

Rio Grande Wild and Scenic River



For 1,250 miles, the Rio Grande forms the boundary between the United States and Mexico. In a remote stretch in West Texas, the river makes a curve to the northeast to form the “big bend.” Winding its way through deep canyons and vast desert expanses, it is here that the wild character of the river lives on.

Why Is it Special?

In 1968, Congress passed the National Wild and Scenic Rivers Act to protect free flowing rivers with “outstandingly remarkable scenic, recreational, geologic, fish and wildlife, historic, cultural, or other similar values.”

As part of the only river system in the Chihuahuan Desert, the Rio Grande serves as the lifeblood for numerous threatened species. Recognizing the dramatic scenery and spectacular geology, as well as the recreational opportunities, and vital habitat

it provides for plants and animals, Congress established the Rio Grande Wild and Scenic River as a unit of the National Park System on November 10, 1978.

Today, Congress has designated more than 225 rivers as National Wild and Scenic Rivers. Of the country’s 3.5 million miles of rivers, only 13,412 miles are designated. In fact, only 2% of the rivers in the United States are free flowing and pristine enough to qualify for wild and scenic designation.

Boundaries

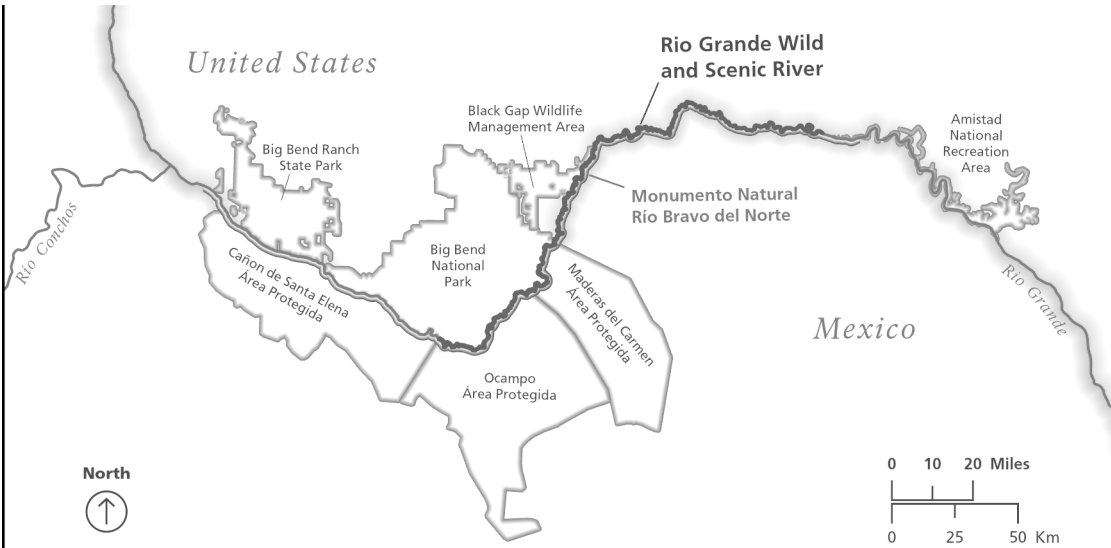


The Wild and Scenic designation applies to 200 miles of the United States portion of the Rio Grande from the Chihuahua-Coahuila (Mexico) state line upstream of Mariscal Canyon to the Terrell-Val Verde county (Texas) line. The national park sections of Rio Grande upstream of Mariscal Canyon, including Santa Elena Canyon are not part of the Wild and Scenic River.

In 2009 the government of Mexico established the Monumento Natural Rio Bravo del Norte, thereby protecting the Mexican half of the river for 300 miles.

Together, Big Bend National Park and the Rio Grande Wild and Scenic River protect 250 miles of river – one fifth of the section of the Rio Grande that is shared by the United States and Mexico.

Most of the U.S. land downstream from Big Bend National Park is privately owned. Rights of private landowners must be respected on both sides of the river.



Visiting the Wild and Scenic River

The Rio Grande Wild and Scenic River is easily accessible from several locations in Big Bend National Park. Stand on the riverbank at Rio Grande Village, at the Hot Springs Historic Area, or along the Boquillas Canyon Trail, and you will view a portion of the wild Rio Grande.

However, the best way to truly experience the Rio Grande is to float it. A 1–2 day float trip through remote Mariscal Canyon, or a 2–3 day trip through Boquillas Canyon offers opportunities to run rapids, or drift at the whim of the river. You can explore a small portion of the Wild and Scenic River in less than a day by floating through Hot Springs Canyon, or through one of the quiet stretches downstream of Mariscal Canyon.

The Lower Canyons between Heath Canyon and Dryden, downstream from

Big Bend National Park, make up the heart of the Rio Grande Wild and Scenic River. Wild and isolated, the canyons provide opportunities for solitude and an outstanding wilderness experience. There are no facilities and access is limited due to rough terrain and the constraints of private land. The arduous 83-mile trip takes 6–7 days. Because of the remoteness of the area, help may be many hours or days away. Extensive experience and preparation are essential when planning a float through the Lower Canyons.

All river trips require planning, equipment, some experience, and a permit. Consult a river guide book and check with a park ranger for current conditions before embarking on any river trip. Permits are required for all float trips and may be obtained at visitor centers in Big Bend National Park up to seven days in advance.

Challenges for the Future

The Rio Grande is a slender ribbon of life that supports a myriad of plants and wildlife. People find a haven here, too. Recreation and solitude allow for a chance to escape the cacophony of our modern world, and reconnect with nature. The mission of the National Park Service is to preserve the free-flowing and natural condition of the Rio Grande Wild and Scenic River and its immediate environment for the benefit and enjoyment of present and future generations.

Despite these protections, a variety of challenges exist. Upstream diversions and consumptive water use in both the U.S. and

Mexico have led to reduced river flows, buildup of excess sediment, diminished ecosystem function, and have fostered ideal conditions for the establishment of invasive exotic vegetation such as giant river cane and tamarisk that further restrict flows.

Managers from both countries are working together to learn from each other, improve environmental flows of the river, and reduce exotic vegetation. The establishment of three protected areas in Mexico, adjacent to Big Bend National Park, has given new life to the international cooperation in managing this critical shared resource.

For More Information

The Rio Grande Wild and Scenic River is administered by Big Bend National Park. For more information about the Rio Grande Wild and Scenic River, its management, and recreational opportunities, contact:

Superintendent
PO Box 129
Big Bend National Park, TX 79834-0129
(432) 477-2251
www.nps.gov/rigr

The following helpful publications are available at park visitor centers or from Big Bend Natural History Association
PO Box 196
Big Bend National Park, TX 79834
(432) 477-2236
www.bigbendbookstore.org

River Guide(s) to the Rio Grande:
-Colorado Canyon and Santa Elena Canyon
-Mariscal Canyon and Boquillas Canyon
-The Lower Canyons

The Lower Canyons of the Rio Grande
by Louis F. Aulbach and Joe Butler

