

# Gunnison Gorge

National Conservation Area & Wilderness

## About the Gunnison Gorge National Conservation Area

The 62,844-acre Gunnison Gorge National Conservation Area encompasses diverse landscapes ranging from desert shrub and sagebrush lowlands, to rugged piñon-juniper-covered slopes, to the spectacular double-canyon of the Gunnison Gorge Wilderness.

Congress designated the NCA in 1999 to recognize its outstanding geologic, scenic, wilderness and recreational resources. The Gunnison Gorge Wilderness is famous for its world-class trout fishing, challenging whitewater boating and spectacular geologic formations, which represent a geological history spanning 1.7 billion years.

The NCA offers non-motorized and motorized riding adventures on primitive roads and trails that wind their way through adobe badland formations, colorful sandstone canyons and challenging uplands. These trails offer spectacular views of the Uncompahgre Valley, West Elk Mountains, San Juan Mountains and Grand Mesa. Visitors are invited to explore the NCA's daunting depths and wild, natural landscapes by foot, horseback, kayak, raft, mountain bike or motorized vehicle on designated routes.



### Recreation

Saddle up your horse, lace up your hiking boots, gear up on your mountain bike or motorcycle and head to the NCA for miles of scenic adventures. Take in views of surrounding mountains, valleys, and the colorful cliffs and canyons of the Gunnison Gorge. Mountain bikes and all motorized vehicles must remain on routes, trails and areas designated for their use.

The NCA provides a number of river access sites for non-motorized boating and fishing. You may not launch or operate any motorized watercraft in the NCA.

Whitewater enthusiasts will find outstanding scenery and technical (Class III/IV) rapids within the Gunnison Gorge Wilderness, a 14-mile river section accessed via the Chukar Trail.

Looking for calmer waters for your canoe or raft? Boater access to the lower Gunnison River (Class I-II) is located at Gunnison Forks, Cottonwood Grove Campground and the Orchard Boat Launch.

Heavy rain can cause flash flooding, rock slides and debris flows in the canyon, which affect rapids and campsites. If you are near a side-drainage during or shortly after a big storm, move to high ground to avoid flash flood dangers.



Depending on snowpack, run-off forecast and available storage in Blue Mesa Reservoir, peak flows can exceed 8,000 cubic feet per second for a short duration each spring. High magnitude flows are powerful and can be dangerous. This occurs typically between May and early June. For spring trips, check with the BLM to find out if a release is scheduled and plan your trip to avoid it.

### Camping

#### Wilderness Camping\*

River corridor camping is allowed only in designated hiker or boater campsites identified on BLM maps and signs. Visitors must purchase camping permits, and register and reserve campsites at wilderness trailheads or the Chukar boat launch. Maximum stay length in the wilderness and upstream of the Gunnison Forks is two nights/three days. Hikers may stay two nights at hiker sites. Boaters must move on after one night; no layover days.

#### Non-Wilderness River Camping\*

Camping is allowed only at the Cottonwood Grove campground and designated river campsites identified on BLM maps and signs. Use of portable toilet system is required in all river sites without restrooms. Maximum stay length is six nights/seven days for sites downstream of Gunnison Forks.

#### Dispersed Vehicle Camping

Camping is allowed in the remainder of the NCA for up to six consecutive nights, unless otherwise posted. Check BLM maps, signs and website for camping information.

#### Day-Use Recreation Sites

Camping is not permitted in day-use areas, including the Gunnison Forks Recreation Area and Smith Fork Canyon. You may not enter or remain in day-use areas after sunset or before sunrise.

**\* All river sites available on first-come, first-served basis. No early sign-ins for campsites.**



### Map & Guide

## A journey through the ages...

The NCA features a number of cultural sites including prehistoric rock art panels and campsites, as well as historic rock structures, cabins and mines. The earliest evidence of people in the canyon comes from Native Americans who camped and hunted in the area thousands of years ago. In fact, prehistoric artifacts at the Eagle Rock Shelter Archaeological Site indicate the NCA has been inhabited for at least 13,000 years.

In historic times, few people settled permanently in the canyon. During the Great Depression in the 1930s, John Howell, the Duncan brothers from Olathe and others built cabins and eked out a living prospecting for gold and mining mica in the Ute Park and Duncan Trail area.

