

# curecanti

recreation area • colorado

The Curecanti Unit—one of four principal authorized elements of the Colorado River Storage Project—is comprised of three reservoirs in the deep canyons of the Gunnison River in western Colorado. It was named for the Ute Indian Chief, Curicata, who with his twin brother, Kanneatche, roamed and hunted over the Colorado territory.

As Blue Mesa, Morrow Point, and Crystal Dams are completed, the reservoirs formed will provide recreation benefits of national significance. When Congress authorized the Colorado River Storage Project in 1956, it also directed the Secretary of the Interior to investigate, plan, construct, operate, and maintain public recreational facilities on the reservoirs thus created.

The Bureau of Reclamation is constructing and will administer the dams and powerplants. The National Park Service administers the recreation area, supervising activities, plans, and development within the area. Both are agencies of the U.S. Department of the Interior.

Within this scenic province is a variety of recreation opportunities sufficient to satisfy nearly every vacationer's taste—forested country in the Gunnison and San Isabel National Forests immediately to the north and east, in the Sawatch Range to the northeast, and in the rugged San Juan Mountains to the south and southwest. The precipitous gorge through which the Gunnison River flows in Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Monument, adjacent to the Curecanti Unit on the west, is one of the dramatic highlights of the region.

## Blue Mesa Dam and Lake

Blue Mesa Dam is made up of three sections: the central core, impervious to water; the next layer, almost impervious; and the outside layer, made up of larger rock and riprap on the upstream face to withstand wave action. It was built by compacting thin layers to a high density in an inverted wedge shape only 30 feet wide at its crest but 1,600 feet wide at its base.

Although it is only 342 feet high, Blue Mesa Dam backs up the largest body of water in Colorado—20-mile-long Blue Mesa Lake, containing more than 940,000 acre-feet of water. The lake offers much water-oriented recreation: boating, exploring, fishing, and camping, all within Colorado's superlative mesa country. Development, however, is in an early stage.

## Morrow Point and Crystal Dams

Work is underway on Morrow Point Dam and powerplant, 12 miles downstream from Blue Mesa Dam. Crystal Dam will be built later, downstream from Morrow Point Dam.

## PREHISTORY AND HISTORY

The discovery of artifacts, burials, and habitations indicates that prehistoric Indians lived in the area that now includes Curecanti Recreation Area.

When Spanish explorers arrived in 1776, they found Ute Indians living in the area. The Utes were still here when other white men—mostly miners and ranchers—appeared. The ranchers stayed; but the miners, for the most part, moved on.

The Gunnison River valley was the approach to the Great Basin used by 18th-century Spanish explorers and slave traders based in New Mexico; it was a popular stream with the American fur trappers of the early 19th century; and it was part of one of several proposed transcontinental railroad routes explored in the 1850's by the Army's Pacific Railroad Surveys. In fact, the river takes its name from Capt. John W. Gunnison, whose 40th parallel survey of 1853 was terminated by an Indian attack in Utah that took his life.

The Rio Grande Railroad came into Gunnison in 1881. In 1882 the Denver, Rio Grande and Western completed its roadbed to Cimarron, a route which took it past the present site of Blue Mesa Dam and down the Black Canyon for 15 miles. The old railroad bed can be seen from an observation point below the dam.

## THE NATURAL SCENE

### Geology

The geology of Curecanti is a story of volcanic outpourings and the powerful forces and tremendous heat of metamorphism and the subsequent bandsaw action of a rushing stream that has incised itself deep into the landscape.

Gentle slopes, flat beaches, and occasional steep bluff faces characterize most of the landscape to be seen from the surface of Blue Mesa Lake. From the axis of the lake are views through canyons and valleys to forest-covered mountain slopes, dramatically eroded cliff faces, and snowclad peaks.

The shores of the lake display evidence of what must have been one of the most dramatic geological events in this part of the country. Eroded into spires, pillars, and cones is a soft volcanic material called breccia. Deposits of this material were caused by explosive destruction of previously formed volcanic cones.

