

# 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 anywhere 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.

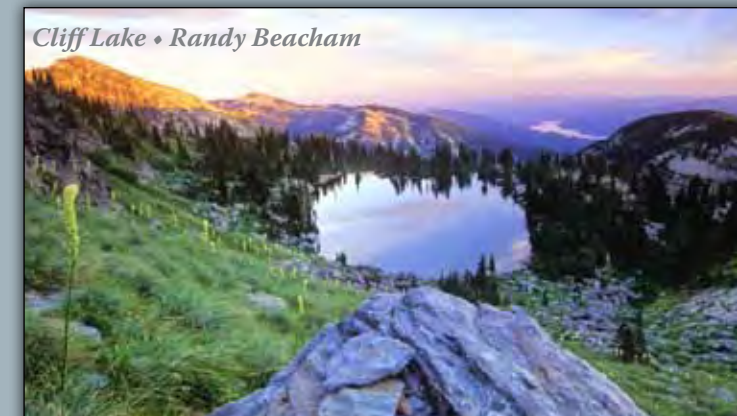
Mid range zones are frequented by grizzly and black bear, mule and whitetail deer, cougar, bobcat and marten. In lower elevations, moose, fisher, mink and beaver enjoy a living among waters teeming with westslope cutthroat, rainbow and brook trout. And, with air just as clear as the water, astronomic 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](http://www.wildmontana.org/cabinethikes)

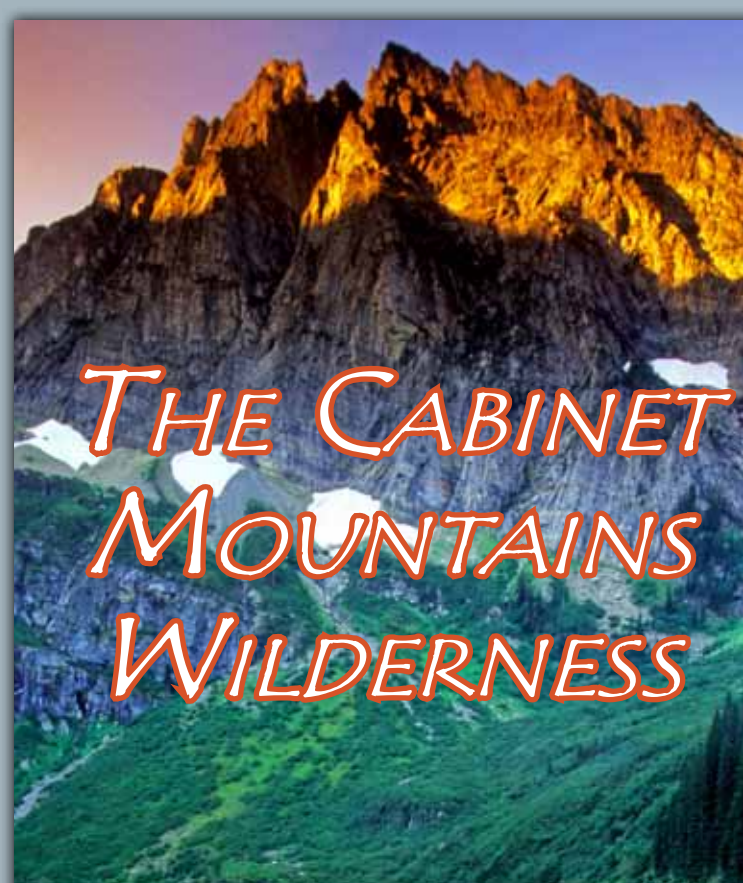


As you use this map to enjoy and learn about the CMW, stop and just be for part of your visit. And please practice the Leave No Trace principles.

