



No other canyon in the world is as steep, deep, and narrow as the Black Canyon of the Gunnison. At its deepest, it measures 2,722 feet. The lack of sunlight, and the dark gray rock that makes up the walls of the canyon, are what inspired the name "Black Canyon." The canyon is so deep and narrow that some areas never see sunlight!

What Lives Here?

Due to the elevation difference from the top of the canyon to the bottom, the Black Canyon ecosystem is very diverse. Over 270 different species of animals call this canyon home, among those are 67 types of mammals and 175 species of birds. Over 550 different species of plants thrive and support other organisms in Black Canyon.



Mule deer

On the rim weather conditions are hot and dry. Most moisture comes from snowfall and late summer rains.

Animals

Turkey vulture
Mule deer
Mountain lion
Coyote

Plants

Gambel oak
Sagebrush
Pinyon pine
Cactus

Peregrine falcon



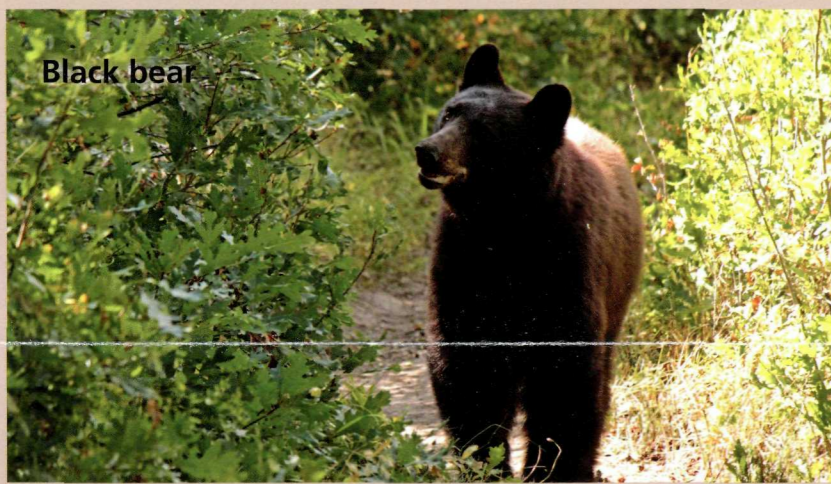
The canyon walls are some of the steepest cliffs in Colorado. Plants and animals have very little space along these walls and rock erosion is a constant threat.

Animals

Peregrine falcon
Bighorn sheep
Golden eagle
Ringtail

Plants

Douglas fir
Black Canyon gilia
Hanging garden
Sullivantia
Moss



Black bear

At the canyon bottom is the Gunnison River, which provides extra moisture to the plants and animals.

Animals

Black bear
American dipper
Cutthroat trout
River otter

Plants

Ponderosa pine
Box elder
Sandbar willow
Poison ivy

National Parks and Rangers

The National Park Service mission is to "conserve the scenery and the natural and historic objects and the wild life therein and to provide for the enjoyment of the same in such manner and by such means as will leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations." With over 400 national park "units," Park Rangers work to protect the park and help people understand, respect, and enjoy their national parks.

We Need Your Help

Park Rangers can't do it alone. We need people like you to learn why these places are special and to share that knowledge with others. Anyone who does that is a Ranger-at-Heart.

Picture yourself as a Ranger! Cut this out and paste your picture on the oval. Take pictures of the areas you help protect as a Ranger-at-Heart!



How Did the Canyon Form?

Black Canyon is a unique and dramatic canyon to see. Compare it to Grand Canyon in Arizona in the profiles below. Notice that although Grand Canyon is wider and deeper, Black Canyon is very narrow and steep. Why is Black Canyon so different? It has to do with timing of events and where they occurred.



Black Canyon's gray and pink rocks are nearly 2 billion years old. They formed 20 miles underground. The gray rocks started as rocks that were buried and then cooked and squeezed underground, forming a brand new metamorphic rock. The pink rocks started as gooey magma that squeezed upwards into the gray metamorphic rocks and later cooled and hardened into igneous rocks. Later, movement in the Earth forced all these old rocks upward towards the surface of the planet. This is called an uplift.

It got really exciting around 30 million years ago when volcanoes popped onto the landscape to the north and south of the uplift. The volcanoes towered above the uplift, which meant it became a valley (or low spot) between the volcanoes. After the volcanoes were done spewing ash and rocks, water and snow melt began heading downhill and carving out a valley. When the waters carved deep enough to hit the uplift, they continued to carve downwards into the old hidden rocks.

The Black Canyon is so steep, deep, and narrow because the old rocks are really hard. Rivers force their energy to carve downwards when rocks are hard (instead of drifting side to side in softer rocks). It took nearly 2 million years for the water to carve the 2,000-foot deep Black Canyon that we see today. The Gunnison River carves about the width of a human hair each year.

What would this place look like if there was no uplift and the old rocks were still hidden underground? What if the volcanoes never erupted onto the landscape, creating a valley between them for water to start carving downwards?



