

# Wyoming's Big Horn Scenic Byways



A travel guide to the  
three Scenic Byways  
in Wyoming's Big Horn  
Mountains.

# Exploring the Big Horn Mountain Country Scenic Byways

**Three Scenic Byways traverse the Big Horn Mountains in north central Wyoming: the Big Horn, the Medicine Wheel Passage, and the Cloud Peak Skyway.**

The **Cloud Peak Skyway** can be reached from the east by exiting Interstates 25 or 90 at Buffalo, or from the west on U.S. 16 at Worland. The **Big Horn Scenic Byway** and **Medicine Wheel Passage** are reached from the east by exiting Interstate

90 at Sheridan/Ranchester. The Big Horn Byway follows U.S. 14 from the west at Greybull, while the Medicine Wheel Passage takes U.S. 14A from Lovell.

Driving time on each Byway depends on the interests of the visitor and time of the year. Stopping to enjoy the outstanding scenery, the many points of interest, or adventures such as camping and fishing, can extend travel time by several hours or even days.



The Indian Paintbrush is Wyoming's state flower. The Wyoming Scenic Byway program adopted the Indian Paintbrush as its logo. As you tour Wyoming's Scenic Byways, the Indian Paintbrush will identify your route.

The National Forest boundary marks the east entrance to the Cloud Peak Skyway Scenic Byway.

U.S. 14A, Medicine Wheel Passage Scenic Byway as it descends through Shell Canyon (cover).

Approachable from either the west or east, the three Byways rise from about 4,000 feet on the valley floor to a height of almost 10,000 feet above sea level, high atop the Big Horn Mountains.

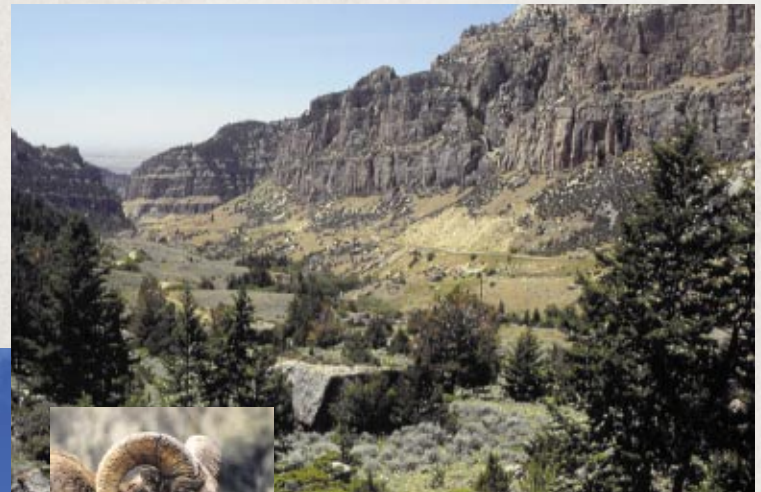
Travelers in Big Horn Mountain Country will note there are several different spellings for almost the same thing—Big Horn. The rule of thumb is: if the area is administered by the federal government it is one word and capitalized, as in Bighorn National Forest and Bighorn Canyon National Recreation Area. All other names are two words, both capitalized, as in Big Horn Mountains, Big Horn River, and the hamlet of Big Horn. Get this—all of these names came from a long-time resident and big game animal, the bighorn sheep. One word, no capitals.

## Special Attractions

A trip through Big Horn Mountain Country offers the Big Horn Mountains, Bighorn National Forest, Cloud Peak Wilderness, Meadowlark Lake, Ten Sleep Canyon, Shell Canyon, waterfalls, and historic Native American sites. While in the area, one can enjoy fishing, hiking,

camping, down-hill and Nordic skiing (in season), scenic views, spectacular fall colors, glorious spring flowers and exceptional wildlife viewing.

