

# Black Canyon of the Gunnison

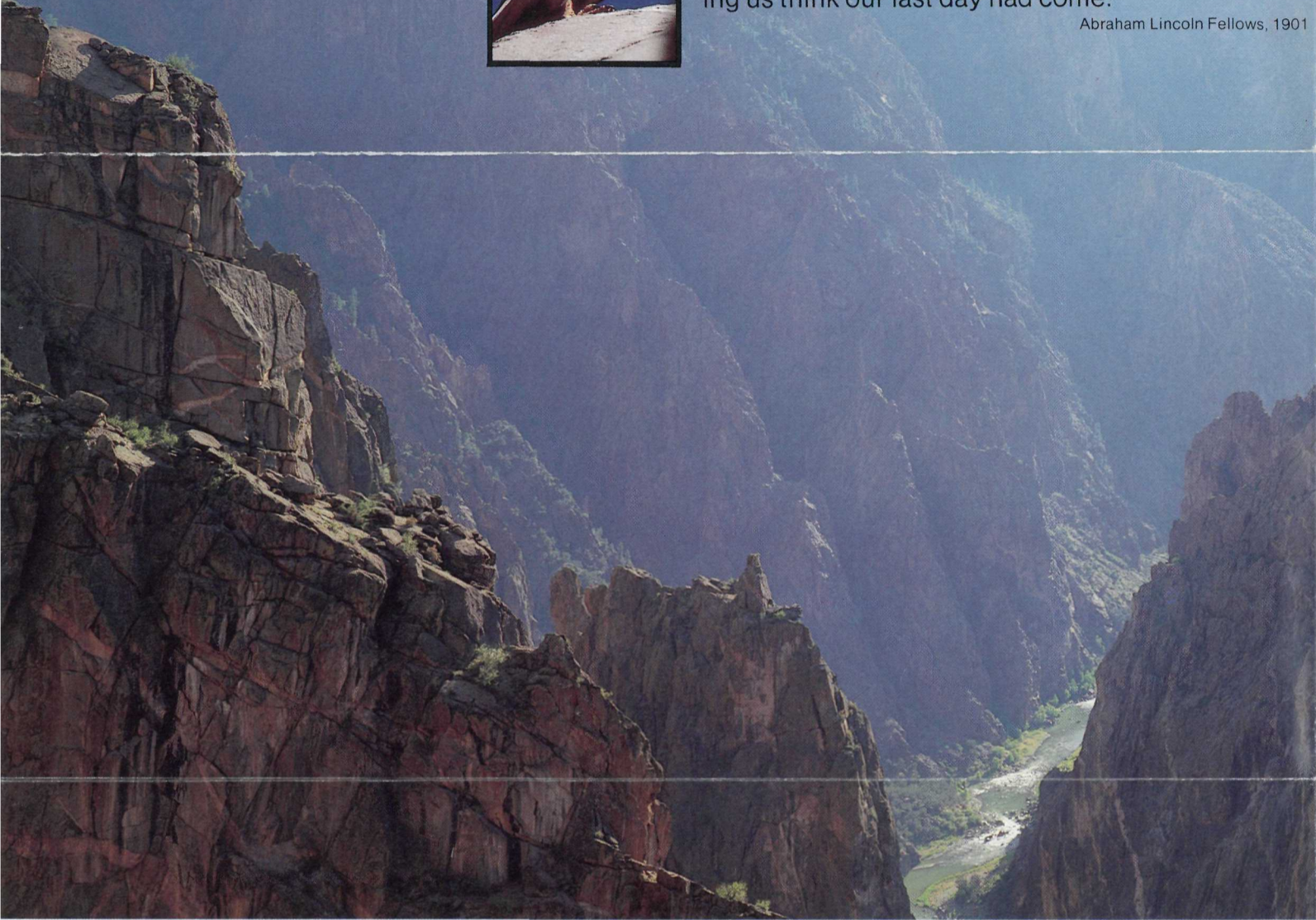
Black Canyon of the Gunnison  
National Monument  
Colorado