## 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](http://www.lnt.org)



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

1964-2014 YOURS TO ENJOY TO PROTECT

## The Cabinet Mountains Wilderness

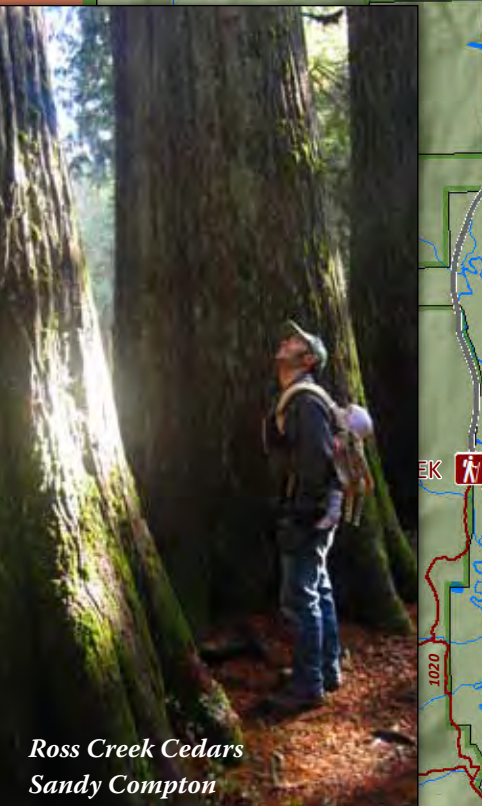
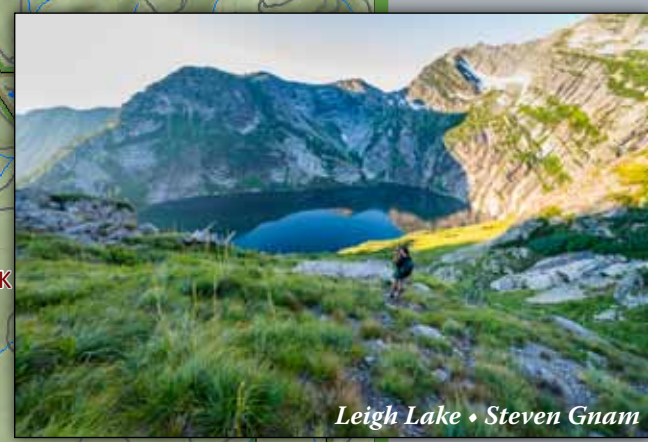
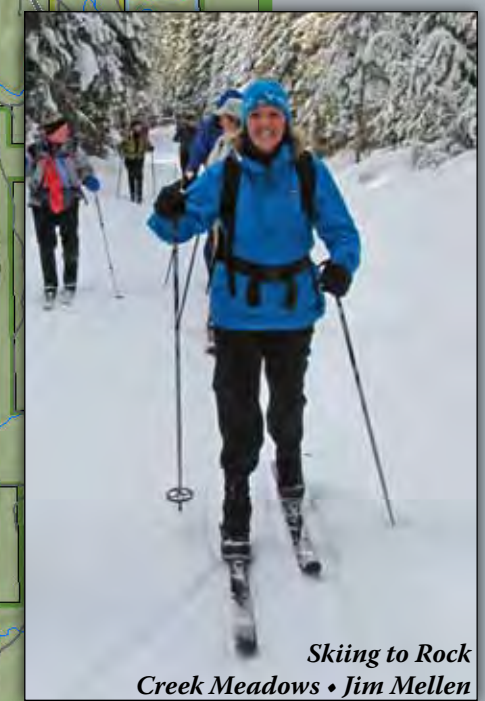
