

Theodore Roosevelt

Theodore Roosevelt
National Park
North Dakota

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



Cover: Michael Francis

A Rugged Land

"I never would have been President if it had not been for my experiences in North Dakota," Theodore Roosevelt once remarked when reflecting on the influences that affected him throughout his life. Here, too, many of Roosevelt's attitudes about and interest in nature and conservation were sharpened and refined.

Roosevelt first came to the badlands in September 1883. Before returning home to New York, he became interested in the cattle business and joined two other men as partners in the Maltese



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The Maltese Cross cabin, the main house on Roosevelt's first ranch, was a substantial, soundly built structure.



Roosevelt enjoyed life in the badlands wholeheartedly. He spent most of his time hunting and tending to his ranches.

Cross Ranch. The next year he returned and established a second open-range ranch, the Elkhorn, as his own operation while continuing as a Maltese Cross partner. The Elkhorn became his principal residence, a place where he could lead the "strenuous life" that he loved. The prospect of big game hunting had initially brought Roosevelt to the West. But when he arrived the last large herds of bison were gone, having been decimated by hide hunters and disease. In other years when he managed to spend some time in North Dakota, he became more and more alarmed by

the damage that was being done to the land and its wildlife. He witnessed the virtual destruction of some big game species. Overgrazing destroyed the grasslands and with them the habitats for small mammals and songbirds. Conservation increasingly became one of Roosevelt's major concerns. When he became President in 1901, Roosevelt pursued this interest in natural history by establishing the U.S. Forest Service and by signing the 1906 Antiquities Act under which he proclaimed 18 national monuments. He also obtained Congressional approval for the estab-

lishment of five national parks and 51 wildlife refuges and set aside land as national forests.

As a conservationist, Theodore Roosevelt was a major figure in American history. Here in the North Dakota badlands, where many of his personal concerns first gave rise to his later environmental efforts, Roosevelt is remembered with a national park that bears his name and honors the memory of this great conservationist.

North Dakota's Badlands

About 60 million years ago, streams carried eroded materials eastward from the young Rocky Mountains and deposited them on a vast lowland—today's Great Plains. During the warm, rainy periods that followed, dense vegetation grew, fell into swampy areas, and was later buried by new layers of sediments. Eventually this plant material turned into lignite coal. Some plantlife became petrified; today considerable amounts of petrified wood are exposed in the badlands. Bentonite, the blue-gray

layer of clay, may be traced to ash from ancient volcanoes far to the west. But even as sediments were being deposited, streams were starting to cut down through the soft strata and to sculpt the infinite variety of buttes, tablelands, and valleys that make up the badlands we know today.

Though at first glance this landscape appears inhospitable and barren, it is home to a great variety of creatures and plants. Rainfall, scanty though

it is, nourishes the grasses that cover the land. And when the wildflowers bloom in bright profusion, they add their vibrant colors to the reds, browns, and greens of earth and grass. At home here, too, are more than 200 species of birds, many of which are songbirds. We can thrill to their songs today as much as Roosevelt did. "One of our sweetest, loudest songsters," he wrote, "is the meadowlark. The Plains air seems to give it a voice and it will perch on top of a bush or tree and sing for hours in rich,

bubbling tones." Both mule deer and whitetail deer inhabit the park. The whitetails prefer the river woodlands, and the mule deer like the more broken country and the uplands. Prairie dogs, historically a staple food source for many predators, live in "towns" in the grasslands. Through careful management some animals that nearly became extinct are once again living here. Bison and elk, for example, were reintroduced in 1956 and 1985, respectively. Keep your eyes open; there is a lot to see here.

Michael Melford



"The Bad Lands grade all the way . . . to those that are so fantastically broken in form and so bizarre in color as to seem hardly properly to belong to this earth."

—Theodore Roosevelt



The plains prickly-pear cactus is a surprise to hikers who think the cold northern climate would be too limiting. Vegetation in the North Dakota badlands is as diverse as the land itself.

Michael Melford



Panoramic vistas show the variety of the badlands. Scenic drives and trails provide ready access to both the North and the South Units.

Jon Farrar



Heralding spring, the meadowlark's song drifts across the prairie. The floodplain forest, woody draws, sagebrush flats, and grasslands are habitats that support a variety of birds.

Jon Farrar



Wood's rose is one of a great number of wildflowers that delighted Roosevelt. Flowers brighten the badlands from early spring until late fall.



The wealth of wildlife that first attracted people's attention to this area still exists. Bands of wild horses roam in the South Unit just as they did when Roosevelt rode over this land.

Theodore Roosevelt

One Park, Two 50th-Anniversary Years (1997: South Unit and Elkhorn Ranch 1998: North Unit)

What To See and Do Summer interpretive programs include campfire programs, talks, and guided walks. Get information at visitor centers and entrance stations or from bulletin boards. The park is open all year, but parts of the roads may be closed in winter.

