

# BLACK CANYON

of the  
**GUNNISON**

NATIONAL  
MONUMENT

*Colorado*



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### NATIONAL MONUMENT

*Spectacular gorge of Gunnison River, notable for its narrowness, depth, ruggedness, and great expanses of sheer walls carved in dark-colored platy rocks, called schists, with extensive intrusions of coarse-textured granites ranging in color from black to pink.*

Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Monument, comprising an area of about 22 square miles 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." The Black Canyon of the Gunnison River is one of the most remarkable bits of scenery in western Colorado. Drives within the monument closely parallel the north and south rims of the gorge, with canyon overlooks provided at advantageous locations.

#### Geology

An observer standing on the rim can easily see that sheer-walled Black Canyon is cut into the floor of a broader outer valley with gentle slopes of stratified sandstone and shale formations. Rocks forming this floor are ancient "base rocks," millions of years old. They consist of a dark, platy rock called

schist, a coarsely banded rock called gneiss (pronounced "nice"), and a crystalline-textured rock known as granite. The granite, composed of crystals of feldspar, quartz, and mica, forms a tracery of dark bands in the canyon walls and light to pinkish-hued exposures along the rim. The weathered surfaces of schist, gneiss, and granite, streaked and stained by organic acids, add to the stark awesomeness of the chasm. Except at midday, the bottom of this incredible gorge is shrouded in gloomy twilight, making the name "Black Canyon" particularly appropriate.

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 2,725 feet in depth within the monument. At one location the channel of the Gunnison River narrows to only 40 feet in width.

For a period of time measured in hundreds of thousands, or perhaps even a few millions,

of years, the river has been carving its channel deeper and deeper into this schist and granite base rock at a greater speed than all combined natural processes can widen it. Tools which the river uses are the sand and gravel that it carries, mainly during times of flood. The hardness of the rock formation, the joint or fracture system, and the comparatively rapid rate of downcutting 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 the stratified formations known as sedimentary rocks. These sedimentary rocks are so much younger than the underlying schist and granite of the gorge itself that during this gap of time life developed from the single-celled type 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 historic lore. Evidence shows that prehistoric Indians camped and hunted in the area, long known to historic Ute Indians as a fine hunting ground.

Don Juan Maria de Rivera, a Spanish prospector, traversed the region in 1761, camping overnight in the vicinity 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

*North rim view of the canyon.*



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



*The National Park System, of which this area is a unit, is dedicated to conserving the scenic, scientific, and historic heritage of the United States for the benefit and enjoyment of its people.*

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. Captain 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. A few 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 the Reclamation Service), and W. W. Torrence, of Montrose, Colo., who made the trip in 1901.

#### Wildlife, Trees, and Flowers

The wary, sure-footed Rocky Mountain bighorn are occasionally seen on ledges along the canyon walls. Black bear 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 canyon (elevation 8,300 feet), the familiar brushland gives way to a remarkable stand of rugged, overage pinyon and juniper patriarchs. In 1940, scientists of the University of Arizona Laboratory of Tree-Ring Research took borings from five living pinyons of this group and examined the sawed stumps and ends of others that were felled in 1934 by geologists of the United States Geological Survey when they established their triangulation station atop this highest point. Annual ring counts that ranged from 467 to 742 years were disclosed, with inside ring dates ranging in age from A.D. 1220 to 1470. The estimated ages were placed at 750 years for one specimen down to 550 years for "babies" of the group examined.

A veritable parade of wildflowers of wide variety is to be seen in the early summer.

### Accessibility

Both rims of the canyon within the monument are accessible by automobile from early spring to late autumn. From Montrose, Colo., the distance to the south rim entrance is 13 miles—7 miles east via U.S. 50, and 6 miles northward over a hard-surface road. The north rim is reached from State Route 92, just east of Crawford, Colo., by a 14-mile road that is usually graded during the summer.

### Accommodations

Refreshments and curios are available at the Rim House on the south rim. Hotel and motel accommodations are available in nearby towns. Campgrounds are maintained on both the north and south rims within the monument. Camping supplies and equipment are not available at the monument and should be procured at the approach towns. Drinking water is obtainable on both the north and south rims.

*The following observations are made for the protection of the natural attractions of the monument, as well as for your comfort and convenience:*

*Hunting and the use of firearms are not permitted.*

*Flowers, shrubs, and trees should not be disturbed. Natural features should not be marred or defaced.*

*Be careful with fires, building them only in designated campgrounds. Use only firewood provided for that purpose. Extinguish fires completely before leaving them. Know that your fire is out.*

*Rocks or other objects must not be thrown or rolled into the canyon. Hikers and fish-*

*ermen in the canyon may be fatally injured.*

*In no circumstances should you attempt the canyon descent or a river trip without first consulting the park ranger. They are arduous and hazardous ordeals.*

*Pets must be kept under physical restraint at all times.*

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

### Administration

Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Monument is administered by the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior. The superintendent of Colorado National Monument, whose address is Box 157, Fruita, Colo., is also in charge of Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Monument.

