

# Buffalo River

National River  
Arkansas

National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior



## An Island of Space and Time

The Buffalo comes as a surprise. How did a river so closely surrounded by civilization so thoroughly escape impoundment, impairment, and change? Yet it flows today as it always has. This integrity led to its designation as a national river on March 1, 1972, 100 years to the day after our first national park, Yellowstone, was established. Float the Buffalo, sit beside it quieted to all else, and you will discover its qualities as a national treasure. A half-wildness haunts this country. You are rarely 16 kilometers (10 miles) from a road, and often closer, but the land's true character has never been changed beyond recognition.

Rivers embody both change and permanence. Ever flowing, they are never quite the same. And so it is with the free-flowing and timeless Buffalo River. Time resonates among its ancient, carved out hills, but the present moment also dances like a twig down its rain swollen rapids. The Buffalo...an island of space and time where life forms extinct elsewhere persist.

The Buffalo River nestles in the Arkansas Ozarks. The Missouri, Mississippi, and Arkansas Rivers bound the region on the north, east, and south. On the west lies the prairie. These boundaries ecologically isolate the Ozarks. The region boasts 13 unique species of clearwater fish which could never disperse into surrounding muddy rivers. Isolated in livable conditions they survive comparatively unchanged. Several natural influences focus on the Ozarks, each lending life forms to these mountains' rare biological bounty. Here eastern woodlands and great plains meet. The glaciers halted their southward push here, depositing nor-

thern life forms but without scouring the hills. To the south lie rich alluvial lands. In the Ozarks the North's river birch, the East's beech tree, and the South's water tupelo share environments. Scorpions and roadrunners of the Southwest and lichens characteristic of arctic tundra both find niches here. The Buffalo River courses a sanctuary, a living biological museum with silent bluffs for walls.

No one knows the total number of plant species in the Buffalo drainage, but the Ozarks possess more than most areas, and more than 160 fish have been identified in the region. Curiously, only 43 mammal species are known, and 13 of these are bats.

The Buffalo Valley boasts 800 to 1,000 flowering plants enjoying a long season. It begins in January's warmer days with witch hazel blooming along the river and runs until late fall when pale, white Indian pipes hold forth from leaf mold deep in the woods. Ferns and mosses counterpoint the flowering plants. Delicate fernfalls spill like soft green fireworks from the faces of moist bluffs above the river, a special gift for floaters.

Why do plants crowd in so eagerly here? Diversity, a variety of habitats attracts them. When a living thing finds conditions right for survival it clings tenaciously to that habitat. The Buffalo and the Ozarks offer myriad choices—mountain balds, forests, meadows, hollows, dry and moist bluffs, springs, creeks, rivers, and gravel bars. The gravel bar community, a feature of the floater's world, often teems with "weeds," fast-rooting, quick-growing

plants with short life cycles. The river deposits their seeds on the bars and they attempt to reproduce before the next high water washes out the bars. In this sense gravel bars represent rapid change. But the gravel itself, mountains and bluffs ground down to stone, slowly plies its way downstream. It will become silt, and eventually, somewhere, soil.

Buffalo River bluffs, attaining heights up to 152 meters (500 feet), are the highest in the Ozarks. They represent stacks of ancient seabeds, eons of slow sedimentation. The river rises at 701 meters (2,300 feet) in the Boston Mountains, intent on carrying this material seaward again—the Ozarks perpetually dissolve themselves away, however slowly. On the geological timescale, catastrophic events happened here some 1.5 billion and 300 million years ago. After the first lava and then granites broke through the earth's crust, the entire area was uplifted, only to be subsequently covered with invading seas. The seas eventually retreated, to be followed by another dramatic uplift. Finally, erosive forces began the relentless sculpting still in progress today.

The Buffalo tumbles down 579 meters (1,900 feet) over its course, ending up only 122 meters (400 feet) above sea level where it joins the White River. Hemmed-in Hollow, one of many scenic side canyons, dramatizes this drop. Its 61-meter (200-foot) free-leaping waterfall is the highest of its kind between the Southern Appalachians and the Rockies. Many hidden and less spectacular side canyons have not been frequented since Civil War days. They still offer coveted isolation and are worth seeing

for that alone. Here you can trade stares with a frog and really feel that it might be the last frog on earth. It's a singular experience that enriches your sense of the natural world.

