



Windsurfers on Blue Mesa Reservoir

NPS / NATHAN BLOW

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 in the 1960s to provide irrigation and hydroelectric power. The dams are part of the Wayne N. Aspinall Unit of the Bureau of Reclamation's Upper Colorado River Storage Project. The dams eliminated the wild-flowing water of the Gunnison River and replaced it with static reservoirs. The high, dry, eroded vistas are no longer interrupted by the Gunnison River's narrow thread, but by

three bodies of water: Blue Mesa, Morrow Point, and Crystal reservoirs. Blue Mesa serves as the main water-storage reservoir. Morrow Point Dam generates most of the power. Crystal Dam maintains an even flow through the Black Canyon of the Gunnison. The old rock faces of Black Canyon that hold the water of the Morrow Point and Crystal reservoirs show the changes that have occurred over two 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 and Crystal reservoirs' steep rock walls. Blue Mesa's bed formed in less-resistant volcanic mudflow materials. As these eroded beneath solidified volcanic layers, spires formed; the Dillon Pinnacles Trail features an example of this formation.

Curecanti's fish are mostly nonnative and stocked for fishing—brook, brown, rainbow, and Mackinaw trout and kokanee salmon—attracting the greatest number of people to the park. Recreational opportunities include power boating, sailing, windsurfing, camping, hiking, and hunting. Any season offers sightseeing at Morrow Point Dam, Pioneer Point, and Blue Mesa. People have an opportunity to discover the solitude and silence of these canyons and mesas.

History



Human occupation goes back at least 10,000 years. Remains of ancient structures called wickiups date back 4,500 years and are some of the oldest dwellings uncovered at Curecanti.

The Utes spent summers in the mountains and winters near today's Montrose and Grand Junction. Like many of the area's earlier inhabitants, they were drawn here by the abundant wildlife in the dry hills and

river valleys and by vegetation in canyons and on mesas.

The arrival of non-Indigenous people in the 1800s began to destroy Ute lifeways as they took control of the land. 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 global commerce.

Despite discouraging reports by Capt. John Gunnison and his Pacific Railroad party, which surveyed the area in 1853, a narrow-gauge railroad was in the area by 1882 transporting coal, cattle, ore, and other items.

Bearing the Curecanti Needle on its logo, the Denver & Rio Grande

Railroad helped develop small towns like Cimarron. It operated until 1949.

The region's ranchers and farmers coveted the Gunnison River's water for livestock and crops. Opened in 1909, the six-mile (9.6-km) Gunnison Tunnel was blasted through a mesa to deliver water to the Uncompahgre Valley for agriculture. A National Civil Engineering Landmark, it ended the natural flows of the Gunnison River through Black Canyon.



Locomotive #278, located at Cimarron, stands atop the last remaining railroad trestle along the Black Canyon of the Gunnison route.

Fishing



Brook trout, kokanee salmon, and nonnative fish including rainbow, brown, and Mackinaw (lake) trout draw anglers to park waters in summer and winter.

Three dams of the Wayne N. Aspinall Unit dramatically changed the area's fishery. Only five of Curecanti's 22 identified fish species are native. Nonnative fish benefit from the

reservoir environment, which has abundant plankton. These microscopic organisms flourish in the still waters, and their concentration helps

maintain the kokanee, Curecanti's most commonly caught fish. Brook trout favor the reservoirs' tributary streams. In Blue Mesa Reservoir's deep subsurface canyons lurk coldwater-loving Mackinaw trout—caught here at over 30 pounds (13.6 kg).