Hikers and horseback riders should inquire at the visitor center for information about the backcountry trails that cover the park and to obtain a free backcountry camping permit.

Besides the North and South Units, the park also consists of the Elkhorn Ranch Site, the location



The North Unit

Stop first at the visitor center at the entrance to the North Unit to get help in planning your visit.

If you have the time, take the 14-mile Scenic Drive that goes from the entrance station to the Oxbow Overlook, with turnouts and interpretive signs along the way. Between the entrance and North Unit Campground you might see some longhorns, similar to the cattle raised by ranchers in Roosevelt's time.

About 3.5 miles west of the visitor center is a series of slump blocks, huge sections of bluff that gradually slid intact to the valley floor. This is not uncommon in the badlands where canyon walls are too steep to support a top-heavy formation. Continued erosion has moved the face of the parent bluff farther back from its original position. Though the blocks generally tilt as they slump, the bands of color on the bluff and the block can be matched so you can get an idea of the original position of the block.

As you go along the drive, you will come to a number of trail heads. Some are self-guiding nature trails. The descriptions below will give you an idea of what to expect. Any trail will help you gain an understanding of this land and its wildlife, so get out of your car and go for a hike, whether it be a short one or a long one. Take time to get to know the park.

Little Mo Nature Trail This self-guiding nature trail, which begins at the North Unit Campground, goes through river woodlands and badlands. Length: 1.1 miles. A shorter trail, 0.7 mile, is wheelchair accessible.

Achenbach Trail Also beginning at North Unit Campground, this trail climbs from river bottom-land up through the Achenbach Hills, drops to the river again, climbs to Oxbow Overlook along the way by a spur trail, and returns along the river bottom to the campground. Inquire about the condition of the river crossings before departing. Length: 16 miles.

Caprock Coulee Nature Trail About 1.5 miles west of North Unit Campground is the start of a self-guiding trail through badlands coulees—dry water gulches—and breaks—interruptions in the grassy plains. Length: 1.6 miles roundtrip.

Upper Caprock Coulee Trail This is a continuation loop from the self-guiding portion of the Caprock Coulee Nature Trail bringing you back to the trailhead. Length: 3.3 miles; as loop with the nature trail: 4.1 miles.

Buckhorn Trail This loop trail can be reached from the Caprock Coulee Nature Trailhead. You come to a prairie dog town about one mile from its beginning. Of the five varieties, only the black-

of Roosevelt's second ranch. Ask at one of the visitor centers for information before going there.

Accommodations and Services Entrance fees may be collected in the summer; camping fees are collected throughout the year. Since firewood is not provided and gathering it is not permitted, bring your own wood, charcoal, or lightweight stove. Cottonwood Campground in the South Unit and North Unit Campground are operated on a first-come, first-served basis and do not have trailer hookups. Other privately run campgrounds are located near the park. Camping for organized groups is available at Roundup Horse

tailed prairie dog lives within the park. Remember that prairie dogs are wild animals, that they can inflict severe bites, and that they often carry disease. Do not feed them or get too close. Length: 11 miles.

Sperati Point The trail from Oxbow Overlook, which is a portion of the Achenbach Trail, leads to the narrowest gateway in the badlands. The flow of the Little Missouri River once continued north from this point, ultimately draining into Hudson Bay. Blocked during the Ice Age, the river had to find a new course and finally broke through the gap between this point and the Achenbach Hills on the other side. The Little Missouri now drains into the Gulf of Mexico via the Missouri-Mississippi system. Near this point it leaves its old bed and follows its newer channel. Length: 1.5 miles roundtrip.

The South Unit

If you are traveling west on I-94, your first introduction to the park is the Painted Canyon Overlook, about seven miles east of Medora. Here on the upper margin of the badlands is a magnificent panorama of the broken topography in its colorful hues. At the overlook, a visitor center, restrooms, picnic shelters, tables, and water are available generally April through October. A short walk provides access during winter when facilities are closed. East of Painted Canyon you can sometimes see wild horses, the descendants of former domestic ranching stock.

Stop at the museum in the Medora Visitor Center to see personal items of Theodore Roosevelt, ranching artifacts, and natural history displays. The restored Maltese Cross cabin, which Roosevelt used, is behind the visitor center.

A major feature of the South Unit is a paved, 36-mile, scenic loop road with interpretive signs that explain some of the park's historical and natural phenomena.

