



The author crests a butte in the south unit of Theodore Roosevelt National Park.

## Turtle Power

SEEK INSPIRATION FROM A PATIENT AND PERSEVERING CREATURE ON NORTH DAKOTA'S MAAH DAAH HEY TRAIL

**E**mbazoned on wooden posts that mark 97 miles of bentonite single-track winding through western North Dakota is a pictogram of a turtle, a symbol of the Mandan Indians. The turtle represents determination, steadfastness, fortitude and longevity—all moral fibers you'll hope for as your muscle fibers tackle a land that's not described as hilly or mountainous—it's just called "bad."

Completed in 1999, the Maah Daah Hey Trail (pronounced exactly how it looks) zags through the Badlands. It cuts switch-back-style up the sides of mammoth buttes, covered with white bentonite (a

type of clay), flashes of brick-red scoria and coarse, tall prairie grasses. It crests the tops of sun-scorched ridges, revealing vistas of fire-colored canyons. From its trailhead in Medora—to its northern

terminus about 15 miles south of Watford City—it loosely follows the ropery Little Missouri River, traversing Theodore Roosevelt National Park along the way.

President Roosevelt, who came to the area in 1883 and later ranched there, described the parched, warped terra firma best: "The Bad Lands grade all the way from those that are almost rolling in character to those that are so fantastically broken in form and so bizarre in color as to seem hardly properly to belong to this earth."



### Ultra Warrior

*Maah Daah Hey*, a Mandan Indian phrase, means “an area that has or will be around for a long time.” Back in Roosevelt’s day—and long before then—the trail consisted of broken sections of footpath used by Native Americans, hunters and fur trappers who had settled in or were passing through the region. Thanks to the U.S. Forest Service’s endeavors over three decades, the trail became the nation’s longest continuous singletrack. Now it has grown. Expansion efforts extended the trail 45 miles south of Medora and was completed this fall.

Meriwether Lewis and William Clark passed over this treacherous area on their

## Saddle Up

➤ **HAPPY TRAILS.** Enjoy stunning views on a guided trail ride. Call Medora Riding Stables at 1-800 MEDORA-1.

➤ **READY TO RIDE.** Want a horse with suspension? The Maah Daah Hey and its connecting side trails are top notch for adrenaline-pumping two-wheeled adventures. Rent from Dakota Cyclery, [www.dakotacyclery.com](http://www.dakotacyclery.com).

➤ **COWBOY LEGENDS.** Prefer to stay out of the saddle? Check out the region’s history at the North Dakota Cowboy Hall of Fame in Medora.

➤ **COWBOY COUTURE.** Dress up your saddle at Medora’s Corner Corral, End of the Trail, Ticket Junction and Joe Ferris General Store.

epic journey; generals and warriors fought bloody battles on this ground; and, millions of years ago, dinosaurs once called the contorted hills home. The area’s history is thicker than the heady scent of sagebrush, and a run over the land will channel your inner warrior.

Draw from the patience and steadfast spirit of the turtle—yet hopefully move a bit faster than the shelled creature—and take on the ultimate distance. Do so in one extremely adventurous day or split it up into shorter jaunts.

While motor vehicles are not allowed on the Maah Daah Hey and most of it is very remote, several points intersect with roads, so meeting up with a support crew is possible.

Four campgrounds between the trailhead and the terminus feature potable water from May to December, but the campgrounds are 18 or more miles apart, so carry plenty of fuel and fluids to cover the distances between. The hot, dry desert climate can sneak up on you.

Be aware of the forecast, as rainfall can create flash floods and impossible mud. Plus, once the bentonite gets wet, it turns in to a cement-like material that will glob onto your trail shoes until you’re essentially running on bricks.

The path has gained popularity with mountain bikers and equestrians, but for much of your journey, you’ll likely be the lone ranger save for the wildlife you may meet. Buffalo, mountain lions, coyotes, mule deer, bighorn sheep, elk and prairie dogs consider the Badlands good living. Running competition might be a pack of wild horses. Don’t let them distract you from keeping an eye out for rattlesnakes and prickly-pear cactus. Also, buffalo can



charge at more than 30 mph, so keep your distance.

Those not familiar with North Dakota often consider it a flat, treeless, wind-swept and desolate region of the high plains. Much of the eastern part of the state is indeed flat, but the western slice resembles mountains mangled by a machete. The elevation on the Maah Daah Hey varies from 2000 to 2700 feet.

A few longer climbs will ramp up your heart rate, but most are on the short side, plus plummeting canyon drops and flat dashes through wooded coulees offer a break from quad-busting hauls up buttes. These switch-ups make the trail fun and manageable at varying distances.

