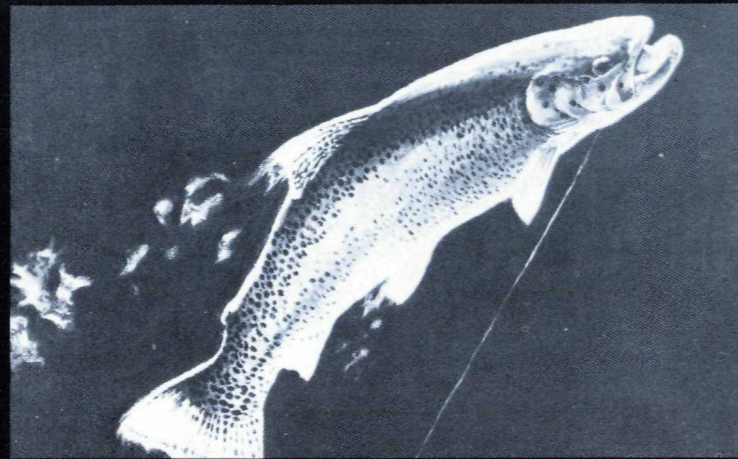


Curecanti



National Recreation Area
Colorado



National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



Blue Mesa Lake's Water Wonderland

Man-made dams on the Gunnison River form three lakes that make up the Curecanti National Recreation Area. The three Curecanti Unit dams work together producing hydroelectric power. Blue Mesa Dam impounds the main storage reservoir, Morrow Point Dam generates the bulk of the power, and Crystal Dam maintains an even river flow downstream. The dams were constructed by the Bureau of Reclamation as part of the Upper Colorado River Storage Project.

Blue Mesa Lake, the focus of water sports, is Colorado's largest lake when filled to capacity. Morrow Point and Crystal Lakes, narrow and deep within the canyon carved out by the Gunnison, suggest fiords. Boat tours offered in season on Morrow Point Lake provide an insight into the ancient sculpting work of time and the river. The old rock faces of the canyon walls reveal immense time spans which dwarf this landscape's human history of Ute Indians, Spanish explorers, fur traders, gold prospectors, miners, railroad builders, and ranchers. Downstream, where the river still tumbles free, carving the ancient Precambrian rock, this 2-million-year-old story continues to unfold in the Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Monument.

Curecanti, named for the Ute Chief Curicata who once hunted the Colorado territory, provides year round water recreation. The main season for camping, boating, fishing, sailing and sight-seeing runs from mid-May until mid-October. Thousands of people come to Blue Mesa Lake every year to fish for Kokanee salmon, rainbow, brown, and Mackinaw trout. During May and early June brown trout give anglers an opportunity to catch some of the largest fish in Blue Mesa Lake. Occasional large Mackinaw are also taken then. But the rainbow trout is the mainstay, summer and winter. Trollers find the rainbows and Kokanee holding up well throughout the season, with late June, July, and August best for salmon. October brings spawning runs of Kokanee salmon up the Gunnison River within the recreation area. Hundreds of thousands of rainbow and Kokanee are planted annually in the lake by State and Federal wildlife agencies. Winter offers ice fishing, snowmobiling, cross-country skiing, snowshoeing, and wildlife observation from mid-December through mid-March. Hunting is permitted under Federal and State laws. Rock climbers, scuba divers and hang glider enthusiasts pursue their sports here, but if you plan to attempt these, contact a ranger first.

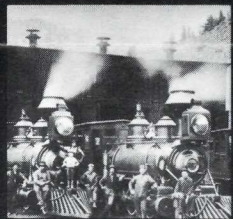
In winter, elk (wapiti) wander into campgrounds here, but wildlife watching is not always so dramatic. Small animals, chipmunks, goldenmantled ground squirrels, cottontail rabbits, marmots, and prairie dogs are common summer sights. Rarely seen are the bears, shorttailed weasels, coyotes, and bobcats. Tributary streams such as East Elk and Red Creeks sometimes reveal beavers at work on dams and houses.

Shore and water birds are common in spring, and wooded areas provide songbird nesting sites. The golden eagle lives here year round, and in winter bald eagles are commonly seen around open water. More commonly seen larger birds are red-tailed hawks, ravens, magpies, eared grebes, ring-billed seagulls, and, along the shore, blue herons. With wingspreads up to 2.4 meters (8 feet), eagles are sights not soon forgotten.

