

# Bighorn Canyon

National Recreation Area  
Montana/Wyoming

National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior



Bighorn Canyon country, looking south, with the Pryor Mountains in the background.

At first glance, time seems to have stopped at Bighorn Canyon. The lake and the steep-sided canyons provide a peaceful setting for those seeking a break from the daily routine. The focus of the area is 113-kilometer-long (71-mile) Bighorn Lake, created by Yellowtail Dam near Fort Smith, Mont. Dedicated in 1968, the dam provides electric power, water for irrigation, flood control, and recreation. Boating, fishing, waterskiing, swimming, and sightseeing are the principal attractions.

While you enjoy the play of light and shadow on rock and water, take time to contemplate the changes that the land and the life upon it have undergone. Time and water provide

## A Challenging Land

Rivers have always been man's highways. For more than 40,000 years in the New World, men have traveled and made their livings along rivers and streams. But the Bighorn River was too treacherous and too steep-walled until the dam tamed it, so for thousands of years men lived near the river but avoided navigating it.

In a similar way, the broken land here has challenged man's ingenuity, forcing him to devise advantageous strategies of survival. More than 10,000 years ago, ancient Indian hunters drove herds of game into land traps. These Indians lived simply, gathering wild roots and seeds to balance and supplement their meat diet. They made clothes of skins, baskets and sandals of plant fibers, and tools of stone, bone, and wood. The many caves of the Bighorn area provided seasonal shelters and storage areas for these ancient men, as well as for early traders and trappers.

*Absaroke* means "People of the large-beaked bird," in the Siouan language of the Crow. Their reservation surrounds most of Bighorn Canyon. Originally a farming people, the Crow split off from the Hidatsa tribe more than 200 years ago. They became a renowned hunting people, described by a

member of the Lewis and Clark Expedition as "the finest horsemen in the world." In the early 1900s they built an irrigation system at the mouth of the canyon, responding in their own way to the challenge of the land.

For 22 kilometers (15 miles) upstream from the dam, the lake bisects a massive, arching anticline, exposing fossils that tell of successive times when this land was submerged under a shallow sea, when it was a tropical marsh, and when its conifer forests were inhabited by dinosaurs. Man first arrived here more than 10,000 years ago, living nomadically as a hunter and gatherer. In modern times, he has further shaped and altered the land.

Explorers, trappers, and traders found their way up the Bighorn early in the 19th century. The earliest was Charles Larocque who met the Crow at the mouth of the Bighorn in 1805; Captain William Clark passed through a year later. Jim Bridger claimed he had floated through the canyon on a raft, but later fur traders packed their goods overland on the Bad Pass Trail, avoiding the river's dangers.

During the Civil War the Bozeman Trail led to the mines of western Montana by crossing the Bighorn north of the dam. Open from 1864 to 1868, the trail was bitterly opposed by the Sioux and Cheyenne, though the Crow remained neutral. The Federal Government was forced to close the trail in 1868 after the treaty of Fort Laramie. Fort C.F. Smith, now on private land, guarded the trail as its northernmost outpost. A simple stone monument now commemorates the Hayfield Fight, a desperate but successful defense against marauding Sioux and Cheyenne warriors.

In this skirmish a small party of soldiers and civilian haycutters, working 5 kilometers (3 miles) north of Fort C.F. Smith, fought for eight hours until rescued by troops from the fort on August 1, 1867.

After the Civil War cattle ranching became a way of life here. Among the huge open-range cattle ranches was the Mason-Lovell (the ML), some of whose buildings remain. Dude ranching, reflected in the remains of Hillsboro, enjoyed a period of popularity at the turn of the century.

The Crow made the transition from hunter-gatherers to ranchers in one generation. They completed an irrigation system in 1904 after twelve years of labor and opened 14,140 hectares (35,000 acres) of land to irrigated farming. Water was diverted into the Bighorn Canal by a 129-meter (416-foot) diversion dam, moving 21 cubic meters (720 cubic feet) of water per second. Visit the Bighorn Canal Headgate, near Afterbay Campground, and other vestiges of the human past.

Named in honor of Robert Yellowtail, former Crow tribal chairman and reservation superintendent, the dam creates one of the largest reservoirs on the Missouri River tributary system. The dam is 160 meters (525 feet) high and of the arch type. It is open Memorial Day to Labor Day for tours conducted by the Bureau of Reclamation. Inquire at the visitor center near the dam.

Opened during the Civil War as a shortcut to mines in western Montana, the Bozeman Trail crossed some of the best Indian hunting grounds and was bitterly opposed by the Sioux and Cheyenne. Forts C.F. Smith, Reno, and Phil Kearny guarded the trail, but they were abandoned after a peace treaty with the Sioux and Cheyenne in 1868. The Bozeman Trail, the Hayfield Fight Monument, and Fort C.F. Smith are on private land.

## Land and Life at Bighorn



**Bighorn Visitor Center** The solar-heated visitor center near the town of Lovell, Wyo., symbolizes the energy-conscious concerns of the National Park Service and of modern Americans. Heating is accomplished by storing heat from the sun in a rock bin, then blowing hot air through the building. A separate facility, the Yellowtail Visitor Center, is located within the park between the community of Fort Smith and the dam. It is approachable from the north by car.



