



Where the Earth and Its Community of Life Are Untrammelled by Man: Badlands Wilderness Area



The Wilderness Act gives a definition to special places in our National Parks, Forests, and other protected lands. Passed in 1964, this law gave a tangible description to something that seemed to be almost uniquely American: wilderness. Considered to be one of the most eloquent documents in American government, the Act requires federally designated wilderness to be of sufficient size to permit natural systems – communities of life – to thrive “untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain.” Wilderness offers itself to each of us on our own terms. Some of us are content to experience wilderness of the mind – it’s enough to know wilderness exists in the world. Others are compelled to explore designated wilderness to take on its challenges. Hopefully, we do not aspire to conquer wilderness. The legal concept of wilderness has a companion inside all humans: wildness. It is this primitive quality of life that causes innovation, wonder, and exploration. Valuing the wildness in ourselves and wilderness as an American landscape brings us closer to becoming active members in the “community of life” described in the Wilderness Act.

A Sense of Place

The wilderness area of Badlands National Park is the largest prairie wilderness in the United States. Established on October 20, 1976 under the provisions of the Wilderness Act, the Badlands Wilderness Area consists of 64,144 acres, or over 25% of the total park. There are two units of the Wilderness Area: Sage Creek, accessed from the Sage Creek Rim Road or Sage Creek Campground, and Conata Basin, accessed primarily from the Conata Picnic Area. These two units are contiguous.

There are no established trails through the Wilderness Area. Many explorers utilize the bison trails that meander through the prairie and skirt the badland formations. Others simply choose a destination and attempt to traverse the terrain as safely as possible. People have long formed a connection with the rolling hills and protected plains of the Sage Creek drainage. In the 1910s and 1920s, the area was dotted with homesteads as erstwhile settlers attempted to raise wheat and hay while grazing a few head of cattle or sheep on their 640 acre allotments. Under the Homestead Act of 1864, homesteads were to measure 160 acres; however, once settlers crossed the Missouri River, the climate and soils changed so dramatically that it was impossible for a family to survive on such a small piece of land. Homesteads west of the 100th meridian were increased in size to 640 acres. Today, hikers find remnants of these 20th century homesites. Remember that all objects at these sites are artifacts to be left in place for future study or for other visitors to discover and reflect on the difficulty in living in this beautifully barren place.

Looking at the Landscape

Approximately 1/3 of the Wilderness Area consists of the sharply eroded badland formations. Seemingly endless mixed grass prairie covers the remainder, providing a rich environment for wildlife. Trees are scarce but low areas harboring enough water to support shrubs are scattered throughout. Bison roam freely along with pronghorn, mule deer, and bighorn sheep. Opportunistic coyotes and bobcats seek out smaller food sources, such as rabbits or prairie dogs and their rodent cousins. Avian life ranges from eagles and hawks soaring overhead to the ground-dwelling sharp-tailed grouse and wild turkeys.

Regulations

☞ Due to the high winds and dry grasses, fires are not permitted anywhere in Badlands National Park. An easily combustible fuel such as grass burns at an extremely high rate. Coached by the Great Plains wind, a simple dropped match can trigger a massive wildfire in seconds. Only backpacking stoves are permitted for heating food or water.

☞ Pets are not permitted in the Badlands Wilderness Area. This is for their safety as well as the protection of park wildlife. They are permitted in Sage Creek Campground if they are on a leash and under the control of a human at all times.

☞ All camping in the Badlands Wilderness Area must be at least 200 feet away from any water source.

☞ Wildlife should never be approached within 100 yards. Badlands' wildlife is truly wild and unused to human sounds and actions, rendering them unpredictable. If an animal reacts to your presence, you are too close. Back off. If you surprise a bison, it is best to stand your ground if there is no escape route, such as up a tree or sod table. Bison can scramble into seemingly unlikely places and can run at a speed of over 30 miles per hour.

☞ Badlands is home to one venomous snake – the prairie rattler. Prairie rattlers are considered the least aggressive of all rattlesnakes. To avoid surprising a rattler, always keep an awareness of where you are placing your hands and feet. Wear ankle high boots and heavy socks.

The Ways of Wilderness

By law, federally designated wilderness such as the Badlands Wilderness Area is a roadless place where wheeled vehicles are not allowed. Its primitive qualities provide people with rustic backpacking, wildlife watching, horseback riding, and true solitude. Requiring cross country travel without the presence of established trails, the Badlands Wilderness Area forces its explorers to be self-reliant and prepared. Always carry a topographic map, a compass, and plenty of water. Due to the extremely high concentration of sediments and dissolved minerals in Badlands water, hikers must carry all their drinking water with them. A gallon per person per day is suggested.

Badlands National Park does not have a backcountry permit system in place so park staff will not search for hikers unless notified by other hikers or by friends or family. Before setting out, make sure that a friend or family member knows where you are and when you plan on returning. Establish a date and time to call home to confirm your safe return.

Leave No Trace

Badlands National Park is a national treasure, set aside for all visitors – now and in the future. To insure that the qualities that brought you here today are unimpaired for those who come next year and next century, Badlands requires that all park users practice principles of Leave No Trace. To this end:

☞ Plan ahead. Be prepared for extreme weather hazards and emergencies. Be prepared for extreme weather hazards and emergencies.

☞ Travel and camp on durable surfaces. When possible, choose the established wildlife trails over “breaking new ground.” The formations seem timeless; however, they change daily. Your weight on a formation will cause increased erosion. Your path through the prairie does trample seeds. Place your tent on an already denuded area, rather than impacting a new surface.

☞ Dispose of all waste properly. You packed it in; you can pack it out. Human waste should not come into contact with any water source.

☞ Leave what you find. Preserve the past. Examine but do not remove cultural objects or fossils. Do not pick plants.

☞ Be considerate of others. Camp at least 400 yards from other campers in the Wilderness Area.

A Landscape of Hope

A prairie wilderness. This seems strange to those who equate wilderness with vast, dark forests or expanses of glaciated mountains. However, it was the prairie that so daunted those who set out to settle the American West. As we attempt to assemble the great biodiversity puzzle, prairie is the heart of the piece. In establishing the Wilderness Act, we as a nation set a standard for wilderness preservation. In establishing a prairie wilderness here in Badlands National Park, we have given credence to the many faces wilderness wears. It is now up to us to accept the challenge of wilderness: to come to the edge of forever and feel complete.