Winter temperatures drop as low as -37C (-35F) at night. In summer, daytime highs may reach the mid-20sC (80F), with nights around 5C (upper 30s to 40s F). Spring snowmelts foster a burst of wildflowers in late May and June. Rabbitbrush paints a yellow cast across the late summer landscape dominated by sagebrush.

Patches of low-growing scrub oak dot slopes above the valley, longleaf cottonwood and willows the canyons. Douglas-fir sparsely pattern the mesas. These plants provide food and shelter for animals. Herds of deer and elk up to 40 strong are common sights along Highway 50 on winter mornings. They summer to the north, throughout the West Elk Mountains.

The earth's incredible power to change itself is what this land most reveals, if you hunt its clues. As you drive along Blue Mesa Lake, look up above the lakeshore. Mesas capped with cliffs, spires of fragmented rock...these tell of volcanic eruptions and immense ash flows. Coarse volcanic material belched out and formed deposits up to 300 meters (1,000 feet) thick. Some mesa cliffs exhibit massive lava deposits that resist erosion better than their surroundings. Imagine such destructive power; all life was snuffed out and centuries passed before life again ventured forth across the land. The layered sandstones and shales seen west of Dry Gulch on Highway 50 are the same type in which dinosaur fossils are found in Dinosaur National Monument. None have been found here, but when summer's high winds drive you off the lakes, why not root out these hills' other secrets?



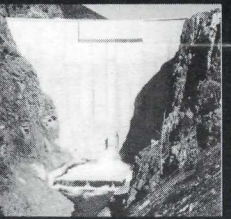
Colorado's mining boom brought the Denver and Rio Grande railroad to the Gunnison country. The D&RG's narrow gauge line conquered the Colorado Rockies. See Engine #278 near Cimarron.



Mining dwindled and irrigation demands grew. The crew at left helped build the 9.7-km-(6-mi) long tunnel diverting Gunnison River water to the Uncompahgre Valley. Trains still brought eager sportsmen.



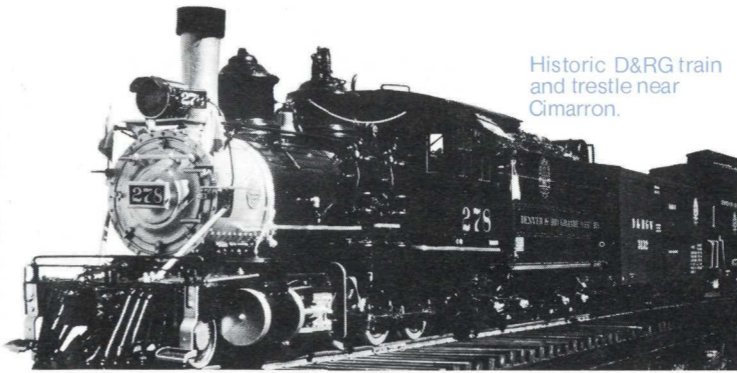
The three Bureau of Reclamation dams of the Curecanti Unit provide irrigation, hydroelectric power, and water recreation to a semi-arid country. Tour Morrow Point Dam (right), an engineering first in the U.S.



Putting a Rugged Land to Work

What can we do with this rugged land? The question has provoked several attempts to put it to work. At present we use the land as a reservoir for water. But "useful" is a human concept that changes with time, and in the past man has tried to put this land to other uses. This high mountain desert is sheltered from heavy snows by surrounding high mountain ranges. The valley of the Gunnison River provides wintering grounds for mule deer, Rocky Mountain elk, and bald and golden eagles. The land's protection and vegetation help them survive harsh winters in a national cold spot. The Ute Indians understood this and followed the seasons here, summering in the mountains and wintering down near today's Montrose and Grand Junction.

The Ute exacted a living from the land, but fur traders and then gold miners tried to make it produce. They blazed the northern branch of the famous Spanish Trail from Santa Fe to Los Angeles, first linking Ute country to commerce. In 1854 Capt. John Gunnison's Pacific Railroad survey party concluded that a railroad link was neither practical nor economical. Gold, coal, cattle, and other goods overruled him in investors' minds by the 1880s, and the narrow gauge railroad penetrated the "roughest, most hilly, most cut up" landscape John Gunnison ever set eyes on. Boom towns of 5,000 people sprang up on fast fortunes of placer gold and nuggets and then dwindled to all but nothing. "The greatest mountain railroad ever" made its last run in 1955.