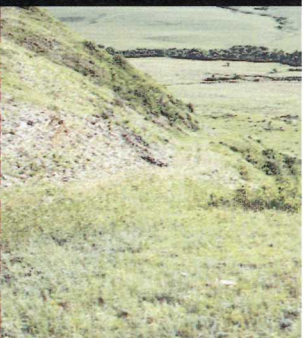
**Pryor Mountain Wild Horse Range** This area was established in 1968 to provide a well-maintained sanctuary for wild horses, descended from Indian ponies and from horses that escaped from farms and ranches. These horses are slowly reverting to true wild horse characteristics. The herd size, now about 120-140, is managed by the Bureau of Land Management.

**Bighorn Wildlife** The wildlife of the Bighorn Canyon country is as varied as the land, which can be divided into four specific climate or rainshadow zones. In the south is semidesert inhabited by wild horses, snakes, and small rodents. Midway is scrub juniper, with elk, coyotes, deer, beaver, woodrats, and porcupines. Along the flanks of the Pryor Mountains is an alpine setting, with mountain lions, bear, elk, and mule deer. To the north is shortgrass prairie, once home to herds of buffalo. Many

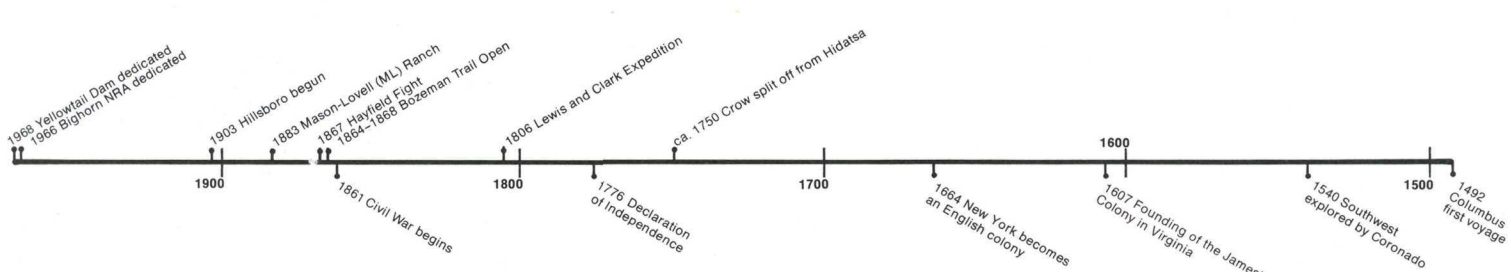
of the smaller animals, such as skunks, cottontails, coyotes, and rattlesnakes, are seen frequently throughout the park. More than 200 species of birds, including many kinds of waterfowl, have been seen in the park. Each plant and animal species is adapted to the particular conditions of temperature, moisture, and land-form within one or more of the park's four rainshadow zones.



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**Mason-Lovell Ranch** A.L. Mason and H.C. Lovell built their cattle ranch here in 1883. A classic open-range operation, cattle roamed the Bighorn basin until the advent of barbed wire. You can visit the bunkhouse, blacksmith shop, and

the married employee cabin. Ask for tour information at the visitor center near Lovell, Wyo.



**Bad Pass Trail** Ancient hunters camped along this trail 10,000 years ago, and in prehistoric and historic times the Shoshone used it for access to the Buffalo plains. Early trappers and traders used it to avoid the dangers of the Bighorn River. You can see rock

cairns left along the trail between Devil Canyon Overlook and Barry's Landing. Before the advent of the horse, lifeways changed little here for thousands of years. Small family groups wintered in caves near the canyon bottoms. In early spring they moved out



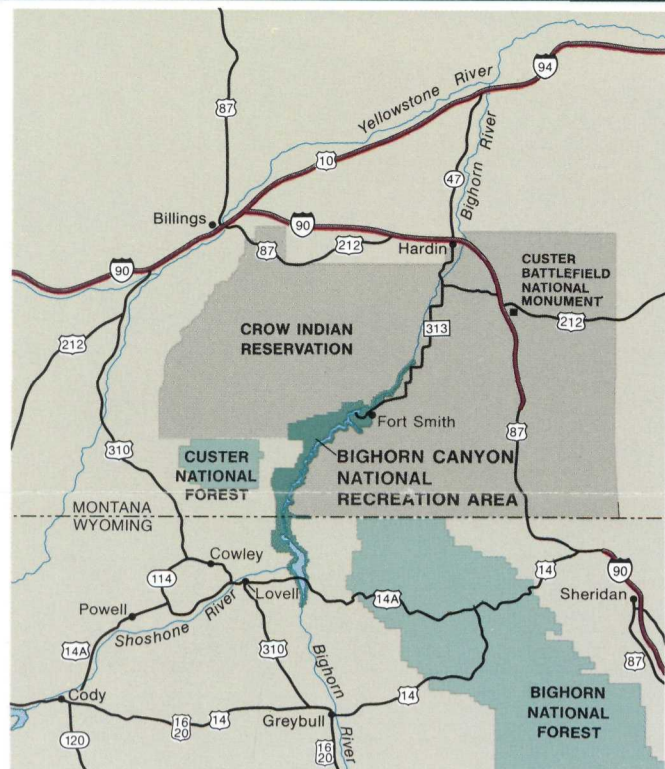
of the canyon bottoms in search of plants and small animals, and in summer they moved to the highlands in search of game and summer-maturing plants. Large groups gathered in autumn for a communal bison hunt.



