

Nez Perce National Historic Trail

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Nez Perce campsite, Big Hole National Battlefield, Montana



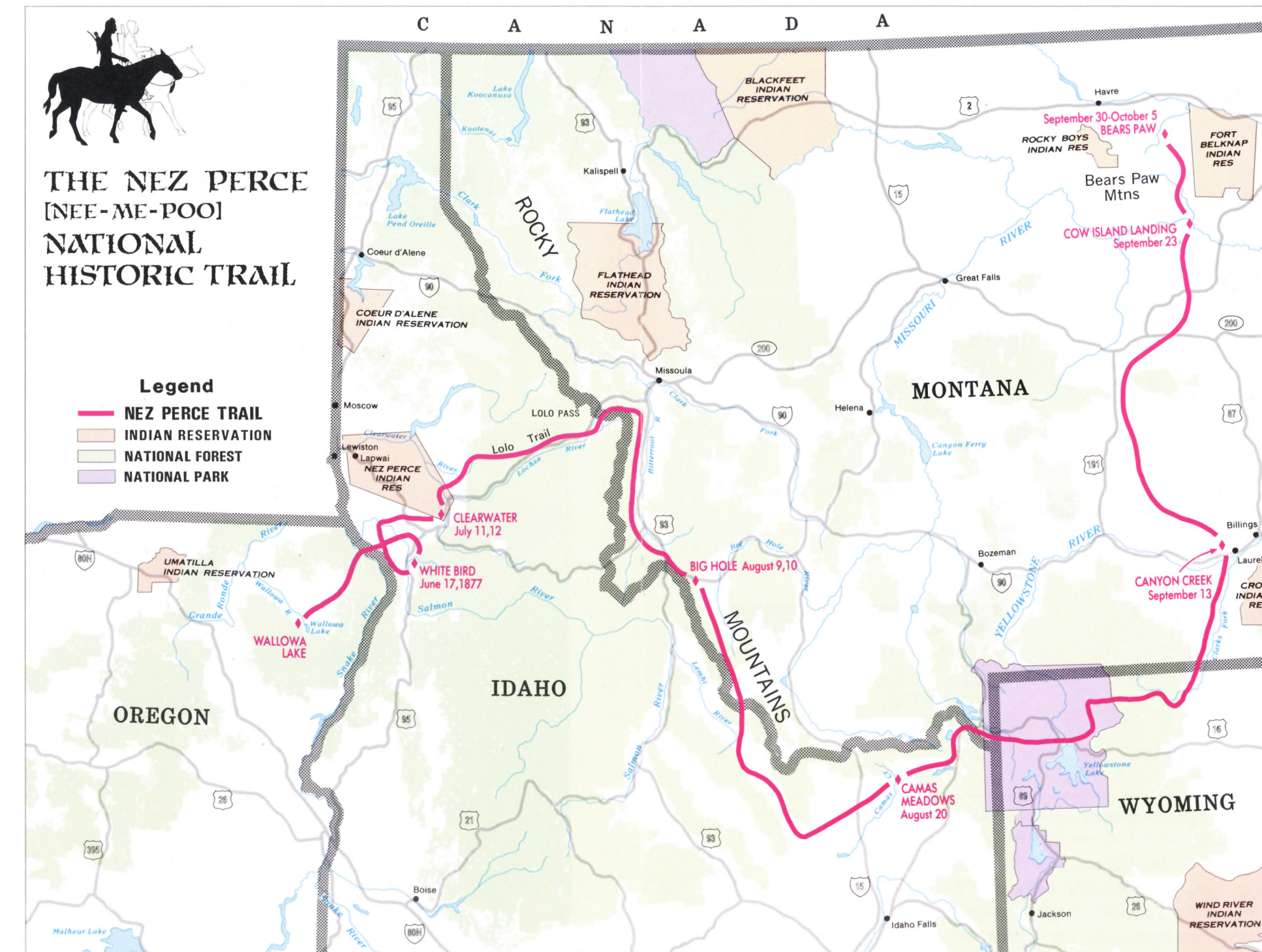
Congress passed the National Trails System Act in 1968 establishing a framework for a nationwide system of scenic, recreational, and historic trails. The Nez Perce (Nee-Me-Poo) Trail, extending approximately 1,170 miles from the vicinity of Wallowa Lake, Oregon, to the Bears Paw Battlefield near Chinook, Montana, was added to this System by Congress as a National Historic Trail in 1986.