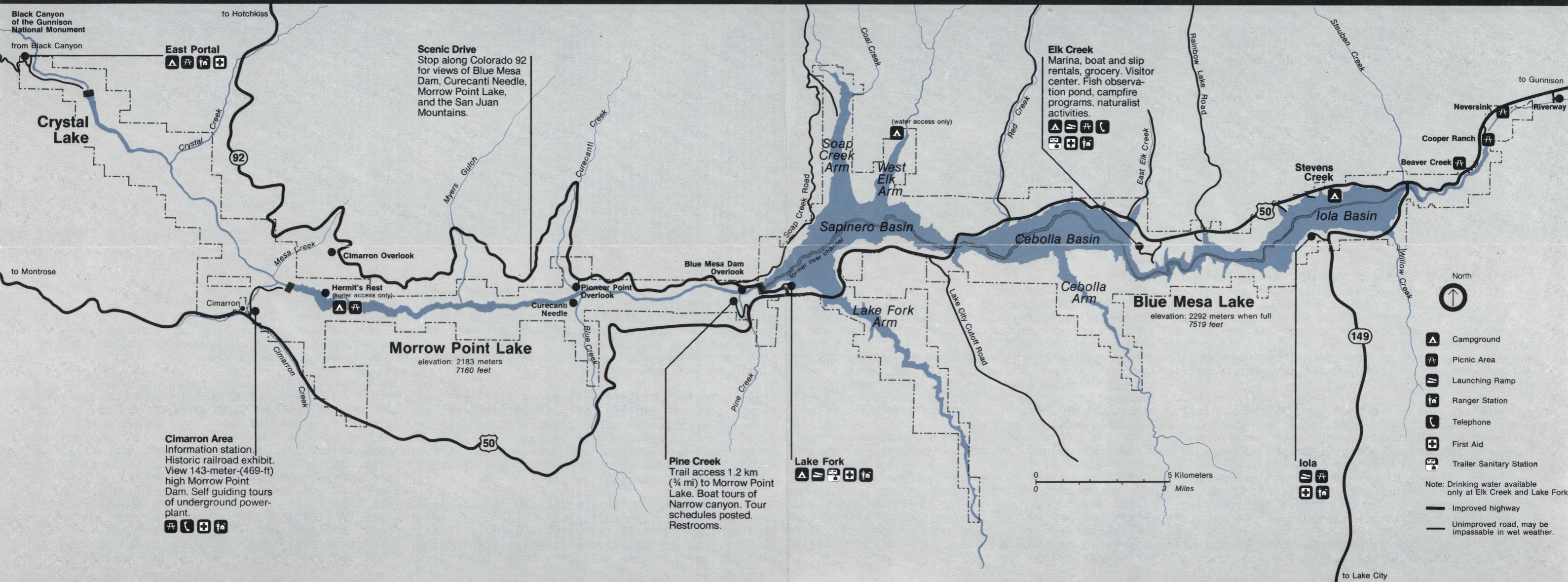
Historic D&RG train and trestle near Cimarron.

As farmers and ranchers moved in and settled here, water grew in value. The 9.7-kilometer (6-mile) Gunnison Diversion Tunnel was cut southwestward through to the Uncompahgre Valley, diverting Gunnison water to thirsty farms there. In between attempts to put the land to work, recreationists sought the fish, game, and scenery abounding here. Now Blue Mesa Lake offers greatly increased water sports. The recreation area is administered by the National Park Service through an agreement with the Bureau of Reclamation. The Superintendent's address is Box 1040, Gunnison, Colorado 81230.

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East Portal
▲ ▲ ▲ ▲

Scenic Drive
Stop along Colorado 92 for views of Blue Mesa Dam, Curecanti Needle, Morrow Point Lake, and the San Juan Mountains.

Cimarron Area
Information station. Historic railroad exhibit. View 143-meter-(469-ft) high Morrow Point Dam. Self-guiding tours of underground power-plant.
▲ ▲ ▲ ▲

Pine Creek
Trail access 1.2 km (¾ mi) to Morrow Point Lake. Boat tours of Narrow canyon. Tour schedules posted. Restrooms.
▲ ▲ ▲ ▲

Elk Creek
Marina, boat and slip rentals, grocery, Visitor center. Fish observation pond, campfire programs, naturalist activities.
▲ ▲ ▲ ▲ ▲ ▲ ▲ ▲

- ▲ Campground
- ▲ Picnic Area
- ▲ Launching Ramp
- ▲ Ranger Station
- ▲ Telephone
- ▲ First Aid
- ▲ Trailer Sanitary Station

Note: Drinking water available only at Elk Creek and Lake Fork
— Improved highway
— Unimproved road, may be impassable in wet weather.