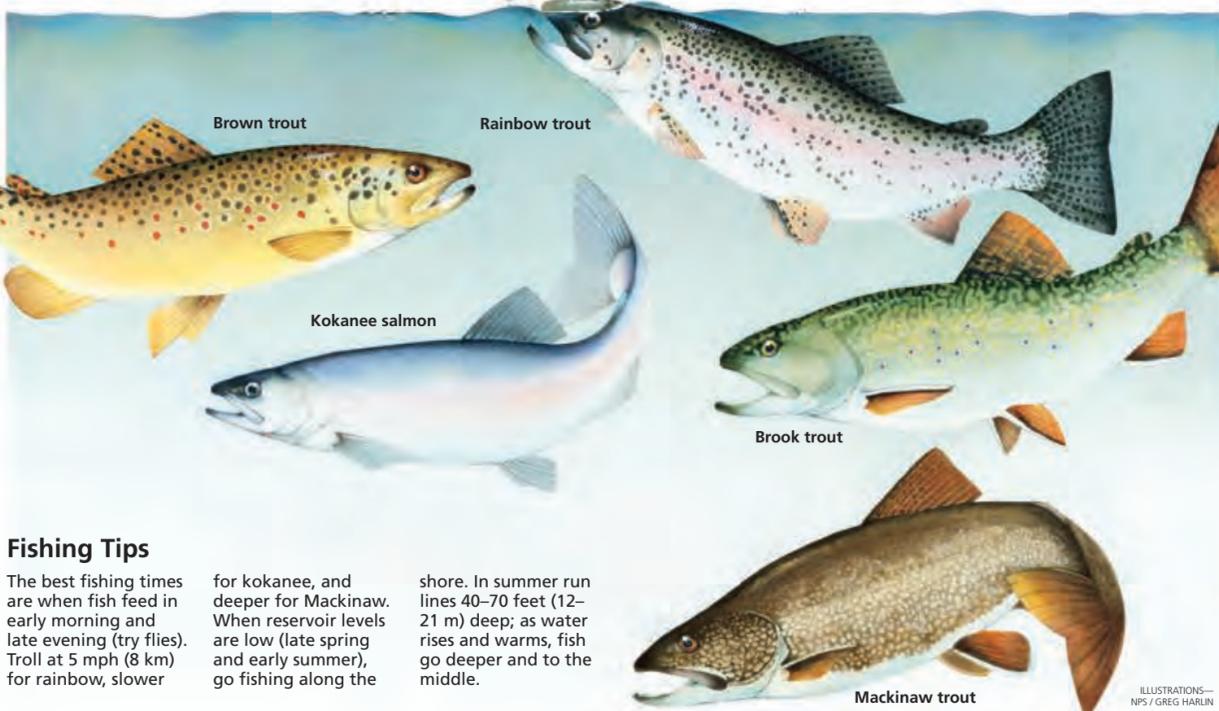
Introduced in the Gunnison River in the 1880s, rainbow trout are still stocked along with kokanee.

Know the Regulations
Buy a Colorado fishing license—required for persons 16 and older—at marinas or sporting goods stores.

Check beforehand for closures, seasons, bait, and other restrictions.

Use provided fish-cleaning stations; if none is available, use trash cans.

Snagging for kokanee begins in November; contact the park for the exact date.



Fishing Tips

The best fishing times are when fish feed in early morning and late evening (try flies). Troll at 5 mph (8 km) for rainbow, slower

for kokanee, and deeper for Mackinaw. When reservoir levels are low (late spring and early summer), go fishing along the

shore. In summer run lines 40–70 feet (12–21 m) deep; as water rises and warms, fish go deeper and to the middle.

Winter



Elk, bighorn sheep, and deer come down from the mountains in winter to feed and avoid colder, snowier conditions at higher elevations.

Despite the abundant wildlife, beautiful snow-capped mesas, and clear blue skies, winter at Curecanti is harsh.

Temperatures dip as low as -40°F (-40°C) and are made more dangerous by strong winds. Adequate preparation for winter activities is a must.

Ice fishing is popular. Four inches (10 cm) of hard, clear ice are needed to support one adult on foot. Do your research before you venture onto the ice. Your safety is your responsibility.

Cross-country skiing and snowshoeing are other ways of experiencing Curecanti's winters.

Warning: Strong winds make wind-chill factors extreme. Be prepared.

Wear clothing in several light layers. Hooded and windproof outer layers are important. Keep your head and neck covered and warm.

Hands and feet are the most difficult to keep warm. Mittens are better than gloves. Boots should be big enough to allow good circulation.

Visit the park website for more winter recreation and safety information.



