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Exploring the Ancient Old North Trail

A 13,000-year-old route along the Rocky Mountain Front

Lisa Ballard



AMONG NORTH AMERICA'S LONG TRAILS, THE APPALACHIAN TRAIL, THE Pacific Coast Trail, and the Continental Divide Trail are the big daddies, but I recently spent some time searching for signs of a much longer, ancient route now called the Old North Trail. Between 13,000 and 30,000 years ago, when the Bering Land Bridge connected Siberia to Alaska, the earliest colonists in the Americas migrated from eastern Asia over this 50-mile swath of tundra, then continued south through what's now Canada and the continental United States. Some eventually traveled to Mexico and all the way to southernmost tip of South America. At first, those early migrants stayed along the coast, but over time, they found a way to follow the mountains on an inland route.

As the last ice age ended and the oceans began to rise again, the Bering Land Bridge flooded, cutting off the route. The ancient trail remains about 100 to 165 feet underwater today, but traces of the ancient Old North Trail remain on dry land. No trail markers or rock cairns show the way, so it's not conducive to putting on a backpack and then taking a few months to trek it. Archeologists have explored it. Native Americans still talk about it, and historians have marked it in a few places. My husband Jack and I discovered it when we passed a road sign mentioning it outside of Choteau, Montana, on our way to a trailhead into the Bob Marshall Wilderness.

It was my first trip into "the Bob," as Montanans call it. That wilderness is immense, twice the size of White Mountain National Forest. Standing atop Mount Wright (8,875 feet), on the eastern edge of the Bob, the unexpected magnitude and feeling of impenetrable strength of those jagged, endless ridgelines awed me. I could only imagine what those early Asian pioneers, who, generations later, formed the Native American nations, must have felt when confronted with such a view.

Ironically, a few weeks earlier, I had hiked to the top of another mountain named Wright: Wright Peak (4,587 feet) in the Adirondack High Peaks. In 1925, *the* Bob Marshall for whom the Bob Marshall Wilderness is named, along with his brother George and guide Herbert Clark, became the first to ascend all 46 peaks over 4,000 feet in the Adirondacks. I felt a kindred spirit to this famous hiker, forester, and conservationist.

Jack Ballard hikes above a burned area on Mount Wright, surrounded by jagged ridgelines above 8,000 feet. LISA BALLARD

I GREW UP IN THE ADIRONDACKS, WHERE, REACHING A SUMMIT IS THE GOAL of most serious hikers. Not so in the Northern Rocky Mountains. Most back-country trips go to remote tarns, many in dramatic, hanging cirques above treeline—inspiring destinations but still a thousand or more feet below the snowcaps that surround them. Summiting a mountain in Montana usually requires technical rock- or ice-climbing gear, or both. Mount Wright, on the edge of the Bob, is an exception, a walk-up and one that has intrigued humans for over 13,000 years.

Mount Wright sits at the geological boundary between the peaks and prairie known as the Rocky Mountain Front. When the land bridge connecting Asia to North America was still intact, a significant percentage of that north-south human migration took place along the Rocky Mountain Front, from north to south. Imagine those prehistoric nomads trekking from Siberia to the Seward Peninsula, then turning south. Their exact route is a mystery, but what archeologists do know is that many of them hunted and gathered their way to the eastern side of the Rocky Mountains, then continued down the continent in the transition zone between highlands and flatlands. At first, they traveled on foot, then using dogs pulling sledges, and later by horse.

“Imagine a footpath that runs along the base of the mountains following the ‘shoreline’ between the mountains and the plains—twisting through stream gullies, unraveling over low ridges and around buttes, running on for 2,000 to 3,000 miles,” wrote Peter Stark in *Smithsonian Magazine* (July 1997), referring to the Old North Trail.

The Old North Trail hugged the Rocky Mountains for four reasons: (1) Drinking water was dependable and plentiful because numerous streams drained out of the mountains. (2) Those mountain streams were easier to cross compared with farther onto the prairie where they turned into broad, deep rivers. (3) One could scout from the various rock outcroppings and ridgelines. And (4) There were plenty of places to find shelter from storms or to hide from enemies.

Later, the Blackfeet controlled much of the region to the east of the Continental Divide onto the prairie: from the Northern Saskatchewan River in Alberta to the Yellowstone River in what is now southern Montana. That land included the Rocky Mountain Front and the Old North Trail. For decades before and after the Lewis and Clark Expedition (between 1804 and 1806), the Blackfeet zealously guarded their territory, allowing few strangers to enter the region, via the Old North Trail or otherwise, but they used the trail.