The alpine regions of Big Horn Mountain Country are inhabited during the summer by elk and a few bighorn sheep. Found in the forested areas are coyotes, snowshoe hares, red squirrels, marmots, chipmunks and blue grouse. Mountain lions inhabit the foothills and canyon areas while black bear occupy remote areas of the northern parts of the Big Horns. Goshawks and gray jays live in the timbered areas year-round. Other birds in the region include red-tailed hawks, golden eagles, American kestrels and great horned owls. On occasion the rare osprey can be observed.



**The imposing rock walls of Tensleep Canyon line Cloud Peak Skyway's west entrance. Bighorn sheep (inset) is the area's namesake.**

Vegetation on the eastern slope of the mountains is more lush than on the western side mainly because there's a better chance of afternoon thundershowers. These occur because the moist air that moves across the Great Plains from the central states brings humidity, which results in showers,



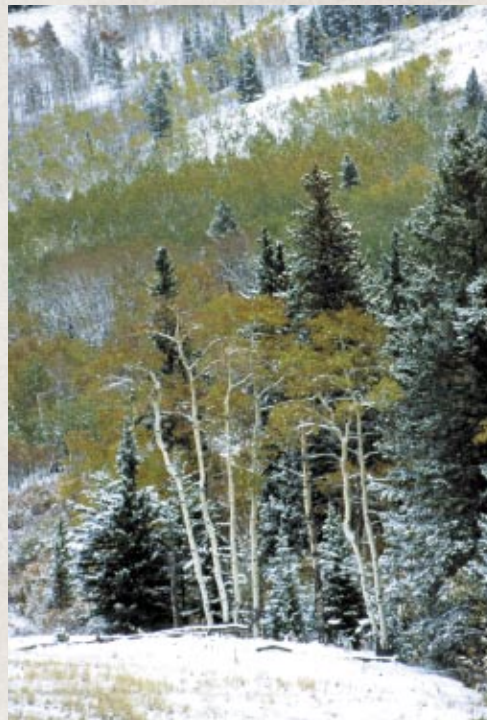
but the moist air is too shallow to cross the Big Horn Mountain Range. As a result, air is always drier on the western slope than on the eastern side.

Travelers approaching the Big Horn Mountains from either direction should watch for pronghorn antelope, deer, pheasants, sharp-tailed grouse and turkeys. Summer birds include lark buntings, mountain bluebirds, American goldfinches, redpolls, juncos, magpies and crows. Red foxes and coyotes may be observed early or late in the day. Birds of prey (raptors) may include golden eagles, red-tailed hawks and merlin. Elk and deer and even moose are often observed during the summer.

## Highlights in Big Horn Mountain Country

Travelers can count on two of these Scenic Byways to be open most of the time in summer and fall, but should expect delays and temporary road closures in winter and early spring due to snowfall. Medicine Wheel Passage closes for the winter. The many side roads into the National Forest—allowing visitors access to the numerous lakes, hiking trails, campgrounds and other points of interest—are only accessible in summer and fall. Of course, the Bighorn Mountains afford ample winter recreation opportunities, such as Nordic skiing and snowmobiling. Many areas of the Big Horns are closed to cars in times of heavy snow, but at that time are perfect for winter recreation enthusiasts.

Travelers will marvel at the scenery of the 1.1 million-acre Bighorn National Forest, established in 1897 by President Grover Cleveland. National Forest roads leaving U.S. 14 and U.S. 16 provide access to wilderness trailheads. The Cloud Peak Wilderness area alone contains almost 200,000 acres, in addition to most of the highest peaks in the mountain range, including 13,175-foot Cloud Peak.



Cloud Peak Skyway's fir and golden aspen under a light blanket of autumn snow.

Egret Communications

## Cloud Peak Skyway

The Cloud Peak Skyway Scenic Byway is the southernmost route across the Bighorn National Forest in the Big Horn Mountains. The designated 47-mile stretch of the Scenic Byway, or U.S. 16, shares its boundaries with the National Forest. The route can be reached via Ten Sleep from the west or Buffalo from the east. Allow one-hour minimum driving time.