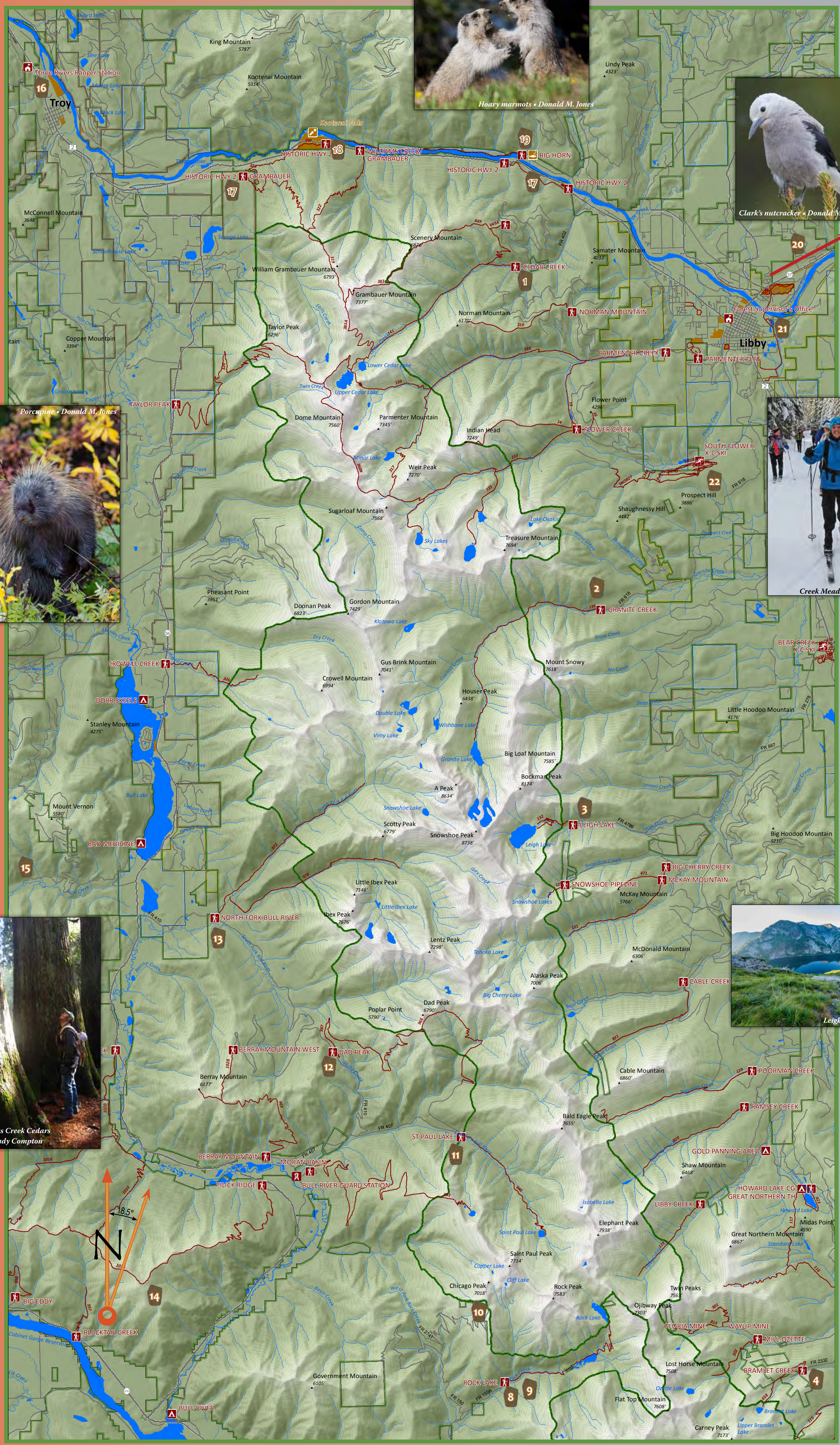
(CMW) was designated Wilderness with the signing of the Wilderness Act in 1964. The CMW comprises 94,272 acres in Lincoln and Sanders Counties, Montana. It is administered by the US Forest Service and lies within Kootenai National Forest, headquartered in Libby.

