

BLACK CANYON

of the
GUNNISON

NATIONAL
MONUMENT

Colorado



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NATIONAL MONUMENT



UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR, J. A. Krug, *Secretary*
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Spectacular gorge of Gunnison River, notable for its narrowness, depth, ruggedness, and great expanses of sheer walls carved in dark-colored rocks consisting of schists, with extensive intrusions of coarse-textured granites varying in color from black to pink

Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Monument, comprising an area of 13,176.02 acres of federally owned land, was established by Presidential proclamation of March 2, 1933. Within its boundaries lies the deepest and most spectacular 10-mile section of the dark, formidable gorge of the Gunnison River. Ute Indians aptly describe this gorge, cut through the heart of a great plateau, as the "place of high rocks and much water." Geologists and others consider the Black Canyon of the Gunnison River to be one of the most remarkable bits of scenery in the entire San Juan Mountains region of Colorado. Scenic drives within the monument closely parallel the north and south rims of the gorge, with canyon overlooks provided at advantageous locations.

GEOLOGY

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, or ancient "base rock," 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 Black Canyon a particularly appropriate name. Except at midday, 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 formation. The rims of the gorge are only 1,300 feet apart at their nearest approach, yet the gorge ranges from 1,730 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. For many millions of years this river has been furiously carving its channel deeper and deeper through this

probable Archean complex at a greater speed than all combined natural processes can widen it. The tools which the river uses are the sand and gravel that it carries, mainly in periods of flood. The hardness of its rock formation and the joint, or fracture, system account for the sharp, ragged sheerness 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.

HISTORY

The monument and vicinity are rich in his-

toric lore. Evidence shows that prehistoric Indians camped and hunted in the area, long known to historic Ute Indians as fine hunting ground.

Don Juan Maria de Rivera, a Spanish prospector, traversed the region in 1761, camping overnight near the mouth of the gorge. Then, in 1776, came the indomitable Franciscan friars, Silvestre Velez de Escalante and Francisco Atanasio Dominguez, who camped in the same vicinity during their search for a "northern" route from Santa Fe to Monterey in California. Next in the locality were the colorful "Mountain Men" searching for beaver, followed in 1837 by Joseph Roubidoux, a French Canadian explorer.

Several military expeditions passed through this region during the period of expansion of frontiers and exploration of the West. The most notable of these was the expedition led by Capt. John W. Gunnison, for whom the river was

named. He was searching for a feasible coast-to-coast route for a railroad. Capt. Gunnison determined that barriers on the proposed Black Canyon route were insurmountable.

A United States Geological and Geographical Survey party, headed by Henry Gannett and A. C. Peale, visited the region in 1874 recording the character, length, and surface geology of the Black Canyon and vicinity. Many persons have attempted to traverse the bottom of the canyon itself along the 50-mile course of the Gunnison River. The first known white men to accomplish this feat were A. L. Fellows, of the United States Bureau of Reclamation (then known as the Reclamation Service), and W. W. Torrence, of Montrose, Colo., in the year 1901.

WILDLIFE, TREES, AND FLOWERS

Black Canyon is one of the few remaining strongholds of the Rocky Mountain bighorn.

These wary, surefooted animals are occasionally seen on ledges along the canyon walls. Black bears and mule deer are also present, and elk winter in the area.

Trees of the monument are of unusual interest. On the highest point on the south rim of the monument (elevation 8,300 feet) the familiar juniper-piñon forest gives way to a remarkable stand of rugged, overage piñon patriarchs. These are distinguished from other piñons by their comparatively smooth, flaky bark of silvered, light-brown hue. In 1940, borings were taken by the University of Arizona Laboratory of Tree Ring Research from five living piñons of this group, and the sawn stumps and ends of others, felled in 1934 by the United States Geological Survey in establishing their triangulation station atop this highest point, were examined. Annular ring counts ranging from 467 to 742 years were disclosed, with inside ring dates varying from 1220 A. D. to 1470 A. D. Estimated

South rim view of the canyon.



Excellent examples of isolated granitic masses standing within the canyon, apart from the walls.



ages in years were placed at 750 years for one specimen down to 550 years for the "babies" of the group examined.

A veritable parade of wild flowers of wide variety is to be seen during the early summer months.

ACCESSIBILITY

Both rims of the canyon within the monument are accessible by automobile during the late spring and summer months. From Montrose, Colo., the distance to the south rim is 17 miles—8 miles east via United States Highway No. 50, and 9 miles northward over a graded road. The north rim is reached from State Highway No. 92, just east of Crawford, Colo., by a 14-mile road that is usually graded during the summer months.

ACCOMMODATIONS

Hotel and motorcourt accommodations are available in nearby towns. Camp grounds and picnic spots are maintained on both the north and south rims within the monument. Camping supplies and equipment are not available at

Part of the rugged north rim of the Black Canyon.



the monument and should be procured at the approach towns.

ADMINISTRATION

Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Monument is one of the areas of scenic, historic, prehistoric, or scientific value, with superlative features of national significance, which the National Park Service of the Department of the Interior is obligated by law to preserve, unimpaired, for the benefit and enjoyment of the people. The monument is under the immediate charge of the Superintendent of Mesa Verde National Park, and communications concerning it should be addressed to The Superintendent, Mesa Verde National Park, Colorado.