The road is a paved two-lane highway, with occasional pullouts as it ascends toward 9,666-foot Powder River Pass. This route makes a more gradual ascent of the mountain range than routes to the north. Mountain weather can be extreme and snow can fall in any month at these elevations but rarely does it affect travel in the summer and early fall.

**Services**—Full traveler services are available in Worland and Buffalo with limited services in Ten Sleep. Four commercial lodges located along the Byway provide



Western meadowlark, Wyoming's State Bird.

# Cloud Peak Skyway



Meadowlark Lake and its surrounding meadow of wildflowers is a popular place to stop.



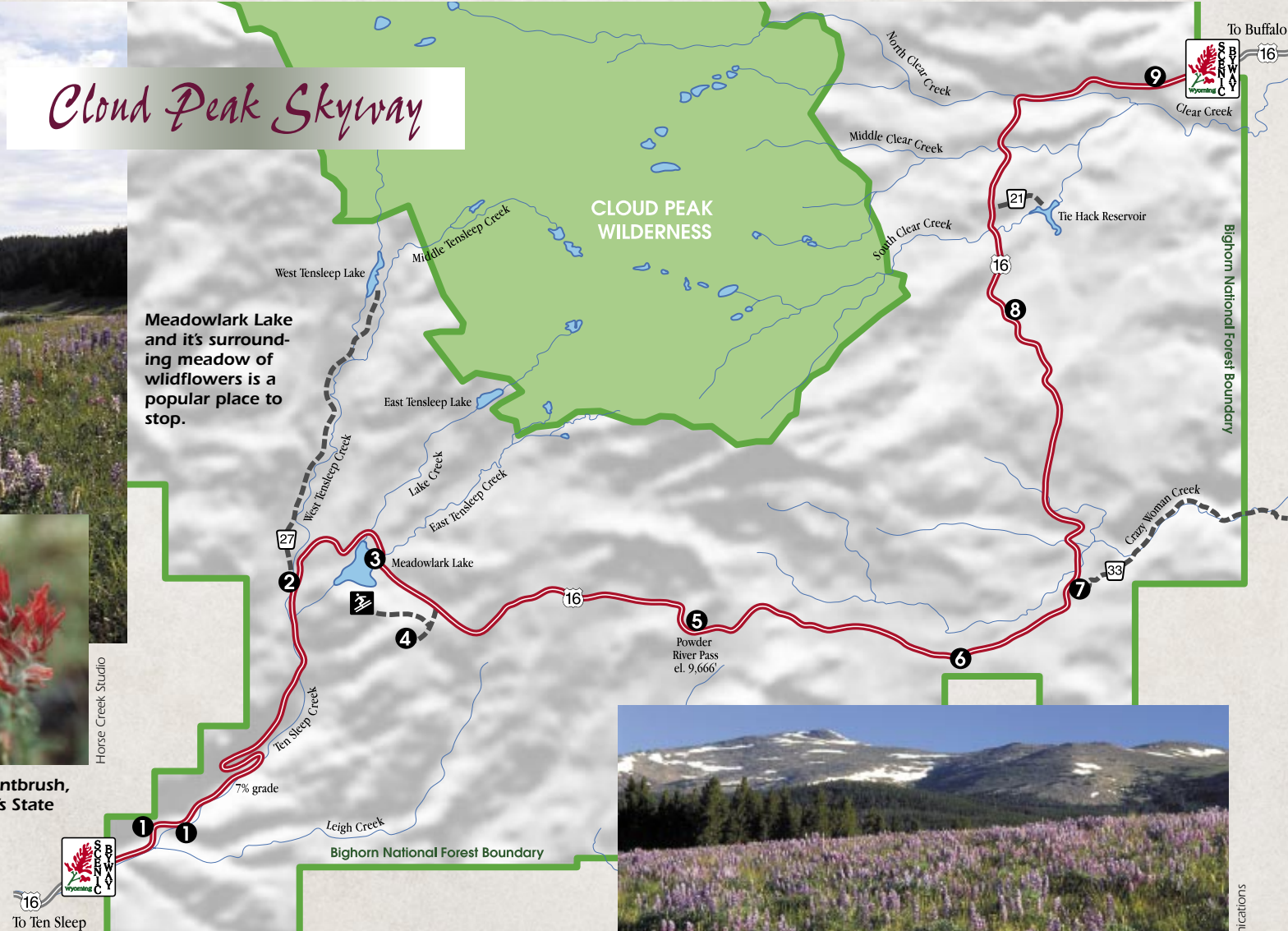
Indian Paintbrush, Wyoming's State Flower.

