

Missouri River

Missouri National Recreational River

Missouri National Recreational River
Nebraska/South Dakota

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



The Missouri River is the longest river in North America. It once had abundant braided channels, chutes, sloughs, sandbars, islands, and backwater areas. The high loads of sediment it carried earned it the nickname "Big Muddy."

Wetlands may be created during major floods if the Missouri slices a new channel through the banks of a riverbend and diverts water into a natural containment area. Wetlands are nature's way of controlling floods and providing new habitats.

Sandbars are created when fast-flowing waters lose their energy while moving downstream and deposit sand and soils that are picked up from the river bottom and banks. Sandbars are a habitat for nesting terns and plovers.

Islands typically develop during floods when the river follows its older channel and breaks open a new channel to encircle a sandbar or piece of land. The Missouri's islands are stable enough to support plants and wildlife like eagles.

A Great American Riverway

Beginning with the confluence of three tributaries at Three Forks, Montana, the Missouri River flows southeast for over 2,300 miles before joining the Mississippi River a few miles north of St. Louis. It was the great waterway for Native Americans, fur trappers, the explorers Lewis and Clark, and emigrants. In the 1800s the river shared with the Oregon and Santa Fe trails the distinction of being one of three thoroughfares to the West.

Forced into much of its present course by glaciers, the river moved massive amounts of silt downstream. The glaciers eventually receded. The river remained, continuing to erode the Rocky Mountains and transporting them to the Gulf of Mexico grain by grain. Its wild, unpredictable course made floodplains of wetlands, sandbars, wet prairies, and bottom land forests.



The Missouri River touches seven states on the journey from its headwaters in Montana to St. Louis. It drains the watershed known as the heartland.

The Lewis and Clark Expedition traveled along this section of the Missouri from late August to early September 1804, and again on the return trip in 1806. They explored landscape features like Spirit Mound, held a council with Yankton Sioux, and wrote the first reports on pronghorns, mule deer, and prairie dogs, all previously unknown to western science.

Flooding—Doing What Comes Naturally During the time of westward expansion the Missouri River had a vast floodplain. Periodic flooding created new side channels as the main channel shifted from side to side, especially below Yankton and downstream to the confluence with the Platte River. In April local snowmelt and spring rains brought floods that lasted one to two weeks. In June melting snowpack from the Rockies and rain from lower elevations caused longer-lasting floods across a greater area.

Looking southeast, Nebraska is on the right of the Missouri River, and South Dakota is on the left (above). ERIC FOWLER, NEBRASKALAND MAGAZINE / NEBRASKA GAME AND PARKS COMMISSION (NGPC)

Taming the Missouri—The Pick-Sloan Plan After a series of floods devastated farms and towns in the early 1940s, Congress enacted the Flood Control Act of 1944. It included the Pick-Sloan Plan, which called for construction of five dams along the Missouri. By the mid-1960s, after the dams were built and reservoirs filled, the river ceased to be a meandering and high-sediment-carrying sculptor of scenery. Although seasonal floods no longer replenish the floodplains, managed fluctuations result in habitats for plants and animals.

Today two stretches of the Missouri River along the Nebraska-South Dakota border are vital remnants of the historic river. In 1978 and 1991 Congress preserved these free-flowing sections by designating them as the Missouri National Recreational River and adding them to the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System.



Native Americans



In 1879 Ponca Chief Standing Bear (right) won a court battle for recognition of Native Americans as "persons with rights of citizenship" under United States law.

Lewis and Clark kept trip notes in a journal (right).

