

The Crown of the Continent

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A trickle of the Flathead River starts high in the mountains of Glacier National Park, gathering force into a spring-melt freshet that becomes Pacific Creek, then Nyack Creek, the Middle Fork of the Flathead River and, eventually the Columbia River to the Pacific.



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On the other side of the peak, the melting snows gather into Hudson Bay Creek en route to Red Eagle Creek, the St. Mary River, Oldman River and Saskatchewan before finally emptying into Canada's enormous Hudson Bay and, beyond, the Arctic and North Atlantic oceans.

This same mountain dribbles its pristine alpine waters in yet another direction, this time via Atlantic Creek and Cutbank River to the Missouri, Mississippi and Gulf of Mexico.

This is Triple Divide Peak, the geographic apex that inspired George Bird Grinnell to dub this great transboundary landscape the "Crown of the Continent." Grinnell, the original proponent of Glacier National Park in the late 1800s, became a passionate champion for the preservation of these

continental headwaters, their tremendous wildlife populations, the spectacular scenery, and the living heritage of the native tribes that he befriended and defended.

Today we know the Crown of the Continent as a sprawling landscape of nearly 25,000 square miles, include the entire Flathead and Blackfoot watersheds, Montana's Rocky Mountain Front, southwestern Alberta's Front Range and foothills prairie, and the mountain valleys and Rocky Mountain Trench of southeastern British Columbia.

Think of each of these sub-regions as large pieces of a grand puzzle. Just like the Flathead Watershed, each of these watersheds and mountain landscapes is special. But in its great diversity, intact and connected with each other, this great region rises to international distinction.

Each of the parts is outstanding, yet the whole of the Crown of the Continent is greater than the sum of its parts.

In 2008, National Geographic Society and 50 partner groups in Alberta, British Columbia and Montana produced an unusual, community-built "MapGuide" of the Crown of the Continent depicting the region's splendid heritage of history, culture and nature. More than a dozen lakes and rivers cross the international border along this narrow waistband of the Rocky Mountain. So, too, does the wildlife and mountain ranges transcend the 49th Parallel. And the native people, historically and today, maintain their cultural ties in both countries: The Ktunaxa/Kootenai, the Interior Salish, and the Blackfoot Confederacy.

Few places on earth match the wild nature and living heritage of the Crown of the Continent, says Jonathan Tourtellot, National

Geographic's senior editor for the Crown of the Continent MapGuide:

"The Crown of the Continent is one of the most intact natural ecosystems in the temperate zones of the world. It is a place of plunging valleys, sweet water, ancient cedar forests, native prairie and diverse wildlife. It's also a place with a rich cultural heritage: Sovereign First Nations still occupy the same territory after thousands of years, alongside loggers, ranchers, miners and more recently an influx of new residents who have brought far-flung business ventures and incomes. This map tells the stories tied to this very special landscape."

Today, educators, conservation and business groups, government agencies, tribes and First Nations are joining together to understand, celebrate and preserve the special values of the Crown of the Continent.

Order a free copy of the National Geographic map and learn more about the region at www.crownofthecontinent.net

