

Rainbow Bridge

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

National Monument
Utah



The World's Largest Natural Bridge

By its wondrous size, majesty, and mystery, Rainbow Bridge has inspired people throughout time. Native Americans living in the region have long held the bridge sacred. Since the bridge became widely known in the early 1900s, thousands of people from around the world have visited each year. It is 290 feet from its base to the top of its arch—nearly as tall as the Statue of Liberty—and spans 275 feet across the river. The top of the arch measures 42 feet thick and 33 feet wide.

How was Rainbow Bridge formed? By water. So were other sandstone arches and alcoves elsewhere on the Colorado Plateau. Water dissolves the calcium carbonate (limestone) that cements the sandstone's sand grains. As it freezes and expands in cracks, water breaks off slabs of rock, creating varied sculptures over millions of years.

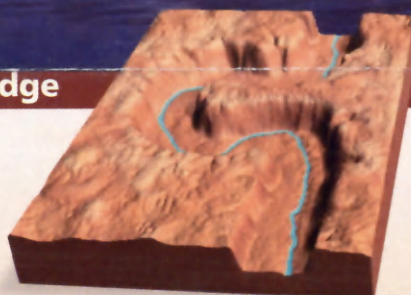


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ILLUSTRATION NPS

The stream flows around a narrow fin of land (*left*), eventually cutting through the fin to form the bridge (*right*). Natural bridges differ from arches in that bridges form initially when water wears a hole through rock.

The rock layer from which Rainbow Bridge was formed is relatively soft Navajo sandstone. It rests on thin layers of harder sandstone and shale of the Kayenta formation. Iron oxide and manganese have colored all this rock shades of pink, red, and brown. At first, water flowing off Navajo Mountain meandered over Navajo sandstone, taking the path of least resistance to the Colorado River. Over time the channel scoured from the rock grew deeper. At the site of Rainbow Bridge the stream chanced to flow in a tight curve around a narrow fin of soft Navajo sandstone (*above left*). When the stream cut

down to the Kayenta layer, the water began to force its way through the softer Navajo sandstone fin. Eventually the stream cut clear through the fin, and Rainbow Bridge was created. Other forces—calcium carbonate dissolving and ice wedging away chunks of rock—shaped Rainbow Bridge into a near-perfect parabola (*above right*). Over time the same forces that shaped Rainbow Bridge will also dismantle it. Look around: throughout this region, the story of Rainbow Bridge is being played out many times over in the sunset-colored canyons of the Colorado Plateau.

Exploring Rainbow Bridge

Next morning early we started our toilsome return trip. The pony trail led under the arch. Along this the Ute drove our pack-mules, and as I followed him I noticed that the Navajo rode around outside. His creed bade him never pass under an arch. . . . This great natural bridge, so recently "discovered" by white men, has for ages been known to the Indians.

—Theodore Roosevelt, after his 1913 visit, from A Book Lover's Holiday in the Open

Tucked among the rugged, isolated canyons at the base of Navajo Mountain, Rainbow Bridge was known for centuries by Native Americans who lived in the area. Ancestral Puebloan residents were followed much later by Paiute and Navajo groups. Several Paiute and Navajo families still live nearby.

By the 1800s wandering trappers, prospectors, and cowboys had surely seen Rainbow Bridge, but it was not publicized until 1909. Two separate exploring parties, one headed by University of Utah dean Byron Cummings and another by government surveyor W.B. Douglass—began searching for the legendary span. Eventually they joined forces, led by Paiute guides Nasja Begay and Jim Mike along with trader and explorer John Wetherill. Men and horses endured heat, slickrock slopes, treacherous ledges, and sandstone mazes. In late afternoon, August 14, coming down what is now Bridge Canyon, the party saw Rainbow Bridge for the first time.

In May 1910 President William Howard Taft created Rainbow Bridge National Monument to preserve this "extraordinary natural bridge, having an arch which is in form and appear-



The Cummings-Douglass exploration team

ance much like a rainbow, and which . . . is of great scientific interest as an example of eccentric stream erosion." After the initial publicity, a few more adventurous souls journeyed to Rainbow Bridge. Zane Grey and Theodore Roosevelt were among those early travelers who would make the arduous trek from Oljeto or Navajo Mountain to the foot of the Rainbow. After World War II, surplus rubber rafts made visiting Rainbow Bridge easier, although the raft trip still required several days of floating the Colorado River plus a 7-mile hike up-canyon. By the early 1950s people could travel by jet boats from Lees Ferry, then make the hike—for a trip totaling only three days!