National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior



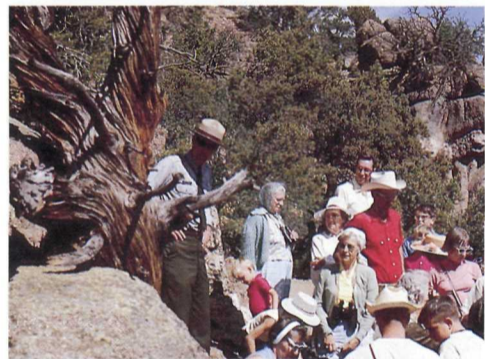
Our surroundings were of the wildest possible description. The roar of the water falls was constantly in our ears, and the walls of the canon, towering half mile in height above us, were seemingly vertical. Occasionally a rock would fall from one side or the other, with a roar and crash, exploding like a ton of dynamite when it struck bottom, making us think our last day had come.

Abraham Lincoln Fellows, 1901



Jeff Gnass

The Painted Wall (above) is the result of molten material forced under great pressure into the cracks and joints of the base rock. These sheer walls are an ideal home for the prairie falcon (inset). Perhaps you will be fortunate enough to see one.



Your time in the park can be spent in a number of ways (left): enjoying a nature walk, driving along the North Rim Drive, or hiking to the canyon floor.

The canyon's landscape was formed by the slow, but continuous and unyielding process of erosion—the effect of one drop of water at a time or the scouring by a seasonally flood-swollen river, the rush of mud-laden side streams after heavy rains, occasional rockfalls from high cliffs, and the relentless creep of landslides. The river first established its course over soft volcanic rock. It then cut through this rock to the harder and older crystalline rock of the present canyon that had been thrust up in a dome-shaped formation known as the Gunnison Uplift. Once committed to its course, the stream had no alternative but to continue to cut through this once-buried hard core, taking about 2 million years to carve the gorge. The excavating process is still going on, but at a slower pace because of the dams upstream.

## An Awesome Gorge

"Several western canyons exceed the Black Canyon in overall size." Wallace Hansen wrote after studying the geology of the region for a number of years. "Some are longer; some are deeper; some are narrower; and a few have walls as steep. But no other canyon in North America combines the depth, narrowness, sheerness, and somber countenance of the Black Canyon of the Gunnison." And it is largely because of this unique combination of geologic features that the Black Canyon has been preserved in its wild state.

The Black Canyon, which has been carved by the Gunnison River as it hurries to join the Colorado, is 85 kilometers (53 miles) long, but only the deepest, most spectacular 19 kilometers (12 miles) of the gorge lie within Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Monument. Slanting rays of sunlight penetrate this deep and narrow canyon's dark gray walls of schist and gneiss that are shrouded in heavy shadows most of the day—hence, "Black Canyon." East of the park the Gunnison River has been impounded and tamed behind three dams. In the Black Canyon, however, it remains one of the few unspoiled wild rivers in the country.

The canyon and its rims are home to a variety of wildlife, from the chipmunks and ground squirrels to weasels, badgers, marmots, and black bear. Infrequently bobcat and cougars are sighted, and at night, coyotes may be heard. If you come across trees that

have been gnawed on, you will have found evidence that porcupines are thereabouts, for the bark of pinyon pine is one of the favorite foods of these nocturnal animals. The Gambel oak and serviceberry that cover most of the Gunnison Uplift provide a good habitat for towhees, western tanager, pinyon and scrub jays, and black-billed magpies. The cliffs are home to white-throated swifts, violet-green swallows, golden eagles, turkey vultures, and red-tailed hawks, who all take advantage of the updrafts for soaring. The canyon may be the last shelter in Colorado for the peregrine falcon.