Later volcanic activity capped the breccia with layers of super-heated volcanic ash which welded it into a rock that is highly resistant to erosion. These rocks form the vertical cliffs just below the mesa tops.

The steep walls of the upper Black Canyon of the Gunnison, although less spectacular than those within that National Monument, are intricately dissected by the forces of weathering and erosion. Their appearance changes with the viewer's position and with the varying light on their sculptured surfaces.

## Plants

The slopes and flats are mostly grassland, with some low brush and with trees restricted almost entirely to cottonwoods along stream channels and to conifers such as blue spruce and Douglas-fir on some sheltered northern slopes.

Various shrubs find conditions favorable enough to grow in the narrow draws that come down the slopes. On the hillsides and uplands that border Blue Mesa Lake the most common shrub is sagebrush. The rocky outcrops so common in the area have many colorful lichens growing on them.

## Animals

The bottom lands along the river in the Blue Mesa area are extremely important wintering grounds for deer and elk. The Gunnison River has long been recognized as a nationally significant trout stream; Blue Mesa Lake has been stocked with rainbow trout and kokanee salmon.

Small mammals, such as chipmunks, golden-mantled ground squirrels, marmots, prairie dogs, and beaver, are found in various places around Blue Mesa Lake. Pocket gophers, wood rats, and deer mice are common in some areas.

As the lakeshore rises and eventually stabilizes, there will undoubtedly be a change in the area's birdlife. Some 165 species of birds have been recorded, of which 71 were summer and 31 were winter residents, with the remainder listed as migrants.

## ABOUT YOUR VISIT

### When To Visit

The normal visitor season is from mid-May until mid-October.

The climate of the area is one of long, cold winters and short, beautiful summers, often punctuated by the violent thunderstorms common to the Rocky Mountains. Late spring and early summer are dry; moisture comes mostly as snow in winter and early spring.

Temperatures in winter often dip well below zero; in summer, they rarely exceed 85°. Although winter days are seldom warm, summer nights are cool.



**How to Reach Curecanti**

U.S. 50, a major east-west transcontinental route, parallels the length of Blue Mesa Lake.

Airlines and buslines serve Gunnison and Montrose, Colo. You will find sleeping accommodations, restaurants, grocery and other stores, and gas stations in nearby towns.

**ADMINISTRATION**

Curecanti Recreation Area is administered by the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior, through agreement with the Bureau of Reclamation.

A superintendent, whose address is 334 South 10th St., Montrose, Colo. 81401, is in charge of the area.

**THE DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR**—the Nation's principal natural resources agency—has an obligation to assure that our expendable resources are conserved, that our renewable resources are managed to produce optimum benefits, and that all resources contribute their full measure to the progress and prosperity of the United States, now and in the future.

**DEVELOPMENT OF CURECANTI**

The National Park Service has constructed an access road, parking facilities, and a launching ramp at Iola, and an access road, parking facilities, a launching ramp, and a campground at Elk Creek. Additional construction will provide campgrounds, picnic areas, marinas, a restaurant, a service station, a store, and similar services.

**FOR AN ENJOYABLE VISIT**

Regulations are few, but we urge you to observe the following to make your visit more enjoyable:

**Camping** is limited to 14 days, and you must camp in designated areas only.

**Boat launching.** There are two launching ramps on Blue Mesa Lake. The Elk Creek ramp is southeast of the camping area; the Iola ramp is on the southeast end of the lake just off Colo. 149.

**Fishing** in Blue Mesa Lake is governed by Colorado regulations, and a Colorado license is required. Before fishing, please check the current regulations.

**Hunting and trapping** are permitted at Curecanti in accordance with Federal, State, and local laws except in developed and/or concentrated public-use areas designated by the superintendent. Check for location of these areas.

