

Bighorn Canyon

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

National Recreation Area
Montana / Wyoming



Bighorn Canyon at twilight from the Sullivans Knob trail © DIANE DURANT

At first glance, time seems to have stopped at Bighorn Canyon. The lake and steep-sided canyons provide a peaceful setting for those seeking a break from the daily routine. The focus of the area is the 71-mile-long Bighorn Lake, created by Yellow-tail Dam near Fort Smith, Montana. Dedicated in 1968, the dam provides electric power and water for irrigation, flood control, and recreational opportunities. Boating, waterskiing, fishing, swimming, and sightseeing are the main attractions.

While you enjoy the play of light and shadow on rock and water, contemplate the changes that the land and the life upon it have undergone. Time and water are keys to the canyon, where the land has been shaped by the elements since upheavals of the Earth's crust formed the Pryor and Bighorn mountains millions of years ago.



Bighorn sheep © VIRGINIA DUBOWY

For 15 miles upstream from the dam, the lake bisects a massive, arching anticline, exposing fossils that tell of successive times when this land was submerged under a shallow sea, when it was a tropical marsh, and when its conifer forests were inhabited by dinosaurs. Humans arrived here over 10,000 years ago, living as hunters and gatherers. In modern times people have further altered the land.

The park is more than just the lake. It's a land where wild-flowers bloom in spring and is an ecosystem over 200 species of birds call home. It is a story of early life forms adapting to a harsh environment and humans' search for energy.

A Challenging Land

North American peoples have traveled and made their living along rivers and streams for over 40,000 years. But the Bighorn River was too treacherous and too steep-walled. People lived near the Bighorn but avoided navigating it until after the dam was constructed.

This broken land also challenged the ingenuity of early residents, forcing them to devise unusual strategies of survival. American Indian hunters drove herds of animals into game traps and gathered wild roots and seeds to balance their meat diet. They made clothes of skins, baskets and sandals of plant fibers, and tools of stone, bone, and wood. The many caves of the Bighorn area provided seasonal shelters and storage areas for the Indians and early traders and trappers.

Apsáalooke means "people of the large-beaked bird" to the Crow people. Their reservation surrounds most of Bighorn Canyon. Originally a farming people, the Crow split off from the Hidatsa tribe over 200 years ago. They became a renowned hunting people,

described by a participant on the Lewis and Clark Expedition as "the finest horsemen in the world."

After 1800, explorers, traders, and trappers found their way up the Bighorn River. Charles Larocque met the Crow at the mouth of the Bighorn in 1805; Captain William Clark traveled through a year later. Jim Bridger claimed to have floated through the canyon on a raft. Later fur traders packed goods overland on the Bad Pass Trail, avoiding the river's dangers.

During the Civil War era, many people crossed the Bighorn River as they took the Bozeman Trail into western Montana. Open from 1864 to 1868, the trail was bitterly opposed by the Lakota (Sioux) and Northern Cheyenne tribes. The federal government closed the trail in 1868 after the Fort Laramie Treaty. Fort C.F. Smith, today on private land, guarded the trail as an outpost. A stone monument commemorates the Hayfield Fight, a desperate but successful defense against Lakota and Northern Cheyenne warriors. In this skirmish a party of soldiers and civilian hay cutters,

working three miles north of Fort C.F. Smith, fought for eight hours until rescued by the fort's troops on August 1, 1867.

After the Civil War, cattle ranching became a way of life. Among the huge open-range cattle ranches was the Mason-Lovell (the ML) in northern Wyoming; some of those buildings remain. Dude ranching, reflected in the remains of Hillsboro, was popular in the early 1900s.

The Crow made the transition from hunter-gatherers to ranchers in one generation. In 1904, after 12 years of labor, they completed an irrigation system and opened 35,000 acres of land to irrigated farming. Water was diverted into the Bighorn Canal by a 416-foot diversion dam, moving 720 cubic feet of water per second. Near Afterbay Campground is Bighorn Canal Headgate, a reminder of this human response to the challenge of the land.

Congress established Bighorn Canyon National Recreation Area in 1966 to provide enjoyment for visitors today and to protect the park for future generations.