Gneiss (pronounced "nice")



Microscope



Geologists look at thin slices of rock through microscopes to name the rock and tell how it formed. Notice the squished and lined up shiny mica minerals that reveal the gneiss is a metamorphic rock (cooked and squeezed underground).

Quick Facts!

- Established as a National Monument: March 2, 1933
- Established as a National Park: October 21, 1999
- Fastest Animal: peregrine falcon (240 mph, 389 kmph)
- Oldest Rocks: gneiss and schist (1.8 billion years old)
- Average Drop of the Gunnison River: 43 ft/mi (13 m/km)
- Erosion Rate: 1 in (2.5 cm) every 100 years
- Total Length: 48 mi (77 km)
- Tallest Cliff: Painted Wall (2,250 ft, 690 m)
- Greatest Depth: Warner Point (2,722 ft, 829 m)
- Narrowest Widths
- At the Bottom of the Canyon: The Narrows (40 ft, 12 m)
- At the Rim of the Canyon: Chasm View (1,100 ft, 335 m)

Things To Do

You can experience your national parks in different ways! Many people attend our ranger programs, and local students can visit on field trips with their class. What would you like to do?



Hiking



Camping



Picnicking



Photography



Fishing



Rock Climbing



Kayaking



Snowshoeing

Ute History

The Ute people were among the first to ever see the Black Canyon. Called the "mountain people," Ute bands share the same language and culture.

Their traditional territory covered much of Colorado, Utah, and New Mexico. It also extended into parts of Wyoming, Arizona, Texas, and Oklahoma. This made Utes one of the largest tribes by territory size although not by population.

Utes traveled seasonally to follow game animals and find edible plants. They moved up into the mountains during

the summers and moved into the warmer, lower valleys and canyons in winter.

Artifacts at Black Canyon reveal that the Ute people frequently visited the canyon rim.

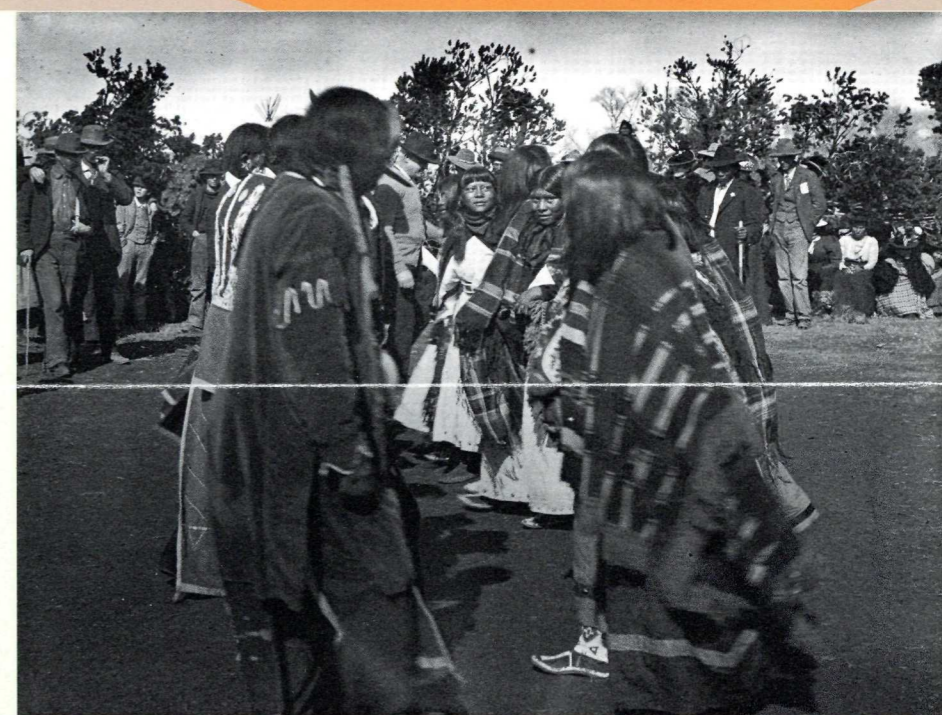
Utes continue their traditions today. In the spring, they still celebrate the Bear Dance (shown in photograph). Women choose their dance

partners for this 3-day celebration of the renewal of spring. The annual dance dates back to before the 1600s.

For more information explore History Colorado's online resources:

www.historycolorado.org

Photograph credit: Glass Negative Collection, Harry H. Buckwalter photographs collection, Ph. 00057 (20030483), History Colorado.



Timeline

1933: Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Monument established

1933-1935: Civilian Conservation Corps built roads and overlooks on the North Rim

1976: Parts of Black Canyon designated as a Wilderness Area

1999: Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Park established

20??: Your first visit to Black Canyon!

1853-1916: Explorers led expeditions through Black Canyon

1972: First successful attempt to climb the rock face of Painted Wall by Bill Forrest and Kris Walker

2015: Black Canyon designated as an International Dark Sky Park