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 from outside the boundary, and access to many trails running into the Wilderness.

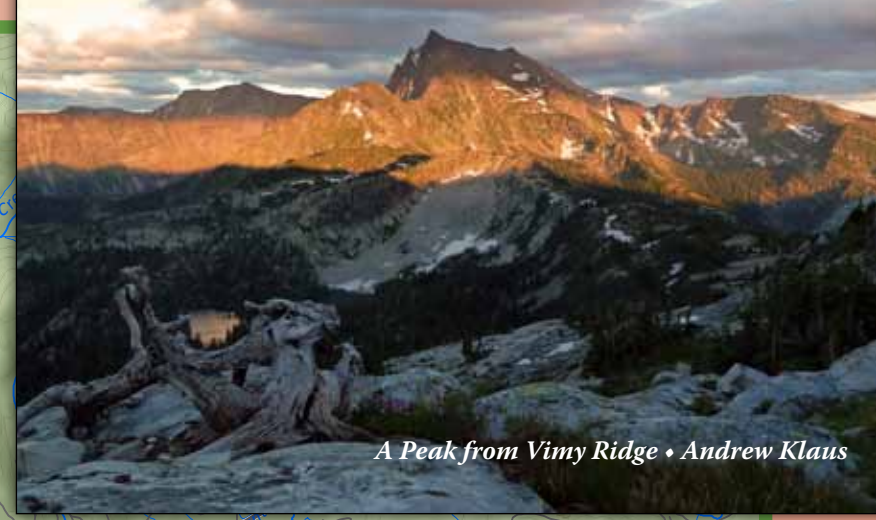
## Resources

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





Camp in the Cabinets • Andrew Klaus



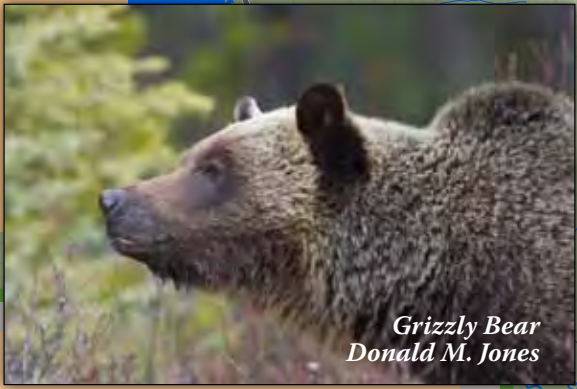
A Peak from Viny Ridge • Andrew Klaus



Black Bear  
Donald M. Jones

### Be Bear Aware

The Cabinet Mountains Wilderness is home to black and grizzly bears. Wilderness visitors should be able to identify which is which. To avoid conflict with these beautiful creatures, it's important to learn about hiking and camping in bear habitat. For the protection of humans as well as bears, there is a food storage order in force on many National Forests, including