

# Cutting through Rock with Water ... Weather ... and Time



**American dipper**  
*Cinclus mexicanus*  
© MICK THOMPSON

*The roaring of the river reverberated and echoed like demons howling over their prey.*

Abraham Lincoln Fellows, 1901

**Song of the Gunnison** Black Canyon's natural music can be percussive, gentle, or raucous. Over the rim at Gunnison Point, where you are mindful of loose rock that could send you sliding into the blackness, a muffled sound reaches up to you. You listen, hard. Is that the wind or the river 1,800 feet (548 m) below you? Close your eyes, and the sound gently envelops you. Open them, and a violet-green swallow passes but adds no sound, or did it? A white-throated swift soars within arm's reach, riding a thermal, its wings adding the slightest bit of flutter to the river's distant rush. A wind gust hits your cheek. From below comes the sound of a peregrine falcon perched beneath a sheltering rock.

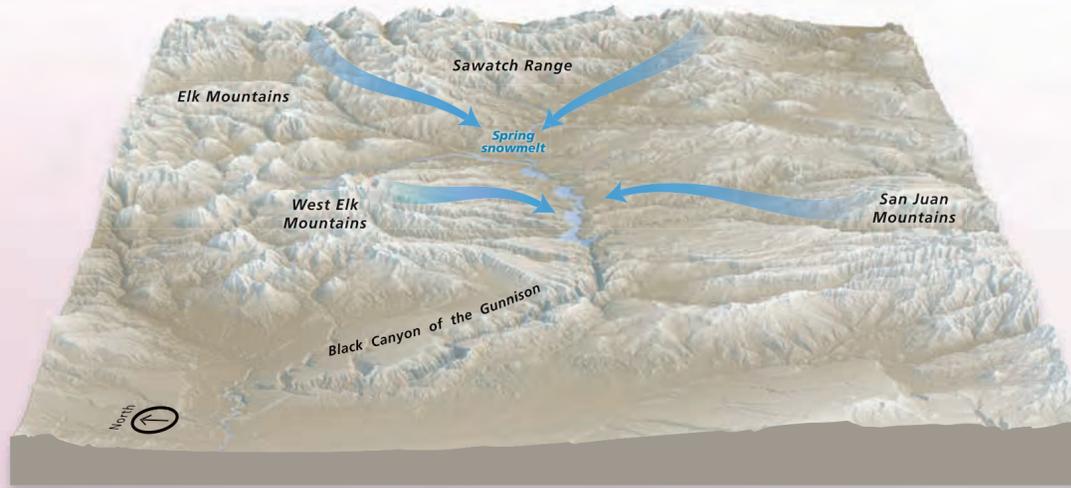
You sleep that night beneath the Milky Way, frothy with stars, as you've never seen it before. In the morning, despite being warned of the steep grade, poison ivy, and heat, you hike to the river. In time the roar builds to a crescendo, until it cancels out all other sounds. You look warily at the 10-foot (3 m) boulders casually scattered about. Any minute one could come crashing down. Imagine the power and the sharp crack as rock meets rock.



**Peregrine falcon**  
*Falco peregrinus*  
© GREG GARD

**A Powerful Partnership** John W. Gunnison, an explorer and engineer seeking a Pacific railroad passage in the 1850s, judged Black Canyon impenetrable and difficult to cross. He could not have known that the river had hewn the canyon walls from a dome of extremely resistant crystalline rock nearly two billion years old. A geological event now known as the Gunnison Uplift had raised the canyon's rock from deep in Earth's basement.

Time is the Gunnison River's unseen but equal partner. Two million years ago, its course determined by the location of high mountain ranges (*below*), the river began cutting through the uplift's core with rocks, gravel, and sediment. Empowered by floodwaters, it gained speed through a steep descent from the surrounding mountains. It wielded huge boulders that scoured trees and chiseled the canyon bottom—which had not yet been reached.



*Below: The Painted Wall from Cedar Point, South Rim. Veins of pink, igneous pegmatite run horizontally through canyon walls of blue-black, metamorphic gneiss.*

© JAO VAN DE LAEGEMAT

**Vertical Views** Black Canyon has some of the darkest skies over the United States. The skies crown a sliver of habitat for nocturnal animals and plants that need the darkness to survive.