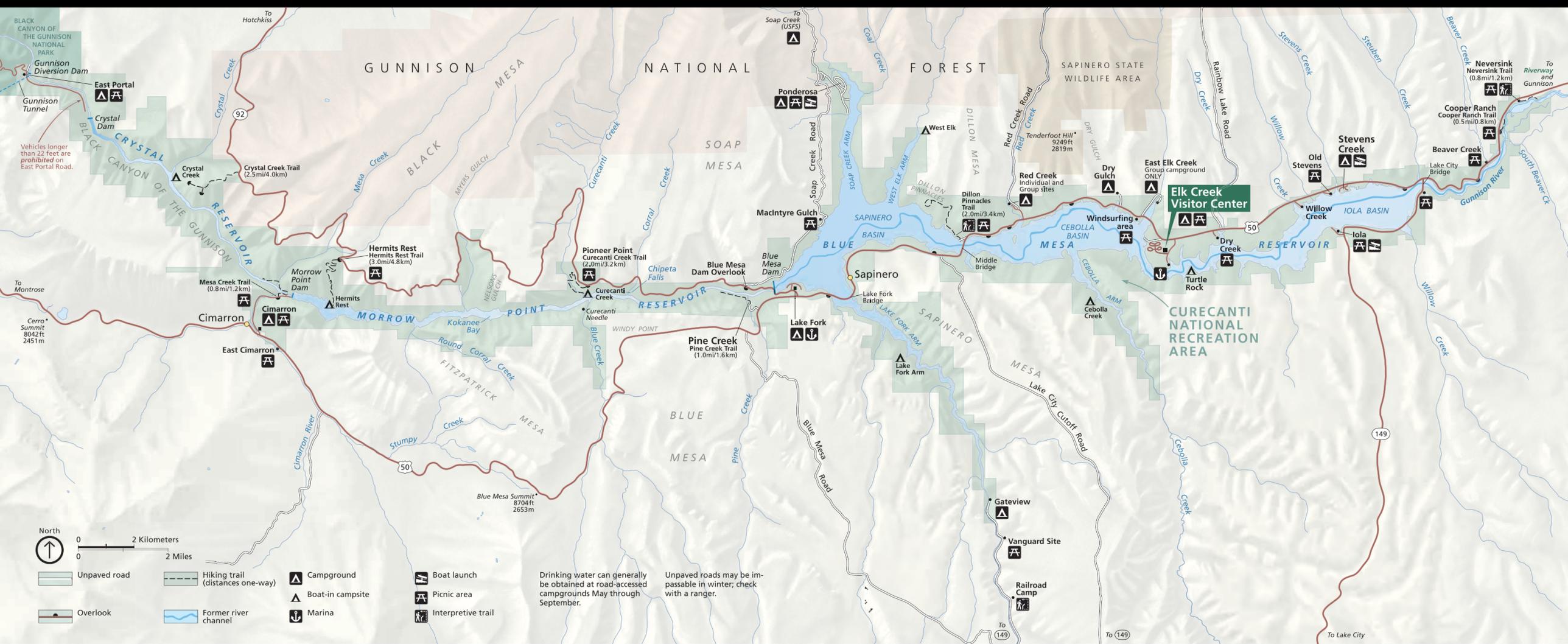
Bald eagles winter at Curecanti, feeding on fish until ice covers water surfaces.



The number of elk herds that winter here depends on the severity of the weather.

ILLUSTRATIONS—
NPS / GREG HARLIN

Explore Curecanti



Orientation



The Morrow Point Reservoir is in the upper reaches of Black Canyon.

Elk Creek Visitor Center is open year-round. Exhibits tell about Curecanti's natural and cultural history and recreational options.

Schedules of park programs are available. Use the official NPS App to guide your visit.

More Information
Curecanti National Recreation Area
102 Elk Creek
Gunnison, CO 81230
970-641-2337
www.nps.gov/cure

Curecanti National Recreation Area is one of over 400 parks in the National Park System. To learn more, please visit www.nps.gov.

Activities, Programs, and Services



Hikers explore Curecanti Creek Trail, which descends from Pioneer Point to Morrow Point Reservoir.

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

East Portal Road (closed in winter) provides access to the Gunnison Tunnel and Gunnison River. Vehicles longer than 22 feet (6.7 m), including trailer, are prohibited.

Visit the historic train exhibit at Cimarron.

Services
Marinas are at Elk Creek and Lake Fork. Each has a small grocery store, boat rentals, guide service, and slips.

Find full travel services in Gunnison, 16 miles (26 km) east of Elk Creek, and in Montrose, 20 miles (32 km) west of Cimarron.

Accessibility
The Elk Creek Visitor Center and most campgrounds are wheelchair-accessible. Contact the park for information.

Hiking and Trails
Curecanti's trail system offers varied hiking experiences. Trails may have rapid elevation changes. Some are ideal for short backpacking trips or long day hikes.

Caution! Hikers please note: Curecanti is 7,500 feet (2,286 m) above sea level. Easy trails may be strenuous if you are not used to the elevation.

Birders may enjoy the *Neversink Trail* with its lush streamside habitat that birds favor. The *Dillon Pinnacles Trail* threads dry mesa country to the spectacular Dillon Pinnacles and beyond for an impressive view of Blue Mesa Reservoir.