**Swimming.** If you plan to swim, be well acquainted with the area. Blue Mesa Lake has many rock ledges not visible from the surface that make diving into un-

explored waters hazardous. Do not swim from unanchored boats, boat docks, or launching ramps!

**Firearms.** Carrying or using loaded firearms or explosives in developed and/or concentrated public-use areas is not allowed.

**Pets** must be kept under physical control when in developed and/or concentrated public-use areas.

**FOR SAFETY**

**In boating**

When launching or loading your boat, only the driver should remain in the car.

Do not swim from an unanchored boat. Be alert to changes in weather and wind. Sudden strong winds are common and can arise without warning. Be ready to head for shore when these changes occur.

**Don't overcrowd.** An overloaded boat is uncomfortable and unsafe. Conform with the manufacturer's recommended capacity rating.

Carry Coast Guard-approved life preservers for each person on board. Never hesitate to have all persons wear life preservers or buoyant vests whenever circumstances cause the slightest doubt of safety.

Be sure that all aboard know what to do in an emergency and where to find safety equipment.

You are responsible for damage caused by your wake. When passing boats, swimmers, or shore facilities, keep your distance.

Learn the "Rules of the Road"—who has the right of way and the meaning of buoys.

Bring all refuse to launching ramps where receptacles are available.

Report any accident to the nearest ranger or ranger station.

All boat operators must make sure that their equipment meets standards set forth by Colorado and the National Park Service.

