

# Solitude and majesty in Montana's Beartooth Wilderness

By **MIKE ECKEL**  
Associated Press

RED LODGE, Montana — Crawl from your warm sleeping bag out the tent door, into the darkness and pre-dawn wind whipping across the plateau. Look up at the cathedral of the sky. Watch the whirlpool of constellations spin overhead. Hold your breath.

It's hard not to feel vertigo in the majesty of Montana's wilderness. Whether you seek the rocky heights of a 10,000-foot peak or an endless chain of lakes, pastels in a mountain meadow or the endless catch of trout, trek into the one of the state's most magnificent ranges — the Absaroka-Beartooth Wilderness — to find solitude and grandeur.

Don't be put off by the name of the best way to get in there: the Beaten Path, a 26-mile trail that climbs up and over the Gallatin National Forest watershed divide, wending its way past pond after lake, peak after cliff, meadow after plateau. The trail has a reputation for high foot and horse traffic, but in the five days we backpacked through last summer, my hiking partner Ben Yeomans and I saw just a handful of others and embraced the solitude.

The trailhead sits at the southeastern edge of East Rosebud Lake. Accessible by car from the north via a 14-mile road from Roscoe, the lake's shores are dotted with cottages and cabins, and make it an easy jumping-off point for the wilderness.

We decided, however, to access the path via Red Lodge, a tourist town east of the wilderness that is best known as the jumping-off point for the Beartooth Highway, the breathtaking drive that climbs to 11,000 feet (3,352 meters) while winding along the border with Wyoming.

After spotting a car just west of Red Lodge, we hitchhiked two-thirds of the way up West Fork Road, until we got to a trailhead to climb north — and up — out of the river valley and onto the Red Lodge Creek plateau. Much of the valley and surrounding ridgeline is a moonscape of charred timber and ash on the forest floor, the result of an intense 2008 fire. Our boots and legs were gray and dusty by the time we reach tree line, and the parched vales and streambeds on the way up made us glad we packed extra water.



In this Aug. 2016 photo, Mike Eckel tries his hand at trout fishing in Elk Lake, the first of several lakes that drain north along the Beaten Path, a 26-mile hiking trail that crosses through Montana's Absaroka-Beartooth Wilderness.



In this Aug. 2016 photo, the autumn colors burst out from the grasses and bushes lining the Beaten Path.



In this Aug. 2016 photo, Mike Eckel hikes above a lake along the Beaten Path.

Up to 9,800 feet then down off the ridge, we camped on the marshy shores of Crow

Lake, hemmed in by a seam of serrated peaks that turned crimson at sunset.



Impasse Falls, shown in this Aug. 31, 2016, photo, is one of the most dramatic waterfalls along the Beaten Path.

The following day, we climbed out of the valley and crossed an amber meadow carpet, then descended a dusty switchback to arrive at East Rosebud Lake and the beginning of the north end of

the Beaten Path.

The path wound south, past one lake after another, following East Rosebud Creek as it drains north. The fishermen we passed carrying trout in plastic

bags provided reassurance that even novice anglers like ourselves could catch something. At Elk Lake that night, we did not.

The next day we climbed, alternating between switchbacks and scree fields perched over the creek scouring the valley walls. When the trail widened again, along Rainbow Lake, the sun had turned the waters into a sea of floating jewels. We took a couple of cliff dives from the overlooking ledges into the frigid alpine water, then apologized to the guy patiently casting flies just around corner.

One of the beauties of the Montana alpine terrain is how easy it is to wander. That night, we bushwhacked off trail, upstream to Echo Lake. Pika Peak, named for the small, furry rodent that we saw occasionally darting along the trail, was bathed in a tangerine sunset, and we were astounded that, literally, with every cast of our reel, we pulled in brook trout well in excess of a foot. Pan-fried trout for dinner and for breakfast.

We reached the headwaters of East Rosebud Creek the next day, after a gradual climb up and across meadow after meadow, past Impasse Falls, the highest cascade along the path.

We topped out at the divide, at 10,200 feet (3,100 meters), at Fossil Lake. After being baked red by the sun for three days, we welcomed the wind but not the spitting snow and hail. We bundled up and descended.

At Fulcrum Lake, above tree line but in the lee of a rocky knob, our luck with the trout was gone. Our consolation was eating dinner perched on a rock at water's edge. Below us, mountains stretched to the horizon. And when the winds quieted at dusk, the lake's surface swallowed the port sky. Pinprick starlight bounced back into the heavens from where it came.