Blue Mesa Reservoir is Colorado's largest body of water and America's largest stocked kokanee salmon fishery.

Curecanti Creek and *Hermits Rest* trails, both strenuous, lead to Morrow Point Reservoir from CO 92.

Crystal Creek Trail, moderately strenuous, leads to an overlook of Crystal Reservoir, the canyon, and the surrounding San Juan and West Elk mountains.

Mesa Creek Trail follows Crystal Reservoir's shore as a fishing access trail.

Pine Creek Trail leads down to Morrow Point Reservoir for shore fishing, launching of hand-carried craft, or sightseeing along a limited section of the historic narrow-gauge railroad bed.

Picnicking
Picnic areas have toilets but no running water except at Elk Creek (year-round) and Iola (May to September). There are picnic tables along US 50 and CO 92.

Camping
Campgrounds are at Lake Fork, Elk Creek, Stevens Creek, and Cimarron. Smaller areas at Dry Gulch, Red Creek, Ponderosa, Gateview, and East Portal offer more seclusion. Each reservoir offers water-access campsites for boaters.

Camp only in designated areas. Reserve Elk Creek and Lake Fork and the East Elk Creek and Red Creek group sites at www.recreation.gov. All other campsites are first-come, first-served.

Hunting
Colorado and federal hunting laws apply within the park. Discharging firearms in developed or populous areas is prohibited.

Weapons are not allowed in federal buildings. Hunters on horseback may use the corrals at Ponderosa and Dry Gulch.

Swimming
Swimming is prohibited from docks and launch ramps. There are no specially designated swimming areas within the park.

Use extreme caution. Water temperatures are very low, shorelines are very precipitous, and submerged rocks are hazardous.

Do not linger in cold water due to the dangers of hypothermia. Extended exposure to cold water can lower your body temperature to dangerous, even fatal, levels.

Toxic algae can occur, primarily in summer. Check conditions at the visitor center.



Check at the Elk Creek Visitor Center for ranger-led and other program schedules.

Boating



Mornings often bring calm waters at Blue Mesa Reservoir, but afternoons can bring winds and storms.

Blue Mesa Reservoir is 20 miles (32 km) long. Its three basins, Iola, Cebolla, and Sapinero, are suitable for boating.

Launch ramps are at Elk Creek, Lake Fork, Iola, and Stevens Creek. Sail boating and water-skiing are popular on Blue Mesa Reservoir in summer.

Because Morrow Point and Crystal reservoirs lie deep in the canyon, boating use is limited to hand-carried craft.

Pine Creek Trail, off US 50, leads down 234 steps to Morrow Point Reservoir. Take the Mesa Creek Trail near Cimarron down to Crystal Reservoir.

Your boat must be registered in your home state. All motorized and/or state-registered vessels on Blue Mesa Reservoir are required to have a

Safety and Regulations
Federal boating safety regulations apply. US Coast Guard-approved personal flotation devices (PFDs) must be carried for each person aboard.

Your safety equipment must include: a personal flotation device for each passenger, a type 4 throwable flotation device for boats 16 feet (4.8 m) or longer, a fire extinguisher, lights for dusk-to-dawn operation, a sound-producing device, and a working ventilation device for inboard engines. Consult the Colorado Boating Statutes and Regulations.

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All motorized and/or state-registered vessels on Blue Mesa Reservoir are required to have a



Personal flotation devices (PFDs) should be worn year-round!

boat permit. All motorized boats must be processed through the inspection station.

Fluctuating water levels and releases from Blue Mesa and Morrow Point dams cause boating hazards. For hazards and launch conditions check at a visitor center.

Be alert to strong afternoon winds—they arise suddenly. It is best to travel west in the morning and east in the afternoon. Keep protective covers in sight. When winds pick up, head for shore.

Strong changeable currents are a concern on Morrow Point and Crystal reservoirs.

Aids to Navigation

Rangers patrol to help boaters in distress and to check for safety equipment; requirements are posted at launch areas. Know the 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 an observer when towing



Diamond indicates warning, danger. Use caution.



Square gives information.



Keep red buoy to your right when going upstream.

Reservoir Surface Elevations

Elevations of the reservoirs vary year-round. Contact the park for information. Full pool elevations (above sea level) are:
Blue Mesa Reservoir—7,519 feet (2,292 m)
Morrow Point Reservoir—6,760 feet (2060 m)
Crystal Reservoir—6,755 feet (2059 m)

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