

# Rangers Trail

(January 2024)

This nearly 9 mile trail (round trip) climbs 2,200 feet elevation from Powerline Rd (~ 6,050 ft) up through thick forest on the north face of Big Pryor Mountain to the Big Pryor Plateau (~8,250 ft). The south end of the trail is at an ATV/4WD road ¼ mile from Bainbridge Cabin.

A shorter alternative to the full 9-mile round trip hike is to hike to a secluded and scenic meadow with great views at 7,900 feet elevation. The round trip to the meadow is approximately 5 miles with about 1,800 feet elevation gain from the Powerline Rd trailhead. Most hikers will want to stay awhile exploring the meadow and views. The 15 acre meadow is bounded by thick forest on the north and west. The east boundary is above rugged limestone cliffs with great views over a deep canyon and beyond. The meadow itself has abundant wildflowers of numerous species in season.

## A Primitive Trail:

Hikers should be aware that at this time the Rangers Trail is a primitive trail. Currently the trail is mostly unsigned and frequently obscure. There is no consistently cleared trailbed. Hikers will need to pay close attention to avoid losing the trail. A variety of clues can help hikers follow the trail. Some places old, partially overgrown blazes (and not so old blazes) can be seen on trees marking the route. Other places logs sawed to clear the trail are visible. There are a few rock cairns. Some places it is possible to see a cleared channel through the trees, while off-trail the trees are closer together with a jumble of obstacles. On many switchback sections the trailbed is leveled as it contours a sidehill. This is evidence of considerable trail work done long ago, but may be obscured by vegetation on the trailbed. *(If the trail gets more use in the future, and/or if the FS does considerable work on it, this “primitive” status may change.)*

## The Trail Name:

The Forest Service calls this new/old trail “**Big Pryor Mountain Trail.**” But that is a confusing name choice. Although the **Rangers Trail** does go to Big Pryor Plateau, the closest it gets to the *top* of Big Pryor Mountain is 4 miles, and the trail’s high point is more than 500 feet elevation below the top. The **Crater Ice Cave / Big Pryor Trail** *does* go to the *top* of Big Pryor Mountain. The **Rangers Trail** is a historic trail constructed and used by Forest Rangers to get to the Big Pryor Plateau from the Sage Creek Ranger Station Cabin. We prefer the name “**Rangers Trail**” to recognize its historic use, and the work done long ago to build the switchbacks – and to avoid confusion with the Crater Ice Cave / Big Pryor Mountain Trail.

Interestingly, the **Rangers Trail** was “lost” for years. During development of the 2008 Custer National Forest Pryor Mountain Travel Plan, the Forest could not find the trail on the ground. So it is not mentioned anywhere in the 2008 Travel Plan or Environmental Assessment. (Nor was it in the previous 1987 Pryor Mountain Travel Plan.) Thus the Rangers Trail is not an officially designated Forest Trail. We believe it would be a good addition to the Forest Trail System, but it should first go through standard NEPA analysis, and importantly it should be limited to its traditional and historic uses of human and horse foot-travel.

## Wilderness:

The Ranger Trail crosses north-south through a mostly heavily forested part of what could, and should, be designated as the **Big Pryor Wilderness Area.** This 12,600 acre area includes both thick Douglas fir forest, mostly on north facing slopes, and sub-alpine plateau grassland (above 8,000 ft elevation) that we call the “*Prairie in the Sky.*” Wildflowers are spectacular in season - late June to early August. (The Crater Ice Cave / Big Pryor Mountain Trail also provides access to this high plateau.)

## Getting There – North (lower) Trailhead: *(See information on the south Trailhead below.)*

From highway 310 south of Bridger MT, follow Pryor Mountain Road to the Forest Service boundary. (See “Driving Directions to Pryor Mountain Hiking Trailheads” at PryorMountains.org.) From the boundary continue 0.25 mile SE into the Forest to Powerline Road (#2500). Powerline Rd is an easy-to-miss two-track that heads straight up the hill to the south. (The Powerline Rd junction is 0.35 mile before (NW of) the turn to Sage Creek Campground.)

Suitable vehicles can drive one mile up Powerline Rd to where it makes a sharp “U” turn down to the right. Park at the top. There may be a wood sign: “*Big Pryor Mountain Trail #30.*” (It was lying on the ground in July 2023.) It is not legal to drive farther up the hill.