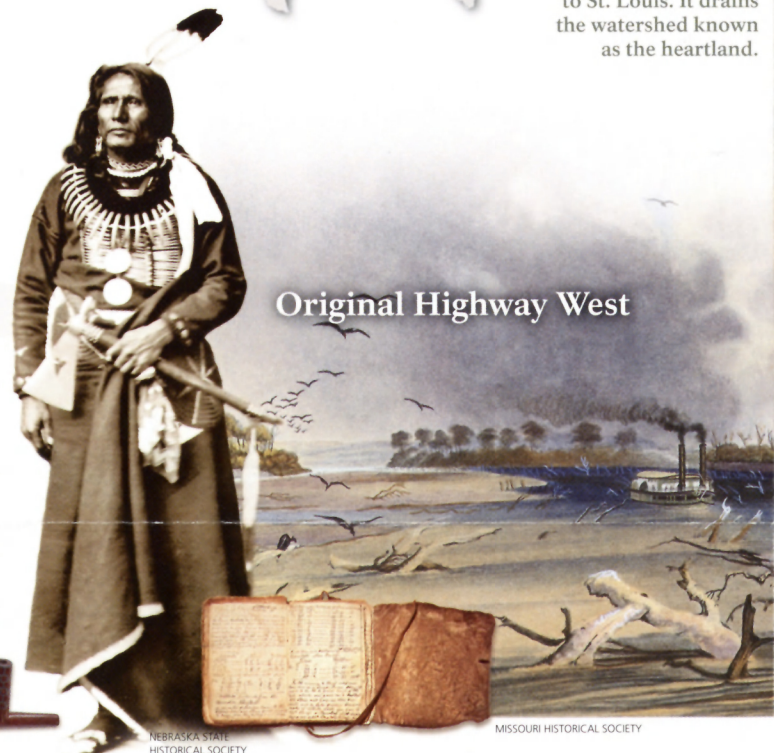
Yankton Sioux (their tips at left) carve traditional ceremonial pipes from red catlinite (below).

SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION

The true pioneers along the Mnisose Wakpa (turbulent river) were Native Americans, for whom the river valley was a highway and is still a home. The Missouri provided shelter, wild game, and fertile soil. It created a Great Circle of Life as spring floods renewed the earth that yielded fruits, berries, and other wild plants. Migrating birds, spawning fish, roaming bison, and other animals wintering along the river dictated the direction and timing of hunts.

Native Americans used fire to shape the river landscape. Fire stimulated the growth of new grass, attracting bison and other animals, and kept the land free of trees. By the late 1700s and early 1800s, it was a wild but human-touched landscape. Ponca lived on the Niobrara River to the west. Oto, Omaha, and Pawnee probably also visited the territory. Yankton Sioux lived on the north bank of the Missouri.

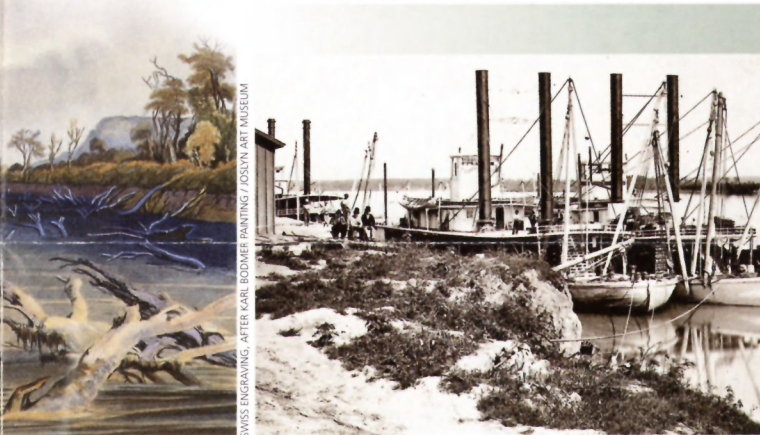
Original Highway West



NEBRASKA STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

MISSOURI HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Spanish explorers in long, flat-bottomed boats (bateaux), and after them, French and British fur traders, were the first Europeans to enter the Missouri basin. Americans came in keel-boats and then steamboats. The river was the most practical route to the Great Plains, but it exacted a price. Artist George Catlin observed that the snags (above) and rafts made of huge trees on the "River of Sticks" presented "the most frightful and discouraging prospect for



SWISS ENGRAVING, AFTER KARL BOEDER, PRINTING / JOSTIN ART MUSEUM

the adventurous voyageur." The bends where snags accumulated were dangerous spots for river travelers. Snags, fire, and ice continued to devour boats until the end of the 1800s.

Towns appeared first in Nebraska Territory, but only after the 1859 treaty with the Yankton Sioux did communities spring up in Dakota Territory on the other side of the river. In 1862 the Homestead Act's promise of 160 acres drew

Snags on the Missouri (colored engraving, center) depicts the perils of steamboat travel, which mostly ended after a flood in 1881.

Sternwheelers like these (above), docked at Yankton, could carry cargo of 300 to 400 tons but drew only three feet of water.

Historical Past and Preserved Future



NEBRASKALAND MAGAZINE / NGPC

people from Europe and the East to both territories. Many intended to farm the rich bottom land, though one wit commented that they never knew if they would harvest corn or catfish.

