Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Monument

CO 81401, is in immediate charge of the monument is administered by the National Park Service.

ADMINISTRATION

Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Monument is administered by the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior. A Superinten dent, whose address is P.O. Box 1648, Montrose, CO 81401, is in immediate charge of the monument.

As the Nation’s principal conservation agency, the Department of Interior has responsibility for most of our nation’s owned public lands and natural resources. This includes fostering the wise use of our land and water resources, protecting our fish and wildlife, preserving the environmental and cultural values of our national parks and historical places, and providing for the enjoyment of life through outdoor recreation. The Department assesses our energy and mineral resources and works to assure that their development is in the best interests of all people. The Department also has a major responsibility for American Indian reservation communities and for people who live in Island Territories under U.S. administration.

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

LIFE ON THE RIMS

On the rims of this narrow park, life is much the same as on the Fruitland and inclinado Mesas to the north and Vernal Mesa to the south. Most of the rim acreage has a cover of mountain brush which is predominantly Gambel oak and serviceberry, though the higher sections support well-developed stands of pinion-juniper woodland. Gravel old pinyon juniper on the rims add rugged grace and a sense of time to the canyon scene. Some of the pinyons on the south rim may be from 460 to 740 years old.

Associated with the rim woodlands is an abundant shrub growth, mostly sand cherry, serviceberry, wild rose, mountain mahogany, rock spirea, snowberry, gooseberry, chokecherry, and wax currant.

In this shrub and open woods environment, mule deer find a natural habitat and are numerous. Coyotes, bobcats, and gray foxes are common carnivores, preying upon smaller mammals such as marmots, rock and ground squirrels, woodrats and chipmunks and other animals that inhabit the rocky woodlands. On rare occasions a black bear or cougar may be seen.

Most of the mammals are shy or nocturnal and therefore not easily seen. The freshly gnawed bark of pinyons indicates that porcupines have been feeding, but you may not see them because, during daylight hours, they sleep under rocky ledges at the top of the canyon or in the upper branches of trees.

Birds are much more in evidence than mammals. Among those you may see in the mesa woodland-shrub environment are the plain titmouse, the junco, chickadees, pinyon and scrub jays, golden and bald eagles, black-billed magpie, turkey vulture, and the red-tailed hawk. You also may see a few reptiles on the rims, such as the garter and gopher snakes, and various lizards sunning themselves on the rocks.

LIFE IN THE CANYON

The other notable environment of the park is, of course, the Gunnison River and its canyon. Because its walls are so steep and its canyon so narrow, the sun warms them for such a short time each day that very little plant life can flourish. Therefore, most animals cannot make their homes in this stark environment. However, various lichens and mosses grow on the rocks in many places, and oak fern and woodsia fern have been found to overhangs. Also, two trees, Douglas-fir and aspen, grow in some parts of the canyon where conditions are more moist and cooler than those above.

In the river are brown and rainbow trout, flannelmouth sucker, and squawfish. You may fish in the river, but be sure to have a Colorado State fishing license.
MAN AND BLACK CANYON

We know little about the existence of prehistoric and pre-Columbian man in southwestern Colorado. South of the park, in the Uncompahgre Valley, Folsom spear points have been discovered and ancient pictographs and petroglyphs can be seen in the surrounding valleys—signs that indicate prehistoric man lived near Black Canyon.

Spanish explorations of the Colorado region were few and unproductive. Coronado's abortive search for the Seven Cities of Cibola had brought him to the area in 1541. His report described a country so uninviting to the Spanish mind that 200 years passed before the Spanish governor of New Mexico ordered Juan Maria de Rivera to visit this area of Spain's empire in 1765. He was followed by the Franciscan friars Dominique and Escalente in 1776.

The Spanish found the Ute Indians, the dominant tribe in the area, to be a treacherous people. Ultimately, they had created a new region, had no inclination to become docile vassals of the King of Spain. Thus Colorado was not suitable for colonization and exploitation.

AN INDEPENDENT MEXICO showed even less interest. Americans, however, had shown a longstanding interest. Trappers and traders were familiar with this country north of Santa Fe, an important market town that was their destination when it was under the rule of Spain and later of a free Mexico.

After America's war with Mexico ended in 1848, the whole area became territory of the United States. Capt. John W. Gunnison led an expedition through the region in 1853. Though the river is named for him, he carefully avoided the inhospitable canyon, bypassing it to the south and west. It was not until 1874 that an expedition of the Hayden Surveys followed the length of the north rim and established several survey stations within the present park.

After 1900 there was increasing recognition of the scenic value of the Black Canyon by local conservationists and civic leaders. In the late 1920's, citizens of Montrose, led by the Rev. Mark Warner, began efforts to have the canyon preserved as a national monument. Finally, on March 2, 1933, a Presidential Proclamation established Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Monument.

The awesome Black Canyon was that a barrier to early explorers, a place to be avoided, has become a challenge for experienced rock climbers, and these sportsmen work the sheer walls in ever-increasing numbers. The river trip has always been more a matter of portaging and rock climbing than of floating.

In the winter of 1882-83, the first successful, though partial survey of the canyon took place. The Denver and Rio Grande Railroad sent one of its engineers to survey the lower part of the Black Canyon to determine whether it would be practical to extend the railroad downstream below Cimarron. Bryan H. Bryant and his crew climbed down into the canyon and, working as far as they could, climbed out again, only to scramble down to the river at the next draw. In this way they managed to complete a survey from Cimarron to Grizzly Gulch in 68 days.

This team decided that a railroad could not be extended below Cimarron but that it would be feasible, by means of a tunnel, to divert water to the Uncompahgre Valley for irrigation purposes.

PROTECT YOUR PARK

Fire is Black Canyon's greatest peril. Do not build fires outside of designated campgrounds. Use only the firewood provided, or your own charcoal. Before leaving, extinguish the last spark with water. Don't take any chances—be sure your fire is out!

Hunting in this sanctuary or the use of firearms for any purpose is not permitted.

FOR YOUR SAFETY

A single stone thrown or rolled from the rim could cause fatal injuries to people below you. People do not protect guard rails and are a serious hazard because of the weathered condition of the rocks. Keep your children under very close supervision; view the canyon from behind the railings at the designated overlooks.

Nights into the canyon and river trips should not be attempted before contacting a ranger who can provide you with information that can make your trip enjoyable. You should register at a ranger station before starting any inner canyon activity.

How to reach the park

You can drive to both rims of the canyon. The south rim is open to traffic all year; the north is closed to traffic in winter. From Montrose, Colo., the distance to the south rim entrance is 11 miles —6 miles east via U.S. 50 and 6 miles north over a hard-surfaced road. You can reach the north rim from Colorado 92, just east of Crawford over a 14-mile graded road.

Continental Trailways and Frontier Airlines serve Montrose, Colo. However, there is no regularly scheduled public transportation from Montrose to the park. Cars can be rented from various agencies in Montrose and at Grand Junction, Colo., 62 miles west of Montrose. Grand Junction is close to Colorado National Monument, and is also served by Continental Trailways and by United and Frontier Airlines.

Hikes into the canyon and river trips should not be attempted before contacting a ranger who can provide you with information that can make your trip enjoyable. You should register at a ranger station before starting any inner canyon activity.