

# In the Footsteps of Norman Maclean On the Banks of the Blackfoot River



Looking upstream the Blackfoot River from the Clearwater Bridge. Norman Maclean makes reference to the bridge in his book, "A River Runs Through It."

Story & photos by Andi Bourne  
*Pathfinder*

SEELEY LAKE - The Seeley Lake Literary Festival "In the Footsteps of Norman Maclean," drew attendees from all over the United States and International visitors. They came to experience places on the Blackfoot River Norman Maclean wrote about in his 1976 book "A River Runs Through It."

Blackfoot River Keeper Jerry O'Connell guided two Blackfoot River fishing-hole tours July 11 and 12 as a part of the festival. O'Connell said that while no one can pin-point the exact locations from the book, there are just enough clues in Maclean's descriptions to narrow down the stretches of the Blackfoot to a few possible locations.

Russell Gates was the first stop on the tour dubbed "Hooker's Corner" by Maclean's book. Participants laughed as O'Connell read Maclean's description of finding his girlfriend's brother sunburned and naked with a gal he had met in town the night before. O'Connell pointed to the gravel bars to the left of the boat ramp that fits Maclean's description saying that the islands change with the

flows of the river so the location is not exact.

The second stop, Johnny Pope Cabin on the E Bar L Ranch, is considered by locals to be the location Maclean describes when Paul swam out, grabbed onto the large rock with his arm, swung over and with water streaming off of him, shook like a dog. With the sunlight behind him and the mist from the rapids, Maclean describes a visionary moment – the poster scene.

While this location was filmed on the Big Boulder near Big Timber, the exact location on the Blackfoot is unknown. It is just one of the many tight canyons above the old Clearwater Bridge where the Blackfoot roars loudest. "This is no place for small fish or small fishermen," read O'Connell from Maclean's book.

The third stop Ninemile Prairie Fishing Access Site (FAS), O'Connell believes was the last time Norman and Paul fished with their father before Paul was killed. O'Connell has several reasons for this belief including the descriptions of the ponderosa pine grove across the river, access to several fishing holes up and down stream and an access about a quarter mile up from the FAS

that Norman's father could have accessed easily.

O'Connell highlighted the Montana mud stone at the third and fourth stops that had the ripples of the river and raindrops permanently formed into them. These rocks are 500 million to a million and a half years old and fascinated Maclean and his father. The various colors are due to the presence of the blue green algae and mixtures of gases in the atmosphere when the fossilization occurred.

The final stop was up river from the third stop near Corrick River Bend FAS. This is where Maclean taught his grandchildren to fish. It also neighbors O'Connell's property.

O'Connell shared the story of how when he first moved to the property from New Jersey he quickly posted a "Keep Out" sign next to the public assess. After sharing a welcome cheesecake with the river ranger, O'Connell was asked about his sign. Thinking nothing of it other than that was the way it was done, O'Connell was willing to remove it after he was told that, in Montana, it is courteous to allow fishing access across private property. The keep out sign was replaced with a sign informing the public that they are crossing private property and to respect the privilege.

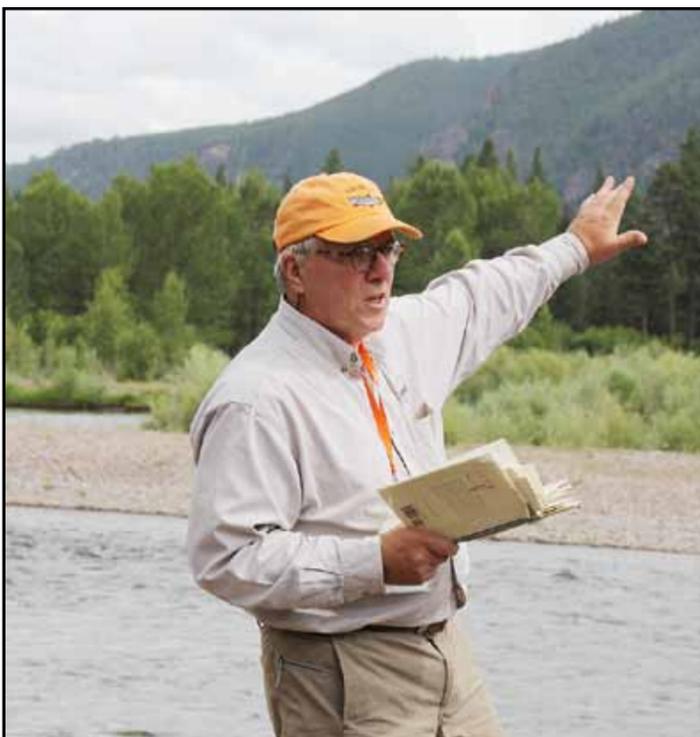
"I've never had to pick up trash or bottles or anything," said O'Connell. "And the sign has been here for years and there is not a single bullet hole in it. It just shows how much people respect these waters."

The public access impressed one man from Virginia who was amazed that the public could drive to three of the four stops. O'Connell said that 100 percent of the private landowners along the Blackfoot Corridor from Russell Gates to Johnsrud Park agreed to allow public use of their land 50 feet from the shore as a part of the Blackfoot Recreation Corridor Agreement.

Alana and Mike Seaman of South Carolina were impressed with the tour.

"I loved how [O'Connell] read from the book [at the different stops]," said Alana.

Mike added, "It ties into everyone's mental image of what they read and how it actually is."



Blackfoot Riverkeeper and tour guide Jerry O'Connell reading a passage from "A River Runs Through It" and pointing to the landscape author Norman Maclean was describing at "Hooker's Corner" now called Russell Gates Fishing Access Site.

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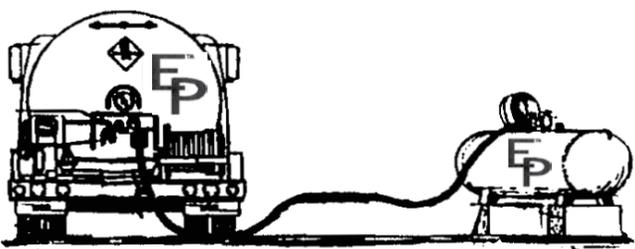
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Tour guide Jerry O'Connell pointing to the fast moving water at the second stop on the tour on the E Bar L Ranch. The stop is distinctive because of the large boulders and tight canyon, making for fast water and difficult fishing, but a place that Norman's brother Paul loved.