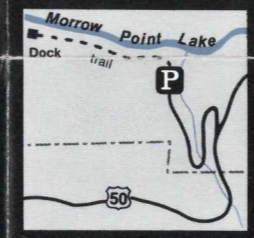
Water Safety
Coast Guard-approved personal flotation devices must be carried for each person on a boat. Keep them readily available. Wear them when danger threatens. When using launch ramps, only the driver should remain in car.

Strong winds may arise suddenly in the afternoons. Head for shore when they do. When Blue Mesa Lake is filled to capacity, boaters must keep a safe distance from the spillway. Use common sense.

Park rangers patrol the lakes to assist boaters in distress and to inspect boats for compliance with safety regulations. Boating equipment requirements are posted at all launching ramps and are published in the

Colorado boating regulations. You are responsible for damage caused by the wake of your boat. Keep your distance from swimmers, divers, and shore facilities.

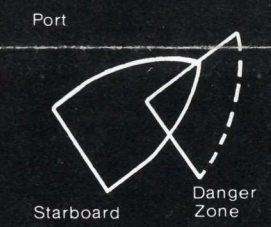
Pine Creek Trail
Provides only access to lake for hand-carried boats. Travel west on the lake in the morning, back in the afternoon because of strong prevailing winds. Avoid marked shoreline slide areas.



Boating Aids



Know your boating signs and markers. The angle of a hazard marker points to deep water. Boaters must avoid areas where a diver's flag is in use. Yield the right of way to boats in your danger zone.



A Map and Guide

Curecanti activities center around Blue Mesa Lake. Morrow Point Lake is primarily accessible only by the Pine Creek Trail, and private boats must be hand carried. A free boat tour of its dramatic, fiord-like canyon setting is offered twice daily in season. A park ranger narrates the trip. For ticket information and schedules call (303) 641-0403. Crystal Lake's daily fluctuating shorelines make it unsuitable for recreation.

Stop at the Elk Creek Visitor Center and ask to view the two color slide programs introducing this area and describing lake fishing. From mid-June to Labor Day, activities—hikes, bird walks, and demonstrations—originate at the visitor center. Feed the fish in its observation ponds at scheduled times. Evening campfire

programs are held in the Elk Creek Campground Amphitheater. Camping is permitted on a first-come, first-served basis in designated campgrounds only. In developed public use areas pets must be kept under physical control at all times. Dispose of waste water only at proper dump sites. Rent boats for sightseeing and fishing, and equipment for fishing and waterskiing, from the concessioner at the Elk Creek Marina. Some groceries and a mooring service are also offered. Fishing requires a Colorado license. When Blue Mesa Lake is drawn down, motor vehicles are permitted anywhere below high water line, *unless posted*, but only on designated roads above high water line. Dirt roads north of Blue Mesa Lake into the West Elk Mountains are passable for some distance when dry but are treacherous when wet. Because there

may be sudden large releases of water below the three dams, anglers should stay at least 180 meters (200 yards) or as posted below the base of these dams. Colorado fish and game laws are enforced by park rangers.

Three large basins (see map) offer suitable expanses for sailing. Waterskiing becomes popular in July and August when surface water temperatures warm. Waterskiers must wear a lifesaving device, and an observer must accompany the boat operator. Coast Guard-approved personal flotation devices must be carried for each person on a boat. Do not ski within 60 meters (200 feet) of the stern of slow moving fishing boats. Give small boats wide berths so you don't swamp them; you are responsible for your

wake. Do not tow skiers in channels or within 150 meters (500 feet) of docks or mooring areas, or within 30 meters (100 feet) of any person swimming or diving.

There are no designated areas for swimming and no lifeguards. Watch out for precipitous shorelines, submerged rocks, and cold water. Do not swim from docks, ramps, or unanchored boats.

Winter at Blue Mesa Lake...come December, auger-bearing ice fishermen try their luck. Park rangers check weekly and mark unsafe ice. Campgrounds with limited facilities are kept open until closed by snow. Snowmobilers take to the fishing access roads, shorelines below high water line, and the lake surface.