Though a home to wildlife, the canyon has been a mighty barrier to human beings. Archeological evidence indicates that prehistoric man, and later the Utes, used only the canyon rims, never living in the gorge. The first white men to see the great chasm actually were members of the Hayden Expedition in 1873–74. It appears that the Spaniards, including the famed Dominguez-Escalante Expedition in 1776, all missed seeing the canyon as they came over the Uncompahgre Plateau and into the Uncompahgre Valley on various journeys of exploration. Even the group led by Capt. John W. Gunnison, whose name has become permanently attached to the river, bypassed the gorge itself in its search for a river crossing. The Hayden Expedition and later surveying parties for the Denver & Rio Grande Railroad all pronounced the Black Canyon "inaccessible" here.

By the last decade of the 19th century there was much interest in tapping the Gunnison River as a source of water for the Uncompahgre Valley. In 1900 five Valley men made a heroic effort to float through the canyon with surveying equipment, but after a month's effort, they had to admit defeat. In 1901 William Torrence and Abraham Lincoln Fellows, learning a lesson from the previous trip, took a rubber mattress for a raft, arranged to be supplied at various points from the rim, and were able to make their way through the canyon—53 kilometers (33 miles) in nine days. From the engineering log the two men kept, it was obvious that an irrigation tunnel was a feasible project. In January 1905 construction work began on the diversion tunnel. Progress was slow because of the many difficulties that the work crews encountered. Intense heat, violent cascades of water, and unstable rock formations were just a few of the problems the engineers had to deal with. When finished the tunnel measured 9.3 kilometers (5.8 miles) long and could carry enough water to irrigate a sizable farming community. Eight years after Torrence and Fellow's trip, on September 23, 1909, President William Howard Taft presided over the dedication ceremonies for the Gunnison Diversion Tunnel, a notable engineering achievement of this or any time.

In the late 1920s, citizens of Montrose and other area towns, led by Rev. Mark T. Warner and local civic groups, began efforts to

have the scenic beauty of the canyon preserved as a part of the National Park System. On March 2, 1933, President Herbert Hoover proclaimed Black Canyon of the Gunnison National



