

Black Canyon of the Gunnison

Black Canyon of the Gunnison
National Park
Colorado

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



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Our surroundings were of the wildest possible description. The roar of the water . . . was constantly in our ears, and the walls of the canon, towering half mile in height above us, were seemingly vertical. Occasionally a rock would fall from one side or the other, with a roar and crash, exploding like a ton of dynamite when it struck bottom, making us think our last day had come.

Abraham Lincoln Fellows, 1901

The Painted Wall (above) is the result of molten material forced under great pressure into the cracks and joints of the base rock. These sheer walls are an ideal home for the peregrine falcon (inset). Perhaps you will be fortunate enough to see one.



Your time in the park can be spent in a number of ways (left): enjoying a nature talk, viewing the canyon from the North Rim Drive, or hiking down to the river at the bottom of the canyon. Should you choose to hike into the canyon, a backcountry permit is required.

The canyon's landscape was formed by the slow, but continuous and unyielding process of erosion—the effect of one drop of water at a time or the scouring by a seasonally flood-swollen river, the rush of mud-laden side streams after heavy rains, occasional rockfalls from high cliffs, and the relentless creep of landslides. The river first established its course over soft volcanic rock. It then cut through this rock to the harder and older crystalline rock of the present canyon that had been thrust up in an earlier dome-shaped formation known as the Gunnison Uplift. Once committed to its course, the stream had no alternative but to continue to cut through this once-buried hard core, taking about 2 million years to carve the gorge. The excavating process is still going on, but at a slower pace because of the dams upstream.

Jeff Gnass

An Awesome Gorge

"Several western canyons exceed the Black Canyon in overall size," Wallace Hansen wrote after studying the geology of the region for a number of years. "Some are longer, some are deeper, some are narrower, and a few have walls as steep. But no other canyon in North America combines the depth, narrowness, sheer-ness, and somber countenance of the Black Canyon of the Gunnison." And it is largely because of this unique combination of geologic features that the Black Canyon has been preserved in its wild state.

The Black Canyon, which has been carved by the Gunnison River as it hurries to join the Colorado, is 53 miles long, but only the deepest, most spectacular 14 miles of the gorge lie within Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Monument. Slanting rays of sunlight penetrate this deep and narrow canyon's dark gray walls of schist and gneiss that are shrouded in heavy shadows most of the day—hence, "Black Canyon." East of the park the Gunnison River has been impounded and tamed behind three dams. In the Black Canyon, however, it remains one of the few unspoiled wild rivers in the country.

The canyon and its rims are home to a variety of wildlife, from the chipmunks and ground squirrels to weasels, badgers, marmots, and black bear. Infrequently bobcat and cougars are sighted, and at night, coyotes may be heard. If you come across trees

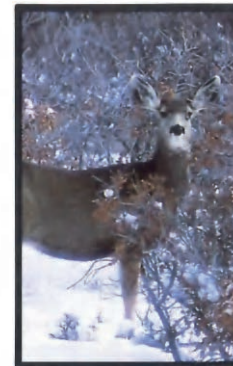
that have been gnawed on, you will have found evidence that porcupines are thereabouts, for the bark of pine and oak is a favored winter food of this quill-covered rodent. The Gambel oak and serviceberry that cover most of the Gunnison Uplift provide a good habitat for towhees, western tanagers, pinyon and scrub jays, and black-billed magpies. The cliffs are home to white-throated swifts, violet-green swallows, golden eagles, turkey vultures, and red-tailed hawks, who all take advantage of the updrafts for soaring. The endangered peregrine falcon also finds protection and feathered prey here.

Though a home to wildlife, the canyon has been a mighty barrier to human beings. Archeological evidence indicates that prehistoric man, and later the Utes, used only the canyon rims, never living in the gorge. The first white men to see the great chasm actually were members of the Hayden Expedition in 1873-74. It appears that the Spaniards, including the famed Dominguez-Escalante Expedition in 1776, all missed seeing the canyon as they came over the Uncompahgre Plateau and into the Uncompahgre Valley on various journeys of exploration. Even the group led by Capt. John W. Gunnison, whose name has become permanently attached to the river, bypassed the gorge itself in its search for a river crossing. The Hayden Expedition and later surveying parties for the Denver & Rio Grande Railroad all pronounced the Black Canyon "inaccessible."

