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U.S. Department  
Of the Interior  
National Park Service



Bighorn Canyon NRA

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# Bighorn Canyon National Recreation Area



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2013 Active Trails Program

Thank you to our partners: Northwest College in  
Powell, WY and Friends of Bighorn Lake

## Waterway Trail Guide

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**Leave What You Find** – Appreciate ancient structures, artifacts, rock art and other natural objects but leave them undisturbed. Avoid introducing non-native or invasive species by cleaning equipment between trips.

**Minimize Campfire Impacts** – Carry a fire pan or build a mound fire. Consider using stoves for cooking. Learn about local fire regulations. Use dead and downed wood no larger than an adult's wrist to keep the fire small. When camping in the canyon build all fires below the high water mark.

**Respect Wildlife** – Observe wildlife from a distance. Avoid feeding wildlife and always properly store food and trash. Control pets or leave them at home.

**Be Considerate of Other Visitors** – Respect other visitors and the quality of their experience. Communicate with other river users about your floating and camping plans to avoid conflicts. Let nature's sounds prevail.

During your summer adventures, always be mindful of your impact and what you leave behind. You are the host for those who will come after you.

## Leave No Trace Practices for Lake Corridors

**Plan Ahead and Prepare** – Learn about lake-specific issues, regulations and carry the necessary equipment to enjoy the lake safely. Schedule your trip to avoid local weather patterns. Repackage food to minimize waste.

**Travel and Camp on Durable Surfaces** – Durable surfaces include water, rock, gravel and sand. Focus activity where vegetation is absent. Leave put-ins, take-outs and campsites clean and natural looking.

**Dispose of Waste Properly** – Pack it in, pack it out. Generally, the best practice is to pack out human waste. Liquid wastes can be dumped into the main current in many high volume (over 500 cfs) rivers. In low volume rivers, scatter liquid waste 200 ft. from water, away from camps and trails. Always check local regulations. There are floating toilets at the developed campsites; however, Devil Canyon, and a few others, do not have toilets or a good place to dispose of waste. It is a good idea to bring WAG bags for these campsites. They can be purchased at [www.LNT.org](http://www.LNT.org)



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Photo by Ed Allen

People who've never heard of Bighorn Canyon have no idea how much they're missing. Bighorn Canyon is a little known treasure waiting to be discovered.

The Yellowtail Dam near Ft. Smith, Montana, creates the 71-mile long Bighorn Lake encased by the 1000- to 2500 foot cliffs of Bighorn Canyon. Peregrine falcons, Pryor Mountain wild horses, and bighorn sheep make their homes on the nearly vertical canyon walls.

Nothing can beat the sensation of water lapping against the boat in the evening as canyon walls begin to block the sun or of sliding the kayak onto the lake as the sun rises to meet water clear as glass.

Water is the focal point that draws most people to Bighorn Canyon. It has been drawing and challenging area visitors for hundreds of years. Many stories are told about the adventures of early explorers and settlers who navigated the Bighorn River.

## Packing List for Overnight Trips

- ☐ Dry Bag
- ☐ This Guide Book
- ☐ Compass
- ☐ First Aid Kit – Including Medications

### Sleep System

- ☐ Tent
- ☐ Sleeping Bag (Might get wet - synthetic is better than down)
- ☐ Sleeping Pad (Closed cell to help insulate against lightening)

### Food and Water

- ☐ Food (3000+ calories a day per person)
- ☐ Water Filter (You can't carry enough water)
- ☐ Water Bottles (3 liter carrying capacity per person)
- ☐ Pot with Lid
- ☐ Bowls and Utensils
- ☐ Camp Stove
- ☐ Fuel

### Clothing

- ☐ Swim Suit
- ☐ Synthetic Thermals Top and Bottom
- ☐ Fleece Jacket
- ☐ Water Proof Jacket
- ☐ Socks to Sleep in
- ☐ Water Shoes (closed toe sandals)

