

Official Map and Guide



Windsurfers on Blue Mesa Lake

Nathan Bilow

Curecanti National Recreation Area's stark landscape bears the imprint of attempts to alter these rugged mesas and canyons for human purposes. The most recent major alteration was the construction of three dams on the Gunnison River, to provide irrigation and hydroelectric power. These Wayne N. Aspinall Unit dams of the Bureau of Reclamation's Upper Colorado River Storage Project have transformed this semi-arid locale into a lake-based recreation mecca. The high, dry, eroded vistas are now interrupted not only by the Gunnison River's narrow thread, but also by three lakes; Blue Mesa, Morrow Point, and Crystal. Blue Mesa

serves as the main storage reservoir. Morrow Point Dam generates most of the power and Crystal Dam maintains an even flow through the Black Canyon of the Gunnison. The old rock faces of the Black Canyon that hold the water of the Morrow Point and Crystal lakes tell of changes which have occurred over 2 billion years. Surrounding mesas are capped with cliffs and rocky spires telling of violent volcanic eruptions some 30 million years ago. These formed the West Elk Mountains to the north. Later episodes to the south, forming southwestern Colorado's scenic San Juan Mountains, spewed vast quantities of ash over this area. The

ancestral Gunnison River readily cut down through this volcanic matter, but below lay the tough, ancient rock that is exposed in Black Canyon. This canyon lends the fjord-like character to Morrow Point Lake's steep, rock walls. Crystal Lake is also steep-walled. Blue Mesa's lakebed formed in less-resistant volcanic mudflow materials. As these eroded beneath solidified volcanic layers, spires formed.

You can see a fine example of this formation when hiking the Dillon Pinnacles Trail. The most striking feature of the lower lakes is the spirelike

Curecanti Needle. It is best viewed from the tour boat on Morrow Point Lake. Curecanti's fish—brown, rainbow, and Mackinaw trout and kokanee salmon—attract the greatest number of people to the park. Recreational opportunities abound, for power boating, sailing, windsurfing, camping, hiking, and hunting. Any season offers such rewarding sightseeing as the Morrow Point Dam powerplant tour, Pioneer Point, the Cimarron Railroad Exhibit's historic narrow gauge, and the Gunnison Diversion Tunnel. But for the most part, you have the rare opportunity to savor here the solitude and silence of canyons and mesas.

History



Few clues remain of the Ute Indians who lived here when pioneers and settlers arrived in the 1800s. Human occupation dates back to at least 8000 B.C. Archeologists here have uncovered the remains of ancient structures, wicki-ups, that date back 4,500 years. These are some of the oldest dwellings to have been uncovered here. Utes of the historic era summered in the mountains and wintered near today's Montrose and Grand Junction. Like many of the area's earlier inhabitants, they were attracted here by the abundance of game in the dry hills and river valleys and by the vegetation in the canyons and on the mesas.

Fur traders and miners blazed the northern branch of the Spanish Trail from Santa Fe to Los Angeles. This trail first linked Ute country to Anglo and Spanish commerce. Despite negative reports by Capt. John Gunnison and his 1854 Pacific Railroad survey party, a narrow gauge railroad transported ore,

coal, cattle, and other goods in this area by 1882. The Denver & Rio Grande Railroad, bearing Curecanti Needle on its logo, spurred development of small towns such as Cimarron. The railroad operated from 1882 to 1949. The region's farmers and ranchers soon coveted the Gunnison River's waters for their crops and livestock. The 6-mile Gunnison Diversion Tunnel was cut through a mesa to deliver the water to the Uncompahgre Valley for agricultural uses. The tunnel was opened in 1909. Today it is recognized as a National Civil Engineering Landmark.



D&RG Engine 278, exhibited on Cimarron Canyon trestle, recalls the railroad era.

Fishing



Brown, rainbow, Mackinaw, and brook trout and kokanee salmon attract anglers to the park's waters both in summer and in winter. The three dams of the Wayne N. Aspinall Unit dramatically changed the area's fishery. Where once the rainbow and brown trout of the Gunnison River fed predominantly on aquatic insects, some fish of Curecanti's lakes feed on plankton.

