

The Upper Missouri Breaks

Worth the Effort



by Mike Sidders
msidders@pilotgetaways.com

With a quick radio call to Salt Lake Center to confirm the status of the Hayes Military Operations Area, Chuck Jarecki banks his Cessna 180 northeast and crosses the Missouri River toward one of his favorite recreational airstrips, Cow Creek. Passing at midfield to check for animals and confirm the wind direction, Jarecki makes a tight right-hand pattern followed by a gentle landing to the west.

Unpacking the heavily loaded Skywagon, Chuck and his wife, Penny, set up a hasty but comfortable camp at the grassy west end in preparation for another spectacular sunset. Donning daypacks, the couple marches off to the west and drops out of sight into a deep coulee. Hikers and explorers at heart, the retired Jareckis enjoy this adventure into the Missouri Breaks as if it were their last. It may be.

Cow Creek, along with nine other identified airstrips, lies within the Upper Missouri Breaks National Monument. Created by presidential proclamation in 2001, the Monument encompasses more than 377,000 acres and 149 miles of the Missouri River winding through varying topography. Some of the airstrips are being considered for closure under a complex travel plan developed by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM).

The Monument is a unique landscape of juniper-lined coulees full of sage grouse, elk, and mule deer. Prickly pear, upland grass, and scattered sagebrush dominate the flat benches teeming with antelope, and the sandstone hills support a healthy population of bighorn sheep. The river cuts deep at times with cliff walls rising nearly 300 feet from the water's edge.

Over the entire length of 2,341 miles, this is the longest stretch of the Missouri that has remained relatively untouched since the days of Lewis and Clark.

Some Things Never Change

On the afternoon of May 26, 1805, Captain Lewis stepped out onto the bank of the river and climbed the nearest knoll where he could get a view of what lay ahead. About the difficult hike, he wrote, "I also walked out and ascended the river hills...On arriving to the summit...I thought myself well repaid for my labour; as from this point I beheld the Rocky Mountains for the first time."

The great peaks to the west gave Lewis pause, for he saw them as an impassable barrier to the Pacific Ocean. Recognizing the gradual narrowing and more frequent forking of the river below, he realized that he would come to a point where this muddy waterway no longer flowed to the east.

We are fortunate to have the opportunity to explore the route of the Corps of Discovery from a non-intrusive, birds-eye-view. Our aircraft offer us a perspective the members of the expedition never enjoyed and a chance to appreciate their hardiness and perseverance.

However, there is a deliberate movement by several organizations to eliminate aircraft landings in the Monument. Some of the most vocal complaints come from people who share our desire for an outdoor experience, yet feel that pilots are an elitist group. The real elitists appear to be those who only want the Monument on their own exclusive terms.

Jarecki and others have devoted considerable time and effort to keeping the airstrips open for future generations of pilots and their families. Chuck has spent countless days in meetings with BLM officials often doing nothing more than taking notes. By presenting factual evidence without being confrontational, he has earned the respect of Monument manager Gary Slagel and other members of the planning team. This is evident in the current status of the Monument plan and especially within the BLM's preferred alternative.

Three of the ten airstrips identified within the Monument are charted on BLM recreational maps. Of the ten, the BLM's preferred alternative is currently recommending that six remain open, with possible seasonal closures on some for the benefit of wildlife. The area surrounding the Ervin Ridge airstrip is a significant bighorn sheep lambing area and pilots are requested to voluntarily avoid this strip until after August 1 to eliminate any additional stress.

Opponents argue that six to ten airstrips are too many. But reason would suggest that a variety of airstrips allows the minimal impact to be even further lessened by dispersing the users over a wider area. A study of aerial photographs from 1956 provides evidence that Monument airstrips have been in existence for nearly 50 years. Since that time, there is no observable degradation of the vegetation or soil surface of the airstrips.



Photos courtesy RAF

Safe & Courteous Operation

Some public opposition states that aircraft noise is a significant threat to the serenity of the Monument. Regardless of this opposition, the military will continue overflight at all altitudes and the noise signature of an F-16 certainly exceeds that of the infrequent visitor in a private aircraft. While this is true, we also need be as courteous as possible to those on the ground.

The hard packed clay "gumbo" surface can quickly become a gooey mess when wet. If it has rained recently, consider staying at one of the paved strips in the area and allowing the ground to dry out. The hard surface causes most of the water to run off the strips and they dry out relatively quickly. Fuel and lodging are available in Lewistown, Chinook, and Havre.

The bicentennial of the Lewis and Clark expedition is the perfect excuse to take time this summer to explore the unique landscape of the Monument and discover its history for yourself. ■

The quest to preserve the Missouri Breaks strips led Chuck Jarecki and other pilots to form the Recreational Aviation Foundation (RAF). The RAF is using tax-deductible donations to keep recreational airstrips open throughout the nation, www.recreationalaviationfoundation.org.

The Hayes MOA overlies the Missouri Breaks. It is typically active 8:30–10:30 a.m. and 1:30–3:30 p.m., however, it is always prudent to check with Salt Lake Center on 133.4 MHz to confirm the status of the MOA.

The Montana Aeronautics Division can be contacted for coordinates of the airstrips, and several are suitable for tricycle-gear aircraft, (406) 444-2506, www.mdt.state.mt.us/aeronautics.