Historic records indicate settlers in covered wagons and on cattle drives crossed the area in the late 1800s at Ute Park. Between the 1950s and 1970s, uranium miners carved primitive routes into the canyon. Descendants of early settlers continue to graze sheep and cattle in the NCA. Today, tourists and residents alike travel the routes of those first visitors while exploring the multitude of recreation opportunities in the NCA.



### BE PREPARED...

The Gunnison Gorge NCA's rugged and remote landscapes will challenge your abilities and can be unforgiving if you aren't prepared for the trip. Frequent, heavy summer rains can make roads and trails impassible and create dangerous flash floods in arroyos.

#### Accessibility

NCA roads are natural surface, rocky and generally impassible when wet. High clearance and four-wheel drive vehicles are recommended. Recreation sites have rough dirt and gravel surfaces; trails are steep, rocky and difficult to traverse without assistance. Check the Recreation Sites table for areas with accessible toilet facilities. There is an accessible toilet at the Chukar boat launch site in the wilderness. Cottonwood Grove campground has an accessible toilet, campsite and fishing pier.

- Always be prepared by carrying a map, compass and GPS, extra water, food, first aid kit, rain gear and warm clothing.
- Tell someone where you're going and when you expect to return, or travel with a group.
- Be prepared for changing weather.
- Watch your step and where you put your hands. You are sharing the land with rattlesnakes and scorpions.
- Wear safety gear appropriate for your sport.
- Know your vehicle and gear and keep it in good condition.
- Dial 911 in the event of an emergency, but don't count on cell phone coverage in all places. Have a back-up plan.

### LEAVE NO TRACE

- Avoid trampling vegetation and do not create new tent sites or trails.
- Wash dishes and bathe 150 ft. from water sources. Use biodegradable soap sparingly and not in springs or side streams. Strain dishwater and pack out residue. Dispose of dishwater in main current of the river.
- Where portable toilet systems are not required by a BLM sign or map, use existing toilets or bury waste 8" deep using the cathole method at least 150 ft. from water sources. Boaters must carry and use an approved river toilet. Pack out toilet paper and sanitary items. Urinate in the river to reduce smells and fly problems near camps.
- Leave natural objects and cultural artifacts where you find them. It is illegal to remove artifacts.

### TAKE CARE OF YOUR LAND

Remember that BLM lands belong to and are used by millions of people each year. These lands need to be managed to prevent degradation from overuse and improper use.

Trees, bushes and plants in the NCA play very important roles in the health of the ecosystem. Alive or dead, plants provide food and habitat and should be left in place.

Anything left behind detracts from the beauty of the area, disrupts natural processes and presents health hazards to humans and wildlife.

## Canyon Ecology

The NCA's diversity of natural environments, ranging from salt-brush desert on its western flank, to piñon-juniper uplands near the canyon rim, to the riparian and aquatic environments of the river, provides a range of habitats for the animals that make the Gorge their home.

Common species include mule deer, elk, mountain lion, Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep, coyote, ringtail cat, small mammals, neo-tropical birds, raptors, chukar, river otter and many more. The Gunnison River is designated as a Gold Medal Trout Fishery by the Colorado Parks and Wildlife because of its excellent trout population, including rainbow, brown and cutthroat trout.

Sensitive species include Clay-loving wild-buckwheat, Montrose penstemon, Rocky Mountain thistle, Delta



## Regulations

### Wilderness

- Motorized and mechanized uses are prohibited in the wilderness.
- Visitors must sign in at trailheads or Chukar boater launch site.
- Maximum group size is 12 people.
- Maximum horse or pack stock group size is 12 animals.
- All boaters must carry and use a self-contained, washable, reusable toilet system, or EPA-approved carry-out bag system. A BLM toilet dump station is located at the Gunnison Forks.
- Maximum stay length is two nights/three days.