### Accessories

- ☐ Headlamp
- ☐ Extra Batteries

### Toiletries

- ☐ Sun Screen
- ☐ Toothbrush/Paste
- ☐ Wet wipes/Hand Sanitizer
- ☐ WAG Bags

### Extras

- ☐ A Book
- ☐ Waterproof Camera
- ☐ A Deck of Cards



In 1825, Jim Bridger, Bighorn Canyon's first recorded boater, built a driftwood raft and set out on the untamed Bighorn River. Three days later, he emerged from the mouth of the canyon, fifty miles downstream, unscathed by the wild river's rapids. Much later, on May 31, 1913, Doc Barry, Claude St. John and a neighbor, Bert Smith, left from Barry's Landing headed to New Orleans in a sixteen-foot, motorized boat. They reached their destination on August 1st. Many others would follow, mostly to brag that they had challenged the rapids of the canyon. The Yellowtail Dam has since transformed the once dangerous, foaming Bighorn River into Bighorn Lake, but visitors can still trace the path of Jim Bridger and Claude St. John.

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## Safety Information

### Weather

Weather related risks can be at least partially mitigated by checking a weather forecast before departure and keeping an eye on the skies. Having this guide with you and knowing where there are places to get off the water will also decrease the chances of getting stuck on the lake in a storm. There are steep canyon sections with no exit. Even on days when the forecast calls for sunny skies there is the possibility of thunderstorm. These storms usually take place between two and four in the afternoon so it may be wise to plan to take a break during this time or to be done for the day by two.

### Collisions with motorized craft

Bighorn Lake sees a lot of motorized traffic specifically on Saturday and Sunday. Usually the traffic picks up after 11 a.m. so it is good to get an early start. For the most part motorized users respect non-motorized users and slow down as they pass; however, chances are there will be some wake. Taking these waves head on will help mitigate the risk of rolling over. The main canyon has a number of blind turns which can present an increased chance of collision. Staying close to the canyon walls while paddling around these turns will insure that any oncoming traffic has room to navigate around.

### Dehydration

Paddling can be a strenuous exercise especially in the wind. Combined with heat, this exercise can lead to severe dehydration if enough water is not consumed. Plan ahead and bring plenty of water. Another part of staying hydrated is assuring a proper amount of electrolytes in the system. Bringing snacks/meals will help keep salt levels high and reduce the chances of dehydration, water intoxication, and hyponatremia.

## Trip Suggestions

### North End

#### Ok-A-Beh to Black Canyon: 12-13 Miles Round-trip

The canyon walls on the North end of the lake are not as steep, but they are much more lush and green. The lake itself is quite wide in this section so it is best to travel near the shoreline to lessen the effects of wind and motorized traffic. The turnaround spot for this trip is the beautiful Black Canyon Campground (Page 17). This trip must be done as a round trip.

#### Five Day Grand Tour of the North End 35-38 Miles Round-trip

This is the ultimate non-motorized Bighorn Lake adventure visiting all four of the boat-in only campsites on the North End. It features the right daily mileage to get a good workout and fill most of the day without overwhelming the average paddler. Every day starts at, ends at, or passes by a restroom. The first two days end at campgrounds with bear boxes making it easier to fit all food inside a bear canister when it becomes necessary on the third night.

Day One 6-6.5 Miles  
Ok-A-Beh to Black Canyon Campground (Page 17)

Day Two 7.5-8 Miles  
Black Canyon Campground to Day Board 9 (Page 16)

Day Three 7-7.5 Miles  
Day Board 9 to Dry Head Canyon Campsite (Page 14)

Day Four 5.5-6 Miles  
Dry Head Canyon Campsite to Big Bull Creek Campsite (Page 15)

Day Five 9-10 Miles  
Big Bull Creek Campsite to Ok-A-Beh (Page 15)

## **Trip Suggestions**

There are a number of options for taking single and multiple day trips. The typical paddler should not attempt more than 12-14 miles per day and most will have a more enjoyable experience at 6-8 miles per day.

### **South End**

#### **Horseshoe Bend to Crooked Creek: 4-6 Miles Round-trip**

Launch at Horseshoe Bend and Paddle to the end of Crooked Creek Bay and back. This trip travels through both wide open areas and narrow sections with tall steep canyon walls. With two cars this can also be done as a four mile one way paddle.

#### **Barry's Landing to Medicine Creek: 6-7 Miles Round-trip**

Launch at Barry's Landing and paddle to the Medicine Creek Campground (Page 13) and back. This trip goes all the way around Barry's Island with even higher canyon walls than the Horseshoe Bend to Crooked Creek Option. There is no way to get a car into Medicine Creek so this must be done as a round trip. It is only a 1.5 mile hike from the dock and bathroom at Medicine Creek to the top of Barry's Island which provides beautiful vistas of the entire area.