The following observations are made for the protection of the natural beauties of the monument, as well as for the comfort and convenience of visitors:

The monument is a sanctuary for wildlife, and hunting and the use of firearms are not permitted.

Flowers, shrubs, and trees should not be disturbed or wild animals or birds harmed or frightened. Initials must not be carved on signs, or structures and natural feature marred or defaced.

Be careful with fires, building them only in designated camping and picnic spots. Extinguish fires completely before leaving. Know your fire is out. Use only firewood provided for picnic and camping purposes.

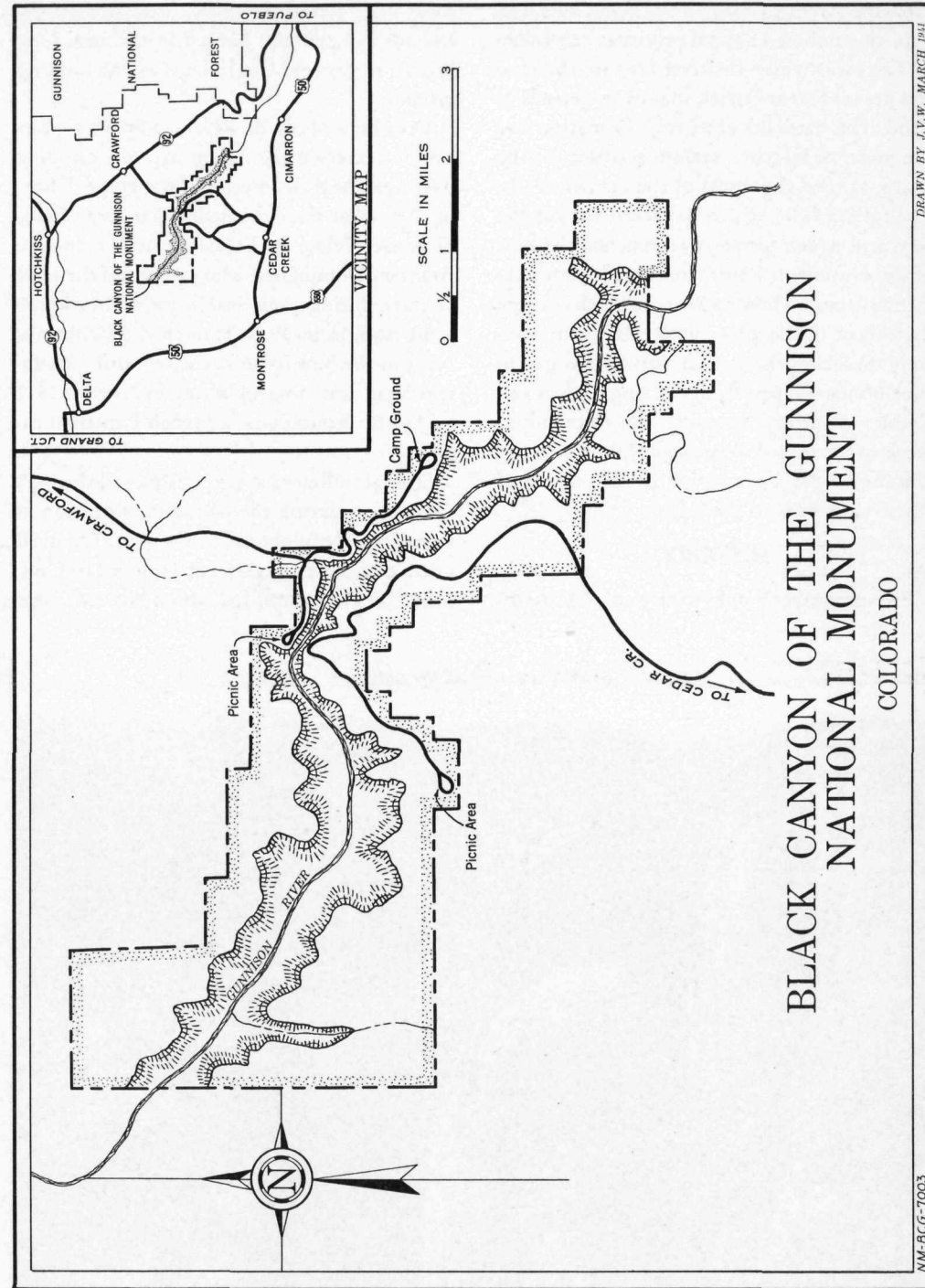
Excellent fishing may be enjoyed, in season, in the river at the bottom of the canyon; a Colorado State fishing license is required.

Rocks, or other objects, must not be thrown or rolled into the canyon. Hikers and fishermen in the canyon may be fatally injured by this practice.

In no circumstances should visitors attempt the canyon descent without first consulting the ranger. It is an arduous and hazardous ordeal.

Dogs and cats must be kept on leash or otherwise under physical restrictive control at all times.

Please cooperate fully in keeping monument premises clean by depositing all refuse in the receptacles provided.



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