During the summer, park rangers are stationed on both the north and south rims of the canyon.

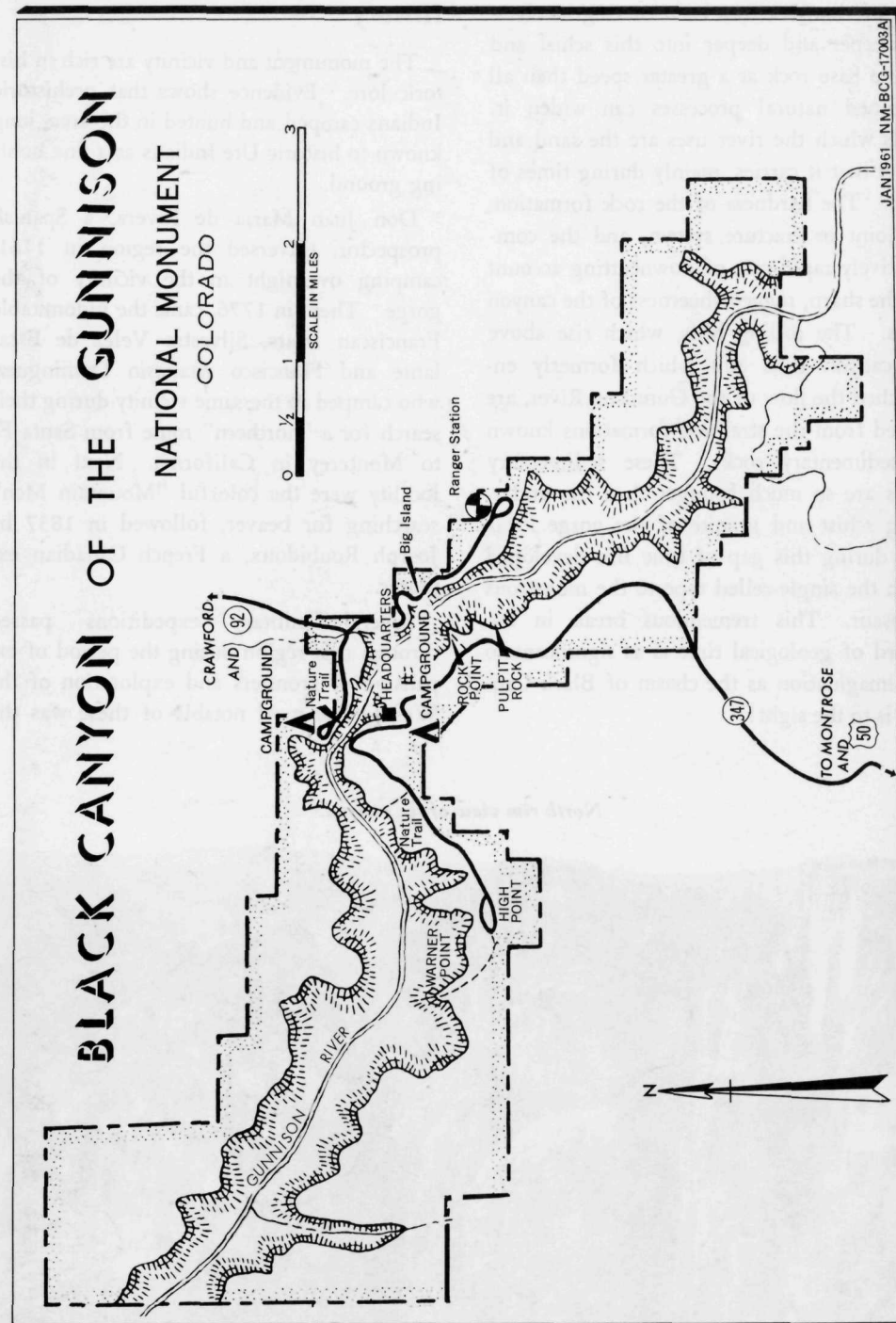
### Mission 66

MISSION 66 is a program designed to be completed by 1966 which will assure the maximum protection of the scenic, scientific, wilderness, and historic resources of the National Park System in such ways and by such means as will make them available for the use and enjoyment of present and future generations.

MISSION 66 projects for Black Canyon include surfacing and partial realignment of the South Rim Drive. Scenic overlooks with guardrails have been developed for each rim. A new campground is scheduled for the south rim in the near future.



U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR  
Stewart L. Udall, Secretary  
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE, Conrad L. Wirth, Director



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Cover: View down the canyon from the north rim.

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