What Roosevelt and contemporaries saw—evidence of Rainbow Bridge's significance to early and present-day Native Americans—is difficult to discern today. Much archeological evidence has been lost as Lake Powell, along with thousands of visitors, arrived. The Glen Canyon Dam was authorized in 1956. By 1963 the gates on the dam closed and rising Lake Powell began to engulf the river and its side

canyons. Higher water made access to Rainbow Bridge much easier, bringing thousands of people to see it each year.

In 1974 Navajo tribal members who lived in the vicinity of Rainbow Bridge filed suit in U.S. District Court against the Secretary of the Interior, the Commissioner of the Bureau of Reclamation, and the Director of the National Park Service. The suit sought to preserve important Navajo religious sites being inundated by the rising waters of Lake Powell. The court ruled against the Navajo, saying that the need for water storage outweighed their concerns. In 1980 the Tenth District Court of Appeals ruled that to close Rainbow Bridge, a public site, for Navajo religious ceremonies would violate the U.S. Constitution, which protects the religious freedom of all citizens.

By 1993 a National Park Service General Management Plan, involving much public input, was adopted. It offered a long-term plan for mitigating visitor impacts and preserving the resources of Rainbow Bridge National Monument. In the planning process, the National Park Service consulted with the five Native American nations affiliated with Rainbow Bridge: the Navajo, Hopi, San Juan Southern Paiute, Kaibab Paiute, and White Mesa Ute. Chief among their concerns was that Rainbow Bridge, a religious and sacred place, be protected and visited in a respectful manner. The tribes expressed concerns about visitors approaching or walking under the bridge. Today the National Park Service asks that you visit this site in a manner respectful of its significance to the people who have long held Rainbow Bridge to be sacred.

Getting to the Park

By boat: You can reach Rainbow Bridge from Lake Powell by private, rental, or tour boats. The park is about 50 miles by lake (at least four hours round-trip) from Wahweap, Halls Crossing, or Bullfrog. A path leads from the courtesy dock (right) to a viewing area (below) near the bridge. Note that the trail length varies from 0.25 mile to 0.5 mile, depending on the lake level.

On foot: Two trails starting near Navajo Mountain lead to Rainbow Bridge. **Hikers must obtain permits before hiking these trails.** Contact: Navajo Nation, Parks and Recreation Department, Box 9000, Window Rock, AZ 86515.

Facilities and Services Glen Canyon National Recreation Area visitor centers have exhibits and information about Rainbow

Bridge. There is a viewing area about 200 feet from Rainbow Bridge. Outdoor exhibits and park staff tell more about the site.

Please note: Rainbow Bridge is sacred to Native American nations. Respect these long-standing beliefs. We request your voluntary cooperation in not approaching or walking under Rainbow Bridge.

Summer ranger programs and year-round restrooms are the only services at Rainbow Bridge. Dangling Rope Marina, about 15 miles downlake near buoy 40a, offers water, gas, food, supplies, and boat repair services. A ranger station near the marina has emergency medical services.

Reservations: Boat rentals, boat tours, lodging, and camping are available through ARAMARK, Inc., 800-528-6154. Or write to these locations: • Bullfrog Resort and Marina, Box 4055, Lake Powell, UT 84533 • Halls Crossing Resort and Marina, Box 5101, Lake Powell, UT 84533 • Hite Marina, Box 501,

Lake Powell, UT 84533 • Wahweap Lodge and Marina, Box 1597, Page, AZ 86040

Plantlife Despite thin soils and barely seven inches of rain per year, over 750 species of plants grow in the Glen Canyon and Rainbow Bridge areas. Look for blackbrush, saltbush, sand sage, yucca, Mormon tea, tumbleweed, and tamarisk, an invasive species. At Bridge Canyon, partially shaded and more moist, the sacred datura, oak, juniper, redbud, and buffaloberry grow.

To protect plants and soils, heed signs and stay on trails. Soil that is kicked loose from around plants blows away and leaves the plants teetering on slender soil pedestals. Plants die as their pedestals crumble. Help keep plants healthy; stay on trails.