#### **Devil's Canyon: 17-20 Miles Round-trip**

This trip travels past the base of Devil Canyon Overlook where the cliffs reach heights over 1000 feet, blotting out the sun and effectively conveying the size and grandeur of Bighorn Canyon. It can be started from Barry's Landing or Horseshoe Bend and can be done as a loop to the Devil Canyon Campsite (Page 12) and back or as a one way trip with two cars. This shuttle will take about an hour and a half to set up. It is best to start from Horseshoe Bend on a one way adventure so as to travel with the flow rather than against.

## **Bear Safety**

There are quite a few black bears in the park. The majority of the sightings take place in the north end of the park. However, there are bears that frequent campgrounds and historic ranches on the south end.

The proper way to deal with an encroaching black bear is to make one's self look as large as possible and to make as much noise as possible. The situation which leads to the most attacks is when humans get between a mother and a cub. If there is a cub in sight, but not a mother it is best to leave the area via boat until the location of the mother can be determined.

Bear spray has been proven as an effective deterrent, but should only be used if absolutely necessary. Any aggressive bear behavior should be reported to park rangers as soon as possible.

Under no circumstances is it acceptable to feed a bear or any other wildlife, intentionally or unintentionally. It is the duty of all visitors to ensure that food is stored in such a way as to not be reachable by wildlife. There are a number of campsites without bear boxes or a good place to hang food. It is a good idea to purchase a bear canister for overnight stays at these sites.

### **Do Not Feed the Bears**

In the summer of 2013 an adolescent black bear had to be destroyed in the park due to visitors intentionally feeding it. Park staff do not want to see this happen again.

## Logistical Information

### There Are No National Park Service shuttles!

The only way to avoid doing a loop is to use two vehicles to create a shuttle, parking one car at the put-in and one at the take-out. Paddling the entire length of the river requires leaving one car at the North end in Montana and driving three hours to the south end to put in. There is no road through the park from the South end to the North end. There are no NPS shuttles between the North and South end and there are no shuttles that run back and forth within the park. Hitchhiking back will not work and should not be attempted. Having an exit strategy is key to an enjoyable excursion.

There is a current on the river, but it is barely noticeable on a wind free day. The wind affects surface current by either increasing the natural south to north flow or in some cases reversing it. Currents may exceed 10mph if the wind is blowing hard and may switch direction mid-day. It is important to watch fatigue levels of all group members and to turn back accordingly. Assuming that the second half of the day will be with the current can lead to dangerous situations in which over-fatigued paddlers are forced to fight headwinds to return to shore.

The shoreline of Bighorn Lake changes dramatically as the water level changes. It is imperative to check the current lake level before departure. Lake levels can be checked on the park website. There are lake levels listed with the pullouts and campsites to help with trip planning.

### Trespass

The Crow Indian Reservation surrounds most of the northern end of the Recreation Area and is closed to all public use. Within the Recreation Area, lakeshore camping is permitted up to full pool plus 30 elevational feet unless otherwise posted.

## Lake Side Campsite F

### Black Canyon



This is a developed campsite approximately 2.8 miles from the main canyon. It features a dozen sites with bear boxes, fire rings, and picnic tables. There is a dock here as well as a floating vault toilet from the third week of May until the middle of September. This site is at the end of a beautiful cove with pristine crystal clear water, an abundance of pine trees, and excellent fishing. This is the most popular boat-in only site and may be full on the weekends. Due to the high use it can be difficult to find firewood. There are bears in the area so use of the provided bear boxes is essential. Poison ivy is present at this site.

See Map Page 11

**UTM** 13t 0267469 5015180





## Lake Side Campsite E

### Day Board Nine



Day Board Nine is a developed campground located approximately eight miles south of Ok-A-Beh at Day Board Nine. Each of the 6 Campsites has a bear box, a picnic table, a fire ring, and room for 1-2 tents. This area also has a floating dock and floating restrooms from the third week of May through the end of September. In addition to the floating dock there is a large grassy area for landing and unloading non-motorized boats. This site has ample firewood early season, but due to high use there may be less by late season. This site is available at all water levels, but may be less accessible at lower levels.