Hikers without a vehicle suitable to drive up this steep two-track can park at the bottom of Powerline Rd and begin hiking up Powerline Rd. Starting the hike from Pryor Mountain Rd (5,460 ft) adds another 2 miles (round trip) and nearly 600 ft more elevation gain.

## The Hike:



*Trailhead sign at the high point of Powerline Rd*

**0.0 miles: Trailhead** at the high point “U” turn of Powerline Rd. (1.0 mile up from Pryor Mountain Rd)

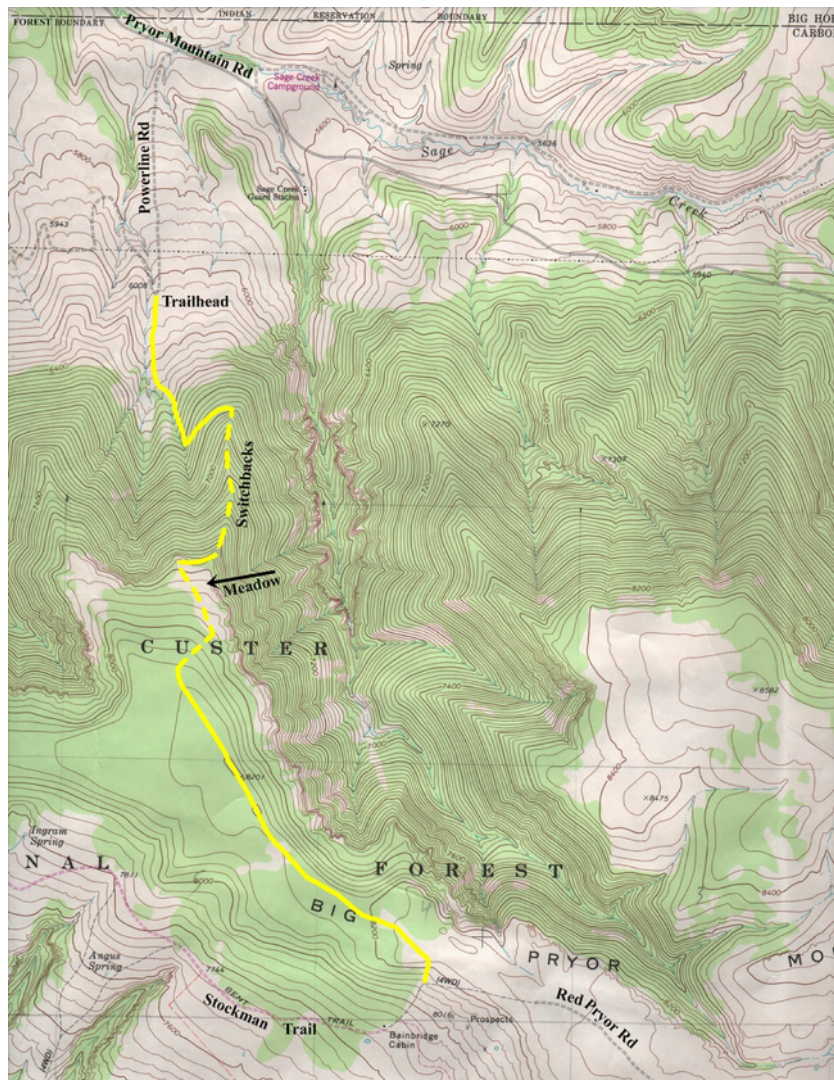
From the trailhead walk uphill (south) on a fading two-track if it is visible. Otherwise follow within one or two hundred feet east of a shallow drainage to the west. It is about half-a-mile in open grassland (elevation gain ~300 ft) to the treeline. At the edge of the trees look for a post with a partly missing “Trail” sign. (See July 2023 photo.)



*Trail sign at treeline (July 2023)*

### **0.5 miles: Trail sign at treeline.**

Notice the cleared opening into the trees heading on south and up. This is the route. The ground may be obscured by thick brushy vegetation. This linear opening in the trees continues to follow a shallow drainage to the west. Follow it for about 300 yds south into the trees.