Pinyon-juniper and Gambel oak woodlands grow near the canyon rims and on the gentler slopes, while lone trees occupy crevices and narrow gorges. Some pinyon and juniper trees are centuries old. Dark spires of Douglas-fir rise from inner canyon ridges. In fall aspen trees glow yellow. Mosses and ferns attach to cool, shaded, moist walls. Box elders cling defiantly to river banks, while most plants struggle at the bottom. You'll mainly find rocks there, as explorer Abraham Lincoln Fellows did in 1901: "Gigantic boulders had fallen in from the cliffs, the water flowing 100 feet [30 m] or more beneath these boulders ... smooth and polished to such an extent that it was only with the greatest difficulty they could be surmounted."

Expanses of silver-blue sagebrush, grasses, and forbs at the North Rim support the Gunnison sage-grouse, a threatened species. Bobcats, mountain lions, and black bears are among the mammals that roam both rims. Bighorn sheep delicately balance on the inner canyon's ledges. American dippers share the water with beavers and river otters. Nocturnal ringtails may nestle among boulders at the canyon bottom.



**Night sky**

© PHILIP SCHEITZ



**Utah Juniper**  
*Juniperus osteosperma*

**Pinyon-juniper woodland**

**Gunnison sage-grouse**  
*Centrocercus minimus*  
© JEANNE STARFORD / USFWS



**Sagebrush**



**Mule deer**  
*Odocoileus hemionus*

**Gambel oak woodland**

**Gambel oak**  
*Quercus gambelii*



**Douglas-fir**  
*Pseudotsuga menziesii*

**Inner canyon**



**Ringtail**  
*Bassaris astutus*  
© DAVID WELLS

**Along the river**

© JACK BAUER



# Visiting Black Canyon of the Gunnison

## Plan Your Visit

Start at the South Rim Visitor Center for information, exhibits, publications, wilderness permits, and Junior Ranger booklets. Check the website for hours.

## Accommodations

The park has two campgrounds for overnight accommodations. Sites at North Rim Campground (open seasonally) are first-come, first served. Most sites at South Rim Campground (open year-round) can be reserved at [www.recreation.gov](http://www.recreation.gov). East Portal Campground (closed in winter) is part of Curecanti National Recreation Area, [www.nps.gov/cure](http://www.nps.gov/cure). Services and lodging are in nearby towns.

## Park Roads

In winter South Rim Road beyond Gunnison Point is closed to vehicles, usually reopening in mid-April. Roads closed for snow remain open for cross-country skiing and snowshoeing.

East Portal Road (paved; closed in winter) leads to the Gunnison River and Curecanti National Recreation Area. It has 16-percent grades and hairpin curves. Vehicles over 22 feet (6.7 m), including trailers, are prohibited.

## Kayaking and Rafting

The Gunnison River is for experienced kayakers. Rafting in the park is strongly discouraged. For an intermediate run through the lower canyon rafters can put in at Chukar Trail in Gunnison Gorge National Conservation Area; for information contact the Bureau of Land Management or visit [blm.gov/programs/national-conservation-lands/coloradolgunnison-gorge-nca](http://blm.gov/programs/national-conservation-lands/coloradolgunnison-gorge-nca).

## Fishing, Hunting, and Firearms

A Colorado fishing license is required. Colorado Gold Medal Waters principles apply. Hunting is prohibited. For firearms regulations ask a ranger or check the park website.

## Accessibility

We strive to make facilities, services, and programs accessible to all. For information go to a visitor center, ask a ranger, call, or check the website.

## Safety

Water is NOT AVAILABLE in the park November through April. • Many places have no guardrails. Loose rock makes canyon rim edges hazardous. Supervise children closely. Stay on designated trails. • Never throw anything from the rim into the canyon. Even a small stone can be fatal to someone below. • The canyon rim is 8,000 feet (2,439 m) above sea level. Watch for signs of elevation sickness. Drink plenty of water, use sun protection, and pace yourself. • Bears are present. Store food properly. Never approach or feed wildlife.