### Motorized and Mechanized Vehicles

Motorized and mechanized vehicles must stay on signed, designated roads and trails. Travel routes are designated by white arrows and/or trail names. All vehicles more than 50 inches in width must stay on designated NCA access roads. Off-route riding for mountain bikes, motorcycles and all-terrain or utility-terrain vehicles 50 inches or less in width are permitted only in designated "open play" areas at Peach Valley and Flat Top recreation areas. Off-highway vehicles (OHV) must have current Colorado Parks and Wildlife OHV Program Registration decals properly affixed to vehicle.

### Hunting, Target Shooting and Firearms

Hunting is permitted during designated game seasons with appropriate firearms and bows except within 150 ft. of developed recreation sites. Target shooting and other activities involving projectile shooting from weapons or recreational equipment (paintball guns, fireworks, etc.) are prohibited in the NCA.

### Fishing

A Colorado fishing license is required on all public lands and waters in the state. Nearly all of the Gunnison River within the NCA is designated Gold Medal Trout Water, which requires using artificial lures and flies only. Contact Colorado Parks and Wildlife for details on fishing licenses and regulations (970-252-6000; <http://wildlife.state.co.us>). Due to cold, swift-flowing water, wading and swimming in the Gunnison River are extremely dangerous.

### Pets

Pets and pack stock must be under visual, audible or physical controls at all times, and are not permitted to harass or disturb wildlife or other users. Keep pets leashed in developed recreation sites and carry a leash with you while hiking. Remove pet and stock solid waste at campsites and trailheads, and dispose of it properly.

### Campfires and Wood Collecting

Unless allowed by a BLM sign or map, you may not cut, collect or use live, dead or down wood for campfires. Stoves, grills and/or fire pans with charcoal are required. Coals and ashes must be packed out.

### GUNNISON GORGE NATIONAL CONSERVATION AREA

2465 South Townsend Avenue  
Montrose, CO 81401  
(970) 240-5300

<https://www.blm.gov/programs/national-conservation-lands/colorado/gunnison-gorge-nca>

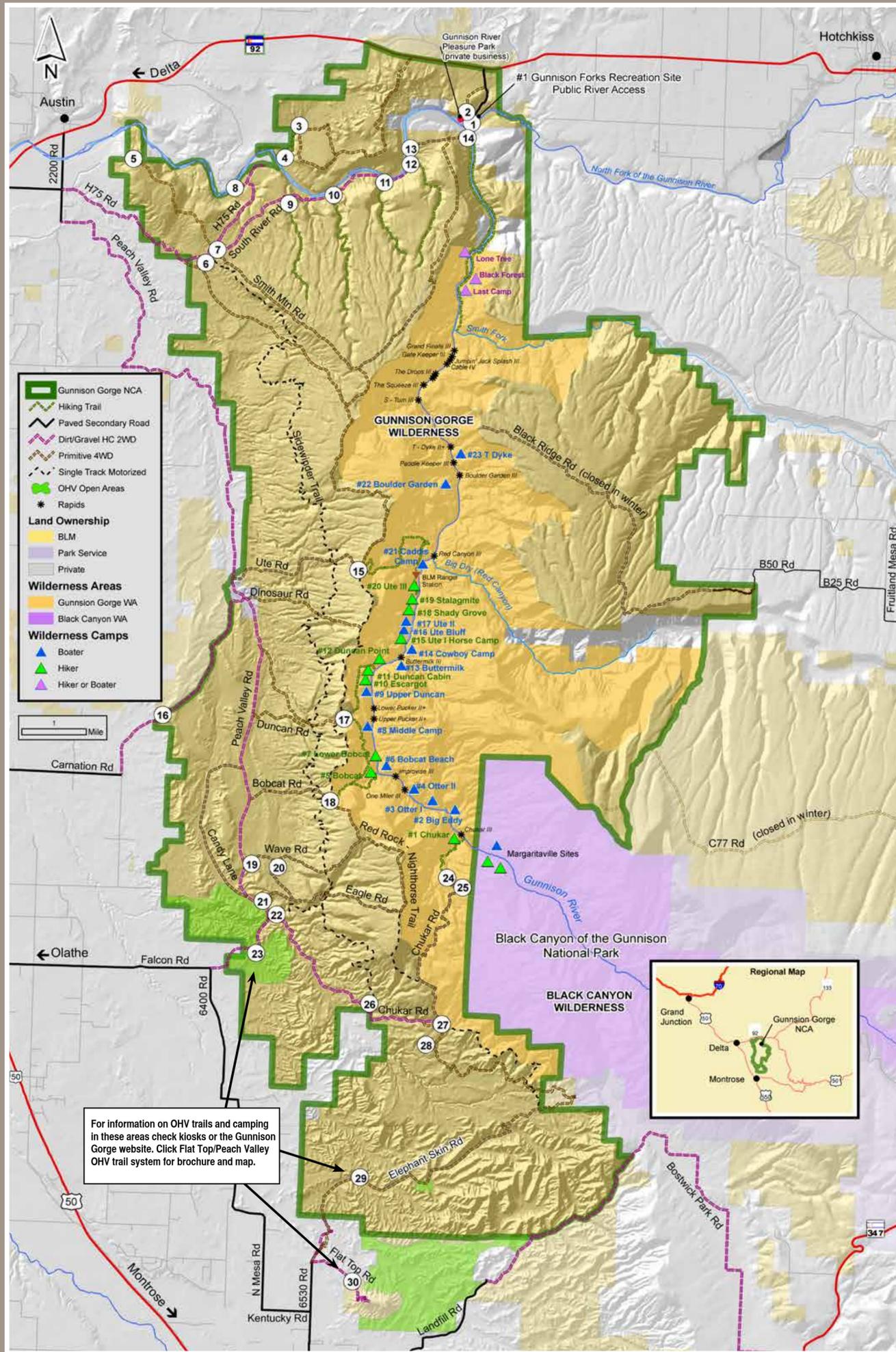
#### River Flow Information:

<http://waterdata.usgs.gov/co/nwis/rt>

The NCA benefits from the attention of a group of vibrant, engaged community stewards known as the **Colorado Canyons Association**. Learn more about this group, and find out how you can help at [www.coloradocanyonsassociation.org](http://www.coloradocanyonsassociation.org) or (970) 263-7902.



The NCA is part of the BLM's National Landscape Conservation System. The NLCS conserves, protects and restores some of America's most spectacular landscapes. BLM Colorado's NLCS areas encompass more than one million acres — about 1/8 of the BLM's land in the state.



## Boating – Launch Sites

Chukar Trail and Boat Launch are accessible via the Chukar Trailhead. The trail can be accessed via a primitive, rough road, often requiring four-wheel drive that ends at the wilderness boundary. From there it's a mile-long hike down Chukar Trail to the river. All gear, including boats, must be carried down the trail to the river. No carts or wheeled devices are allowed in the wilderness. A commercial horse packing service is available seasonally.

Gunnison Forks Day-Use Recreation Site offers public launching and take-out on BLM land. There is an adjacent private river access site available for a fee at the Gunnison River Pleasure Park.

Cottonwood Grove Campground is located on river-left 1.5 miles downstream from the Gunnison

Forks. It can be accessed from the river or by vehicle via the South River Road. The campground has six sites with picnic tables, a toilet and boat ramp. The campground features a universally accessible campsite with an adjacent accessible fishing pier.

Orchard Boat Launch is the last public boater take-out on the Gunnison River before Confluence Park in Delta. Boaters need to be aware of private lands and potential river hazards before floating the river downstream of the NCA.

Gorge rapids vary from Class I (moving water with no obstructions) to Class IV (long, difficult rapids with constricted passages). Rapid difficulty changes dramatically with varying river flow. If in doubt, SCOUT!