Land and Life at Bighorn



Recreation
Fifteen hiking trails and 71 miles of lake are just the beginning of the recreational opportunities offered here. Slide your kayak onto the lake as the sun rises to meet water as clear as glass. Feel the water lap against your boat in the evening, as canyon walls begin to block out the sun. Glimpse a peregrine falcon rising from the canyon as you hike to the rim.
© JEAN MARSHALL



Pryor Mountain Wild Horse Range
In 1968 this area was established to provide a well-maintained sanctuary for wild horses. The herd size of about 120–140 is managed by the Bureau of Land Management, National Park Service, and US Forest Service.
© CARRIE SAPP



Bighorn Wildlife
The wildlife of the Bighorn Canyon country is as varied as the land, which can be divided into four climate or vegetative zones. In the south is desert shrubland inhabited by wild horses, snakes, and small rodents. Midway is juniper woodland with coyotes, deer, bighorn sheep, woodrats, beavers, and porcupines. Along the flanks of the canyon is pine-and-fir woodland with mountain lions, bear, elk, and mule deer. In the north is

shortgrass prairie, once home to herds of bison. Many of the smaller animals, like cottontails, skunks, coyotes, and rattlesnakes, are seen often throughout the park. Over 200 species of birds, including many kinds of waterfowl, have been seen here.

Each plant and animal species is adapted to the particular conditions of temperature, moisture, and terrain within one or more of the park's four primary zones.
© JONATHAN WELDE



Yellowtail Dam
The dam honors Robert Yellowtail, former Crow tribal chair and reservation superintendent. This 525 feet high, arch-type dam creates one of the largest reservoirs on the Missouri River tributary system.
NPS / STEVE GRISHAM



Yellowtail Wildlife Habitat Management Area
Riparian, cottonwood forest, shrubland, and wetlands provide habitat for white-tailed deer, bald eagles, pelicans, heron, waterfowl, wild turkeys, and other species. The area is managed by the Wyoming Game and Fish Department through agreements with the National Park Service, Bureau of Land Management, and Bureau of Reclamation.
© VIRGINIA DUBOWY



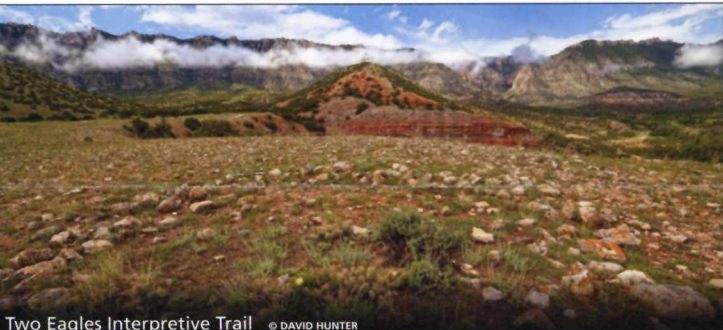
Ewing-Snell Ranch © CRYSTAL ANN

MASON-LOVELL RANCH
A.L. Mason and H.C. Lovell built a cattle ranch headquarters here in 1883. Cattle roamed the Bighorn Basin in a classic open-range operation.

HILLSBORO
A 1.0-mile roundtrip trail leads to the site of Grosvenor William Barry's Cedarvale Guest Ranch and the 1915–45 Hillsboro post office.

LOCKHART RANCH
Reporter, editor, and author Caroline Lockhart began ranching at age 56. Well-preserved buildings give a feel for ranch life. The trail is a 0.5-mile roundtrip.

EWING-SNELL RANCH
This site was in use for nearly 100 years.



Two Eagles Interpretive Trail © DAVID HUNTER

TWO EAGLES
Bighorn Canyon has been home to many generations of people. Tipi rings, or stone circles, and cairns are some of the more visible reminders of the people who occupied the area. The number and density of the tipi rings on Bighorn Canyon's landscape are a

strong indication that people used the area domestically for thousands of years. See over 25 of these tipi rings and a buffalo jump along this 0.25-mile interpretive trail.

