

West Pioneer Mountains Loop

Contributed by Bruce Newell, May 2012

- Length: 120 miles round trip
- Starts: Wise River (Travel clockwise, recommended for prevailing winds)
- Ends: Same
- Parking: Wise River Ranger District, call for permission (406) 832-3178
- Elevation: Starting and low point: Wise River 5,715 ft
High point: Near Crystal Park, 7,800 ft
- Duration: 3 day tour (could be done in 1–3 days)
- Difficulty: Moderate, two high passes
- Attractions: This is a hot springs tour, featuring Elkhorn and Jackson hot springs. The Pioneer Mt. Scenic Byway is gorgeous, especially in the early summer when flowers are blooming. The Big Hole Valley, with the Bitterroot Mts in the background, is stunningly beautiful. The roads are generally very quiet, fun to ride, astonishingly scenic, and ideal for a relatively, very enjoyable, three-day tour.
- Picnic: Hundreds of prime picnic spots
- Camping: See map, many campgrounds. Water from pumps in campgrounds may be rusty-tasting, bring a filter
- Lodging: At Elkhorn Hot Springs, in Jackson, in Wisdom
- Surface: Paved road. Variable surface, generally very good. Variable shoulders.
- Terrain: Two big climbs, to Crystal Park in the Pioneers, and Big Hole Pass/Carroll Hill on MT278. Otherwise, level to moderate rollers along the Big Hole River
- Best time: The Pioneer Mountains Scenic Byway typically opens mid-May, and closes in the fall. Check with the Ranger District (406) 832-3178
- Traffic: Moderate to light. Recreational traffic along the Big Hole River (pickups towing drift boats).
- Cautions: Riders are exposed to potentially severe mountain weather. Pack for cold, wet and strong winds. Bring warm clothes and consider bringing a light shelter in the event of thunderstorms. Until the fall freeze, mosquitos are likely present and voracious in the Big Hole Valley.

Bring your camera, a bathing suit and a towel. This three-day tour routes you through some of the prettiest scenery in Montana, and affords lodging or camping sleeping options, restaurants, and small grocery stores, and water stops. RATPOD riders ride part of this route, S to N, and the Great Divide Mountain Bike Route runs from Wise River to Bannack.

Cue Sheet

- 1.3 Wise River Ranger District
- 0 Wise River, head south along the Pioneer Mountains Scenic Byway
- 12 Fourth of July Campground (USFS)
- 13 Lodgepole Campground (USFS)
- 14 Willow Campground (USFS)
- 20.5 Grand Vista Scenic Overlook (USFS)
- 21 Little Joe Campground (USFS)
- 22 Climb begins
- 26 Meadows at top of climb
- 29 Crystal Park
- 32.2 Climb gravel side road to Elkhorn Hot Springs, 0.4 miles further. Swimming, restaurant, various lodging offers, call for info: 800-722-8978, 406-834-3434 (distances along scenic route, not including side trip to Elkhorn HS)
- 33 Grasshopper Campground (USFS)
- 35.5 Optionally, turn E toward Ma Barnes Country store, 0.4 miles along gravel side road
- 39.2 Polaris (no services)
- 45.8 Turn E on MT 278
- 53.2 Top of Big Hole Pass, see exhibit at summit
- 64 Jackson, groceries, lodging, restaurants, call Jackson Hot Springs Lodge, 406-834-3151 for info
- 81.7 Wisdom, groceries, gas, restaurant, limited lodging
- 107 Sportsman Campground (private)
- 112 East Bank Campground (BLM)
- 113 Dickie Bridge Campground (BLM)
- 120 Town of Wise River
- 121.3 Wise River Ranger District