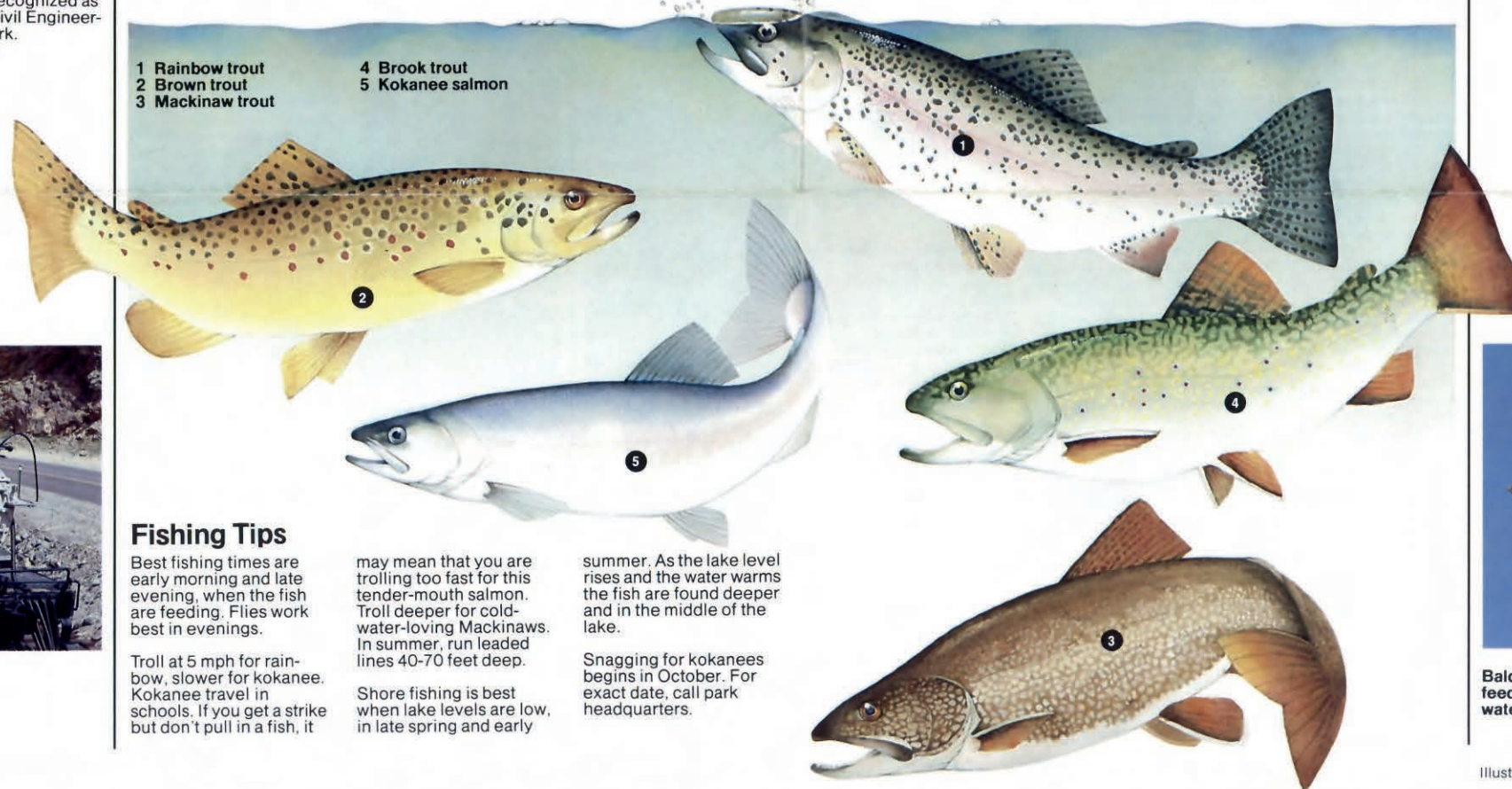
Plankton are microscopic plants and animals that flourish in this new lake environment. Brook trout favor the lake's tributary streams. The lakes' concentration of plankton is suitable for maintaining kokanee. Kokanee lure many people to the area,

and particularly during the snagging season, which generally begins in October. Rainbow trout are the most commonly caught fish. In Blue Mesa Lake's deep subsurface canyons lurk cold-water-loving Mackinaw (lake) trout caught at more than 30 pounds here. Rainbows, introduced in the Gunnison River in the 1880s, are still stocked, along with kokanee

salmon. During the summer season you can learn more about the park's fish by joining a ranger for fish feeding at the Elk Creek Visitor Center's fish pond.

Fishing regulations. A Colorado fishing license is required for all persons 15 years of age and over. Buy licenses at the marina or at a number of area sporting goods

stores. Know the regulations. Note that daily bag and possession limits are often the same. Check before fishing, for closures, seasons, bait, and any other local restrictions that may apply. Use the fish cleaning stations provided. If one is not available, use trash cans for proper disposal.



