



BLACK CANYON OF THE GUNNISON
NATIONAL MONUMENT
COLORADO

BLACK CANYON OF THE GUNNISON NATIONAL MONUMENT



United States Department of the Interior

Harold L. Ickes, *Secretary*

National Park Service, Newton B. Drury, *Director*



Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Monument, an area of 13,968.55 acres, was established by Presidential Proclamation of March 2, 1933, and later modestly extended. It embraces within its boundaries the deepest and most spectacular 10-mile section of the dark, formidable gorge of the Gunnison River which begins at Sapinero, Colo., and ends at Austin, Colo., a distance of approximately 50 miles. Ute Indians aptly describe this gorge, cut through the heart of a

great plateau, as the "place of high rocks and much water." Scenic drives closely parallel the north and south rims of the gorge. Canyon overlooks are provided at the most advantageous locations.

History

The monument is rich in historic lore. Evidence has been found indicating that prehistoric Indians camped and hunted in the area, long known to historic Ute Indians as an excellent hunting ground.

These sheer pinnacles are known as "Island Peaks." (George Grant photo)



In the year 1761, Don Juan Maria de Rivera, a Spanish prospector, traversed the region, camping overnight near the mouth of the gorge. In 1776, the indomitable Franciscan friars, Silvestre Velez de Escalante and Francisco Atanasio Dominguez, visited the region, following down Uncompahgre Valley, through the present location of Montrose, Colo., and up the Gunnison River Valley from the vicinity of present Delta, Colo., to an overnight camp near the mouth of the gorge, before continuing their search for a "northern" route from Santa Fe to Monterey in California. Next came the colorful "Mountain Men" in search of beaver, followed in 1837 by Joseph Roubidoux, a French Canadian, who established his camp about 7 miles west of the present town of Delta, Colo. During the period of expansion of frontiers and exploration of the West, several military expeditions passed through this region. Capt. John W. Gunnison, for whom the river was named, visited the region in 1853 in his search for a feasible route for a coast-to-coast railroad. He determined that the Black Canyon location presented an insurmountable barrier. In 1874, Henry Gannett and A. C. Peale, of the United States Geological and Geographical Survey, in the course of their surveys of the Gunnison River and its tributaries, recorded the character, length, and surface geology of the Black Canyon. Although attempted by many persons, no known white man had ever traversed the floor of Black Canyon throughout its 50-mile length until 1901, when Prof. A. L. Fellows of the United States Reclamation Service

and W. W. Torrence of Montrose, Colo., first accomplished this feat.

Geology

In many respects, geologists and others consider the Black Canyon of the Gunnison River the most remarkable bit of scenery in the entire San Juan Mountain region of Colorado. Certainly, its peculiar physiographic features and unusual location merit the very careful study which scientists have given it.

Into the floor of a broader, outer valley with gentle slopes of stratified rock and shale formations the Black Canyon is cut into the basic pre-Cambrian complex which consists chiefly of a dark micaceous schist impregnated by innumerable intrusions of coarse-textured, generally dark granite, sometimes pinkish in color, which forms a tracery of sinuous bandings wherever exposed in canyon walls. The weathered surfaces of these rocks, streaked and stained by organic acids, make the name of Black Canyon particularly appropriate. Except in the middle of the day, the bottom of this incredible gorge is shrouded in gloomy twilight.

Black Canyon is notable for its narrowness, depth, ruggedness, great expanses of sheer walls, and interesting gorge formations; additionally, the areas bordering both rims have unusual natural beauty. The rims of the gorge are only 1,300 feet apart at their nearest approach, yet the gorge ranges from 1,730 feet to 2,425 feet in depth within the monument. At one location the channel of the Gunnison River narrows to only 40 feet in width.

Through several hundred millions of years the Gunnison River has been furiously carving its channel deeper and deeper through this probable Archean complex at a greater speed than all combined natural forces can widen it. The hardness of its rock formation accounts for the sharp, ragged sheer-ness of the canyon walls. The rolling hills, which rise above the canyon rims and which formerly entrenched the flow of the Gunnison River, are carved from sedimentary rocks. These rocks are so much

younger than those of the gorge itself, which immediately underlies them, that during this gap of time life developed from the single plant cell to the monstrous dinosaur. This tremendous break in the record of geological time is as significant to the imagination as the chasm of Black Canyon is to the sight.

Tree Ring Chronology

In 1940, in the course of his search for over-age drought conifers

View down the canyon from the north rim. (George Grant photo)





Part of the rugged north rim of the Black Canyon. (George Grant photo)

of the Rocky Mountains, Edmund Schulman, dendrochronologist of the Laboratory of Tree Ring Research, University of Arizona, took borings from five living piñons on the highest point on the south rim of the monument (elev. 8,300 ft.), and examined the butts of others left where they were felled in 1934 by the United States Geological Sur-

vey to clear the view to their triangulation station atop this highest point. These showed annular ring counts ranging from 467 to 742 years, and inside ring dates ranging from 1200 A.D. to 1470 A.D., with estimated ages in years ranging from 750 years for one specimen, down to 550 years for the "babies" of the group examined. These rug-



Excellent examples of isolated granitic masses standing within the canyon, apart from the walls. (George Grant photo)

ged, over-age piñon patriarchs are readily distinguished from other piñons by their comparatively smooth, flaky bark of silvered, light-brown hue.

Wildlife

Black Canyon is one of the few remaining strongholds of the Rocky Mountain bighorn. These wary, surefooted animals are frequently seen on the face of the canyon walls. Bear and deer are also present, and elk winter in the area.

Fishing

Excellent fishing may be had in the canyon. A Colorado State fishing license is required.