the Kootenai. Visit <http://bit.ly/BearSafeFood> to learn more. Bear educational information is available at most ranger stations, as well as online at many sites. Google "Bear Aware" or visit [www.bearaware.bc.ca](http://www.bearaware.bc.ca)



Grizzly Bear  
Donald M. Jones



Rocky Mountain Elk  
Donald M. Jones

### Cabinet Mountains Wilderness

— State Routes	— National Forest Trails
— Secondary Roads	— Kootenai National Forest
— Tertiary Roads	— Montana State Lands
Trailhead	City & County Parks
Nordic Ski Area	Plum Creek
Campground	Stimson Lumber
Lookout	Lakes
Fishing Access	Streams
Stock Facilities	200-foot Contours

**LEGEND**

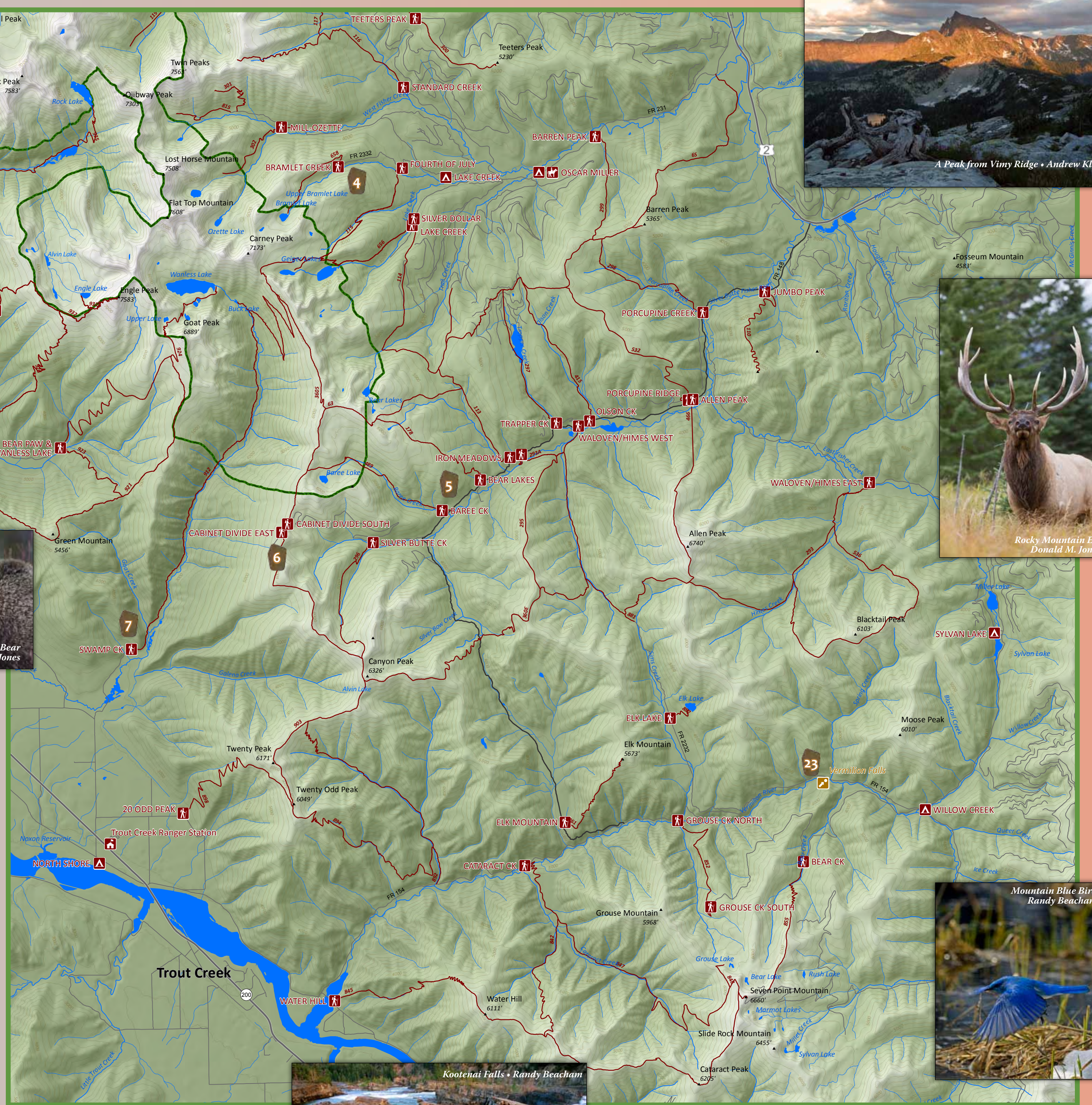
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**50 YEARS**  
CELEBRATING  
WILDERNESS