## Emergencies call 911

## Regulations

Federal laws protect all natural and cultural features in the park. • The inner canyon is designated wilderness. You must have a permit for all wilderness activities including climbing, hiking, and kayaking. • Leashed pets are allowed at most overlooks. Pets are prohibited on most trails and in the inner canyon and wilderness. • Build campfires only in campground grates. Never leave a campfire unattended. Firewood is not available at the park; gathering it is prohibited.

## More Information

Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Park  
102 Elk Creek  
Gunnison, CO 81230  
970-641-2337  
[www.nps.gov/blca](http://www.nps.gov/blca)

Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Park is one of over 400 parks in the National Park System. Learn more about national parks and programs at [www.nps.gov](http://www.nps.gov).

Use the official NPS App to guide your visit; select "save this park" to use it offline. Cell service in the park is not reliable.



## Getting Here

The park is 250 miles (402 km) southwest of Denver. The South Rim is 15 miles (24 km) east of Montrose via US 50 and CO 347.

Lat., long.: 38.55056, -107.68667

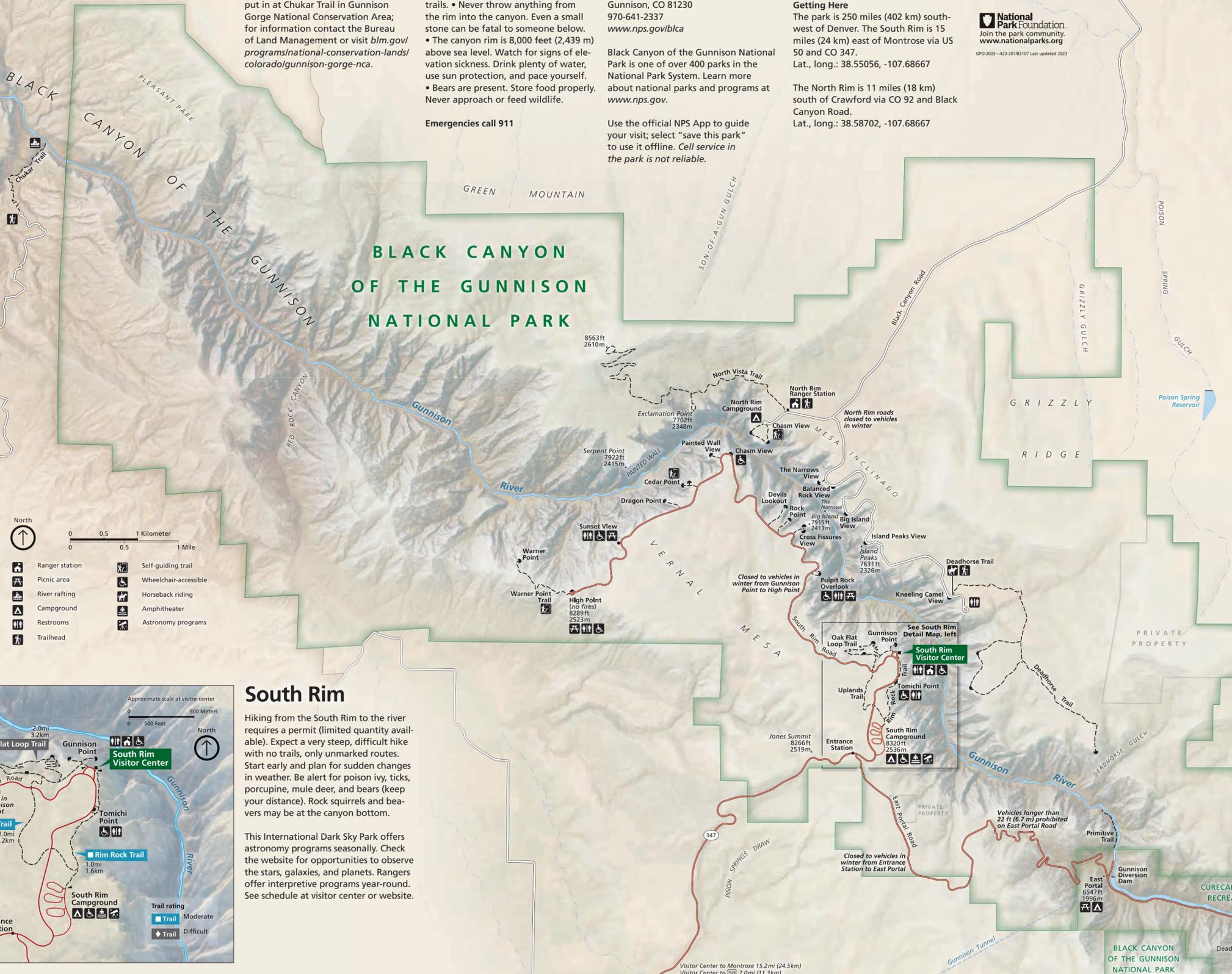
The North Rim is 11 miles (18 km) south of Crawford via CO 92 and Black Canyon Road.