The meaning of the Buffalo River for our time and way of life is not difficult to grasp. It finds expression on the faces of people reacting to the river and its landscape: recreation and relaxation, exhilaration and enthusiasm. Some are soothed and some are challenged by the river. Still others challenge the river. The Buffalo provides a balance, and against it we can measure ourselves as an urban, industrial society. Call it curative or restorative, it is downright therapeutic.

Its special meaning for you is another matter, a matter between you and the river. Take a few moments by yourself at the water's edge and you will feel yourself wrapped in the river's gentle music and find the sounds of civilization stopped for a moment. This is the moment you have been waiting for, *your* moment in an island of space and time. Such moments are timeless and so natural. Why? Who knows... but take yours as a gift of the river, the wild and free-running Buffalo River.



The peaceful, looping meanders of the Buffalo belie the river's erosive, rock carving strength so evident in the steep bluffs. The missing ingredient in the photograph is time, endless spans of time. The best way to see the Buffalo—and to experience it—is by canoe, kayak, or other craft. You can bring your own or arrange rentals with several local outfitters.



A half-wildness haunts the Buffalo country. Left untended, man's works fade back into the environment and nature reasserts its grip on things. The river itself symbolizes this, its rising and falling taking and giving to and from the life along its banks.



## A Way of Life Preserved

Well into the 1800s the Buffalo River country was an unbroken wilderness belonging to the Indians. Today it remains one of the least populated parts of Arkansas. Sparsely populated Newton County, through which the upper Buffalo flows, is the only county in Arkansas which has never had a railroad constructed within its boundary.

Virtually cut off from all contact with the outside world, the people of the Buffalo country continued lifeways that, in our nation as a whole, fell prey to time and change, to industrialization and urbanization. This country tells the same story today. A few steel bridges, scattered modern buildings, asphalt-surfaced highways...this peaceful valley has changed comparatively little since 1900.

The image of the Ozarks as an island preserving features lost elsewhere holds true both for its ecology and its culture. Social historians cannot agree on what culture—frontier or mountain—has been preserved here, but they do not dispute its preservation. Unfortunately, serious attempts to appreciate this culture have been crowded out by the stereotypes of cartoonists who have preferred to indulge our pride in rapid social progress at the expense of the "hillbilly."

Ozark culture cannot be stereotyped, however. Sophisticated people too often have seen mountain folk as nature's children, simplistic and transparent, whose every thought could be readily discerned. But nothing could be further from the truth. Abundant

folk lore of this region reveals the complex symbolism of their lifeways and a traditional world view involving complex interpretations of nature.

The island effect created by the rough, Boston Mountain terrain isolated the Buffalo River valley from surrounding improvements in communication, industry, and agriculture. The problem existed long before European settlers arrived in the early 1800s. The earliest native peoples here, the Bluff Dwellers, did not keep pace materially with surrounding peoples. By the time of European exploration the Buffalo Valley was largely an uninhabited seasonal hunting ground of the plains-dwelling Osage Indians. Until recently, the population trend since 1900 in the Buffalo

Valley and the Ozarks had been downward. The exception came with the Great Depression when the self-sufficient agrarian lifestyle proved comparatively depression-proof. People plagued by unemployment fled cities and returned to the land to "grow their own" again. Most simply waited out the economic hard times, however, and World War II witnessed a massive exodus.

But times and values change. Today the region experiences new growth as people move here from urban areas for retirement or to find an alternate lifestyle. A life of relative hardship offering greater feelings of self-sufficiency...what we sought to escape 20 years ago now appears attractive once again. In a sense the Buffalo River country has come full circle.

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## A New World Awaits You

The Buffalo River country is best seen from the river. Its roads stick to ridge tops, with occasional river crossings to the opposite ridge's more constant elevations. Except during autumn's burst of forest colors, from a car you see little and learn even less. Afoot or afloat a new world awaits you, a world of slowed down time and stretched out space, of peace and quiet beauty. From the river you see, and see with different eyes.

There are as yet no developed hiking trails along the river, and in summer's tick and chigger seasons bushwhacking off established trails gets tedious. A short trail up Lost Valley follows Clark Creek by a natural bridge formation. Here you hike below impressive bluffs like those greeting floaters along the river itself.