*Rangers Trail Topo Map*

### **0.6 miles: Sharp left (east) turn.**

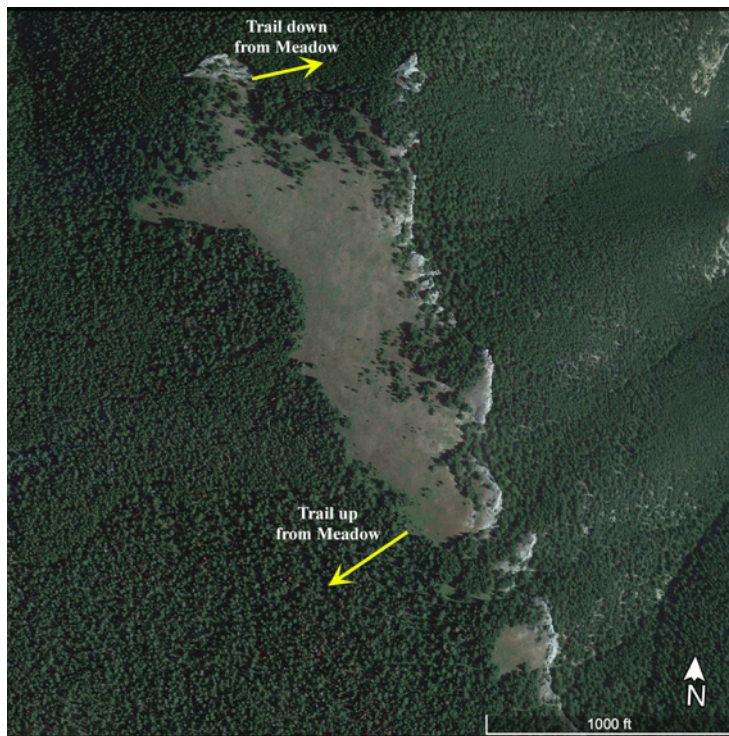
The trail makes an approximately 90 degree left turn to the northeast. Instead of simply going uphill, the trail now contours around the hillside climbing gently. Most of the time the narrow trailbed is flat compared to the sidehill above and below. But the trailbed may be covered with vegetation. The trail continues contouring for 300 to 400 yards before beginning to switchback generally heading south up a ridge. After a couple miles of switchbacks up through thick forest, the trail breaks out into the bottom of the meadow described earlier.



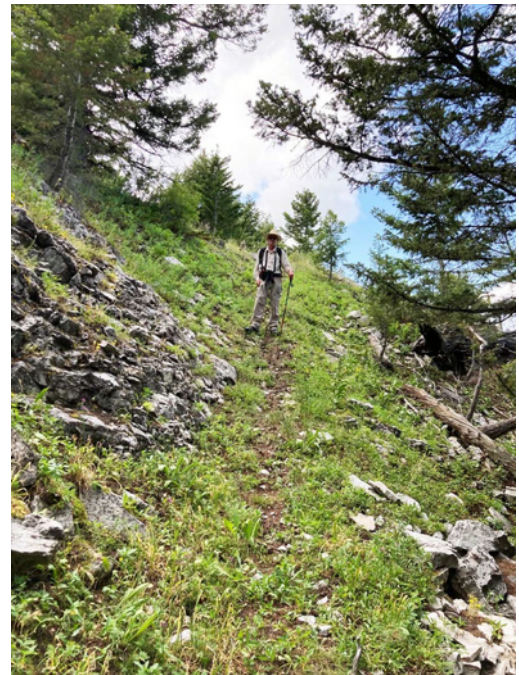
*Margaret & Bob hiking down the switchbacks*

**Approximately 2.5 miles: The Meadow.**

Be sure to notice very carefully where the trail entered the meadow, or it might be a challenge to find the trail back down. (GPS Coordinates for trail from the meadow down to Powerline Rd: 45.1875°N, 108.5666°W)



*Google Earth view of the Meadow*



*Looking up the final stretch of trail to the meadow.  
(M. Webster photo)*

**Continuing south on the Rangers Trail:**

There is no trail through the meadow. Enjoy wandering south and up. The top end of the meadow is about 1/3 mile south from the bottom, and 200 ft higher elevation. Look for the trail entering the trees on the right (west) just before the upper (south) end of the meadow. There are a bunch of sawed logs just inside the woods. (See photo) (It is at about GPS coordinates 45.1832°N, 108.5644°W)



*Beginning of trail beyond the meadow. Note sawed logs*

South of the meadow the trail is in the woods most of the rest of the way. First the trail heads generally southwest climbing about 200 feet elevation to the relatively flat Big Pryor Plateau at approximately 8,200 ft elevation. The trail continues generally southeast for a couple miles through the forest. A good clue to help follow the trail is to note that this entire section follows close to the edge of the plateau where there is a steep drop into a deep canyon. (See topo map.) This edge is often visible from the trail though open forest. The last part of the trail shows increasing remnants of a long abandoned two-track.