Lat., long.: 38.58702, -107.68667

**National Park Foundation**  
Join the park community.  
[www.nationalparks.org](http://www.nationalparks.org)  
GPO:2023-423-20183107 Last updated 2023

**Rock climbing** Scaling Black Canyon's near-vertical walls is for experienced climbers only. Consult guidebooks, online sources, and park rangers for information and route finding.

GUNNISON GORGE NATIONAL CONSERVATION AREA



North

0 0.5 1 Kilometer  
0 0.5 1 Mile

	Ranger station		Self-guiding trail
	Picnic area		Wheelchair-accessible
	River rafting		Horseback riding
	Campground		Amphitheater
	Restrooms		Astronomy programs
	Trailhead		



## South Rim

Hiking from the South Rim to the river requires a permit (limited quantity available). Expect a very steep, difficult hike with no trails, only unmarked routes. Start early and plan for sudden changes in weather. Be alert for poison ivy, ticks, porcupine, mule deer, and bears (keep your distance). Rock squirrels and beavers may be at the canyon bottom.

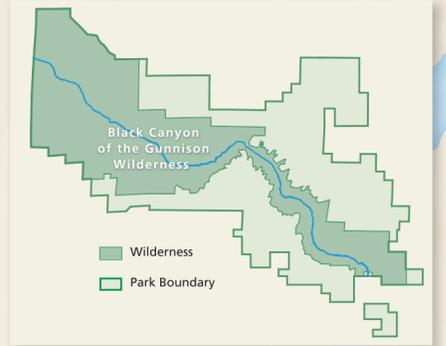
This International Dark Sky Park offers astronomy programs seasonally. Check the website for opportunities to observe the stars, galaxies, and planets. Rangers offer interpretive programs year-round. See schedule at visitor center or website.



## North Rim

The North Rim is far from the highway, and services are limited. No bridge spans Black Canyon. To drive from one side to the other, allow 2 to 3 hours.

You'll find more solitude and self-reliant conditions here. Camp in one of the few sites at North Rim Campground. Take the easy Chasm View Nature Trail through pinyon-juniper woodland. Enjoy views of the Painted Wall. Longer hikes like Deadhorse Trail pass through thickets of serviceberry and Gambel oak. Rocky outcrops offer vistas of the primeval canyon and its fast-moving river.



**Wilderness** Congress has protected over 17,000 acres of Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Park as wilderness under the 1964 Wilderness Act. For information about the National Wilderness Preservation System visit [www.wilderness.net](http://www.wilderness.net).

## East Portal

East Portal is part of Curecanti National Recreation Area, an adjacent unit co-managed with Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Park. East Portal Road carried equipment and crews that built the Gunnison Tunnel from 1905 to 1909. Outdoor exhibits tell more of the story. Pets are prohibited in the wilderness and allowed (leashed) elsewhere.

Hike a primitive trail that follows the Gunnison River as it threads through cliffs and rocks. Picnic beneath a shelter as you gaze at rock spires. Fish for trout (license required). Watch an American dipper repeatedly dive into icy waters. Look for great blue herons, eagles, and otters that might be along the river.

