their church but nonetheless allows two westside groomed snowmobile routes along the Shields River/Smith Creek road system and the Ibex/Cottonwood Creek trails. The upper reaches of other westside trails are protected from off-road vehicles only by rocky alpine terrain. To its credit the agency is encouraging motorized visitors to stay on designated routes.

In contrast, all of the eastside trails in the major drainages are open to foot and horse travel only, thanks to cooperation between landowners and the Forest Service. That means no motors, mountain bikes, or llamas. The stewardship and protective attitude of these cooperators helps maintain what is truly special about the Crazies. Private ownership encompasses some of the loftiest summits, including Crazy Peak, and some of the loveliest lake basins. But except for grazing cattle wherever grass is found these mostly barren inholdings are of little value to their ranching operations and are certainly confusing to the public. A classic "win-win" would be achieved if these long-time Montana ranching families ever choose to sell their mountaintops to the Forest Service in order to purchase more productive lower elevation grasslands for ranching.

A SUMMARY OF TRIPS AND TRAILS

On the northern, more forested reaches of the range hunting during the fall is the predominant use. Several hunting outfitters operate in the northern half of the range. In the more rugged lake country of the south Crazies most recreational use is crammed into the fleeting summer of early July to late August. And most of these visitors are further concentrated into limited areas of public access, notably Big Timber Creek and the adjacent Blue Lake Basin. Blue Lake, a 9 to 10 mile roundtrip hike, is so impacted by campers that the Forest Service has placed a voluntary ban on campfires. Further restrictions may be forthcoming so, to avoid contributing to the growing problem of overuse, consider looking for a less crowded corner of the Crazies.

Two private guest ranches near the Sweetgrass Creek and Big Timber Creek trailheads operate on both private and national forest lands during the summer. In general, visitors need to request access from landowners to cross their private land in the Crazies. Many folks are astounded to learn that they need permission to climb the apex of the range, 11,214-foot Crazy Peak.

Here is a brief rendition of the major trailheads accessible to the public:

North End: The only public access is the Forest Lake Road which heads south from Montana Hwy 294 and extends about 10 miles into the mountains. In a round about way most of the trails in the North Crazies can be reached from this road. The trails are signed along the road but there are no formal trailheads.

Eastside: The well-signed Big Timber Road deadends at the trailhead with access into the upper reaches of several lake basins. About 0.2 mile above the trailhead a short side trail leads left (south) to the dark chasm of Big Timber Falls. The through trail climbs to 10,000 feet near Conical Peak and drops into the expansive Sweetgrass drainage. Expect lots of company during summer weekends, along with impacted campsites near Blue and Twin Lakes.

South end: From the Rock Creek North Trailhead, trail 270 begins on private property. Please stay on the trail for the next 2.5 miles until entering the national forest. After 10 miles the trail ends at the treeless shores of Rock Lake where trout fin the icy waters. Debris from dam construction is scattered on private land during the final, steep rocky mile to the lake. Trail 220 branches off to the northeast about 7 miles up Rock Creek, and then climbs another 2.5 miles to Smeller Lake. Both of these talused tarns are owned by Crazy Mountain Ranch, recently acquired by Phillip Morris Company. Upper Rock Creek is well worth visiting, in a more lightly visited corner of the range, but you might be sharing the trail with motorbikes, horses and mountain bikes, until the roughness of the trail blocks all but the most determined hikers. With an early start both lakes are long but rewarding day trip destinations.

Westside: To reach Cottonwood Trail 197 take the Cottonwood Creek road just north of Clyde Park and hike up the two-track trail. After about one mile Trespass Creek Trail 268 leads north through gently graded mountain meadows. This very popular 5-mile long route to Campfire Lake joins the short segment of Elk Creek Trail 195 that is closed to vehicles for the steep climb to the divide. Continuing to the right up Cottonwood Creek, the trail passes through some private land, where it makes a steep ascent. The turnaround point for most motorized use is just before this climb. Cottonwood Lake, 5 miles above the trailhead, is heavily visited for fishing and camping.

Northward, the nonmotorized Sunlight Trail 260 climbs above Sunlight Creek for about 3 miles to a scenic 9,280- foot divide and then descends a rough stretch to 8,961-foot high Sunlight Lake at the head of the North Fork of Sweetgrass Creek. The trailhead is at the end of primitive road 6630 just south of the Shields River Road. This hard-to-find trail is in poor shape and not recommended for horses.