Mule deer

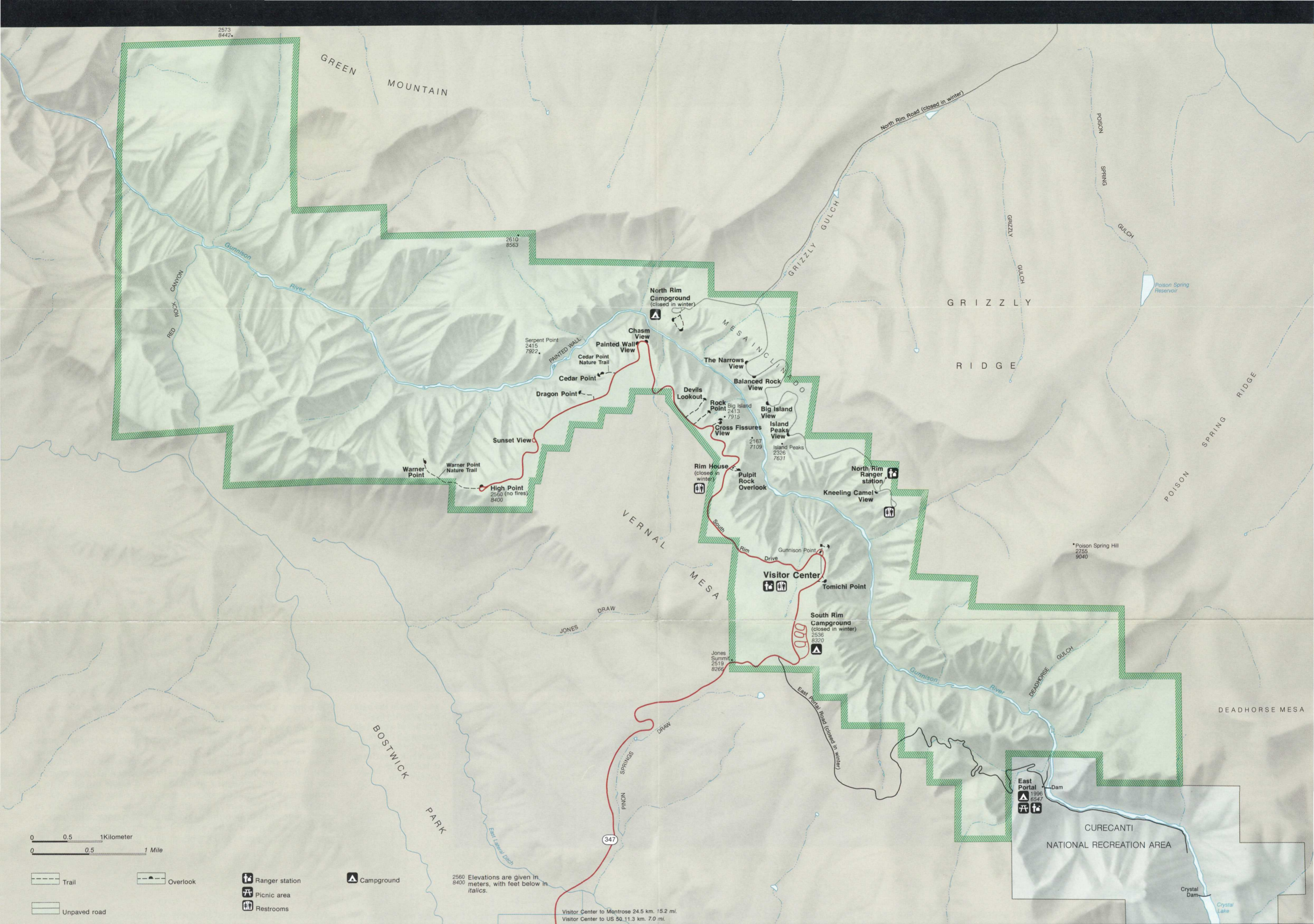


Indian paintbrush



Golden eagle

Monument. Since that time, thousands have enjoyed the scenic grandeur of Black Canyon. A smaller number of hardy individuals have hiked to the bottom of the canyon for fishing, rock climbing, and camping. Most of the Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Monument is classified now as wilderness in an attempt to ensure that the landscape will remain forever in its natural state.

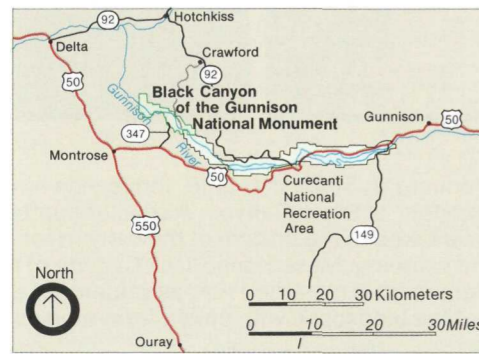


### Access

Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Monument is located in west-central Colorado 24 kilometers (15 miles) east of Montrose via U.S. 50 and Colo. 347. Airlines and buses serve Montrose, 24 kilometers (15 miles) west of the park, and Grand Junction, 100 kilometers (62 miles) west of the park. To get to the north rim of the park, use either U.S. 50 east and Colo. 92 west through Curecanti National Recreation Area to Crawford, or U.S. 50 east and Colo. 92 east through Delta to

### The Visitor Center

Crawford. From Crawford, a graveled, county road goes to the north rim. The first route is 145 kilometers (90 miles) long and the second is 129 kilometers (80 miles). The north rim is closed in winter by snow.



### Camping and Hiking

Begin your stay in the park at the visitor center, where you can get information on current activities and the staff can answer your questions. Exhibits explain the history, flora and fauna, and geology.