On the final climb down, we passed so many lakes, we had to resist trying to fish every one of them. The lake names themselves are things to behold: Anvil, Sourdough, Stardust, Courthouse, Fossil, Fizzle, Froze to Death, No Bones, Dude. Gradually the forest pines closed in, and the trail felt claustrophobic after spending so much time open to the sky. The riot of wildflower reds, oranges and yellows beneath our feet took the edge off our wilderness farewell and re-entry to civilization.

## To make heavenly banana bread, make it with vegetable oil

By **ELIZABETH KARMELE**  
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Everyone makes banana bread. And most people love it. A good friend of mine always makes it with chocolate chips because her family will eat anything with chocolate in it. I grew up with my mother making banana bread with butter and pecans, and I thought it was very good until I accidentally created the world's best banana bread a few years ago.

Here is a little background: Anyone who bakes knows that there are butter cakes and oil cakes. Most of the cakes I make, I make with butter, but my Grandmother's Apple Cake is made with vegetable oil and it is always the crowd favorite. So, when I was working on the recipes for my upcoming "Steak and Cake" cookbook, I decided to see how banana bread made with vegetable oil would taste versus my mother's butter recipe.

I was visiting my sister in Houston, and her twin daughters wanted to bake with me. To make sure that everyone had a part in making the recipe, I passed out three bowls. One for each of my nieces, and one for me. I then divided the recipe into three parts. Natalie mashed the bananas with most of



AP Photo/Richard Drew

### Banana bread

the sugar and the vanilla, Olivia measured and whisked the flour and remaining sugar with the other dry ingredients, and I blended the eggs and the vegetable oil.

We mixed the eggs and the flour together, added the completely liquefied banana-sugar mixture and added toasted walnuts for taste and texture. I decorated the tops of the loaves with walnuts and ushered the loaves into the oven.

Of course, they smelled heavenly as they baked — all banana bread smells

heavenly. But once the loaves were out and cooled enough to taste, it was a whole new world.

There was even caramelization all the way through the loaf, which is significant because many loaves of banana bread are darker on the bottom than the top. And, the crumb of the cake was soft and silky but very light and moist. Dry banana bread is also a common complaint and this was the opposite of dry. Best yet, the loaf stays moist and flavorful for days after you

bake it.

The walnut encrusted top is both decorative and adds a welcome crunch. If I have any bread leftover, I love to toast a slice on day 3 or 4 and eat it with a thin spread of peanut butter on top — heaven.

*Elizabeth Karmele is a barbecue and Southern foods expert. She is the chef and pit master at online retailer CarolinaCueToGo.com and the author of three books, including "Taming the Flame."*

### THREE-BOWL BANANA BREAD

**Servings:** 2 loaves, each makes 10 generous slices

**Start to finish:** 1 hour, 15 minutes (Active time: 15 minutes)

**Pan:** 8 x 4 x 2.5-inch loaf pans, disposable aluminum pans work very well.

- 3 large and very ripe, "brown" bananas (you can use 4 small bananas)
- 1 ½ cups granulated white sugar, divided
- 1 teaspoon vanilla
- 1 ¾ cup all-purpose flour
- 1 ½ teaspoon baking soda
- ½ teaspoon salt
- ¼ teaspoon cinnamon
- 3 large eggs
- ¾ cup Crisco all-vegetable oil
- 1-2 cups toasted walnut halves, coarsely chopped plus more halves for decorating
- Flour and Oil Baking Spray

Toast walnuts in the oven at 250 F for about 15-20 minutes. Remove and let cool. Get oven to 325 F.

Meanwhile, mash bananas with a fork and add all but ½ cup of the sugar. Mix and add vanilla. Continue mixing until the mixture is completely smooth.

In a separate large bowl, measure flour and stir with a whisk or fork to aerate. Place ½ cup of sugar in the bowl. Add baking soda, salt, cinnamon and whisk well.

In a third bowl, mix eggs and oil with a blending fork until emulsified. Using a fork, mix eggs well with the flour mixture. Add banana mixture to the egg-flour mixture and stir with a fork until completely combined. Add chopped walnuts and pour batter into prepared loaf pans, using a baking spray so that the bread doesn't stick to the pan. Decorate the top with walnut halves.

Bake for about 60 minutes or until the cake pulls away from the sides of the pan and a toothpick inserted in the center comes out clean.

Remove from oven and let sit in the pan for 5 minutes. Transfer to a cooling rack.

Can be served warm or completely cooled.  
*Nutrition information per serving: 256 calories; 133 calories from fat; 14 g fat (2 g saturated); 0 g trans fats; 32 mg cholesterol; 163 mg sodium; 27 g carbohydrate; 1 g fiber; 17 g sugar; 3 g protein.*