Fishing Tips

Best fishing times are early morning and late evening, when the fish are feeding. Flies work best in evenings.

Troll at 5 mph for rainbow, slower for kokanee. Kokanee travel in schools. If you get a strike but don't pull in a fish, it

may mean that you are trolling too fast for this tender-mouth salmon. Troll deeper for cold-water-loving Mackinaws. In summer, run leaded lines 40-70 feet deep.

Shore fishing is best when lake levels are low, in late spring and early

summer. As the lake level rises and the water warms the fish are found deeper and in the middle of the lake.

Snagging for kokanees begins in October. For exact date, call park headquarters.

Winter



Winter finds elk, bighorn sheep, and deer descending from the mountains to feed and to avoid the harsher conditions found at higher elevations then. Despite the beautiful snowcapped mesas, clear blue skies, and abundant wildlife, winter is harsh here. Temperatures dip as low as -40°F, and are made even more dangerous by the strong winds. Adequate preparation for winter activities is a must here.

Anglers persist in winter, bearing augers for ice fishing. *Four inches of hard, clear ice are needed to support one adult afoot.* The specific rules that pertain to ice fishing should be obtained from the visitor center or from park rangers before you venture onto the ice.

Other winter-sports enthusiasts enjoy snowmobiling and cross-country skiing. Snowmobiling is permitted on the frozen surface of Blue Mesa Lake and on fishing access roads as

designated. *Seven inches of hard, clear ice are needed to support snowmobiles.* Check on ice thickness. State regulations on snowmobile use apply.

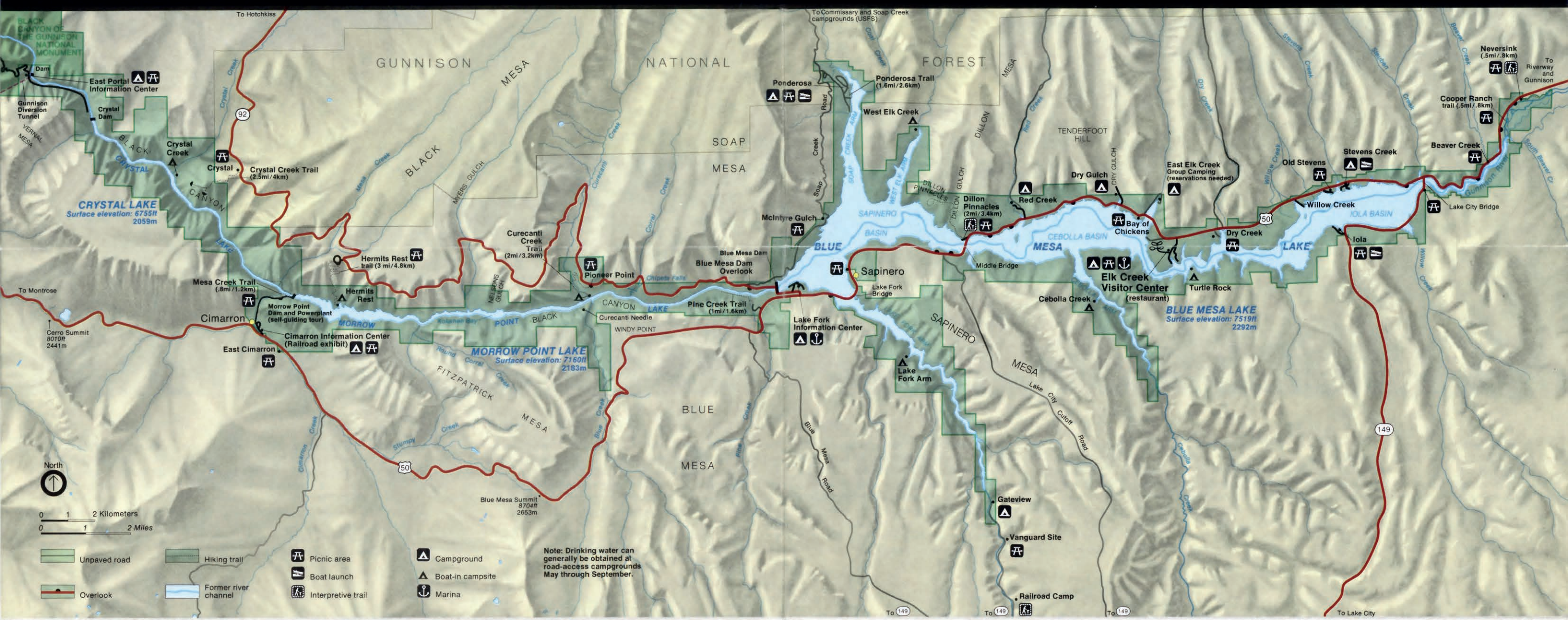
Crosscountry skiing is a good way to see wildlife wintering near Blue Mesa, or try the beginning ski trail near the Elk Creek Visitor Center, conditions permitting. Advanced ski routes follow U.S. Forest Service access roads leading from the park. **Warning:** *Strong winds make wind chill factors extreme.* Be prepared. Obtain winter safety and preparedness information from park employees. Here are some general principles that you should follow: Wear clothing in several light layers. Hooded and windproof outer layers are important. Hands and feet are most difficult to keep warm. Mittens are better than gloves. Boots should be big enough to allow good circulation. Keep your head and neck covered and warm.