### Hiking in the Cabinet Mountains Wilderness: A Sampler

The CMW has 34 National Forest System trails comprising 143 miles of designated routes, and no signs saying "stay on the trail." Below is a sampling of 13 hikes picked to whet any appetite. These hikes are keyed to numbers on both sides of the map and are arranged in geographic order clockwise around the Wilderness starting with Cedar Lakes at the north end. **E** is for **Easy** (bring the toddler), **M** for **Moderate** (take the ten-year-old), **S** for **Strenuous** (and also for **Serious**), **ES** for **Extra-Strenuous** (check with your physician). The ratings are lighthearted, but they are also to be taken seriously. Always error on the side of caution. The Wilderness is wild, after all.

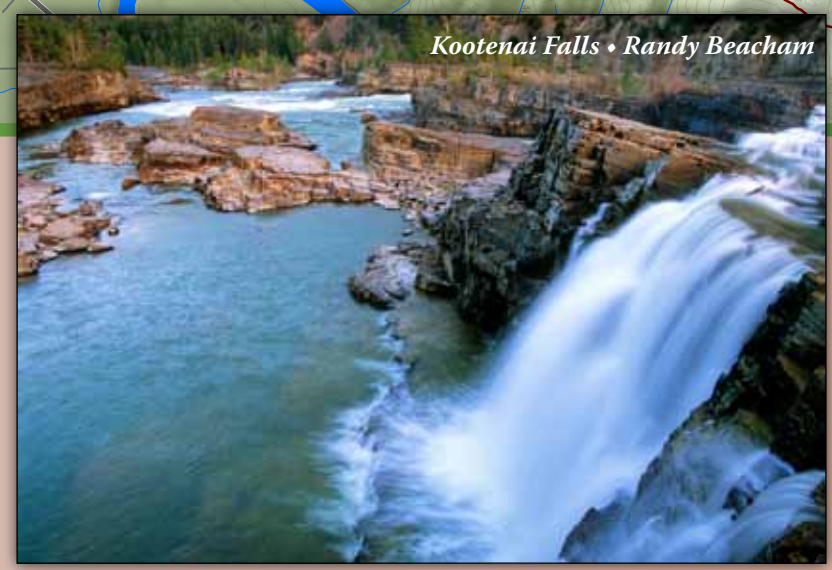
- M** • Cedar Lakes Trail # 141: Upper Cedar Lake is one of the most spectacular lakes in the CMW. The trail is a long straight steady 5 miles. From there, Dome Mountain, Sky Lakes, and Minor Lake are within reach, providing a pure wilderness experience. **Stock friendly**
- M** • Granite Creek Trail # 136: Being one of the lowest in the CMW, the trail to Granite Lake is one of the first to be snow-free. Six miles one-way, the elevation gain is moderate. A and Snowshoe Peaks tower above the lake, and Blackwell Glacier resides in a cirque to the south. Travel beyond the lake is very challenging.
- E** • Leigh Lake Trail # 132: This lake is a total gem and a gateway to some of the most exciting terrain in the CMW. The trail is short and steep, especially near the lake where it is cliffy.
- E** • Bramlet Lake Trail # 658: This trail follows an old mining road almost to the lake. The lower lake is a peaceful fishing destination.
- M** • Barree Lake - Bear Lake Loop (Trails # 489, # 3605, # 63 and # 178): This nine mile loop trip has it all. From 1910 fire originated lodgepole pine to old growth forests and high open ridgeline vistas. Add in the opportunity to fish for westslope cutthroat trout at two alpine lakes. To enjoy it all, camp overnight along the Cabinet Divide and experience a dazzling sunset. **Stock friendly**.
- S** • Cabinet Divide East Trail # 360E: This 14 mile loop trip is well suited for stock users. After ascending the powerline road to the Cabinet Divide, 6 miles of high open ridgeline vistas await the visitor. Plan your trip for clear weather and you will surely run out of film. At Silver Butte Pass, turn north to your start point.
- S** • Swamp Creek Trail # 912: At nine miles one way to Wanless Lake, this is best accomplished in a multi-day trip. Well worth the price of admission, the whole multi-lake basin is a wonderland. Engle Peak or Lost Buck Pass are possible for the adventurous.
- M** • Rock Lake Trail # 935: The trail follows an old mining road past Rock Creek Meadows to Heidelberg Falls, where some interesting remains of a rusting pelton wheel and other mining equipment make a great spot for a lunch break. The wilderness boundary is at the lake, which is overshadowed by the impressive rock slab of Ojibway Peak.
- ES** • Libby Lakes: The highest lakes in the CMW are located north of Rock Lake. A manway on the west side of Rock Lake leads to St Paul Pass, with the lakes lying east of the pass. This arduous but rewarding trip can be accomplished on a long day hike or better yet, a 3-day backpacking trip. For the super adventurous, an extreme scramble up Elephant Peak is possible from Libby Lakes.
- E** • Cliff Lake: Although not an official trail, this leads to Cliff Lake and Chicago and St Paul Peaks. It crosses a fragile mountain meadow, so travel on established routes. Possibly the easiest trail in the CMW, the drive is way more difficult than the hike. Take a high-clearance vehicle you are not fond of.
- M** • St Paul Lake Trail # 646: The trail to St Paul Lake follows a cold-air drainage with a heavy canopy, making it a perfect hike for hot summer days. While not as impressive as other lakes in the Cabinets, the waterfalls and cliff bands above the lake are stunning.
- S** • Dad Peak Trail # 987: Hike to the ruins of an old fire lookout on a trail that winds from Snake Creek Pass through beargrass and pick luscious huckleberries in late summer. Make an interesting open loop by combining this with the Devils Club trail.
- ES** • Snowshoe and A Peaks: The two highest and most spectacular peaks in the region can be reached via a manway at the end of the North Fork trail. It may be easier to reach the peaks from Leigh Lake, but the manway leads to Snowshoe Lake, an amazing gem. From the Lake, both Snowshoe and A Peaks can be accessed. The view of Granite Lake from A Peak is particularly stunning with a nearly 4,000 foot vertical drop!



### CMW's neighboring communities

The nearest five communities are Troy and Libby in Lincoln County and Heron, Noxon and Trout Creek in Sanders County, all within a few air miles of the CMW boundary. Other population centers nearby are Clark Fork, Hope, Bonners Ferry and Sandpoint, Idaho; Thompson Falls, Kalispell and Missoula, Montana. The nearest international airports are at Kalispell, Missoula and Spokane, Washington.