Buffalo Point offers a series of nature trails. Guided walks and demonstrations of local culture are scheduled in season. Ask a ranger for details. At Buffalo Point you can camp, rent cabins, enjoy amphitheater programs, and purchase meals. Canoes can be rented nearby. For cabin rental information and reservations write: Buffalo Point Concession, Route A, Box 214, Yellville, Arkansas 72687.

Camping at Buffalo Point is first-come, first-served, with a two-week limit and a fee. There are no sewage hookups, but a dumping station for trailers, flush toilets, and showers are provided. Check the map for more primitive camping facilities elsewhere on the river. Certain group picnic facilities at Buffalo Point may be reserved in advance. Write to the Superintendent (address below) for reservations.

Small- and largemouth bass, catfish, and panfish attract anglers to the Buffalo each year. Many nearby rivers have been changed into lakes by damming, but the Buffalo provides productive free flowing bass waters. Arkansas fishing regulations apply. Hunting is permitted on lands within the national river boundary with seasons and bag limits set by Arkansas law. But check at a district ranger station before you hunt. Private lands, many with homes and livestock, still exist within the river boundary. *These must be respected.* District rangers maintain land ownership maps and can help you choose the best area to hunt.

The scenic grandeur of Buffalo River bluffs and cliffs can become a nightmare if you are not careful. Loose, crumbly rock can

send you scooting off a cliff to certain injury. After rains, slippery rock and mud can send you plummeting into the river. Be careful and use common sense. Getting accident victims to safety or medical facilities is difficult and dangerous.

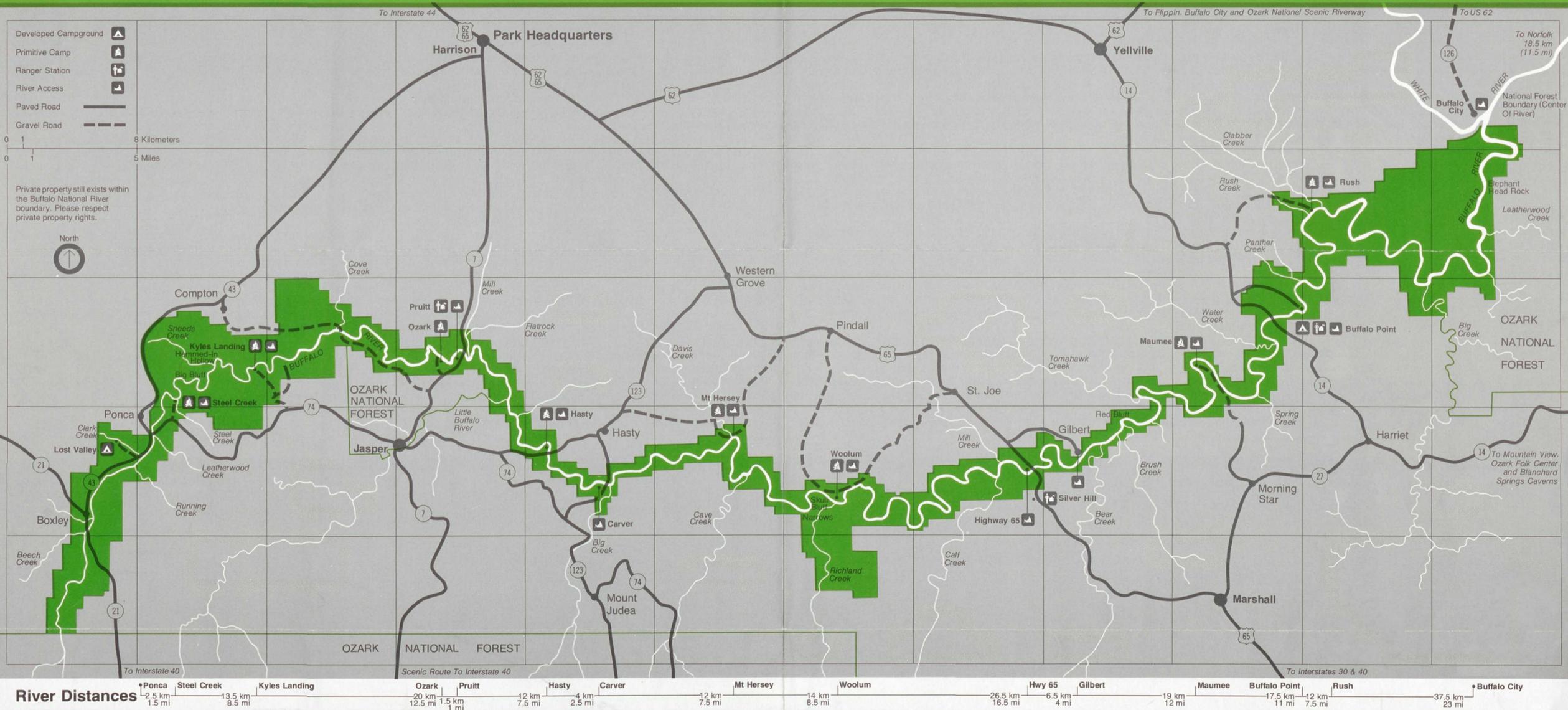
Respect poisonous snakes for your sake and theirs. (All animal life, plants, and artifacts are protected here.) Wood ticks are prevalent in warm months. Examine yourself periodically and remove ticks before they attach themselves. Chiggers can also prove irritating. Rangers can describe normal safety precautions for snake country—rattlesnakes, copperheads, and water moccasins are present and are best left alone. Common sense is your best protection against accidents, here as at home. Make sure children realize they are in a natural area containing hazards unfamiliar to more populous areas. The river is great for swimming, but use good sense. Do not swim alone. Diving is hazardous—many unseen rocks lie beneath the surface.