## Running the Gorge

RIVER MILES	RAPID	CLASS	DESCRIPTION	
1-6 Chukar to Red Canyon	Chukar Rapid	III	Single drop at the put-in. Most run center at higher water and right slot at lower flows.	
	Run One Miler	III	Run left of the large center hole or rock depending on flows.	
	Improve Rapid (mile 1.5)	III	Recognized by a small vertical cliff on right and a prominent rock slide on left. Scout left.	
	Upper and Lower Pucker	II+	Narrow slots at low flows. Large holes at high flows (>2000 cfs).	
	Buttermilk Rapid	III	Run at mile 4 straight down the tongue and watch out for the cliff on left.	
	Ute Park (mile 4)	III	The canyon opens up and the river gets shallower. Watch for rocks in low-flow periods. Ute Park provides the most campsites in the Gorge and good fishing access.	
	Red Canyon Rapid	III	The canyon narrows again at a rocky rapid requiring technical boating skills. Scout right.	
7-8 Boulder Garden to T-Dyke	Boulder Garden	III	This used to be a Class IV rapid. Flooding in August 2010 altered the hydraulics, making it less difficult. Recommend scouting (left), as it is unknown what effects high flows may have on the rapid.	
	Paddle Keeper	III	Best run on left with ferry back to the right. Scout left.	
	T-Dyke Rapid (mile 7.5)	III	A straight run through with nice waves. The last designated boater camp is located on the right above the rapid.	
	S-Turn Rapid	III	Pushes boats toward the cliff wall on left.	
	The Squeeze	III/IV	Immediately below S-Turn. A deceptive, rocky rapid that has wrapped rafts and pinned kayakers. Most common run is through the narrow slots river right.	
	The Three Drops	III	Contains many large holes and narrow slots. Scout all from right.	
	Cable Rapid (mile 9.5)	III/IV	Very technical with large holes and two narrow slots. Most run right slot avoiding cliff on left. Scout right.	
9 S-Turn to Grand Finale (Most difficult section)	Jumpin' Jack Splash	III	Run left of large boulder and finish right avoiding large hole on left. Watch out for the lateral wave!	
	Gate Keeper	II/III	Requires navigating a narrow slot either center at higher flows or left against the cliff at flows below 600 cfs.	
	Grand Finale	III	The last named rapid; stay right and avoid rocks on left.	
	10-14 Smith Fork to North Fork		III	Below the Smith Fork, the canyon widens again making for an easy float out. The Gunnison Forks take-out is at mile 13.5 at the North Fork confluence.

## Other Trails

TRAILS AND STAGING AREAS	ALLOWED USES	DESCRIPTION	MILES
Flat Top-Peach Valley OHV Recreation Area	Staging Area OHV Bicycle	Off-route cross-country riding permitted in two designated "open play" areas. Peach Valley staging area offers a beginner loop and training area.	100+ miles of trails covering 9,800 acres.
Red Rocks-Nighthorse Trail	Hiker Hiker or Boater Bicycle	Steep climbs and rocky terrain. Single track and jeep road sections extend along the western wilderness rim from the national park boundary north to Ute Trailhead.	13 miles, one-way.
Wave-Eagle 4X4/OHV Route	OHV Bicycle	Primitive four-wheel drive jeep road. Loop includes moderate hills with very rocky terrain. Access off Peach Valley Road. Easier if traveled counterclockwise from Wave Road.	6.5-mile loop.
Sidewinder Trail	Hiker Bicycle	Technical, multiple-use, single track trail runs north and south along NCA's west side. Numerous access points including Smith Mountain Recreation Area, Eagle Valley Trailhead, Wave-Eagle Loop, Bobcat, Duncan and Ute Roads.	Entire trail is 20 miles in length. Shorter or longer rides/hikes are available by combining with other roads or trails.
Eagle Valley Trail	Hiker Bicycle	Single track trail connects off Chukar Road and connects to Sidewinder, Wave and Sunset Rocks Trails.	1.25 mile, one-way.
Sunset Rocks Trail	Hiker Bicycle	Single track trail connects to other single track routes. Access off Chukar Road.	3 miles, one-way. Combine with Eagle Valley Trail and Chukar Road for 6 mile loop.
West River Trail (Day Use Area)	Hiker Bicycle	Provides great opportunities for walk-wade fishing. Access from South River Road. No camping or sleeping in vehicles at trailhead.	2.5 miles, one-way.
Cool Rock Canyon Trail	Hiker	Winds through colorful sandstone canyon with interesting rock formations and fun places to explore. Great family hike. Located off South River Road.	Up to 3 miles, one-way.
Suncliff Trail	Hiker	Fun hike up and back through scenic sandstone canyon. Good family hike.	Up to 2 miles, one-way.
Smith Mountain 4X4 Loop	OHV Bicycle	Panoramic views of Gunnison Gorge Wilderness and North Fork. Connects to Ute Trailhead and makes a loop with South River Road.	14-mile loop (Smith Mtn Rd/wilderness rim/South River Rd).
Smith Mountain Recreation Area	Staging/trailhead area for all uses	Provides access to Smith Mountain jeep roads, South River Road, Sidewinder and other trails. Trailer parking for equestrians and motorized users.	Located on H-75 Road at NCA north entrance.
Gunnison Rock Art Trail (Law-head Gulch)	Hiker	Trail to interpretive rock art site and Gunnison River. Access via jeep road off Highway 92. No camping at the rock art site.	.25 mile.
Crocodile Rock Trail	Hiker	Undefined trails in canyon bottom with interesting geology. Requires route finding and navigating over large rocks.	Up to 2 miles.
Birthday Canyon Trail	Hiker	Undefined trails in canyon bottom with interesting geology. Requires route finding and navigating over large rocks.	Up to 2 miles.