some services too. Many campgrounds line the route. Some offer facilities for boats and motor homes and are open in summer and early fall. Boat ramps and fishing area parking lots are available at Meadowlark Lake and Tie Hack Reservoir.

A short distance off the main highway, about four miles east of Ten Sleep, is the Wigwam Rearing Station. About four miles farther is the Ten Sleep Fish Hatchery. Both are operated by the Wyoming Game and Fish Department and have interpretive signs. These facilities supply young game fish to waterways throughout the state.

The Forest boundary is slightly more than seven miles east of Ten Sleep and is the start of the Scenic Byway. Ponderosa pines mingle with Douglas fir, cottonwoods and aspen in the mountain forest. The drive up the canyon is spectacular, and features limestone and dolomite cliffs.

**1. Two adjacent scenic pullouts.** These pullouts give the traveler a chance to appreciate the views and to read interpretive signs that describe local history. One tells of the large bighorn sheep herds that once dwelled in the area. The other explains the stone monument perched high atop the south wall of the canyon. It was erected in 1889 to commemorate English nobleman Gilbert Leigh, who fell to his death while hunting the nimble sheep.



Wyoming's high-country is as colorful in summer as it is white in winter.

**2. Forest Road 27.** This gravel road is navigable by most vehicles. It passes a lodge, several campgrounds, and leads to West Ten Sleep Lake. The trailhead here leads to many incredible mountain-hiking destinations, and is one of the most popular access points into the Cloud Peak Wilderness.

**3. Meadowlark Recreation Area.** Lying in a valley on the south side of the road, the area is a magnet for recreational vehicles, boaters and campers. There's a commercial lodge here, and access to the Big Horn Ski Area and groomed Nordic ski trails at Willow Park.

**4. High Park Lookout.** This inviting trip is down a short gravel road to see wonderful views and St. Christopher's of the Big Horns, a woodland chapel and a popular site for summer wedding ceremonies. The lookout, constructed in 1942 by the Civilian Conservation Corp (CCC), was built for rangers to watch for forest fires and to serve as a communication link.

**5. Powder River Pass.** At 9,666 feet elevation it is above timberline and the views of the surrounding peaks are exceptional. In addition to the elevation, wind patterns and localized soils influence where grass grows and where trees flourish. This phenomena can be seen by observing trees growing at the same elevation on Hesse Mountain several miles to the south. Lodgepole pine is the most common tree species in the Bighorn National Forest. Large quantities of snow accumulate on these mountain peaks and valleys in winter, which supply valuable spring and summer runoff to lakes, reservoirs, streams and rivers in the dryer valleys below.

**6. Pullout six miles from the Pass.** An interpretive sign identifies nearby rock as being three billion years old; other signs farther down the slope mark increasingly "younger" rock. The paradox of younger rock being lower in elevation is made possible through the geological act of tilting. Continuing eastward, travelers will find a number of campgrounds and pullouts on the way down the mountain. The willow bogs and wet meadows ahead are good spots for seeing moose. Moose are most often seen in the morning or evening during the summer, and at mid-day during the winter.