Mount Wright sits at the geological boundary between the peaks and prairie known as the Rocky Mountain Front. LARRY GARLAND/AMC

In 1896, a white man, Walter McClintock, traveled to Montana on an expedition for the U.S. Forestry Service. He spent four years living with the Blackfeet and was adopted by the tribe. In 1910, he published the book, *The Old North Trail: Or Life, Legends and Religion of the Blackfeet Indians* (Forgotten Books, 2015), which gave a rare look into the route's uses.

"There is a well-known trail we call the Old North Trail," said Blackfoot Chief Brings-Down-the-Sun in McClintock's book:

It runs north and south along the Rocky Mountains. No one knows how long it has been used by the Indians. My father told me it originated in the

migration of a great tribe of Indians from the distant north to the south, and all the tribes have, ever since, continued to follow in their tracks. My father once told me of an expedition from the Blackfoot that went south by the Old Trail to visit the people with dark skins. . . . It took them 12 moons of steady traveling to reach the country of the dark-skinned people, and 18 moons to come north again. They returned by a longer route through the 'High Trees' or Bitterroot country, where they could travel without danger of being seen. They feared going along the North Trail because, by that time, it was also frequented by their enemies, the Crows, Sioux, and Cheyennes. I have followed the Old North Trail so often that I know every mountain stream and river far to the south as well as toward the distant north.

Today, much of the Old North Trail has become overgrown or obliterated completely by modern roads and cities such as Calgary, Alberta, and Helena, Montana, but there are places outside of Choteau where the path was worn so deeply that you can still see it if you know what to look for. Thirty-three miles of it are officially marked outside of this rural town of 1,600.

We bought several days' worth of food at the local grocery store in Choteau, then drove west on Teton Canyon Road into Lewis and Clark Forest. The road turned to dirt and got increasingly rougher as civilization faded. We drove deeper and deeper into the mountains toward the trailhead for Mount Wright, where we planned to pitch our tent, 33 miles from town, a coincidental distance, though half of it was, in fact, along the Old North Trail.

We followed the North Fork Teton River. Some of the most extreme changes in elevation in the shortest distances occur along the Rocky Mountain Front in this area. In 1983, the Bureau of Land Management called the Rocky Mountain Front "a nationally significant area because of its high wildlife, recreation, and scenic values."

It's a distinct ecosystem, a transition zone between rolling prairieland and giant alpine peaks, with a variety of wetlands, riparian areas, grassland, and forests. Black bear, cougar, elk, lynx, moose, wolf, wolverine, and deer all live here. When Meriwether Lewis and William Clark came through in the early 1800s, thousands of bison grazed here, and grizzly bears ruled the landscape. The bison are long gone, but this area harbors the densest population of grizzlies in the Lower 48, about 1,000 of them that travel from the mountains onto the prairie.

"Carry your bear spray all the time!" warned Jack as we set up camp under a couple of tall Douglas firs a hundred yards from the river.



Fly-fishing along the North Fork of the Teton River. LISA BALLARD

Indeed. In November 2017, Montana Public Radio reported 46 human–grizzly bear conflicts where we stood, here on the Rocky Mountain Front south of the Blackfeet Indian Reservation. I affixed my pepper spray to my belt then peered around me to see if a big brown bruin lurked nearby. My eyes landed on a couple of rusty wagon wheels still attached to their axles. I forgot about bears and wondered if perhaps we had camped precisely on the Old North Trail. Were these abandoned wagon parts from a pioneer party traveling on the trail? It was fun to imagine.

OUR TWO GOALS ON THIS TRIP WERE TO CLIMB MOUNT WRIGHT AND NET A westslope cutthroat trout. After setting up our tent, we grabbed our fly rods and a pack. Neither Jack nor I had seen a westslope cutthroat before and considered them the fishing version of a coveted prize, like a birder who seeks a distant, exotic avian.

Montana's state fish, westslope cutthroat trout (*Oncorhynchus larkia lewisi*) historically fanned the west side of the Continental Divide throughout most of Montana, as well as the Upper Missouri River drainage on the east side of the Divide, including the Teton River. But its numbers have dropped by half. The introduction of non-native brook trout, rainbow trout, brown trout, and lake trout; agriculture; logging; roads; mines; and dams have all contributed

to the westslope cutthroat trout's decline. Numbers now may have stabilized because most of them have been pushed into wilderness areas.