**Devil Canyon Overlook** Here the canyon crosscuts the gray crosscut of the Devil Canyon Anticline, a 330-meter (1,000-foot) high segment of the fault blocks that make up the Pryor Mountains.



# Bighorn Canyon



## Getting Around the Park

As you can see on the adjacent map, the north and south ends of the park are not connected by a direct road. Use this map to determine the route you wish to use if you plan to visit both ends of the park by car. We suggest you stop first at the National Park Service visitor center at Lovell, Wyo., or at the one near the dam at Fort Smith, Mont.

**Access** to the south end of the park is by U.S. 310 from Billings, Mont., or U.S. 14A from Sheridan, Wyo. From Hardin, Mont., take Mont. 313 to get to the north end of the park. Rental cars are available in nearby communities,

but no public transportation is provided to the park. Scheduled airlines serve Cody, Wyo., and Billings, Mont. Transcontinental buses serve Cody, Greybull, Lovell, and Powell, Wyo., and Billings and Hardin, Mont. Unattended aircraft landing strips are at Fort Smith, Mont., and Cowley, Wyo.

**Accommodations**, including hotels and motels, restaurants, service stations, groceries, and sporting goods stores, are in Lovell, Wyo., and Hardin, Mont. Fort Smith, Mont., at the north end of the park, has a motel, restaurant, service station, and grocery.

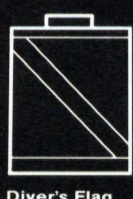
**Further Information** about the park and nearby facilities and attractions can be obtained by writing to the superintendent at P.O. Box 458, Fort Smith, MT 59035, or by telephone: (406) 666-2412. Please write or telephone well in advance of your visit if you plan to bring a large group; this will help the staff plan on providing interpretive services for your group.



**Boating Tips** Please be sure to get a copy of the boating map of the park before you head for the water; it shows boating facilities, campgrounds, boat ramps, and navigational markers

for Bighorn Lake. Additional information is listed on the back, including regulations for boating safety while you are on the lake. Please read the boating folder carefully, and

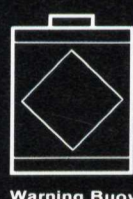
observe all rules and warnings. Have a safe and pleasant outing on the lake. For your safety, please sign the registration sheet at the boat ramps.



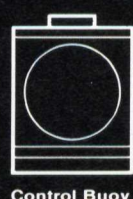
Diver's Flag



Swimming Area



Warning Buoy



Control Buoy

## What to See and Do

An **orientation film** is shown at Bighorn Canyon Visitor Center on activities throughout the park. **Exhibits** highlight the canyon's history and natural features. Ask here about **guided tours** through the visitor center's solar heating system, and to the Mason-Lovell Ranch site.

More **exhibits** at the Yellowtail Visitor Center feature the Crow Indian history and the Yellowtail Dam. The Bureau of Reclamation conducts **tours** Memorial Day to Labor Day at the Yellowtail Dam powerplant. Inquire at the visitor center.

A **tour boat service** originating at Horseshoe Bend runs daily Memorial Day to Labor Day to Yellowtail Dam and to Devil Canyon. Roundtrip time to the dam is six hours, and the fee includes a box lunch. The Devil Can-

yon trip takes two hours. Each tour is accompanied by a tour guide.

**Boating** enthusiasts will find a marina, snack bar, campstore (gas and oil), and a boat launch ramp at Horseshoe Bend. Ramps are also at Afterbay Dam, Ok-A-Beh, and Barry's Landing. **Swimmers** are encouraged to use the lifeguarded area at Horseshoe Bend.

**Camping** is restricted to designated areas located on the map above, unless you have a fire permit. Note the boat-in campsites shown on the map above. Please be sure to pour water on your fire to be certain it is out.

**Fishing** in either Montana or Wyoming requires the appropriate state fishing license. Fine game fish abound, such as brown and lake trout, sauger, ling, and crappie. The

most popular game fish, a gourmet's delight, is the walleye. Winter ice fishing around Horseshoe Bend is good. In the local streams you will find brook, rainbow, brown, and cutthroat trout. Be sure you have the correct fishing license.

**Hiking** is available in nearby areas. Inquire at the visitor centers for further information.

Please Observe: Firearms are prohibited in developed and concentrated public-use areas, unless unloaded. Pets must be kept under physical control in developed and concentrated public-use areas. Trash and waste disposal into the waters of the area is strictly prohibited; all vessels must have a waste receptacle on board. A first-aid kit should be carried as a precaution against poisonous snakebites.