The Buffalo National River crosses U.S. Route 65 in northwestern Arkansas, between Springfield, Missouri and Little Rock, Arkansas. Accommodations, float outfitters, and canoe rentals are

available in Harrison, Arkansas, where national river headquarters are located, and in other communities throughout the area.

Airlines and buses serve Harrison, but rental car and other facilities may be difficult to obtain if not reserved in advance. Airlines also serve larger cities nearby. The river lies in a pleasantly mountainous region, within easy driving distance of many popular scenic and recreational attractions.

River guides, topographic maps, and books exploring the culture, folk-ways, natural history, and history of this region may be purchased at district ranger stations at Buffalo Point, Silver Hill, and Pruitt. These can add a new dimension to your enjoyment of the Buffalo River and surroundings. For specific information about reservations for park facilities and for other questions write: Superintendent, Buffalo National River, P.O. Box 1173, Harrison, Arkansas 72601.



## Floatin' the Buffalo

Canoeists and floaters have long treasured the Buffalo River for its breathtaking views. Indeed a feast of outdoor delights awaits the unhurried floater. The river's meanders frame endless picturesque scenes watched over by massive sandstone and limestone bluffs. Repeating patterns of pools and ripples on the upper Buffalo give way to quiet waters on its lower reaches. Fernfalls above, bass off the starboard bow, and a wood duck dead ahead—nature does a bit of bragging here.

Check water conditions before you set off. The lower river, east of Silver Hill, is generally floatable all year. Except during high water it is relatively safe even for novice canoeists. Experience is recommended for the Ponca-to-Pruitt stretch, which offers the most exciting white water. It is usually only floatable in spring

and winter. From Pruitt to Silver Hill the river may be too low for floating during summer. *Watch water conditions during your trip too!* The river can sometimes rise very quickly and quietly. Pull yourself and your canoe well out of the water or you may wake up in the morning as a hiker. You should never camp on a gravel bar when rain threatens.

If you do not have your own craft, you may want to rent one. Write the Superintendent for a list of nearby commercial canoe rentals and shuttle services or pick one up at any park office. Float operators can arrange trips of four hours to several days. A list of operators and rates can be obtained by writing to the Superintendent. During 1978, canoe rentals ran \$12.50 per canoe per day, on the average.



Please observe all water safety regulations. An approved and serviceable lifejacket is required for *all* floaters. Waterproof your gear, stow it low and balanced, and carry an extra paddle. Never go on the river alone or during periods of high water. Flood-condition canoeing poses extreme hazards even to experts.

River maps and guides are sold at district ranger stations. They can help make your float trip safe and enjoyable. Protect the river's beauty for floaters who follow you. If you pack anything in, pack it back out. Help preserve this priceless waterway.