A roadlog guide, which is for sale in the visitor center, gives detailed information about the landscape. The following descriptions give you an idea of what you can expect to see and find at some of the points:

Scoria Point True scoria is volcanic in origin. Locally, however, wherever a seam of coal has caught fire and baked the surrounding sand and clay into a kind of natural brick, it has been given the name scoria. Over the years erosion has removed the softer earth and left the bluffs capped with this harder, more resistant material.

Ridgeline Nature Trail This self-guiding loop trail gives you information about the badlands scenery and ecology and about the role of fire, wind, and water in this area. Length: 0.6 mile.

North Dakota Badlands Looking across Paddock Creek, you see a field of bumps. Erosion has worn away all but the hardest materials, leaving the maze of buttes and canyons.

Coal Vein Trail From 1951 until early 1977 a fire burned here in a coal seam. The intense heat baked the adjacent clay and sand, greatly altering the appearance of the terrain and disturbing the vegetation. Length: 0.8 mile.

Buck Hill A short walk leads to this hill, which has an elevation of 2,855 feet. Note that only shrubs and other small plants grow on the dry, hot, south-facing slopes, and that trees grow on the wetter, cooler, north-facing hillsides.

Boicourt Overlook One of the best views of the badlands in the park is from this overlook.

Wind Canyon A short trail up the ridge leads to an overlook of both a graceful bend in the Little Missouri River and also the wind-sculpted sands of the canyon. A short way beyond the river the wilderness area begins.

Jones Creek Trail This trail that leads through the heart of the badlands reaches the road at two points. It may be hiked from either end. Length: 3.7 miles.

Peaceful Valley This was the site of a horse ranch during the 1880s heyday of cattle ranching. The high central section of the ranchhouse was built about 1885.

Petrified Forest The greatest collection of petrified wood in the park can be reached only by foot or on horseback. Besides the petrified wood here, pieces may be found scattered throughout the park, though not in such great quantity. Length from Peaceful Valley: 16 miles roundtrip.

DeMores State Historic Site Near the town of Medora is the 27-room chateau that the Marquis DeMores built for his wife in 1884. The marquis was a wealthy French nobleman who built a slaughterhouse to process beef from the large local herds for shipping to market in the new refrigerated railroad cars. He also built the town of Medora, which he named for his wife, and persuaded the Northern Pacific Railroad to build a station there. He was an acquaintance of Theodore Roosevelt. Conducted tours of the chateau are usually offered from late May through September.

Safety For your protection, use caution while visiting the park. All animals in the park are wild and unpredictable. View them from a safe distance. Bison, though apparently tranquil, are wild and if disturbed or annoyed may attack you. Rattlesnakes don't always give a warning before they strike. Be alert while walking in the park. Rattlesnakes and black widow spiders often live in

prairie dog burrows. Prairie dogs can give you a sharp, painful bite if you attempt to feed them. Drive with caution: the park's winding roads and abundant wildlife may yield some unexpected surprises. Drinking water should be obtained from approved sources; water in the backcountry is not recommended for human consumption, unless boiled. Watch out for poison ivy in

wooded areas and for ticks in late spring and early summer. The climate in the badlands is very harsh with extremes in temperature and sudden violent storms. Prepare yourself for a variety of conditions. Climbing on the steep, barren slopes in the badlands can be dangerous, because slippery clays and soft sediments may yield underfoot. Stay on trails.

Camp and in part of the North Unit Campground. Groups must have a written reservation from the park superintendent. Riding groups with their own horses should write to the superintendent to make special arrangements. In the summer only, guided trail rides on saddle horses are available at Peaceful Valley Ranch. Picnicking is permitted at Painted Canyon, Peaceful Valley, and the North Unit. If you need supplies or accommodations, you can find services year round at Medora (limited in winter), Belfield, and Beach near the South Unit and at Watford City near the North Unit. The Medora, Painted Canyon, and North Unit visitor centers are accessible to the disabled. More

information on services for the disabled is available.

Regulations Please read the rules posted at the campgrounds and throughout the park.

- Picnicking is not permitted in campgrounds.
- Use motor vehicles and bicycles only on park roads. Off-road use is prohibited. Wear seatbelts while driving in the park.
- Keep pets leashed and under control; they are not allowed on trails or in buildings.
- Horses are prohibited in campgrounds and picnic areas, and on self-guiding nature trails.

- Build fires only in fire grates provided at the campgrounds and picnic areas. Fires are prohibited in the backcountry.
- Report all accidents promptly.
- All weapons and archery tackle must be broken down and cased. Hunting is not allowed.
- Use or possession of fireworks or other explosives is prohibited.
- Leave all natural features undisturbed; collecting is prohibited.

More Information Write: Superintendent, Theodore Roosevelt National Park, P.O. Box 7, Medora, ND 58645-0007; or call 701-623-4466. ©GPO:1997-418-648/60007 Reprint 1997 Printed on recycled paper