The National Park Service works with partners at federal, state, and local levels to protect and promote restoration and conservation efforts for the Missouri National Recreational River.

Bald eagle; view of the Missouri River from a sandbar (above).

Ancient and endangered pallid sturgeons (below) have bony plates and no scales. They weigh up to 65 pounds and reach five feet in length.



NEBRASKALAND MAGAZINE / NGPC

Discover the River

At Missouri National Recreational River you'll find a wild, untamed river that continues to flow as nature intended. Boat and fish in its refreshing water; camp, hike, bike, and hunt; retrace the Lewis and Clark expedition; visit historic sites and a national fish hatchery and aquarium; tour a dam and powerplant; and observe wildlife.



Lucky anglers might hook a walleye or catfish.



A visitor observes wildlife.



Avocets use their bills to stir up aquatic insects.

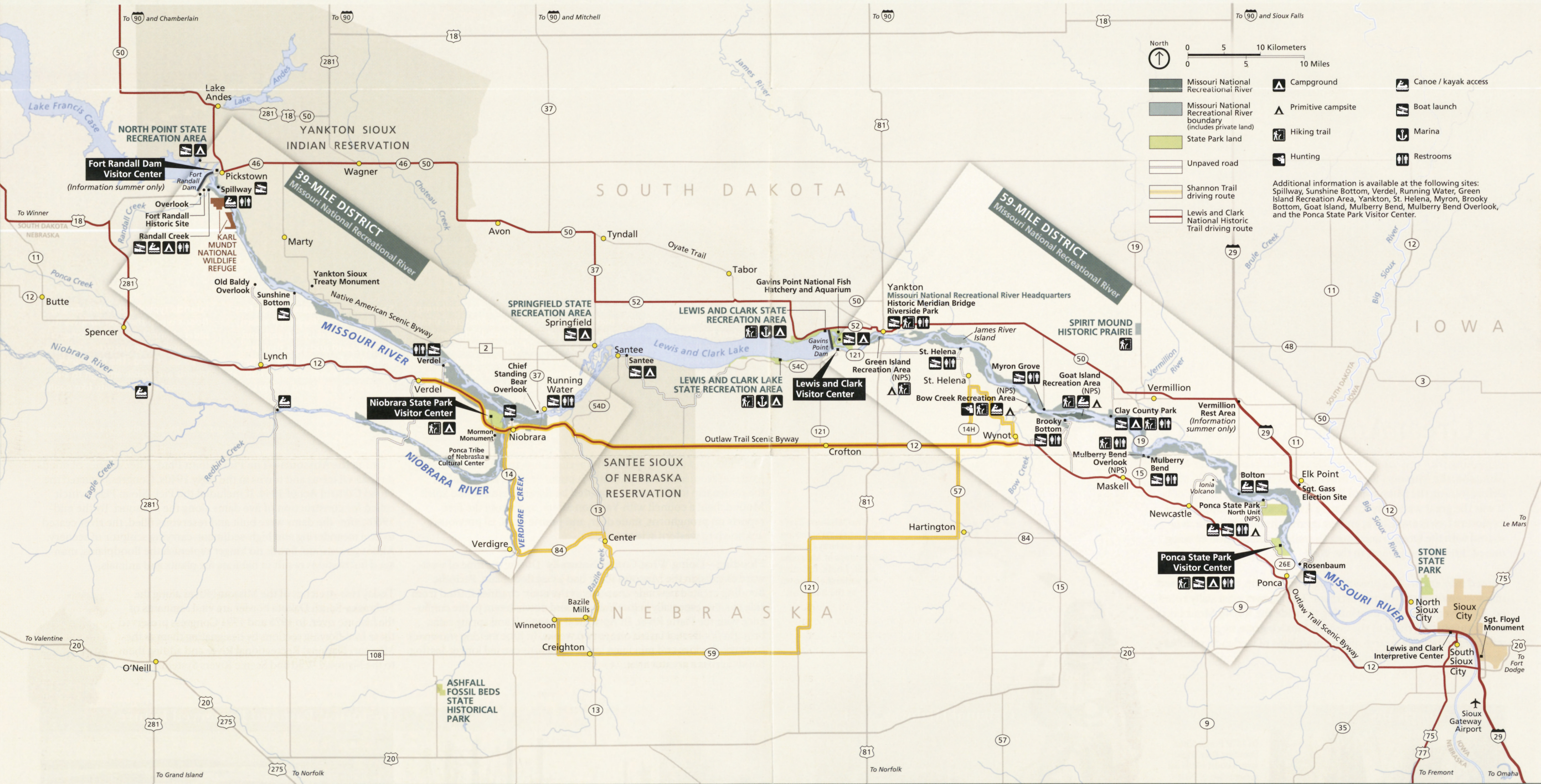


Canoes and other craft ply the river.