Before the arrival of the horse, life changed little here for thousands of years. Small

family groups wintered in caves near the canyon bottoms. In early spring they moved out of the canyon bottoms in search of plants and small animals, and in summer they moved to the highlands in search of game and summer-maturing plants. Large

groups gathered in fall for a communal bison hunt.

DEVIL CANYON OVERLOOK
Here, the canyon crosscuts the gray limestone of the Devil Canyon Anticline, a 1,000-foot-high segment of the fault blocks that make up the Pryor Mountains.



Devil Canyon © DAVID HUNTER



Bighorn Mountains © GREG L. JONES

Explore Bighorn Canyon



Plan Your Visit

Getting Here No road connects the park's north and south ends directly. To get to the park's south end, take US 310 from Billings or US 14A from Sheridan. To reach the north end, take MT 313 from Hardin. To visit both, use the map at left to choose a route.

You can rent cars in nearby communities, but no public transportation serves the park. Scheduled airlines serve Cody and Billings. Unattended aircraft landing strips are at Fort Smith and Cowley.

Contact the park in advance to plan your visit, especially if you are bringing a group.

National Park Foundation
Join the park community.
www.nationalparks.org

Facilities and Services Be sure to stop at the Cal S. Taggart Bighorn Canyon Visitor Center at Lovell (open daily) or the Yellowtail Dam Visitor Center near Fort Smith (open seasonally).

Hotels, motels, service stations, restaurants, and grocery and sporting goods stores are in Lovell and Hardin. At the park's north end, Fort Smith has fishing outfitters but very limited grocery services.

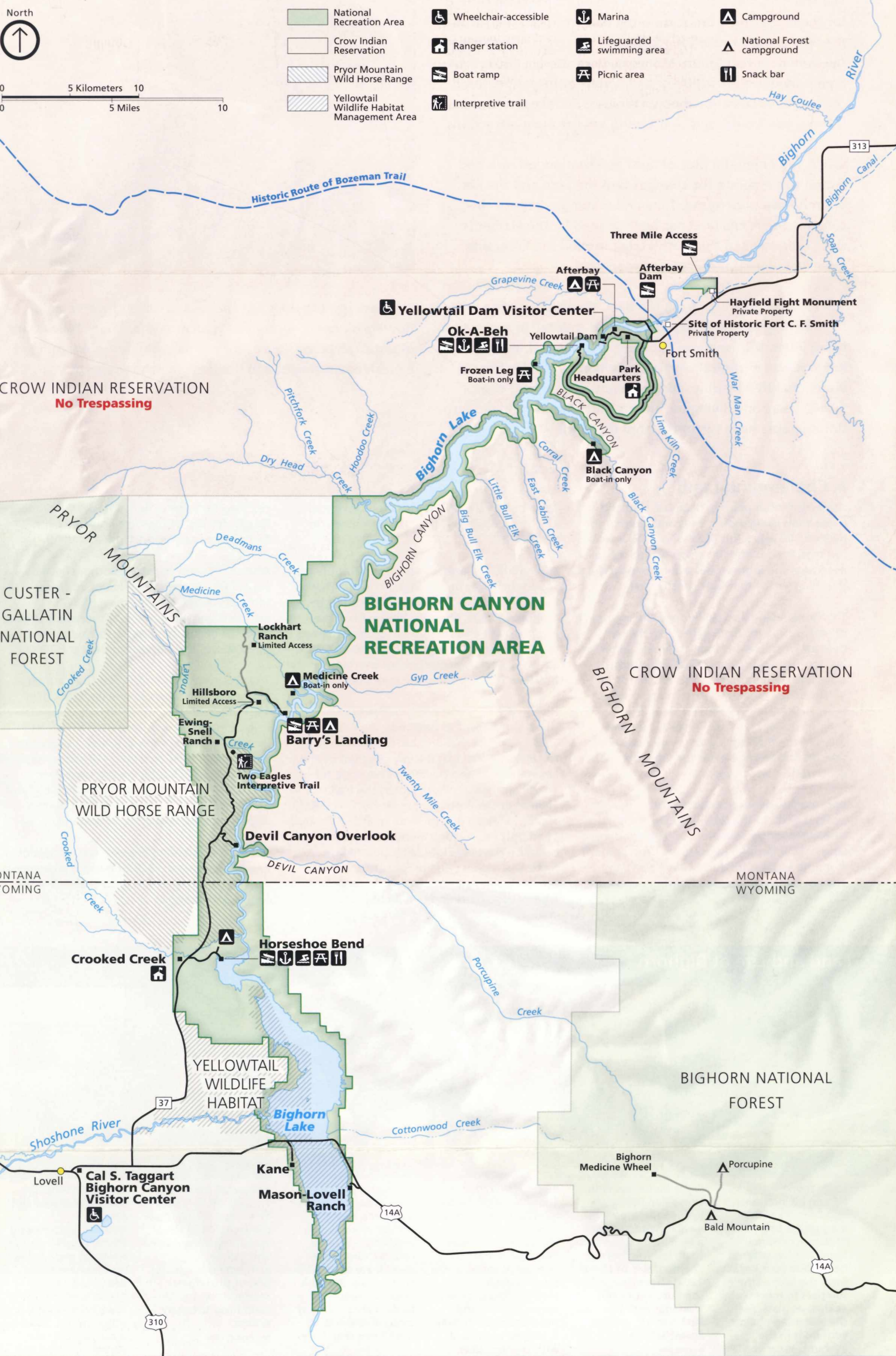
Accessibility We strive to make our facilities, services, and programs accessible to all. For information go to a visitor center, ask a ranger, call, or check our website. Service animals are welcome in the park.