By the last decade of the 19th century there was much interest in tapping the Gunnison River as a source of water for the Uncompahgre Valley. In 1900 five valley men made a heroic effort to float through the canyon with surveying equipment, but after a month's effort, they had to admit defeat. In 1901 William Torrence and Abraham Lincoln Fellows, learning a lesson from the previous trip, took a rubber mattress for a raft, arranged to be supplied at various points from the rim, and were able to make their way through the canyon—33 miles in nine days. From the engineering log the two men kept, it was obvious that an irrigation tunnel was a feasible project. In January 1905 construction work began on the diversion tunnel. Progress was slow because of the many difficulties that the work crews encountered. Intense heat, violent cascades of water, and unstable rock formations were just a few of the problems the engineers had to deal with. When finished the tunnel measured 5.8 miles long and could carry enough water to irrigate a sizable farming community. Eight years after Torrence and Fellow's trip, on September 23, 1909, President William Howard Taft presided over the dedication ceremonies for the Gunnison Diversion Tunnel, a notable engineering achievement of this or any time.

In the late 1920s, citizens of Montrose and other area towns, led by Rev. Mark T. Warner and local civic groups, began efforts to have the scenic beauty of the canyon preserved as a part of

the National Park System. President Herbert Hoover proclaimed Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Monument in March 1933. President Bill Clinton signed the act of Congress designating



Mule deer



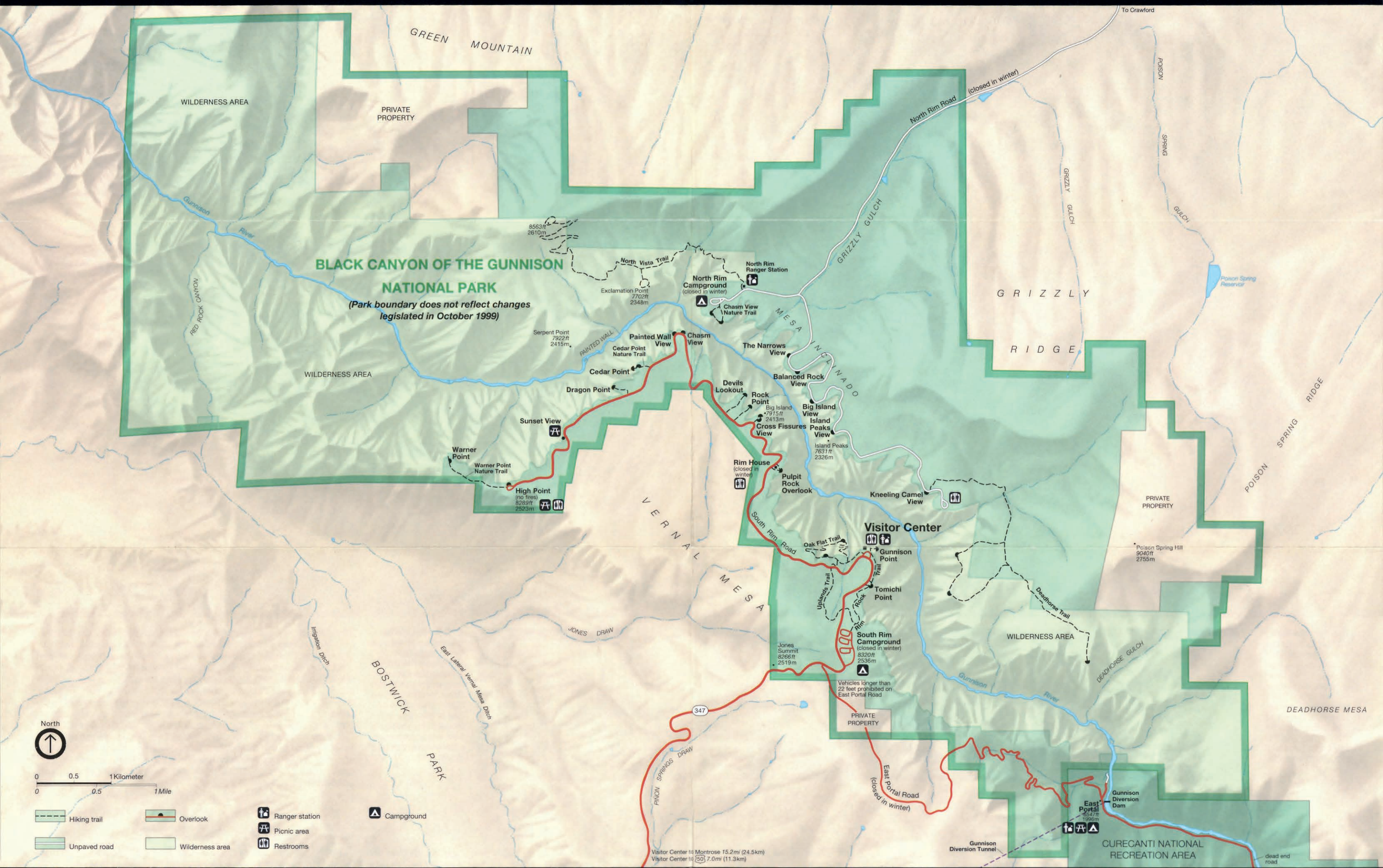
Indian paintbrush



Golden eagle

Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Park in October 1999. Congress has designated land below the rim in the park as wilderness to ensure the preservation of its natural conditions forever.