The Nez Perce Indians, composed originally of a number of independent villages and bands, were long known as friends of the whites. They had welcomed Lewis and Clark, fur trappers, and missionaries to their homeland in the mountains, valleys, and along the rivers of southeastern Washington, northeastern Oregon, and northcentral Idaho. In 1855, Washington Territorial Governor, Isaac I. Stevens, responding to increasing white expansion, negotiated a treaty with the Nez Perce chiefs, recognizing their peoples' right to their traditional homeland and establishing it as a reservation of some 5,000 square miles.

In 1860, prospectors, encroaching on Nez Perce lands, struck gold. In the ensuing rush, thousands of miners, merchants, and settlers, disregarding Stevens's treaty, overran large parts of the reservation, appropriating the Indians' lands and livestock and heaping mistreatment and injustices on the Nez Percés. To cope with the crisis, the United States Government engaged the angered Nez Perce in new treaty talks that culminated in a large treaty council in 1863. Nearly all tribal bands were represented. When the Government tried to get some of the bands to cede all or most of their lands, they refused to do so and left the council. In their absence, other chiefs, without tribal authority to speak for the departed bands, did just that, ceding the lands of those who had left the council. Their act resulted in a division of the tribe. Those who had signed were praised by the whites as "treaty" Indians; those who did not sign became known as the "nontreaty" Nez Perce.



Whitebird Battlefield,
Nez Perce National Historic Park, Idaho



For some years, the nontreaty bands continued to live on their lands, insisting that no one had the right to sell them. But conflicts with the growing white population increased, particularly in the Wallowa country of northeastern Oregon, the homeland of Chief Joseph's band. In May, 1877, the Army finally ordered the nontreaties to turn over their countries to the whites and move onto a small reservation. Rather than risk war with the Army, the nontreaty chiefs decided to move onto the reservation at Lapwai, Idaho. Pent-up emotions, stemming from years of high-handedness and mistreatment by whites and from the order to leave their homelands, moved several embittered young warriors to ride out to the Salmon River and kill some whites, avenging the past murders of tribal members. The hope for a peaceful move to the small reservation at Lapwai, thus ended, and the flight of the Nez Perce began on June 15, 1877.

Pursued by the Army, the nontreaties left Idaho, intending initially to seek safety with their Crow allies on the plains to the east. When this failed, flight to Canada became their only hope. Their long desperate and circuitous route, as they traveled and fought to escape pursuing white forces, is what we now call the Nez Perce National Historic Trail.

This route was used in its entirety only once; however, component trails and roads that made up the route bore generations of use prior to and after the 1877 flight of the nontreaty Nez Perce. Trails and roads perpetuated through continued use often became portions of transportation systems, though some later were abandoned for more direct routes or routes better suited for modern conveyances. Most abandoned segments can be located today but are often overgrown by vegetation, altered by floods, powerlines, and other manmade structures, or cross a variety of ownerships.

General William Tecumseh Sherman called the saga of the Nez Perce "the most extraordinary of Indian wars." Precipitated into a fight they did not seek by the impulsive actions of the few revengeful young men, some 750 nontreaty Nez Percés — only 250 of them warriors, the rest women, children, and old or sick people, together with their 2,000 horses — fought defensively for their lives in some 20 battles and skirmishes against a total of more than 2,000 soldiers aided by numerous civilian volunteers and Indians of other tribes. Their route through four states, dictated by topography and their own skillful strategy, covered over 1,100 miles before they were trapped and surrendered at Montana's Bears Paw Mountains just short of the Canadian border and safety on October 5, 1877.



Mountainous terrain along the trail,
Crandall Creek, Wyoming



Steamboat Rock near Cow Island
crossing of the Missouri River, Montana

There is irony in the tragic fate of the Nez Percés. In addition to having been loyal friends and allies of the whites for almost three quarters of a century, their conduct during the war was free of traits which whites usually associated with Indian warfare. Following what the whites regarded as a civilized code of conduct, the Nez Percés refrained from scalping, mutilating bodies, or torturing prisoners, and generally avoided attacks on noncombatant citizens. Nevertheless, as defeated Indians, the surviving Nez Percés were sent to several years of exile in present-day Oklahoma before they were allowed to return to reservations in the Northwest.



