

EXPLORING THE BADLANDS WITH CHILDREN

*Pleasures newly found are sweet
When they lie about our feet.----William Wordsworth*

Badlands National Park offers children the opportunity to play in a natural setting. Here, they can use their imaginations and make up their own games—much like the Native American children and the children of homesteaders once did.

All children must be supervised by an adult while exploring the park. Explorers of all ages should wear boots and long pants for protection against scrapes and snakes. Don't forget the sunscreen and be sure to have lots of water and snacks with you.

SCOUTING OUT THE BUTTES

Since the park is a natural setting, there are no designated playgrounds. The picnic areas at the Ben Reifel Visitor Center are great places for modern-day explorers. Check out the buttes on the north side of the Visitor Center by the picnic area. See the paths on and around the buttes? Try exploring the paths, and see where you end up. And consider this--were the paths created by erosion, wildlife, or by humans? Take a guess—what do you think?

WATCH OUT!

Like all good explorers, you must stay sharp and alert. There are snakes here—this is their neighborhood—so watch where you step and where you put your hands. Pickly pear cacti hide in the tall prairie grasses. They are fun to find but come with an Ouch! if you step on one.

PICNICS AND RABBITS

There are more places to explore on the south side of the Visitor Center. Keep a lookout here for rabbits—they love the good eating provided by the prairie grasses. But remember—do not feed them. Human food gives them stomachaches. Rabbits, like all the wildlife here, feel best when they eat their own food.

HUMAN-MADE FOOTPATH

Near the picnic tables on the south side of the Visitor Center is a gravel footpath by the road. See where it takes you. Along the way you might see more rabbits. Do you see any plants that remind you of home? Do you see the wash (creek bed)? When it rains, the wash fills up with running water, and frogs sing their croaky songs.

The footpath continues through the parking lot in front of the Cedar Pass Lodge and on to the campground. Along the way there are more buttes to explore. Do these buttes look exactly like the ones by the Visitor Center? Or are they different? How so?

RAIN-MADE FOOTPATH

Across the street from the Visitor Center is a wash (creek bed) that meanders through the prairie grasses. If the wash is dry, you can hike in the middle of it and see where it goes. The wash starts near the two cottonwood trees (you can't miss them—they're the only ones on that side of the road!). Before you begin your exploration, try to guess where you think the wash goes. Did you end up where you predicted? Were there any surprises along the way?

Remember, you are an explorer in a natural setting. Stay sharp and alert for snakes and other wildlife. Watch out for cars on the road when you cross the street.

FOSSIL ALERT

Lucky explorers sometimes find fossils which are the remains of something that lived a long time ago. You are most likely to find fossils in the washes—especially if there has been a recent rain.

If you find a fossil, here's what you should do. Admire it and take pictures of it, but **DO NOT TOUCH IT**. Touching it changes the fossil, and it is important that we leave the park just as we found it. Study the fossil with your eyes. Try to guess if it's an animal bone, or a piece of an antler, or maybe it's a tooth. Then too, the fossil might be part of a plant or even an ancient insect. See what you think.

Now look around you and notice landmarks. Then return to the Visitor Center and tell a ranger what you found and where you found it. Congratulations! You have made a scientific discovery!

BEN REIFEL VISITOR CENTER

Here, you can put together a rattlesnake vertebra. Say *cheese* with antlers on your head. Decide if a tanned skin would keep you warm on a snowy February night. Or would you prefer to sleep under a bison skin? Check out the telescope and see what its bird's-eye view tells you.

For more fun, find the Touch Box in the Touch Room, close your eyes, and figure out what's in your hand. Is it a rock, an animal bone, a plant, or maybe a piece of wood? Make up a play about bison and prairie dogs and stage it at the puppet theatre. Look through the pressed flowers. What is the funniest name for a plant you can find? And just what does *stinkgrass* look like?

WALKS AND TALKS

Ever been to a Pig Dig? How about a town built by prairie dogs? Check out the naturalist programs (times and places are listed at the Visitor Center and in the park's newspaper) and find a topic that you're curious about. There's even a Junior Ranger program for kids ages 7 to 12. Come join us and learn something new in a wide-open classroom. Come join us and share your 21st Century imagination with us in Badlands National Park.