Private Property The Crow Indians own property within the boundary of the national recreation area. Tribal lands are closed to the public. Check with a park ranger for more information.

More Information Bighorn Canyon National Recreation Area
PO Box 7458
Fort Smith, MT 59035
and
20 Hwy. 14A East
Lovell, WY 82431
307-548-5406
www.nps.gov/bica

Bighorn Canyon National Recreation Area is one of over 400 parks in the National Park System. Learn more at www.nps.gov.

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BOATING TIPS Get the park's boating brochure and map before you head for the water; they show boat ramps, boating

facilities, navigational markers, and campgrounds for Bighorn Lake. Read and heed regulations for boating safety on the lake.

BUOY MARKERS:



Diver's Flag



Swimming Area



Warning Buoy



Control Buoy

What to See and Do

Films and exhibits at both the Cal S. Taggart Bighorn Canyon Visitor Center and Yellowtail Dam Visitor Center highlight park activities, natural features, and history.

Boating enthusiasts will find a marina, snack bar, camp store, and boat ramp at Horseshoe Bend and Ok-A-Beh. Ramps are also at Afterbay Dam and Barry's Landing. In summer all watercraft must go through the Aquatic Invasive Species (AIS) Stations. If mechanical problems develop while you are on the lake, stay with your boat; hail other boaters and ask them to notify a ranger. Carry both day and night signaling devices. Do not try to climb the lake's steep canyon walls.

Camping is restricted to designated sites in developed areas. It is also allowed in the backcountry and below the highwater mark along Bighorn Lake. Fire restrictions during periods of high fire danger may close certain areas to camping. Check with a ranger for the restrictions on fires and backcountry camping.

Hiking is available in the national recreation area and in nearby forests. Ask at the visitor centers for more information.

Hunting is allowed in designated areas in accordance with state laws. Trapping is prohibited.

Fishing in Montana or Wyoming requires the appropriate state fishing license. The Bighorn River provides excellent brown and rainbow trout fishing. Sauger, ling, and smallmouth bass abound in Bighorn Lake. The most popular fish is the walleye, a gourmet's delight. Try winter ice fishing around Horseshoe Bend.

Regulations and Safety Check the park website for firearms regulations. Pets must be on a leash. Do not dispose of trash or waste into area waters; all vessels must have a waste receptacle on board. Carry a first-aid kit as a precaution against poisonous snakebites.

Federal law protects all plants, animals, natural and cultural features, and archeological sites. Collecting is prohibited.