There are several trip options in the Shields River drainage, including Lodgepole Creek and Porcupine Lowline Trails. Refer to the 1999 Gallatin Forest Travel Plan Map for the special restrictions on motorized travel.

If you venture into the Crazies remember that you are visiting a holy Native American church. You can show your respect by avoiding overnight stays in high use magnets, such as Twin Lakes, Blue Lake, Campfire Lake and Cottonwood Lake. Parking your vehicle at the trailhead instead of in the backcountry is desirable, along with careful practice of Leave No Trace outdoor ethics.

MAPS AND VITALS

So, the Crazy Mountains challenge is to sample her wildness without detracting from it. A good way to begin is to study the relevant Forest Service maps to determine routes and ways to avoid the more congested Big Timber and Cottonwood trailheads. True, you won't find many other options. Entrance points are few given the large size of the range. The upside is that this limited access helps protect the very wildness that attracts us there in the first place. The essential "lay of the land" overview is best gained from the 1999 Gallatin National Forest East Half map (1:126,720 planimetric). If you plan to travel the single public access road into the north end of the Crazies you'll also need the 1997 Lewis & Clark National Forest Visitors Map for the eastern end of the forest.

These maps can be purchased for \$4 each from any one of the two national forest and three ranger district offices that administer the Crazies. The Forest Service district can also advise you on the status of road access, ownership, places to camp, leave no trace wilderness ethics, cabin rentals, and trail conditions. Think of the Crazies as "north", "west" and "east". For the "North" Crazies contact the Musselshell Ranger District, 809 2nd Street NW, Harlowton, MT 59036, phone (406) 632-4391. The contact for the "West" Crazies is the Livingston Ranger District, 5242 Highway 89 South, Livingston, MT 59047, phone (406) 222-1892. For the "East" Crazies get in touch with the Big Timber Ranger District, Box 196, Highway 10 East, Big Timber, MT 59011, phone (406) 932-5155.

In addition to travel restrictions the forest maps have an index to the more detailed topographic maps. You can thus quickly identify which of the 11 topos, spanning the roadless reaches of the Crazies, cover your chosen route. The overwhelming majority of visitors recreate in alpine basins, containing lakes with names and fish, shown on the "Campfire Lake-MT" and "Crazy Peak-MT" topos. Most Montana topographic maps have 40-foot contour intervals. But in the Crazies these 1:24,000 scale USGS quads have

80 feet of vertical difference between contour lines, making cliffs look deceptively gentle. Don't be fooled. These maps can be purchased at most area outdoor stores or from Information Services, Montana Bureau of Mines and Geology, 1300 West Park Street, Butte, MT 59701-8997, phone 496-4167, fax 496-4451. The cost is \$4 each plus \$3.50 per order.

To learn how you can help safeguard the wildland values of the Crazy Mountains contact the Montana Wilderness Association, Box 635, Helena, MT 59624, phone (406) 443-7350, e: mwa@wildmontana.org

CONCLUSION

It seems implausible that a land so mighty, so lofty, so wild, so rugged, so formidable, can be so vulnerable. And yet everything here that matters is tenuous. Good landowner relations, vital to the stewardship and appropriate public use of the Crazies, could be upset by the unthinking actions of only a few insensitive slobs. The same danger holds true for traditional religious practice in these holiest of mountains, when the noise of snowmobiles, ATVs and other machines shatters the peace and quiet needed for respect of that which is sacred.

There are lots of folks out there wanting a piece of the Crazies, some on motors, some on horseback, a few leading llamas, and even more on foot. A few want their own exclusive private estate as in, "what a beautiful wilderness, let's develop it!" Understandably, some of the local folks see the Crazies as their home turf and resent the invasion of "outsiders". They see any publicity as negative. In this respect this elevated island, with its striking visibility for 100 miles around, is its own worse enemy. It's hard to hide such dramatic terrain. Those who would like to see more roads, motorized trails, and development are outnumbered by those who either want the Crazies protected as wilderness or, at the very least, want to keep it like it is. The country itself is on the side of her protectors, with its limited access, rough-hewn wildness, and lack of developable resources. Those who have tried to extract wealth, from mining speculators to subdividers, have failed.

I thought these thoughts atop a windy ridge along the main Crazies divide. If only I could replicate the vision questing of the great Chief Plenty Coups, to realize a dream that would help untangle the cobweb of this confusing game of checkers. But deep down I knew that I lacked the will and discipline. For now it seemed enough to raise the question and to care about the outcome.