The world seems magical from horseback.

PHOTOS - NEBRASKA MAGAZINE / NGPC



Things To See and Do

Missouri National Recreational River comprises two free-flowing reaches of the Missouri River separated by Lewis and Clark Lake. The 39-mile and 59-mile districts lie on either side of the 98th Meridian—the eastern border of the Great Plains. Heading west, Lewis and Clark noticed a change in the landscape: The woods tailed off into tall grass prairie, then gave way to the short grass of the drier high plains. This change is increasingly noticeable west of the Niobrara River.

39-Mile District The western portion (Fort Randall Dam to Running Water, South Dakota) has one of the best-preserved natural landscapes along the entire course of the river. It includes forested chalkstone bluffs and rolling hills.

59-Mile District The eastern portion (Gavins Point Dam to Ponca, Nebraska) exhibits the river's dynamic character in its islands, shallow bars, chutes, and snags.

Hike and observe wildlife throughout the 39-mile and 59-mile districts, at Fort Randall Historic Site, Gavins Point National Fish Hatchery and Aquarium, Green Island, Bow Creek Recreation Area, Clay County Park, Mulberry Bend Overlook, and Spirit Mound. **Hike, bike, or drive scenic trails and byways** at Lewis and Clark National Historic Trail, Native American Trail, and Oyate, Outlaw, and Shannon trails (*map*).

Fishing and Hunting Walleye, bluegill, catfish, paddlefish, largemouth bass, and smallmouth bass are popular catches. In season, hunters can take geese, ducks, turkeys, pheasants, and deer. Licenses required.

Plan Your Trip

Missouri National Recreational River Headquarters, open Monday through Friday, 8 am to 4:30 pm, has park maps, Junior Ranger booklets, a film, and passports.

You can also find visitor information at:
Fort Randall Dam Visitor Center, 605-487-7845, www.nwo.usace.army.mil
North Point State Recreation Area, 605-487-7046, northpoint@state.sd.us
Niobrara State Park Visitor Center, 402-857-3373, outdoornebraska.gov/Niobrara
Lewis and Clark Recreation Area, 402-388-4169, outdoornebraska.gov/LewisandClark
Lewis & Clark Recreation Area, 605-668-2985, Lewis-Clark@state.sd.us
Lewis and Clark Visitor Center, 402-667-2546, www.nwo.usace.army.mil
Ponca State Park Visitor Center, 402-755-2284, outdoornebraska.gov/ponca

Lodging and services are available in nearby communities. Primitive tent camping in the park is available at Goat Island, Bow Creek, and Green Island Recreational areas. Visit the park website for further information.

Park neighbors include homes, tribal lands, communities, federal, state, and community parklands and recreational facilities. Please treat all property with care and respect.

Safety and regulations differ among areas managed by federal, state, tribal, local, and private agencies. Read bulletin boards and know the regulations—*your safety is your responsibility*.

Beware of snags, stumps, sandbars, and floating debris. • Always wear a life vest (PFD) on the river. • Swimming in the river is discouraged because of unpredictable currents. • Personal watercraft (PWC), airboats, and remotely piloted aircraft like

drones are prohibited within the park. • Stay back from cliffs; large chunks of the riverbank can suddenly collapse. • For firearms regulations check the park website.

Accessibility We strive to make facilities, services, and programs accessible to all. Visitor centers and state parks are generally accessible for visitors with disabilities. For information go to a visitor center, ask a ranger, call, or check the park website.

Emergencies call 911

Enjoy a Safe Visit

More Information
Missouri National Recreational River
508 East Second St.
Yankton, SD 57078
605-665-0209
www.nps.gov/mnrr

Follow us on social media.

Use the official NPS App to guide your visit.

Missouri National Recreational River is one of over 400 parks in the National Park System. To learn about national parks and National Park Service programs, visit www.nps.gov.

National Park Foundation
Join the park community.
www.nationalparks.org

©GPO:2022—419-059/82855 Last updated 2022