See Map Page 11

**UTM** 12t 0730195 5014899



## Where to Launch

### South End

#### Horseshoe Bend

Horseshoe Bend has a large parking area and multiple spots to launch a boat. The area is mostly protected from the wake of the main lake by log booms encircling it. There is a gap in the logs between two floating docks that must be used to gain access to the main canyon. There are also bathrooms and a marina here that serves burgers and some snack food. Horseshoe Bend has a number of free campsites and sites with RV hook-ups for only \$15 per night.

#### Crooked Creek Bay

There is a small gravel lot off of the main road on the right hand side approximately ¼ mile after the Horseshoe Bend turn off. Launching here requires carrying boats 100 yards or more depending on lake level.

#### Barry's Landing

Barry's Landing has vault toilets and is located ¼ mile down the road from the Trail Creek campground. The campsites at Trail Creek are free. There are no RV hook-ups. There is ample parking at the top of the boat ramp and the launch area is protected by log booms similar to the Horseshoe Bend area.

### North End

#### Ok-A-Beh

Ok-A-Beh has ample parking and a large boat ramp for launching and beaching boats. It also has a swimming area with a lifeguard on duty for most of the summer. There is no camping at Ok-A-Beh; however, there is camping at the After Bay Campground which is a thirty minute drive away.

## Custer National Forest



## Lake Side Campsite D

### Big Bull Elk Creek



There is an abundance of camp worthy sites in this area. The sites farther back offer a bit more privacy and protection from the elements. These sites are in a bay on the East side of the lake in-between dayboards 10 and 11. There is plenty of firewood and a few rock fire rings. This is a large area without much human impact to date so it is important to follow the seven principles of Leave No Trace when camping here. Once again this area gets a fair amount of bear activity and there are no bear boxes so a bear canister is suggested. It is possible to find space for up to ten tents regardless of water level.

See Map Page 11

**UTM** 12t 0729780 5011874



## Lake Side Campsite C

### Dry Head Creek



There are a couple of small one or two tent sites at the head of Dry Head Canyon. On the way back into the canyon you will pass a floating vault toilet that should be in the third week of May until the end of September. The sites are approximately 1.5 miles from the main canyon. There is space for 5-6 tents with a good amount of shade and plenty of firewood. There are some underwater rocks near shore so a careful approach is necessary. The best sites are a short walk up the creek at the end of the canyon. This area supports both bighorn sheep and black bears. There are no bear boxes so a bear canister is suggested. There may be rattlesnakes in this area, watch where you put your hands and feet.

See Map Page 11

**UTM** 12t 0723436 5010595





## Lake Side Campsite A

### Head of Devil's Canyon



This is the only campsite between Horseshoe Bend and Barry's Landing at the head of Devil Canyon on Porcupine Creek. This site is approximately one mile from the main canyon. There are a couple of other smaller sites just a bit farther up Porcupine Creek. The large area pictured above can support up to ten tents up to lake level 3625. At 3635 the lower areas are too wet to be camp worthy, but the upper area will still support 3-4 tents. At higher lake levels there are still multiple spots; however, they are the smaller areas farther up Porcupine Creek and may require some clearing of driftwood and vegetation. There may be rattlesnakes in this area, watch where you put your hands and feet. These spots are mostly single tent spots, but between them can support 2-3 tents all season long. Devil Canyon is one of the best places in the park to see Bighorn Sheep and there are signs of bear activity as well. There is plenty of firewood and good landing areas at most lake levels. This is one of the most scenic campsites in the park and it sees little use by motorized watercraft.

See Map Page 10

**UTM** 12t 0718323 4988778

## Lake Side Campsite B

### Medicine Creek



This campsite is approximately 2.8 miles north of Barry's Landing and .7 miles west of the main canyon. This is a developed site with a dock and 5 separate campsites. Each site has a level area for 1-2 tents, a picnic table, a bear box, and a fire ring. Finding firewood at this site can require more work due to higher usage. When the dock is not in the water the landing area is less than ideal and may require carrying gear up to 100 yards. The dock should be in the water from the third week of May until the middle of September. There is a great swimming area here and a hiking trail that leads two miles South to the vault toilets at Barry's Landing. You can also hike to the top of Barry's Island from here for great views.

See Map Page 10

**UTM** 12t 0719977 4998895