- Each of the small communities surrounding the Wilderness has its unique attractions and events.**
- January:** Annual Polar Bear Plunge, Libby March: Libby Irish Fair
  - May:** Heron Players annual spring play • STOKR Bike Race to benefit Habitat For Humanity in Libby
  - Montana stream fishing season opens third week-end of May.
  - June:** Libby Logger Days
  - July:** Troy Fourth of July Celebration and parades in Heron, Noxon, Clark Fork, Trout Creek and Thompson Falls;
  - Kootenai River Rodeo, Libby
  - Two Rivers Rendezvous, Fisher River valley
  - August:** Blues festivals in Noxon and Libby
  - Trout Creek Huckleberry Festival
  - Ignite the Nights Car Show, Libby
  - September:** Libby Nordic Fest
  - David Thompson Days in Thompson Falls
  - September thru November:** Big game hunting seasons
  - December:** Annual Festival of Lights in Libby
  - December thru March:** Alpine Skiing at Turner Mountain
  - Snowmobiling opportunities abound in the Kootenai and Panhandle National Forests.
  - Nordic Skiing at Flower Creek Nordic trails and along the Bighorn Trail near Libby.



Kootenai Falls • Randy Beacham

### Other Attractions Around the Wilderness

- Proposed Scotchman Peaks Wilderness:** This 88,000 acre roadless area west of Bull River features some of the wildest country in western Montana.
- Ross Creek Cedars:** 600-year old cedars in a rain-forest setting. Wheelchair accessible.
- Roosevelt Park:** Troy's waterfront city park features ball fields, a music stage, picnic grounds and a boat ramp.
- Historic US 2 Hiking Trail:** Two sections of a recycled highway lead to big views of the Kootenai River. Entries at MPs 21.6, 25.7 and 27.3 on US 2; MP 33 on MT Hwy 56.
- Kootenai Falls:** The Kootenai River is at its most spectacular between Libby and Troy on US 2. Wheelchair accessible view; hiking trail, swinging bridge.
- Big Horn Hiking Trail:** A five-mile hiking and biking trail along the north edge of the Kootenai River west of Libby through land deeded to Montana as bighorn sheep habitat.
- Libby Dam and Lake Kooeenusa:** A lake shared with Canada; fishing, boating, camping and summer water fun.
- J. Neils Park and Trail:** A 1.5 mile trail system and city park near the Kootenai River in Libby.
- Flower Creek Nordic Trails:** Over 8 and a half miles of groomed crosscountry ski trails just south of Libby.
- Vermillion Falls:** Tumbling down a steep, narrow canyon, the falls makes rainbows in sunlight filtered through big trees on both banks. A great place on a hot day,

### A Western Legacy: Hunting, Gathering and Fishing

Fishing at Snowshoe Lake  
Jim Mellen

For centuries, humans have been traveling through, resting in and gleaned sustenance from wild places. The Wilderness Act of 1964 was written in part to protect and enhance these human-powered endeavors in wild and roadless areas. The CMW is open to hunting, fishing, berry picking and mushroom gathering during the appropriate seasons. Trophy elk, west slope cutthroat trout, mountain goats, moose, deer and game birds are taken regularly from the CMW, as are gallons of huckleberries and pounds of morels and chanterrels. Many of the high mountain lakes have been stocked with cutthroat trout and the rivers adjoining the wilderness are known to produce sport fish from bass to walleyes to rainbow trout and German browns.

As important as these opportunities are, it is also critical that we have places "to hear ourselves think," away from the growing clamor of the planet. "In wildness is the preservation of the world," wrote Henry Thoreau. It is just as true today as when he penned that nearly 200 years ago.

Don Clark (right rear) with three former students and a trophy bull

### A Wilderness Hunting "Disclaimer."

"It might sound like the hunting is spectacular in the wilderness. Actually, the elk hunting is very difficult because of the steep terrain and the distances you have to hike to get to the game. This holds doubly true for packing out animals over long distances.

"Because it's more physical than most want to endure, the area is not crowded. Usually you have it pretty much to yourself. When you draw a moose, goat or sheep permit for the Wilderness you have to hunt there. What is spectacular are the cliffs, lakes, glaciers, and wildness of the area. It sets one apart from the regular hunters, who spend a lot of time driving."

Don Clark, retired teacher and hunter, Libby, Montana



Huckleberry Heaven • Sandy Compton



The view looking north from Engle Peak • Jim Mellen