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 walls, reveal immense time spans which dwarf this landscape's human history. The Ute exacted a living from the land, but fur traders and then miners, railroad builders, and ranchers followed. 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.

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Putting a Rugged Land to Work

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 overflowed 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.

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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 wingspans up to 2.4 meters (8 feet), eagles are sights not soon forgotten.

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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. Snowmobiles take to the fishing access roads, shorelines below high water line, and the lake surface.