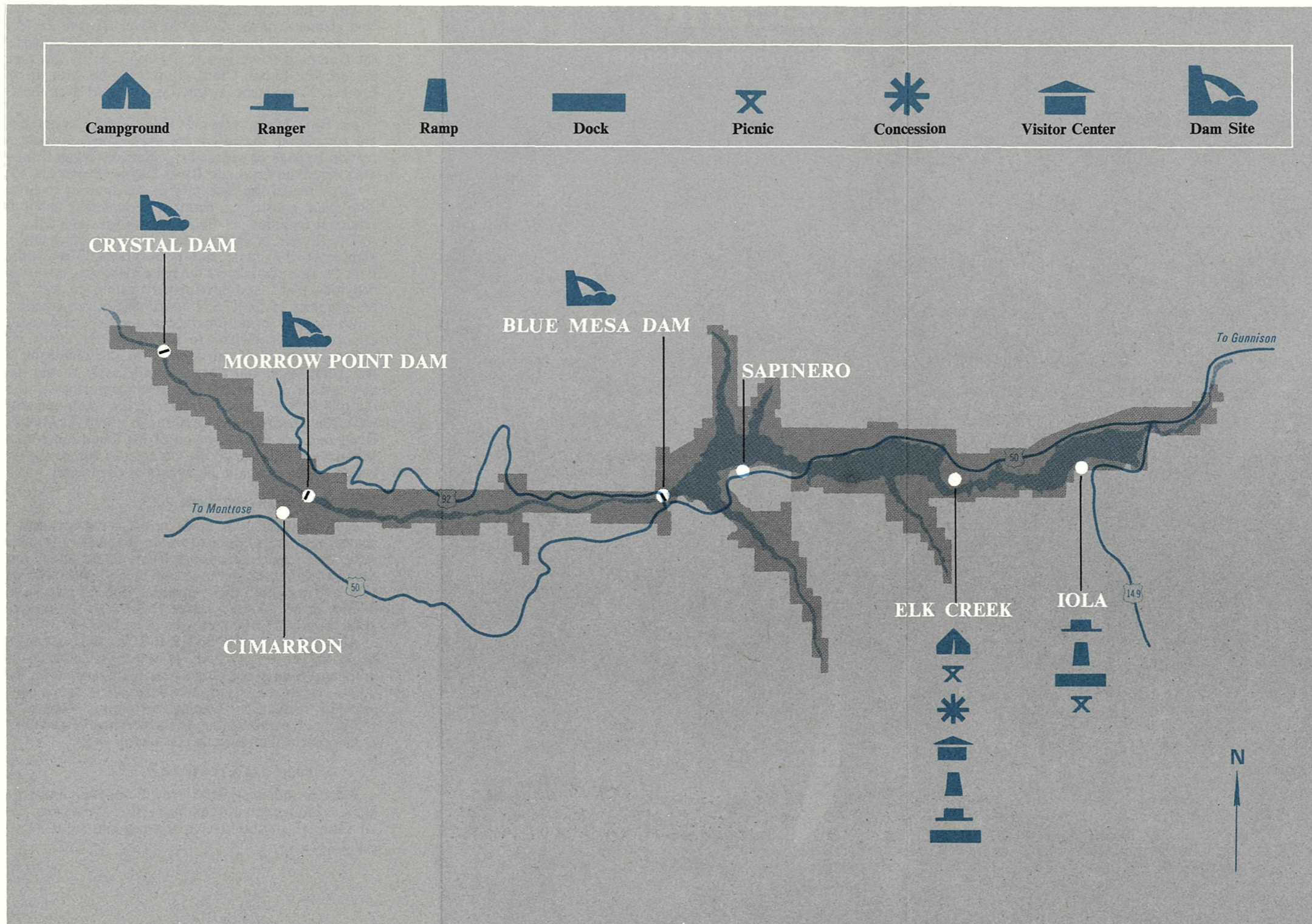
**In water skiing**

The law requires that there must be a second person in the boat to act as observer. This will permit watching both the skier and the waters ahead.

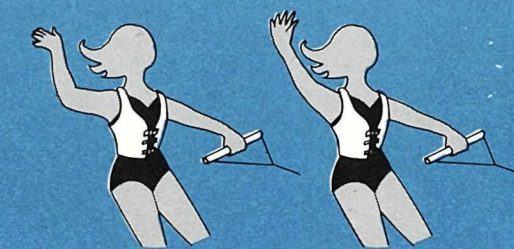
Do not tow a skier in channels or within 500 feet of harbors, swimming beaches, and mooring areas, or within 100 feet of any person swimming or diving.

Make sure that the skier is wearing a proper life-saving device. If he tumbles, the boat should approach him from the left side. An approved life-preserver jacket must be in the boat for each water skier.

In taking the skier on board, be careful not to swamp your boat. In smaller craft it is normally safer to take a person aboard at the stern—motor turned off.

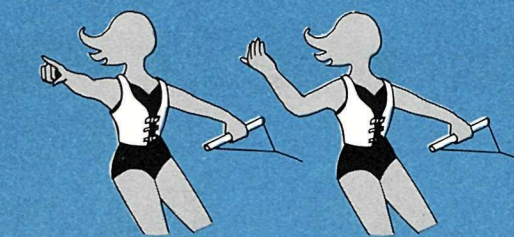


These water skiing signals are recommended by the American Water Ski Association:



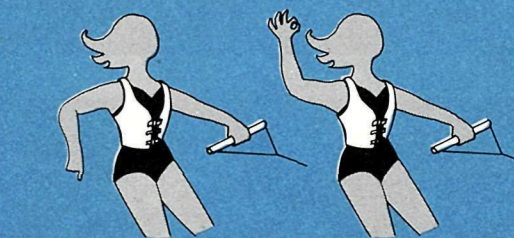
TURN

STOP



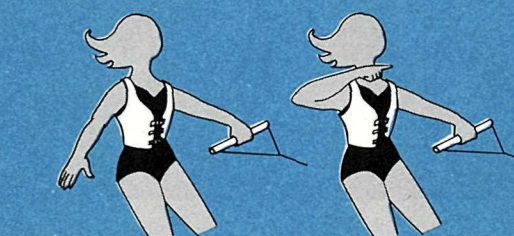
WHIP OFF

FASTER



BACK TO DOCK

SPEED O.K.



SLOWER

CUT MOTOR