

BEST MAGAZINE

2012 Pacific Northwest
SPJ winner for
General Excellence

Montana Quarterly

VOLUME EIGHT NUMBER FOUR, TWO THOUSAND TWELVE | WINTER

Road(less) Traveled
Photographer Tony Bynum
Catches the Prairie at its Best

Out of the Wild
David Quammen Explores
Diseases that Lurk and Pounce

**Sometimes a
Great Document**

How Montana's
Constitution
Shapes our Lives

Monida: The Town that Wouldn't Die
Fiction by Glenn Chamberlain



The Road(less) Traveled: Photographer Tony Bynum explores Montana's untracked Prairies

PHOTOGRAPHY BY TONY BYNUM
STORY BY SCOTT McMILLION

TONY BYNUM LIVES IN EAST GLACIER, where the prairies smack the mountains, folding up like a loose rug at a dance party, with aspen and pines, water and ice filling the cracks. It's grizzly country there, home ground to elk and bighorns and the Blackfoot Indians, the people who ruled an awful lot of prairie for an awful long time.

Bynum makes his living as a wildlife and landscape photographer, shooting for outdoor, hunting and conservation magazines around the country. He doesn't photograph captive animals, he has a taste for foul weather, and he wears out a lot of shoes.

"You've got to have boots on the ground," he says. Otherwise, the work can look a little hollow.

So he's out there. Boots on the ground. And it shows.

Bynum works all over the West, but last summer he spent three and a half months shredding his boot leather in the most isolated parts of Montana's prairies. He had a job to do, documenting roadless areas for the Pew Environment Group, focusing on big,



Sunset marks the end of another day on the eastern rim of Frenchman Coulee in northeastern Phillips County, Montana.

wild chunks of BLM land, places where people don't go very often, places that might be eligible to become protected as wilderness, someday, maybe. Wilderness is a contentious issue, out on the prairie, where arguments seem to last forever when people talk about things like bison and national monuments and the best ways to run a herd of cattle. It's third-rail politics for a lot of people so Congress hasn't passed a Montana wilderness bill since 1988 and that one got vetoed in a political deal. One that addresses prairie lands doesn't loom on the immediate horizon.



A bachelor herd of elk, antlers still in velvet, coats sleekened by summer weather, cast eyes across the prairie north of the Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge, southern Valley County, Montana. Below, time, water and wind shape the landscape east of the Larb Hills, Valley County.



Scattered clouds highlight the sky west of Frenchman Creek, northern Phillips County. Grasslands National Park, Canada, lies in the far distance.



The badlands south of Fort Peck and east of the Dry Arm of Fort Peck Reservoir invite the simple acts of exploration and wonder, a dwindling form of recreation in a world dominated by machines.



Thunderstorms bring water, wind and fire, forces that shape the workings of a prairie ecosystem. This storm approached the Dry Arm of Fort Peck Lake from the west, 30 miles south of Fort Peck.



Stacy Dolderer, technology and GIS expert, bathes in the glow of a prairie sunset near the Page Whitham Ranch, south of Malta, Montana, with the Little Rocky Mountains in the far distance.

Still, it helps to know what's out there, how the land looks and feels today, and that's how Bynum spent his summer, spelling it out.

The Bureau of Land Management oversees 12 million acres in Montana and last inventoried its roadless areas in the 1980s. Bynum's job was to see what has changed since then, comparing old maps and statistics to what he found on the ground.

"What we found is that there's a lot less use these days," Bynum says. Native plants are overtaking old roads and trails, gradually reclaiming the land. "It's remarkable how fast these things come back."

Armed with his camera, Bynum and his colleague, Stacy Dolderer, focused this summer on Montana's Hi-Line country, the expanse of prairie bisected by Highway 2 and stretching from the Canadian border to the Missouri River Breaks, driving dirt roads until they petered out, then walking for miles, to see what they could see. They found a whole lot of empty.



Mule deer skull in the Frenchman Creek Breaks. Life works out its cycles there.



Looking south toward the Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge from the Page Whitham Ranch. Scattered boulders escaped the grinding molars of glaciers that passed through thousands of years ago.



After a summer rain shower, wispy clouds form in the sky over Frenchman Creek, northern Phillips County.

“For the most part, if we weren’t on a county-maintained road, we saw no one,” Bynum said. But they found something beyond a lack of people, and Bynum’s photographs show it to us: a sense of solitude, an urge to explore, and the rewards of taking a good look around.

Montana’s prairies are never as flat as they look. While you can see for miles and miles, the land has ripples and creases that hide all sorts of things: a patch of trees, the fossils of ancient sea creatures, badlands and coulees and brushy draws that shelter all sorts of wildlife. Elk, maybe. Deer and antelope probably, raptors and prairie dogs, and coyotes carrying on in the evening gloam.

And the wind song with its freight of tiny sounds: bug chirp, bird whistle, human breathing.

You can’t see much of it from the cab of a pickup, and it’s all a lot more accessible than you might think.

“These places are doable,” Bynum says. “They’re accessible. A common person with a tent and a backpack can get out there and do it.”

You’ll need good shoes, your own water and some maps. A four-wheel-drive is a good idea. Shovels and jacks in case you get stuck. Probably an extra can of gas. Patience if rains arrive and strand you in impassable gumbo. And hopefully, a sense of exploration.

You never know what you might find. 📌

Exploration has its rewards, like this petrified log spelling out how things have changed in a badlands area south of Fort Peck and east of the Dry Arm of Fort Peck Lake.