Dusk settles over the Montana prairie
near trail's end.

Maps and Information Contacts: For more information on the Nez Perce National Historic Trail, contact the agencies listed below. Visitor maps of lands along the trail that are managed by the Forest Service, National Park Service, Bureau of Land Management, and the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks, are available, generally on a 1/2" = 1 mile scale, at a nominal fee. U.S. Geological Survey topographic maps are available from: Branch of Distribution, U.S. Geological Survey, Box 25286, Federal Center, Denver, CO 80225.

Forest Service

Wallowa-Whitman National Forest
Box 907
Baker, OR 97814
(503) 523-6391

Hells Canyon National Recreation Area
Route 1, Box 270A
Enterprise, OR 97828
(503) 426-4978

Nez Perce National Forest
Route 2, Box 475
Grangeville, ID 83530
(208) 983-1950

Clearwater National Forest
12730 Highway 12
Orofino, ID 83544
(208) 476-4541

Lolo National Forest
Building 24, Fort Missoula
Missoula, MT 59801
(406) 329-3750

Bitterroot National Forest
316 North 3rd
Hamilton, MT 59840
(406) 363-3131

Beaverhead National Forest
610 North Montana Street
Dillon, MT 59725
(406) 683-3900

Salmon National Forest
P.O. Box 729
Salmon, ID 83467
(208) 756-2215

Targhee National Forest
P.O. Box 208
St. Anthony, ID 83445
(208) 624-3151

Gallatin National Forest
P.O. Box 130
Bozeman, MT 59771
(406) 587-6701

Shoshone National Forest
808 Meadow Lane
Cody, WY 82414-4516
(307) 527-6241

Custer National Forest
P.O. Box 2556
Billings, MT 59103
(406) 657-6361

Lewis & Clark National Forest
Box 869
Great Falls, MT 59403
(406) 791-7700

National Park Service

Nez Perce National Historical Park
P.O. Box 93
Spalding, ID 83551
(208) 843-2261

Big Hole National Battlefield
P.O. Box 237
Wisdom, MT 59761
(406) 689-3155

Yellowstone National Park
P.O. Box 168
Yellowstone, WY 82190
(307) 344-7381

Bureau of Land Management

Vale District Office
P.O. Box 700
Vale, OR 97918
(503) 473-3144

Coeur d'Alene District Office
1808 North Third Street
Coeur d'Alene, ID 83814
(208) 765-1511

Salmon District Office
P.O. Box 430
Salmon, ID 83467
(208) 756-5401

Idaho Falls District Office
940 Lincoln Road
Idaho Falls, ID 83401
(208) 524-7500

Worland District Office
P.O. Box 119
Worland, WY 82401
(307) 347-9871

Butte District Office
P.O. Box 3388
Butte, MT 59702
(406) 494-5059

Miles City District Office
P.O. Box 940
Miles City, MT 59301
(406) 232-4311

Lewistown District Office
80 Airport Road
Lewistown, MT 59457
(406) 538-7461

State of Montana

Department of Fish, Wildlife & Parks
1420 East 6th Avenue
Helena, MT 59620
(406) 444-3750

Guides and Books: Additional sources of information on the Nez Perce and the trail include: The Flight of the Nez Perce, Mark H. Brown, University of Nebraska Press, 1967; The Nez Perces: Tribesmen of the Columbia Plateau, Frances Haines, University of Oklahoma Press, 1978; The Nez Perces and the Opening of the Northwest, Alvin Josephy, University of Nebraska Press, 1965; Chief Joseph's People and Their War, Alvin Josephy, Yellowstone Library and Museum Association, 1964; Forlorn Hope, John D. McDermott, Idaho State Historical Society, 1978; Hear Me My Chiefs!, Lucullus V. McWhorter, Caxton Press, 1940; Yellow Wolf: His Own Story, Caxton Press, 1952; and Noon Nee-Me-Poo (We the Nez Perces), Nez Perce Tribe of Idaho, 1973.



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