A month before our arrival, unusually heavy rains washed out the road to the trailhead, along with houses, bridges, and power lines. It also washed away most of the fish, though we didn't know that. Jack and I bushwhacked along the North Fork Teton River deep into a canyon where a fishing buddy had told us to look for cutthroats. We cast and cast into each chilly water hole we found. Nothing.

We trekked farther into the rocky chasm. A fish-loving harlequin duck played in a riffle then hopped onto a rock to preen.

"There must be fish in this river if there are harlequins," I thought.

After a couple of hours, the act of casting became more habit than purposeful. My attention drifted to a lone gaillardia blooming near the river, my frozen toes, the can of stew I would make for dinner. Suddenly, my rod tip bent. A fish! A few minutes later, I held my first westslope cutthroat trout, a 15-inch with telltale red slashes under its chin and black freckles covering its silver-green body and tail.

"You might be the only one left in the neighborhood," I said, as I let it go.

THE NEXT MORNING, WE ATTEMPTED MOUNT WRIGHT, WHICH RISES 3,200 feet over a 3.9-mile trail. It was worth every step. The lower trail, one of the primary gateways into the Bob Marshall Wilderness for backpackers, followed a branch of the North Fork Teton River, west toward Teton Pass. After a flat half-mile along the creek, we left the main trail at an unmarked but obvious junction, turning north, and began to climb.

The path took us through a forest, or what was left of it. A wildfire had scorched the area in 2007. A plethora of blue and white wildflowers, including bog gentian, blue flax, fleabane, death camas, mariposa lilies, and marsh marigolds, speckled the green flora below the barren tree trunks. We paused frequently to take photos of the lovely flowers, one of my passions, and to examine a spot where it looked as if a fault line was forming. A long crack had opened at a random place in the soil.

"Let's not dally here," I prodded Jack, as he focused his camera on a flaming red Indian paintbrush. We picked up our pace to clear the area.

As we approached treeline, about 1.5 miles into the climb, I heard a rustling and grabbed the pepper spray off my belt, but it was only a mule deer doe. She paused to watch us, then trotted over a nearby hillside. Her two fawns soon emerged and followed.

“Better a deer than a bear,” I smiled, relieved.

At 2 miles, the trail bent 90 degrees to the west and headed up a long ridge. Though the day was mild, the sun beat down mercilessly as we continued uphill, and the footing turned to scree. The slog felt like a parabolic curve, getting steeper and steeper as we climbed, but more beautiful, too.

At first, we could see only the burned hillsides we had just hiked through, but the higher we got, the more numerous the mountains. When we turned onto the summit ridge, a bouquet of 8,000-footers burst forth from the landscape, taking our breath away as much as the exertion of the climb had. By the time we reached the summit, I was overwhelmed by the expanse. Row upon row of alpine peaks lay before us.

The view into the Bob Marshall Wilderness from atop Mount Wright is staggering. Established in 1964 with the advent of the Wilderness Act by Congress (which Bob Marshall, himself, influenced), it is the fifth largest wilderness in the Lower 48. Its 1,856 miles of trails are only open to foot traffic and stock (horses, llamas, goats, and other domestic animals used for carrying supplies). However, from our perch atop Mount Wright, it looked like an endless array of impenetrable acreage.

The vista mesmerized me as I sipped from my water bottle. I couldn’t get enough of the scene. What mountains! This was Mother Nature’s stronghold, and she was allowing me a rare, unobstructed look at it, but only temporarily. Though the day was warm and calm, clouds formed on the horizon.

The Rocky Mountain Front is famous for its violent weather. As warm, moist air from the Gulf of Mexico drifts north, the front pushes it upward and eastward. Hail, lightning, blizzards, and tornadoes often originate here then head east across the Great Plains. It can snow at any time.

“Time to go,” nudged Jack, shouldering his pack. “We don’t want to get stuck up here in an afternoon thunderstorm.”

The Blackfeet called the Rocky Mountain Front “the backbone of the world.” They climbed to mountaintops such as Wright on their vision quests. Their ancestors, the earliest adventurers who came to this region via the Old North Trail, undoubtedly drew strength and inspiration from the panorama, too. I will never forget my encounter with a small piece of this prehistoric route.

LISA BALLARD is an award-winning writer, photographer, and filmmaker based in Red Lodge, Montana, and Chateaugay Lake, New York. See her piece on the Rainbow Mountains on page 8.