**7. Crazy Woman Canyon Road (Road 33).** Leading east off the Byway and into a steep canyon is an interesting side road. It is navigable by most cars and trucks but shouldn't be attempted by large vehicles or

vehicles with trailers in tow. The route winds through a scenic canyon, where many large boulders have tumbled down to the creek below. The road eventually connects with Wyoming 196, 12 miles south of Buffalo.

**8. Loaf Mountain Overlook.** On the south side of the Byway it provides an excellent view of high peaks in the Cloud Peak Wilderness with their rocky cliffs and snowfields. An interpretive sign tells about timber harvesting activity visible in the middle distance.

**9. Hospital Hill.** The east portal of the National Forest boundary marks the eastern end of the Cloud Peak Skyway Scenic Byway. The area was used for outings by early patients of the soldier's hospital at old Fort McKinney. A forest firefighters' memorial is located here. The town of Buffalo sits about 10 miles below the end of the Scenic Byway.

## Big Horn Scenic Byway

The Big Horn Scenic Byway is the middle route across the Bighorn National Forest in the Big Horn Mountains. The official 47-mile stretch of the Scenic Byway, or U.S. 14, shares its western boundary with the Forest. From the west, the route begins around four miles from the town of Shell. At Burgess Junction the Big Horn Scenic Byway meets the Medicine Wheel Scenic Byway (U.S. 14A). The eastern boundary of the Scenic Byway is 6.5 miles west of the town of Dayton.

The two-lane Byway can close for short periods of time due to heavy snows during winter or early spring, but summer and fall travel are normally not interrupted by inclement weather. Granite Pass at 9,033 feet marks the apex of this scenic route that switchbacks through a canyon on the western side and descends more gradually on the eastern slope of the mountains.

**Services**—Shell and Dayton have limited visitor services. Full tourism facilities and services are available in Greybull and Sheridan. Several Forest Service camp-



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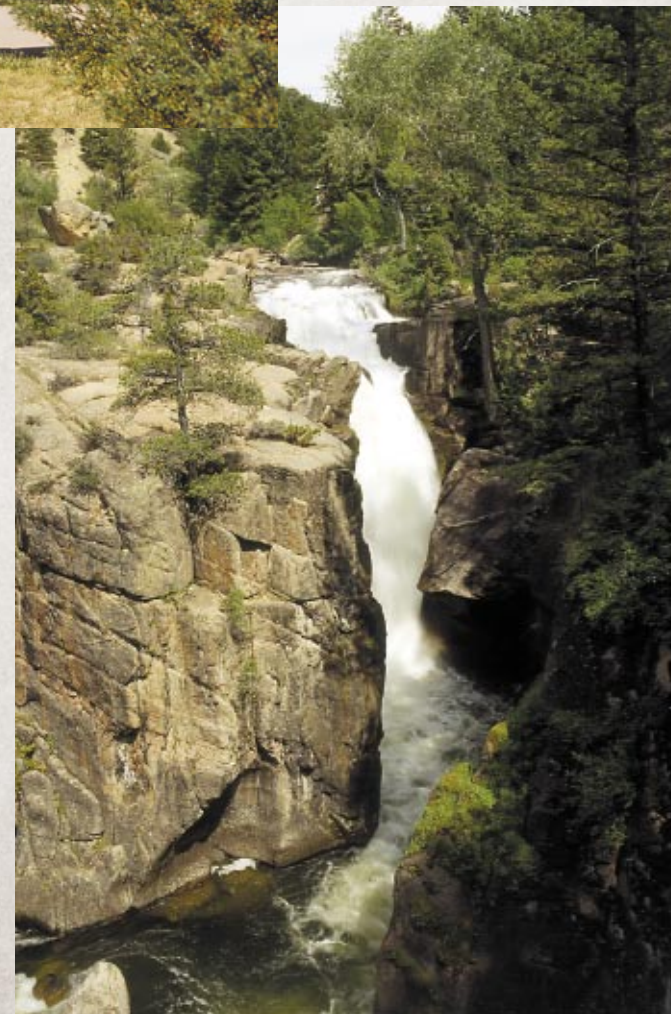
grounds along the passage can accommodate a variety of recreational vehicles and tent campers.