Campgrounds

Campgrounds are maintained on both the north and south rims of the monument. Camping supplies and equipment are not available at the monument; these may be obtained at any of the approach towns.

Accessibility

Both rims of the canyon are accessible by automobile during the summer months. From Montrose, Colo., the distance to the south rim is 17 miles—8 miles east via U. S. Highway 50, and 9 miles north over a graded road. The north rim may be reached from Colorado State Highway 92, just east of Crawford, Colo., by a 14-mile unimproved road.

Administration

The monument is administered by the National Park Service of the Department of the Interior under the immediate charge of the superintendent of Mesa Verde National Park. Communications concerning the monument should be addressed to the Superintendent, Mesa Verde National Park, Colo.

Rules and Regulations

Please help keep the monument clean. Deposit all refuse in trash receptacles.

DO NOT, IN ANY CIRCUMSTANCES, ATTEMPT THE CANYON DESCENT WITHOUT FIRST CONSULTING THE RANGER. IT IS AN ARDOUS AND HAZARDOUS ORDEAL.

The throwing or rolling of rocks, or *any* object, into the canyon is strictly prohibited. Visitors in the canyon may be fatally injured by any object thrown from such great heights.

The use of firearms is expressly prohibited within the monument.

Extinguish fires completely before leaving. **KNOW YOUR FIRE IS OUT.** Build small fires, in designated areas only. If in doubt, ask the ranger.

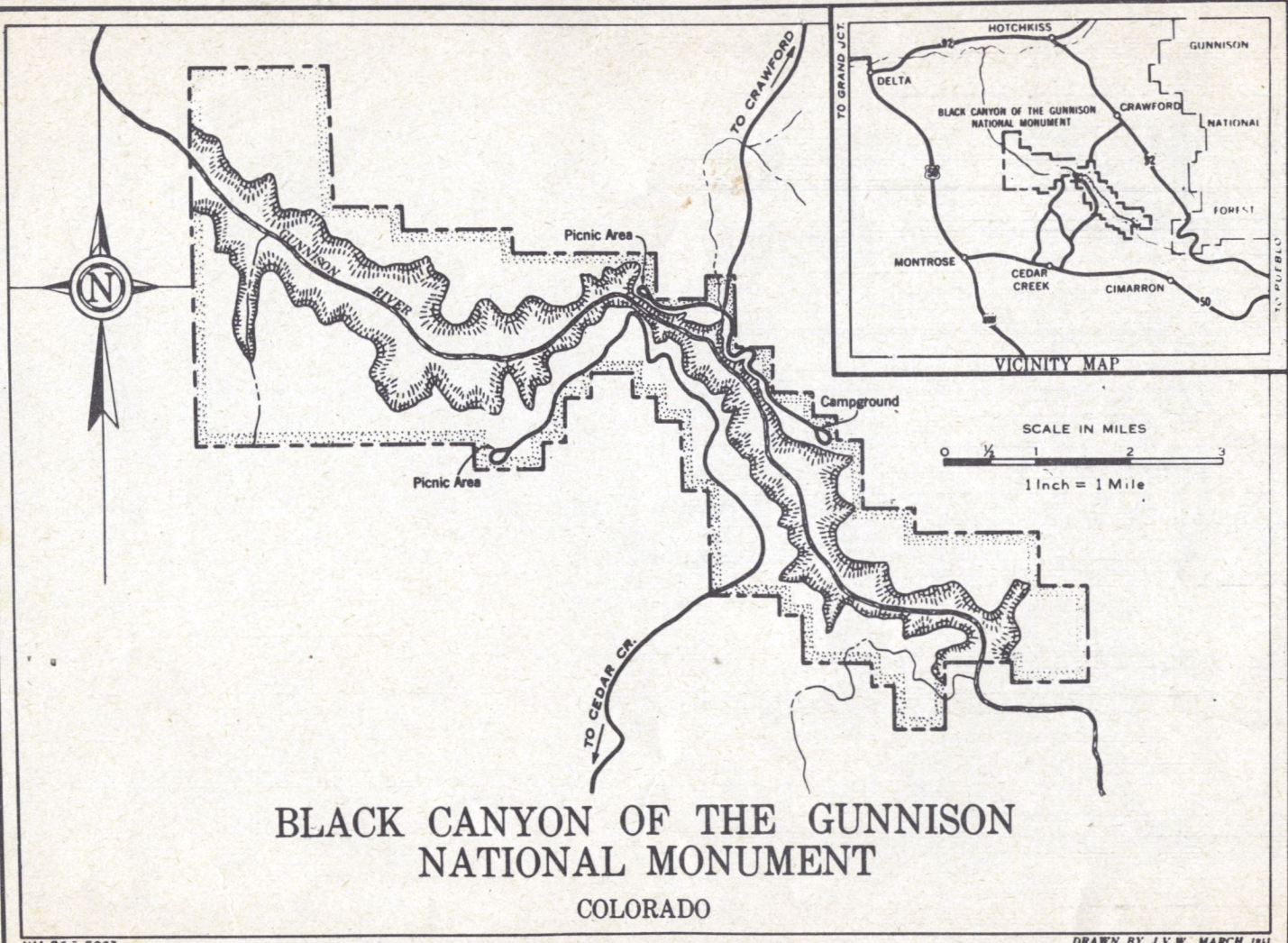
Do not carve initials on signs or buildings, or mar or deface them in any way.

Do not disturb flowers, shrubs, or trees, or harm or frighten any wild animals or birds.

Dogs must be kept on leash, or otherwise confined.

Looking down the canyon from the north rim. (George Grant photo)





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