Safety/Regulations • Drink at least one gallon of water daily in hot weather. • Sunlight is intense; wear sunscreen, hats, and clothing. • Wear appropri-



Courtesy dock

ate shoes. • Snakes live in the park; be alert and watch where you put your hands and feet. • Avoid narrow canyons when it is raining or if rainstorms are nearby. Flash floods can kill.

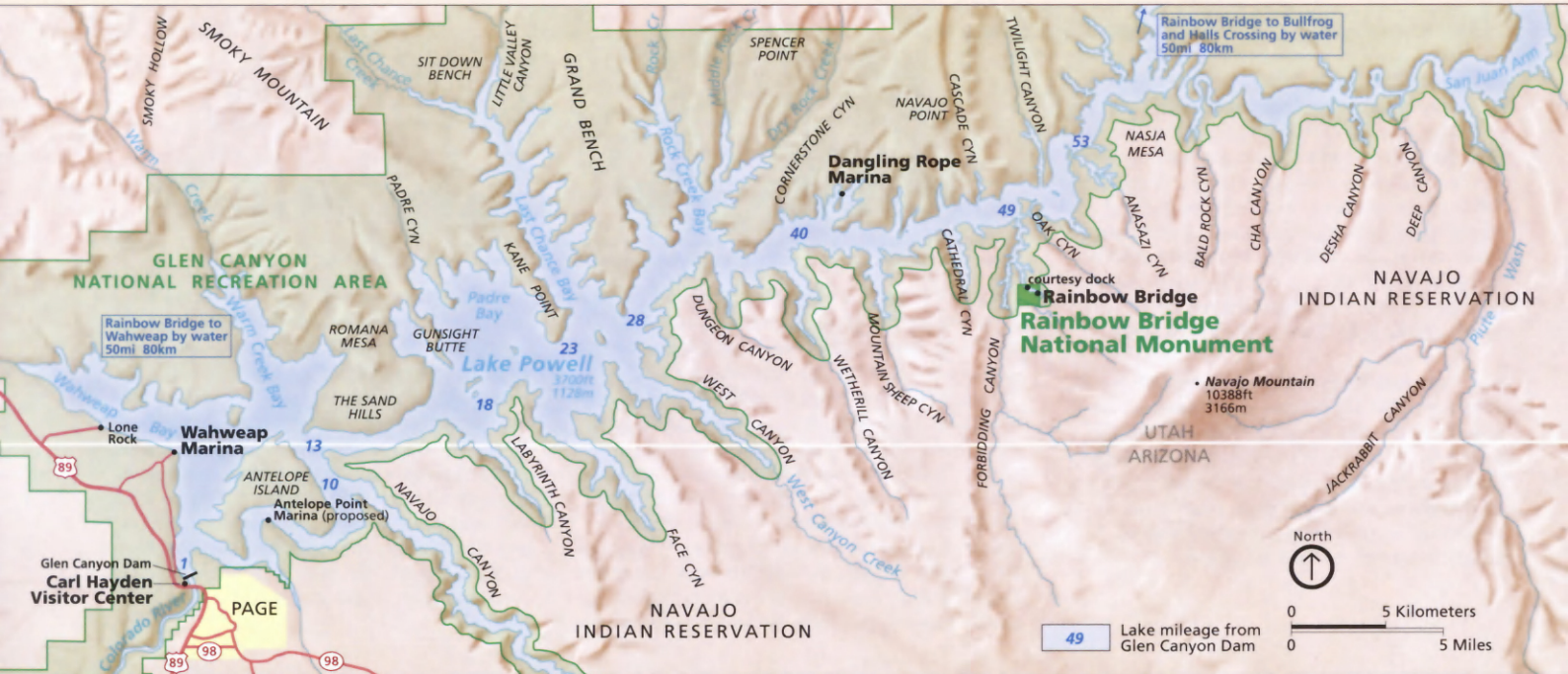
Emergencies: From a boat: Marine Band 16, call National Park Service By cell or land phone: 800-582-4351

For More Information Rainbow Bridge National Monument P.O. Box 1507 Page, AZ 86040 928-608-6404 www.nps.gov/rabr

Rainbow Bridge is one of over 390 parks in the National Park System. The National Park Service cares for these special places saved by the American people so that all may experience our heritage. For more about parks and National Park Service programs, please visit www.nps.gov.



Rainbow Bridge viewing area



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