### Climbing

The park has two campgrounds—one on each rim. Campsites are available on a first-come, first-served basis. Water must be used sparingly because it has to be hauled by tank truck. Each campsite has its own fireplace or charcoal grill, and a table. Wood gathering is not permitted, nor is wood provided. Bring charcoal, or wood, and water with you. There is a nominal camping charge.

From the overlooks along the South Rim Road, trails of varying length—none longer than 2.3 kilometers

### Driving

(1.4 miles) round trip—lead to the canyon rim. The longest is the Warner Point Nature Trail at the end of the South Rim Road. If you like the backcountry, Black Canyon has a lot of it. Most of the park is wilderness, check with the park staff on the rules and regulations that apply. Always let a ranger know your plans.

There are no marked trails into the canyon. If you plan to make the descent it is essential to check with a park ranger who can tell you which route is best.

### Climbing

The Black Canyon's steep, sheer walls make this park ideal for climbing. But these cliffs are not for beginners or inexperienced climbers. You need to be in excellent physical condition, know what you are doing, and possess the necessary equipment. All climbers must register with park authorities before and after climbs. Park rangers can give you advice on the difficulty of various climbs and tell you what you can expect to find on the canyon floor. Above all, exercise extreme caution and never climb alone.

### Driving

Both the north and south rims have roads that take you to the very edge of the canyon. The drives are not connected. At the visitor center you can pick up a guide to the South Rim Drive. The text

### Park Regulations and Safety

tells what you can see at each overlook and which ones to be sure to see if you have a limited amount of time to spend in the park. At Dragon Point, on the south rim, you can look across to the Painted Wall that rises

### Further Information

a sheer 670 meters (2,200 feet) above the river. At the Narrows View on the north rim, the distance between the rims (396 meters/1,300 feet) is less than the depth (518 meters/1,700 feet) of the canyon.

### Other Information

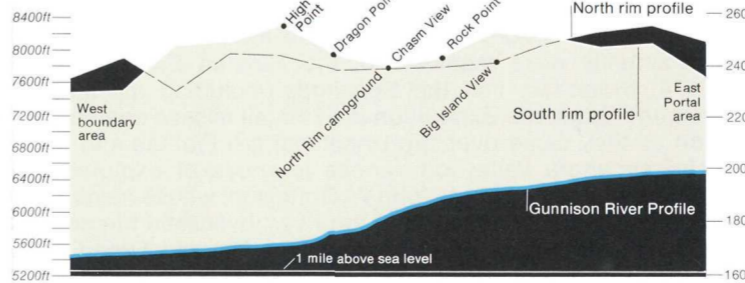
- Fire is Black Canyon's greatest peril. Do not build fires outside the campgrounds. Before leaving, extinguish the last spark with water. Do not take any chances—be sure your fire is out.
- Hunting or the use of firearms for any purpose is not permitted.
- Fishing must conform with Colorado regulations for season, hours, and fishing and baiting methods. A Colorado license is required.
- Natural features must not be disturbed. Please do not pick wildflowers, collect rocks, or damage plants; leave them for

### Other Information

- Pets must be kept on a leash or under physical control at all times. Pets may not be taken down into the canyon.
- Do not throw anything from the rim into the canyon. A single stone thrown or rolled from the rim could cause fatal injuries to people below.
- Stay on the trails. Many places along the rim are not protected by guard rails and are a serious hazard because of the weathered condition of the rock. Keep your children under very close supervision.

### Other Information

No overnight lodging, other than at the campgrounds, is available within the park. Motels, medical services, groceries, and auto repair and gasoline stations can be found in nearby communities. During the summer light lunches, sandwiches, and souvenirs are sold at the Rim House. Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Monument is administered by the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior. For further information, write to the superintendent, P.O. Box 1648, Montrose, CO 81401.



The Gunnison River within the Black Canyon drops an average of 18 meters per kilometer (95 feet per mile). This is one of the greatest rates of fall for a river in North America. The diagram covers the 19 kilometers (12 miles) of the river within the park.