Bald eagles winter here, feeding on fish while lake waters remain open.



How many elk herds winter here depends on how severe the weather is.



Orientation

Activities, Programs, and Services

Boating and Water Safety



Morrow Point Lake boat tours are offered on a regular schedule in summer. An interpreter on board relates the lake's story and you will get a lake-level view of Curecanti Needle and an appreciation of the lake's sheer canyon walls. For boat tour schedules and reservation information, call the Elk Creek Marina at (303) 641-0402.

Curecanti is surrounded by the mountains of southwestern Colorado. Elk Creek serves as park headquarters. The visitor center there is open from mid-May to late September. It is open intermittently the rest of the year. Exhibits and a slide/tape presentation tell about Curecanti's natural and cultural histories and introduce its many recreation activities. Schedules for the park's interpretive programs are available at information stations, campgrounds, or from any ranger.

For information, write: Superintendent, Curecanti National Recreation Area, 102 Elk Creek, Gunnison CO 81230, or call (303) 641-2337.

Information stations are found at Lake Fork, Cimarron, and East Portal. The access road to East Portal and inner Black Canyon is shown on the small map above. (Buses, trailers, and mobile homes are prohibited.)



Horseback riders explore Curecanti's Dillon Pinnacles Trail. Its semi-arid landscape contrasts sharply with Crystal Lake. The Gunnison River's deeply etched canyon forms steep walls for Curecanti's lower lakes. Access to them is by steep foot trails only; boats or canoes must be carried by hand. Easy road access makes Blue Mesa Lake the focus of Curecanti water sports and recreation.

Sightseeing
Scenic Highway 92 skirts the Black Canyon's north rim for spectacular views. The Pioneer Point overlook offers two views into this deep canyon and a chance to learn of its history.

See the historic train exhibit (photo on front of this folder) at Cimarron and tour the Morrow Point Dam powerplant there. The tour is generally open from Memorial Day to Labor Day.

Stop at Curecanti's Elk Creek Visitor Center for the slide/tape presentation and exhibits. Topographic maps and publications about the area are also available at the visitor center. The person at the information desk can answer questions you may have.

Services
Marinas offering small grocery store, boat rentals, guide service, slips, and showers are operated by concessioners at Elk Creek and Lake Fork. There is a restaurant at Elk Creek. Make reservations for the Morrow Point Boat tour (photo at far left) by calling (303) 641-0402. Find full travel services in Gunnison, 16 miles east of Elk Creek, and in Montrose, 20 miles west of the Cimarron entrance.

Hiking
Curecanti's trail system offers varied hiking experiences. Birders especially enjoy the 5-mile *Never Sink Trail*, with its lush, streamside habitat that birds favor. The 2.5-mile *Dillon Pinnacles Trail* threads dry mesa

country to the spectacular Dillon Pinnacles and on for an impressive view of Blue Mesa Lake. *Curecanti Creek* and *Hermits Rest Trails* lead to Morrow Point Lake from Colorado Highway 92.

Caution: The rapid vertical elevation change on these trails is about 1,000 feet. But these trails are ideal for short backpacking trips or long day hikes. *Crystal Creek Trail*, also strenuous, leads to an overlook of Crystal Lake, the canyon, and surrounding San Juan and West Elk mountain ranges. *Mesa Creek Trail* follows Crystal Lake's rocky shore for 0.75 miles as a fishing access trail.

Pine Creek Trail leads down to Morrow Point Lake for the boat tour, shore fishing, boat launching, or sightseeing along a limited section of the narrow gauge railroad bed. *Hikers please note:* Curecanti lies 7,500 feet above sea level. Easy trails may be strenuous if you are not used to the altitude.