Black Canyon of the Gunnison



How to Get There

The park is in west-central Colorado 15 miles east of Montrose via U.S. 50 and Colo. 347. Air and bus-lines serve Montrose and Grand Junction (75 miles), and both towns offer car rentals. To reach the park's north rim from Montrose, use either U.S. 50 east and Colo. 92 west through Curecanti National Recreation Area to Crawford (90 miles), or U.S. 50 west and Colo. 92 east through Delta to Crawford (80 miles)—see small map. Half of the road from Crawford to the north rim is paved, half is graveled.

Access to the north rim is closed in winter by snow.



The Visitor Center

Begin your stay in the park at the visitor center, where you can get information on current activities and accessible facilities. Exhibits explain the history, flora and fauna, and geology of the park.

Camping and Hiking

The park has two campgrounds—one on each rim. Campsites are available on a first-come, first-served basis. Water must be used sparingly because it has to be hauled by tank truck. Each campsite has its own fireplace or charcoal grill and a table. Wood gathering is not permitted, nor is wood provided. Bring charcoal or wood and water with you. A fee is charged for camping.

The best way to see the canyon is on foot. A variety of trails leads to overlooks on the canyon rim. Although

most are rated easy, remember that you are hiking at an elevation of 8,000 feet. If you like the backcountry, Black Canyon has a lot of it. A portion of the park is wilderness; check with the park staff on the rules and regulations that apply. Always let a ranger know your plans. There are no marked trails into the canyon. If you plan to make the descent, a backcountry permit is required, and it is essential to check with a park ranger who can tell you which routes to use.

Climbing

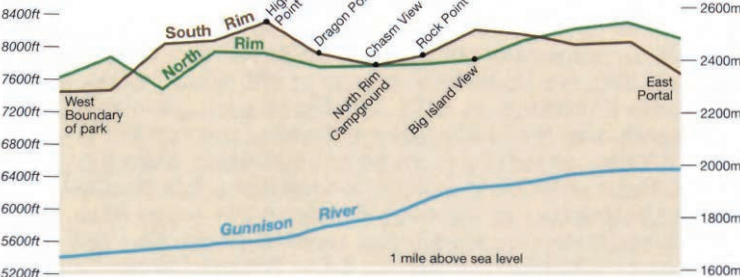
The Black Canyon's steep, sheer walls make this park ideal for climbing. But these cliffs are not for beginners or inexperienced climbers. You need to be in excellent physical condition, know what you are doing, and possess the necessary equipment. All climbers must register—a backcountry permit is required. Park rangers can give you information about routes and the degree of difficulty of the various climbs. Above all, exercise extreme caution and never climb alone.

Driving

Both the north and south rims have roads that take you to the very edge of the canyon. The drives are not connected. At Dragon Point, on the south rim, you can look across to the Painted Wall that rises

a sheer 2,200 feet above the river. At the Narrows View, on the north rim, the distance between the rims—1,150 feet—is less than the depth—1,725 feet—of the canyon. Publications about the canyon are available

for sale at the visitor center and ranger station. They provide information about the canyon, including its geology and natural history, that may add interest to your visit.



The Gunnison River within the Black Canyon drops an average of 95 feet per mile. This is one of the steepest descents for a river in North America. At High Point it is a 2,689-foot drop to the river.

Park Regulations and Safety

- Be careful with fire. Do not build fires outside the campgrounds. Before leaving, extinguish the last spark with water. Do not take chances—be sure your fire is out.
- Hunting or using firearms for any purpose is not permitted. Fishing must conform with Colorado Gold Medal Waters regulations for limits; use artificial lures only. A Colorado license is required.
- Natural features must not be disturbed. Please do not pick wildflowers, collect rocks, or damage plants; leave them for others to enjoy.

- Pets must be kept on a leash at all times. Pets may not be taken into the inner-canyon or wilderness areas.
- Do not throw anything from the rim into the canyon. A single stone thrown or rolled from the rim can cause fatal injuries to people below. Stay on the trails. Many places along the rim are not protected by guardrails and are a serious hazard because of the weathered condition of the rock. Keep your children under very close supervision.
- Watch for bicycles on South Rim road. Bicycles are not permitted on hiking trails.

Further Information

The park has no overnight lodging except camping. Nearby communities offer full travel services. In summer, light lunches, sandwiches, and souvenirs are sold at the Rim House. For information contact: Superintendent, Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Park, 102 Elk Creek, Gunnison, CO 81230-9304; 970-641-2337; or www.nps.gov/blca.