■ = EASY  
■ = MODERATE  
■ = DIFFICULT

## Recreation Sites

1 Gunnison Forks River Access & Picnic Area (day use only)	16 NCA Entrance - Carnation Road
2 Gunnison Forks Overlook	17 Duncan Trailhead (Wilderness Trail)
3 Eagle Rock Shelter Trailhead	18 Bobcat Trailhead (Wilderness Trail)
4 Eagle Rock Shelter Archaeological Site	19 Wave Road Parking
5 Smith Mountain Overlook	20 Wave/Eagle/Sidewinder Connector Parking
6 Smith Mountain Recreation Site/ North Sidewinder Trailhead	21 Eagle Road Parking
7 Smith Mountain Saddle Trailhead	22 Eagle Valley Trailhead
8 Orchard Boat Ramp	23 Peach Valley OHV Staging/Open Riding Area
9 Sun Cliff Canyon Trailhead	24 Chukar Trailhead (Wilderness Trail)
10 Cool Rock Canyon Trailhead	25 Chukar Geologic Trailhead (Wilderness Trail)
11 Crocodile Rock Trailhead	26 Sunset Rocks Trailhead
12 Birthday Canyon Trailhead	27 Red Rocks Connector Trail
13 Cottonwood Grove Campground	28 Slanty Bridge Trailhead
14 West River Trailhead	29 Elephant Skin OHV Staging/Designated Route Riding
15 Ute Trailhead (Wilderness Trail)	30 Flat Top OHV Staging/Open Riding Area

## Wilderness Trails

Wilderness trails are accessible via primitive jeep roads off the Peach Valley Road on the west side of the NCA. Trails range from one to 4.5 miles and provide exceptional views and wilderness experi-

ences for hikers. Most trails are horse-friendly; however, the Duncan and Bobcat Trails are not recommended for equestrians due to very steep and rocky sections.

## Wilderness Trails

TRAIL	MI	ELEVATION	DESCRIPTION
Chukar	1.1	560' drop (5960'-5400')	Heavy foot, horse and boater use. Limited hiker camps and river access.
Chukar Geologic Trail	.75	445' climb (6130'-6575')	Fun foot and horse trail with interesting geologic features and outstanding gorge and national park river views. No river access.
Bobcat	1	800' drop (6100'-5300')	Primitive trail. Steep descent in last .5 mile requires basic rock climbing techniques. Two hiker camps. Impassable for horses.
Bighorn	1.5	200' drop (6200'-6000')	Rocky sections and spectacular river views. Access from Bobcat or Duncan Trails. Horse-friendly. Combine with Redrocks-Nighthorse Trail (a non-wilderness, shared-use trail) to form a 3.7-mile loop.
Duncan	1.5	840' drop (6500'-5300')	Popular fishing access trail. Last .5 mi. very steep with loose scree. Three hiker camps. Impassable for horses.
Ute	4.5	1200' drop (6500'-5300')	Well-developed. Gradual slope with one steep switch-back section. Four hiker camps. Horse-friendly.
North Fork to Smith Fork	4.0	200' climb (5100'-5300')	Good fishing access. Four hiker/boater camps. Trail access from Gunnison Forks requires crossing the North Fork River. Contact Gunnison River Pleasure Park for river ferry information.



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