**1. Shell Creek Canyon.** Beginning near the western National Forest boundary several switchbacks start the ascent into the Big Horn Mountains. Massive tilting rocks reveal their tips, while their roots reach deep into the Big Horn Basin. Towering cliff walls may block the sun as the highway and Shell Creek squeeze through the narrow canyon. At times the creek is hidden from view far below the roadway. Stock trails visible along the opposite canyon walls indicate where livestock is sometimes driven up the steep canyon walls. Cottonwood trees and willows provide habitat for numerous resident songbirds. At higher elevations, juniper and sagebrush dominate the slopes where magpies, Rocky Mountain bluebirds and mourning doves are seen during the summer. The area provides an important winter range for deer and elk. Mountain lions also occupy the canyon but are seldom seen due to their secretive nature. Coyotes and bobcats are abundant, but a sharp, experienced eye is needed to spot them. Scenic overlooks provide the traveler with a chance to stop, take

The Shell Falls interpretive site (left) and beautiful Shell Falls on Shell Creek (below).

a break from driving and enjoy the view. Photographic opportunities abound.

**2. Shell Falls.** On the north side of the highway in Shell Creek Canyon there's an easy access parking area. The creek dives 120 feet down this Precambrian granite slippery slide



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into the gorge below. This stop offers nature trails, interpretive signs and restrooms. The site is open daily, 8 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. from mid-May through September, and is a popular stop for visitors to the area.

**3. Granite Creek Picnic Area.** Featured is an interpretive sign that describes a huge stretch of damaged trees on the opposite mountain. A freak tornado swept through here in 1959. Trees at this environment and elevation are slow to rejuvenate.

**4. Granite Pass.** At 9,033 feet above sea level, it sits among windswept vegetation and solid granite. Ski runs are noticeable from the highway at nearby Antelope Butte Ski Area. The route continues eastwardly from the Pass down to Dayton, on a steady, and not-as-steep descent to the lower elevation.

**5. Burgess Junction / Blowdown Interpretive Sign.** Burgess Junction marks the point where U.S. 14A splits off to the west and becomes the Medicine Wheel Passage Scenic Byway. Travelers will find a Visitors Center and camping and picnic sites nearby, as well as access to numerous secondary gravel roads.

**6. Cutler Hill.** A stopping area a few miles eastward stands at 8,347 feet. Several lakes, campgrounds, picnic areas and popular trout fishing waterways are near this point. Among the most popular fishing areas are Sibley Lake, Prune Creek and the Little Tongue River.

**7. Forest Service boundary.** 6.5 miles west of Dayton is the official eastern edge of the Scenic Byway. It's marked with a scenic overlook, one of several in the immediate area. The overlook reveals spectacular views and information about the Powder River Basin far beyond, and nearby Fallen City, a field of Madison formation limestone blocks that toppled onto the rocks below.

**8. Tongue River / Tongue River Canyon.** The river is accompanied by a foot trail that hikers can follow from the trailhead near Dayton all the way to Burgess Junction. Anglers will find the icy waters of the river a trout fishing adventure.

In the 1870s and 1880s, Dayton and other nearby towns were at the heart of numerous conflicts between Native Americans and the U.S. Army, which ultimately ended with the Indians losing their prized hunting grounds. Dayton offers a museum dedicated to these struggles, and is a jumping-off point for visitors who wish to explore more of Big Horn Mountain Country.

## Medicine Wheel Passage

The Medicine Wheel Passage Scenic Byway is the northern-most route across the Bighorn National Forest in the Big Horn Mountains. The 27 miles of this Scenic Byway run nearly the length of U.S. 14A, ending at the western edge of the Bighorn National Forest. Just to the west of the boundary are the Bighorn Canyon National Recreation Area and the nearby town of Lovell. On the east end is Burgess Junction, where the Scenic Byway merges with U.S. 14 and becomes the Big Horn Scenic Byway. The town of Dayton provides access to the route from the east.

