

## What's In a Name?

By Bruce Rieman and Ken Barber

Ever wonder why it's called the Clearwater River? Let's explore what is known of the history of the River's name. A search of Salish place names (the primary Native American Group inhabiting the area) did not turn up a designation for the Clearwater River. The Lewis and Clark Expedition passed the Clearwater near the confluence of the Blackfoot on July 5, 1806. In Meriwether Lewis' journal he did name the Clearwater River, but following their usual convention, it was given a person's name rather than descriptive name. Lewis made a brief note in the Corps of Discovery journal designating what is now called the Clearwater River as "Werner Creek" after Private William Werner who was part of the expedition. It is curious why Lewis called it Werner Creek rather than Werner River given that he estimated the width at 35 yards.

From what records are available, the name Clearwater was given to the river by a prospector in the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century. The entry in the Montana Historical record shows that the prospector noted that the water was clearer than the Blackfoot at high flow. If you've looked at the confluence of the Clearwater and the Blackfoot rivers in the last few weeks you might have noticed what others did when geographic names were being given out. What the unnamed prospector noticed over a hundred years ago compelled him to provide the descriptive name to the River that is still true today.

So why is the Clearwater so clear in flood as compared to the Blackfoot? The differences might not always have been so striking as they are today, and they might not be that way in the future. But, one big reason for the differences now is the huge set of natural filters that sit in the valley bottom of the Clearwater Basin. The chain of lakes and the major wetlands and floodplains that sit on the head end of each lake and along the margins of the river and major tributaries, do a lot of work. Those deep lake basins, and the shallower, shrubby, marshy wetlands slow the water down where it drops much of what it's carrying from the watersheds above. A lot of that is fine sediment, but it includes nutrients, and other dissolved material as well. Ever notice the color of the water in many of our small streams in the spring? Even when the water is relatively clear it can be the color of strong tea (or pretty weak coffee) because of dissolved organic materials carried out of the watersheds in the spring.

In really high water years like this one, the lakes may be less important as they flush more quickly---- but the wetlands are even more important as the water pushes over the banks and out on to the flatter, marshy, vegetation choked floodplains that also slow and trap a lot of the load.

The milkshake brown Blackfoot and the clearer Clearwater aren't necessarily bad and good. A lot of it is just the way it works. The Clearwater has a lot of lakes and wetlands that the Blackfoot doesn't and never did (if you don't count Glacial Lake Missoula that is). But the way we use and develop the land also matters. When you travel the valleys in the spring pay attention to the smaller tributary streams and see if you can figure out where things might have changed more than others. And even that change isn't necessarily bad. It's often the result of what we do to support ourselves, to create jobs, and live in beautiful places. But as we do that it's probably good to think about the natural systems that work with us to make the valley what it is.... And what it was. Keeping our lakes and wetlands working for us can

help us link to the past and the future. That prospector who named the Clearwater in the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century did not call it the Greenwater or the Brownwater River and with a little work we can make sure the original name remains relevant.