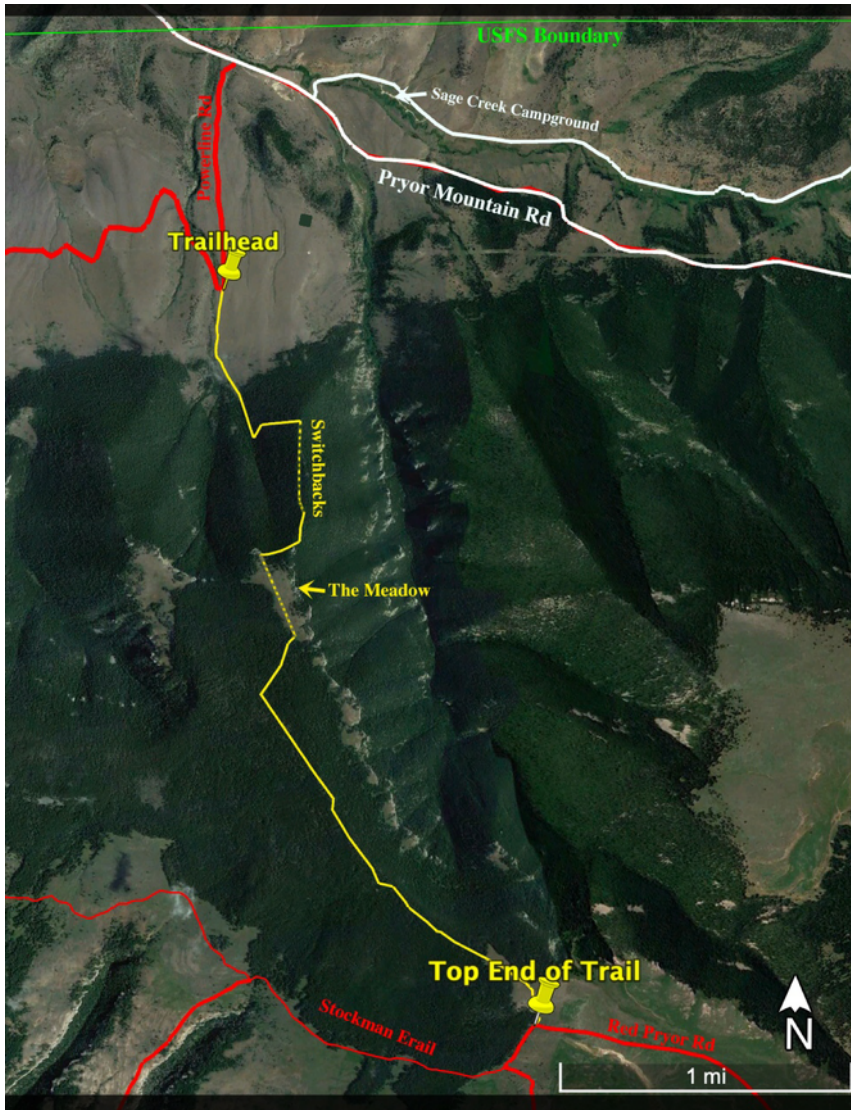
Finally the trail breaks out of the forest into open grassland. Note the barricade and post as you exit the forest (See photo). There is little trail visible in the grassland. Continue southeast through the grassland. Then turn south along the treeline and follow a rehabilitating two-track steeply down to a log barricade and Red Pryor Rd. Bainbridge Cabin is about 0.2 miles down this road.



*Looking back to the barricade where trail breaks out of forest.*



*View down abandoned two-track to barricade*



*Google Earth view of Rangers Trail*



*Barricade at upper (south) trailhead and Red Pryor Rd.*

**The South (upper) Trailhead:**

There is another trailhead at the south (upper) end of the Rangers trail. **Few hikers will begin or end there because it is a long, slow and challenging 4WD drive to get to it.** Possible routes are via Stockman Trail (#2850) from either Helt Rd south of the Pryors, or from Railbed Rd west of the Pryors. Follow either Stockman Trail to its junction with Red Pryor Rd near Bainbridge Cabin. From the junction drive 0.2 miles north up the hill on Red Pryor Rd (some places called #2091, others #1022) to a log barricade. From there the road makes a sharp right turn to the east and contours to the top of the Big Pryor Plateau. The barricade is the south trailhead for the Rangers Trail. (There is no trail sign.) It is also possible to drive Red Pryor Rd from Helt Rd in the south Pryors up to this trailhead.