“There’s a fair amount of evenness,” says David Wakefield of Weyburn, Saskatchewan, Canada. “You get a good feel for everything, and the scenery couldn’t be better.” Wakefield fell in love with the Maah Daah Hey after visiting Medora on a road trip and returned to run the annual race.

### Racing the Hey

The Badlands Trail Run takes place in late summer and includes an out-and-back 5K and 10K. The race starts and ends at the Burning Hills Amphitheater, the site of the famed Medora musical. The variety show plays every summer evening and is

chock full of regional culture—especially if you’re in the mood for some expert yodeling. You’ll receive a free ticket for winning your age group in the event.

This year marked the third race. Charles Black, 24, whose birthday gift to himself was winning the 10K with a time of 43:27:39, says, “It was easy for the first couple of miles. Then you get to those switchbacks, and it just feels like you’re putzin’ along.” A recent graduate of the University of North Dakota, Black works as a Biological Technician in the north unit of Theodore Roosevelt National Park. He enjoys runs in the Badlands because the diverse terrain constantly challenges him. “After the switchbacks, it was all downhill for a while,” he adds, “but then we came back up and around the corner and, oh, the wind!”

Andrea Grubb, 34, placed second in her age group for the 5K—missing first place by a mere three seconds. She was enamored with the painted canyons, twisted rocks and wildflowers she spied out on the course. “It was tougher than I thought,” she says, “but the trail and views are so inspiring.”

A fan of escaping capital city crowds—if you can call Bismarck crowded—Denise Weeks, 45, often piles her two girls in the car in favor of camping, running and hik-

### CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT:

Andrea Grubb punches up the last incline for a strong 5K finish; David Wakefield holds off the bulk of the 10K pack; bentonite- and scoria-covered bluffs provide the backdrop for the Badlands Trail Run.





ing in the Badlands. She grabs post-run grub at Medora's Pitchfork Fondue or the Chuckwagon Buffet, not to mention tastes of the ice cream and fudge found in the boardwalk-lined shops. Medora has been preserved and restored to its Wild West roots, with original buildings from the late 1800s. The newly renovated Rough Rider's Hotel, for example, first opened as lodging in 1884 as the Metropolitan. Many

historical log-cabin-style shops and businesses provide the perfect backdrop for impromptu shootout reenactments on the streets of the old cattle town.

Weeks earned first place in her age division in the 5K and says even though the town was full of tourists for the event, "We spread out during the race. When I was coming up to pass someone they just moved to the side. But everyone's so nice

in North Dakota," she adds with a laugh.

Whether you come for the race or to seek solitude out in the backcountry, after running with the turtle on the Maah Daah Hey, you'll remember its mettle. You'll remember how it challenged you to have the courage to charge up yet another dusty incline, and when you're out on your next run, perhaps in a less epic spot, you'll channel its patience and determination again to power on.

Racers brace for a mighty ascent of Maah Daah Hey switchbacks on the out-and-back course near Medora.



*Freelance writer and marathon runner Jennifer Chesak resides in Chicago but says North Dakota, her home state, has the friendliest races, and that the Badlands are some really good stuff.*

## TRAILHEAD // EXPLORING THE MAAH DAAH HEY

**SEASONS.** The Maah Daah Hey remains open all year, but portions may become impassible in winter from snow or ice or in any season due to high waters off the Little Missouri.

**GETTING THERE.** The closest regional airport is in Dickinson (about 35 miles east of the trailhead) but Bismarck is only 100 miles away and offers more flight options. Interstate 94 takes you directly to Medora as does US 85.

**CAMPING AND ACCOMMODATIONS.** The trailhead and Sully Creek State Park are accessible via East River Road heading south out of Medora. Additional campgrounds that intersect the trail and have potable water are accessible via side roads either off of I-94 or US 85. For directions to Wagnan, Elkhorn, Magpie and Bennet camps and the CCC campground at the north end of the trail, visit [www.fs.fed.us/r1/dakotaprairie](http://www.fs.fed.us/r1/dakotaprairie).

**RESOURCES AND GUIDEBOOKS.** You can view and print a trail map at [www.mdhta.com](http://www.mdhta.com). Stream flow for the Little Missouri River can be found at <http://waterdata.usgs.gov/nd/nwis/rt>.

**RECOMMENDED ROUTES:** While the trailhead begins in the south, many people start their journeys in the north and end in Medora to celebrate their achievements. Looking for a shorter trek? Run from Magpie to Bennett camp (about 20 miles) but take a detour to visit the ice caves (about .5 miles east of the MDH).



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