

MONTANA'S COWBOYS & RODEOS

CULTURE, HISTORY & HERITAGE

Montana cowboys are almost as famous as its blue sky. Perhaps it's the idea of riding across the range under that sky, that present the romance of the idea. But cowboys not only ride across gentle hills, they may ride one-ton bulls, unruly broncs or a horse in intricate patterns to test their horsemanship skills, all in the name of competition and fun – the rodeo.

The true western sport of rodeo began as the result of activities performed by working cowboys on their day-to-day jobs. Calf roping was done when a calf had to be caught for doctoring, while saddle bronc riding was performed to break a horse to ride. It wasn't long before cowboys began gathering regularly to test their skills and prove who was the toughest cowboy and the best rider. Today, rodeo participants display feats of agility, strength, courage and sometimes, to the onlookers, sheer madness. Here's a quick history lesson and the events you'll see today.

- ✚ **Saddle Bronc Riding** ~ On the ranch, wild broncs (horses) were rode until they were broke (rideable) or the cowboy bucked off. Today, the bronc rider's 8 second ride is judged on how well he rides and how well the horse bucks.
- ✚ **Bareback Riding** ~ Smaller horses required different techniques for the same results, making the horse rideable or the cowboy bucked off. Today, no stirrups or reins are used; just a strap to hold on to, while the horse bucks for 8 seconds, due to the rhythmic spurring from the cowboy's boots. Riders are judged on how he rides and how well the horse bucks; if he's not bucked off in the process.
- ✚ **Calf Roping** ~ First used to catch calves that needed "doctoring," today the event is still a test of speed, horsemanship and agility. Calves are released and then the horse and roper speed after it. The cowboy, hopefully, ropes the calf then dismounts. The horse works to keep the rope taut while the cowboy downs the calf and ties three legs together. If one part fails, the calf escapes and the cowboy and his horse are defeated. The roper with the fastest time succeeds.
- ✚ **Steer Wrestling** ~ When calves needed to be tended to on the open prairie, a team of two cowboys would catch the calf and wrestle (or "bulldog") it to the ground. Today, in the corral, a team chases the released calf in a timed event. One rider keeps the steer in a straight line; the other leaps from his horse onto the steer, grab it by the horns, stop it and wrestle it to the ground. The cowboys who perform this contest in the shortest time prevail.
- ✚ **Barrel Racing** ~ Women also spent time on the horse in days gone by. Today, to show their skill as a rider and the agility of their horse, women run highly trained horses through a cloverleaf pattern around three barrels at breakneck speeds. The fastest time, often by a hundredth of a second, is the winner.
- ✚ **Bull Riding** ~ The "ultimate contest" of the rodeo pits a man against a bull. Only a flat braided rope and the cowboy's skill, while using only one hand to stay on, is all that's between the cowboy and the bull. For 8 seconds, judges rate the cowboy's skill, his spurring and the bulls bucking, turning and twisting.
- ✚ **Rodeo Clowns** ~ These men are the true heroes of every rodeo. These professionals, while outfitted to look like a clown, have one primary mission – rescue cowboys. These "matadors" distract the bull once the cowboy is off, allowing him to escape any way he can.



Just as in days gone by when Montana cowboys met after the annual roundup (or rodeo in Spanish) professional cowboys adhere to the same spirit and professionalism. Danger and luck, friendship and camaraderie, skill and strength make each rodeo exciting and unforgettable. To experience Montana's rodeos up close and personal, here's a sampling of large and small, professional and downhome celebrations to watch.

- ✚ **Home of Champions Rodeo & Parade** – (Red Lodge, Yellowstone Country) – Come, celebrate the July 4th in true small town spirit with parades at noon. Each July, national rodeo champions – cowboys and cowgirls – compete in this historic town at the base of the most scenic road in America. www.redlodge.com
- ✚ **Livingston Roundup Rodeo & Parade** (Livingston, Yellowstone Country) – Celebrating the 4th of July, this three-day rodeo extravaganza features ropers and riders from across the U.S. and Canada. Since 1924, this event, less than an hour from Yellowstone National Park, has entertained generations with its all-American cowboy tradition and fireworks each night.
- ✚ **MontanaFair** (Billings, Custer Country) – For nine days each August, Montana's biggest city hosts plays host to the biggest event. Choose from rodeos, concerts, exhibits and stages and celebrate Montana's agricultural history. www.montanafair.com
- ✚ **Wild Horse Stampede** (Wolf Point, Missouri River Country) – Montana's oldest pro-rodeo, the Wild Horse Stampede, has been held in early July since 1921. Even before the term 'rodeo' was coined, this was an event staged by Native Americans for wild riding skills and celebration, which continues today on the Fort Peck Reservation.



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A cowboy's life was not just about riding the horse or herding cattle, but the nature, the gear and the philosophy of life that instilled a sense of quiet reflection from their surroundings which also managed to capture the thrill of life's challenges. In Montana, there are several attractions focused on the cowboy and their life that offer a glimpse into the soul of these unique men and women.

- + **CM Russell Museum** (Great Falls, Russell Country) – A cowboy who became “*the*” western artist, this namesake Museum displays the most complete collection of Russell’s original art and personal objects, as well as works by his western contemporaries. (year-round) www.cmrussell.org
- + **Grant-Kohrs Ranch National Historic Site** (Deer Lodge, Gold West Country) – Operated by the National Park Service, this free 1,500-acre working cattle ranch illustrates the cattle industry from the 1850’s to recent times. See activities and explore the house and buildings that recall the days of old-time cowboys as well as modern ranchers. (year-round) www.nps.gov/grko
- + **Holt Heritage Museum** (Lolo, Glacier Country) – This private museum showcases the story of cowboys and their equipment, including the evolution of different types of saddles and tack, as well as artifacts from various Indian tribes. From the cowboy and Indian to rodeo’s and powwow’s this collection, despite its limited hours, is one not to be missed. (July – September) www.holtheritagemuseum.com
- + **Prairie County Museum and Cameron Gallery** (Terry, Custer Country) – Just moments off I-94, this museum complex is the essence of the pioneer life: the way it was lived, how it was endured, and how they thrived in eastern Montana. The Gallery features photos of the area as seen through the eyes of the pioneer British immigrant, Lady Cameron. (Memorial Day – Labor Day) www.visiterrymontana.com



- + **Range Riders Museum** (Miles City, Custer Country) – The largest western museum in the area, the Range Rider portrays the authentic personality of men and women during the most difficult time in the life of a pioneer. The wall of chaps, hundreds of guns and hand-sewn quilts are just a glimpse to life on the open range. (April – October) www.rangeridersmuseum.org

If you're wishing to become – or at least blend in – a cowboy or cowgirl, every Montana community from small to large has shops, stores or markets that carry what you need, ranging from jeans to hats to ropes and buckles. Whether it's a straw hat to shield you during the rodeo or a custom-made hat by the Mad Hatters in Twin Bridges or Rand's of Billings, Montana's hospitality will help you feel the part. After the hat, how about a silver belt buckle (along with the leather belt) made by Montana Silversmith's, handcrafted here in Big Sky Country? No matter what you're wearing, a smile is always appreciated; the friendly two-finger wave while driving is a welcome greeting; and a simple “You bet,” let's us know that you are a cowboy or cowgirl at heart.



If you're looking for more information on Montana's rodeos or western adventure or attractions or even a chance to experience what today's cowboy is like, check out www.visitmt.com or www.montanadra.com.