This two-lane paved highway follows one of the highest routes in the state. The steep, winding road sports numerous truck turnoffs and a maximum 10-percent grade. Heavy snow keeps the road closed in winter and early spring, so summer and fall are the only practical seasons to make this trip.

A high point (literally) along the route is the 9,430-foot view looking southwesterly into the Big Horn Basin thousands of feet below. Mountain peaks tower above 13,000 feet in this high-altitude neighborhood. The rapid change in elevation along the Byway provides a variety of habitat types. During the summer, deer and an occasional elk can be viewed feeding at the edge of timber stands. Blue grouse, with their young, are found near the many springs in the forested area. Mourning doves are also common near water.



Overhead diagram of the rock structure known as the Medicine Wheel. The spokes have been found to correspond to the lunar calendar



Steamboat Point, a major landmark of U.S. 14's eastern end above the town of Dayton.

## Medicine Wheel Passage

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The ever present color of high-country wildflowers.



## Big Horn Scenic Byway

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Morning mist on Sibley Lake.

tion of the Yellowtail Dam about 47 miles north in Montana. The area has sparse vegetation, which makes it a geology buff's paradise. Spectacular cliffs and rock formations contain fossils of long gone sea creatures and dinosaurs. The Bighorn Canyon National Recreation Area Visitor Center is located on the eastern edge of Lovell. Here travelers can get information about the area and the nearby Pryor Mountain Wild Horse Range.

(Medicine Wheel Passage map bullets are blue)

**1. The National Forest boundary.** Marking the western edge of this Scenic Byway, it features a highway pullout and interpretative sign. This is a great place to view the Big Horn Basin, a product of ancient mountain building and erosion. When the Big Horns, the Owl Creeks and the Beartooth Mountains were formed, the Big Horn Basin and other mountain valleys

**Services**—All traveler services are available in nearby Lovell. Several Forest Service campgrounds accommodate a variety of recreational vehicles and tent campers along the route.

## Special Attractions

Big Horn Lake is visible from U.S. 14A, a few miles west of the official start of the Scenic Byway. The lake is part of the 120,000-acre Bighorn Canyon National Recreation Area. The lake was created by the construc-

sunk. Changing conditions over geologic time created the rich oil, gas, and bentonite fields found here today.

**2. Medicine Wheel National Historic Landmark.** Located on the slopes of Medicine Mountain, it can be reached by taking a short gravel road off the north side of the highway to a parking area. The most conspicuous feature of the landmark is a circular alignment of limestone boulders that measures around 80-feet in diameter and contains 28 rock "spokes" that radiate

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from a prominent central cairn. Visitors may walk to see the Medicine Wheel up close, but be advised it is a three-mile round-trip hike at an elevation of nearly 10,000 feet above sea level.

The Medicine Wheel is a sacred, historic site and an archeological wonder. Researchers believe the Medicine Wheel was constructed in stages by prehistoric Native Americans in the past 1,000 years. There are many legends and traditions that may explain the Wheel's origin. Some believe it was built as a monument to an ancient chief. A more widely held theory is that it is a form of calendar, since the 28 spokes correspond with the lunar calendar. It has been found to align with the rising sun at the summer solstice.

Traditional beliefs of the Arapaho, Bannock, Blackfeet, Cheyenne, Crow, Kootenai-Salish, Plains Cree, Shoshone and Sioux revere the Medicine Wheel as a uniquely important and powerful spiritual site that figures prominently in oral and ceremonial tribal traditions. Interpretive tours are available daily from mid-June through October, weather permitting.

**3. Bald Mountain City.** At the site of a ghost town, a highway pull-out features interpretive signs that describe the area's rich gold mining history. Local granite was found to contain gold-bearing quartz, word of which quickly attracted prospectors to the area. In the 1890s, claims were established, mines were built, and towns were founded. The harsh climate and low yield of gold were enough to shut the operation down after a few years, leaving behind only placenames as a reminder.