Camping
Curecanti's major developed campgrounds are at Elk Creek, Lake Fork, Stevens Creek, and Cimarron. Smaller areas along Blue Mesa Lake at Dry Gulch, Red Creek, Ponderosa, and Gateview offer more seclusion. Camping is allowed in designated areas only. It is on a first-come, first-served basis and is limited to 14 days.

The East Elk Creek Group Campground requires reservations.

Make them by calling (303) 641-2337. Each lake also offers water-access camping sites for boaters.

Picnicking
Find picnic areas with water and toilets along the Gunnison River on the park's east side, and at East Cimarron on its west side. There are also picnic tables along Highways 50 and 92.

Swimming
Swimming is prohibited from docks, launch ramps, and unanchored boats. There are no areas specially designated for swimming within the recreation area. Water temperatures are very low, shorelines can be precipitous, and submerged rocks are hazardous.

If you swim, exercise extreme caution. Don't linger in cold water, because of the dangers of hypothermia. *Extended exposure to these cold waters can lower your body temperature to dangerous, even fatal, levels. Ask a ranger about the early symptoms of hypothermia so that you can heed them.*

Handicapped Access
The Elk Creek Visitor Center and three information stations are wheelchair accessible. So are most campgrounds; Lake Fork is most suitable. Find Gunnison River fishing access at Cooper Ranch.

Hunting
Both Colorado and federal hunting laws apply within the recreation area. Discharging

firearms in developed or populous areas is prohibited. Carrying or possessing a loaded weapon in a motor vehicle, vessel, or other mode of transportation is prohibited. Hunters on horseback may use the corrals at Dry Gulch, Red Creek, and Ponderosa.



Interpretive programs include ranger-led walks and nature talks. Check at the Elk Creek Visitor Center or other information stations for schedules.



A powerboat skims over Blue Mesa Lake (large photo). With 96 miles of shoreline and ready road access, Blue Mesa Lake is Curecanti's focus for water sports. Windsurfing (above) is popular in the warmer bays, such as East Elk Creek. Note this windsurfer's wetsuit. Err on the side of caution: Prolonged exposure to cold waters may be life-threatening.

Blue Mesa Lake is 20 miles long. Its three large basins—Iola, Cebolla, and Sapinero—offer suitable expanses for sailing. Its narrow arms reach into otherwise inaccessible areas, opening up quiet canyons for you to explore by boat. There are launch ramps at Elk Creek, Lake Fork, Iola, and Steven's Creek. In summer when the lake's waters warm up, sail boarding and waterskiing are popular on Blue Mesa Lake. Always keep boating and water safety principles in mind. *Be alert to strong afternoon winds. They arise suddenly. When they do, head for shore.*

Federal boating safety regulations apply. Coast Guard-approved personal flotation devices must be carried for each person aboard. Your boat must be registered in your home state.

Because Crystal and Morrow Point Lakes lie deep in the canyon, boating use is limited to hand-carried craft. The Pine Creek Trail, off

Highway 50, leads down 234 steps to Morrow Point Lake. Take the Mesa Creek Trail near Cimarron down to Crystal Lake. Fluctuating water levels and releases from Blue Mesa and Morrow Point Dams cause special boating hazards. Check on these hazards and on launch conditions with the rangers at the Cimarron information station.

Your safety checklist must include these items: Personal flotation device, bailing bucket and paddle or oar ready for use, fire extinguisher, tools for minor repairs, anchor and line, and warm clothing for changes of weather. Rangers will be glad to inspect your boat for necessary items. They may stop you to check for proper equipment.

Because of violent wind potentials it is best to travel west in the morning and east in the afternoon. This is particularly important for Morrow Point and Crystal Lakes. Keep protective covers in sight. When strong winds blow, head for shore.

Aids to Navigation

Park rangers patrol lakes to help boaters in distress and to inspect boats for safety equipment. Requirements are posted at launch areas. Be sure you know rules of the road and navigational aids. If your boat capsizes, stay with it until help arrives. Keep a safe distance from spillways, divers, and smaller craft. A third person must be on board as observer when towing waterskiers. Don't tow skiers within 500 feet of beaches or mooring areas and within 100 feet of a swimmer. Riding on the bow is prohibited. Watch ahead when trolling. Stay seated when casting. When you go to net a fish, don't rock the boat.

	Diamond shape indicates warning, danger. Use caution.		Diamond shape with cross indicates danger. Keep out.
	Square or rectangle gives information.		Diver's flag.
	Red buoy: Keep buoy to your right when going upstream.		Black buoy: Keep buoy to your left when going upstream.
	Black striped channel marker: boats should keep right of buoy.		