**4. Forest Roads 14 and 15 / Bucking Mule Falls.** Just a few miles apart, are two gravel routes leading off the northern part of the Scenic Byway. Take Forest Road 14 and a forest map to find the trail-

The Big Horn basin as viewed from the western summit of the Medicine Wheel Passage (below left), a late afternoon Wyoming sun bathes the high-country along U.S. 14A.



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head to Bucking Mule Falls. The 500-foot vertical drop waterfall can be reached by hiking a mile and a half from the Bucking Mule Trailhead.

Forest Road 15 offers an alternate unpaved route to Burgess Junction. Both these roads connect with numerous other forest roads, leading to campgrounds, trailheads and more scenic locales.

**5. North Tongue River.** The river provides much of the scenic quality of this eastern stretch of the Scenic Byway, as it forms grassy meadows with ample opportunities for trout angling and moose viewing. The river has carved its way through granite to create the

canyons where the highway carries visitors past spectacular high-country scenery.

**6. Burgess Junction.** This stop marks where the Medicine Wheel Passage meets the Bighorn Scenic Byway. Travelers will find camping and picnic sites nearby, as well as access to a number of gravel mountain roads. The **Burgess Junction Visitor Center** is about two miles east of the Junction on U.S. 14. This is a good spot to survey the scenery of high meadows and conifers, and to obtain maps and other information about the area. The Visitor Center is staffed daily 8 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. from mid-May through September. A large exhibit area provides state-of-the-art displays about the history and natural resources of the area. It also offers a large selection of educational materials for purchase.

## Byway Travel Tips

- ▶ The minimum driving time along each of these three scenic byways is approximately an hour. Allow additional time to enjoy the many scenic features the Byways have to offer.
- ▶ The Cloud Peak Skyway and the Big Horn Scenic Byway are open year-round while the Medicine Wheel Passage is closed during the winter.
- ▶ These routes traverse one of Wyoming's famous mountain ranges. Road grades on the Cloud Peak Skyway and the Big Horn Scenic Byway do not exceed 7% while the steepest grade on the Medicine Wheel Passage is about 10%.
- ▶ All three routes are modern, two-lane paved roads and have a number of turnouts, picnic areas and scenic views.
- ▶ Vehicles tuned for sea level may not perform as well at higher mountain elevations. Be prepared to pull over and allow faster traffic to pass if necessary.
- ▶ While driving in the mountains, use lower gears going uphill to avoid overheating the engine and lower gears going downhill to avoid excessive wear on vehicle brakes.



WGS&F Dept.

Seldom seen, but always present in the Big Horn Mountains is the reclusive mountain lion.



# Byway Information

Bighorn National Forest maps may be obtained at the Forest Service offices in Buffalo, Lovell and Sheridan; at the Burgess Junction Visitor Center and at the Bighorn Canyon National Recreation Area Visitor Center in Lovell.

**For further information, stop at one of the Visitor Centers or call the Forest Service in Buffalo (307) 684-1100, in Lovell (307) 548-6541 or in Sheridan (307) 672-0751.**

Additional Wyoming travel and wildlife information may be obtained from:

**Tourism Division—Wyoming Business Council**  
**I-25 at College Drive**  
**Cheyenne, WY 82002**  
**(307) 777-7777 or 1-800-225-5996**

## **Sheridan Information Center**

(Open daily during summer)

**I-90 at 5<sup>th</sup> Street Exit**  
**Sheridan, WY 82801**

## **Sheridan Wildlife Educational Center**

**and Outdoor Classroom** (Open weekdays)

**Wyoming Game and Fish Department**  
**I-90 at 5<sup>th</sup> Street Exit**  
**Sheridan, WY 82801**

## **Buffalo Visitor Center** (Open daily during summer)

**Buffalo Chamber of Commerce**  
**55 N. Main Street**  
**Buffalo, WY 82834**

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