

The Bent Loop Trail

12/2022

The five-mile Bent Loop hike provides scenic views and dramatic rock cliffs. Most of the route follows two motor legal ATV routes,¹ but the connection between the two routes to make the loop hike is neither legal nor passable by motor vehicle.

It might be preferable, if possible, to avoid the hike on weekends and holidays. There may be little or no motorized traffic on weekdays.²

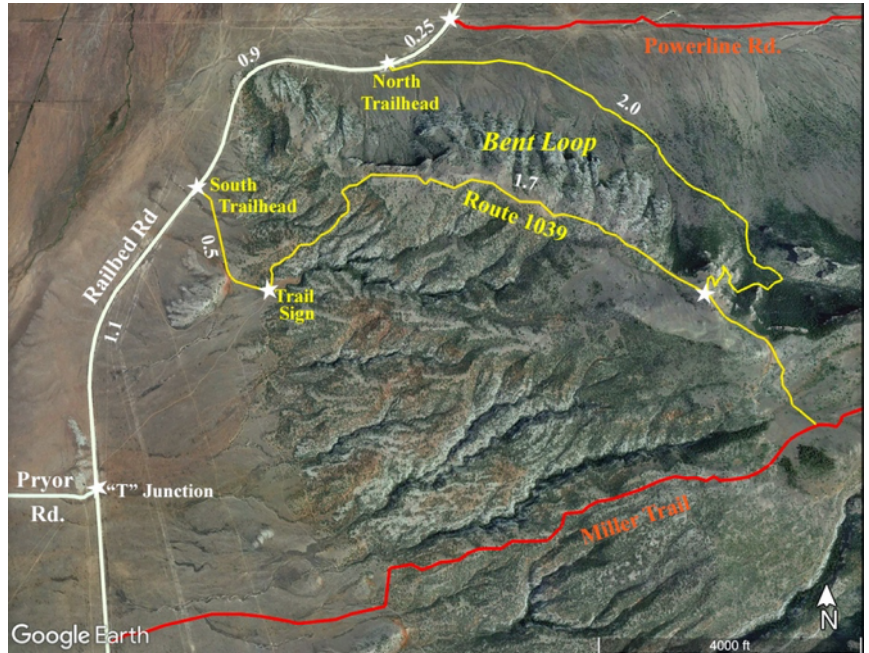
Getting There:

See detailed **Driving Directions to Pryors Hiking Trailheads** on the **Hiking Overview** page at www.PryorMountains.org.

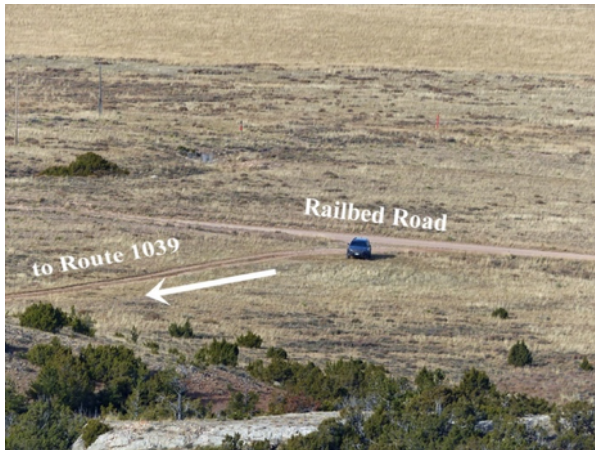
Follow the route from Bridger MT toward the Water Canyon and Timber Canyon trailheads as far as the "T" junction where Pryor Rd. meets Railbed Rd. But at the "T" turn left (north) instead of right.

The south and north trailheads are on Railbed Rd 1.1 and 2.0 miles north from the T Junction. (Powerline Rd is ¼ mile northeast beyond the north trailhead.)

There were no signs at either trailhead (in 2022). Both are two-track trails heading east from Railbed Rd. It is an easy 0.9 mile walk on Railbed Rd between the trailheads to make the 5-mile loop.



South Trailhead for counter clockwise hike.



North Trailhead for clockwise hike.



The Hike:

This guide describes the hike in the clockwise (CW) direction. See CCW Notes below for hiking counter clockwise.

0.0 miles: The North Trailhead on Railbed Rd. From the north trailhead the two-track is easy to follow east across prairie gradually climbing about 250 feet in the first mile. The grade steadily increases as the trail climbs about 800 feet in the second mile. The final 1/3 mile of rough switchbacks up through rugged cliffs to the ridgetop is not feasible with motor vehicles.

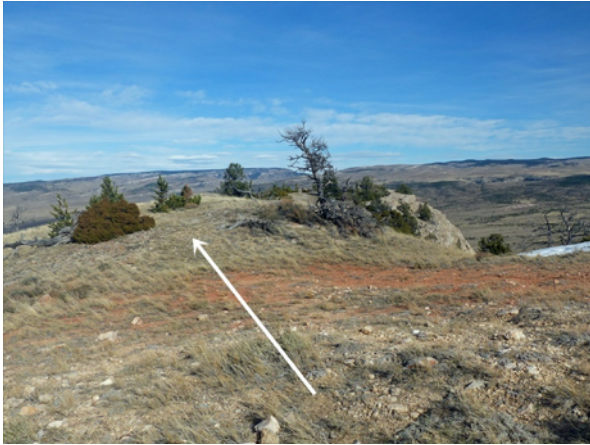
Photo: Oblique Google Earth View of Switchback route up cliffs to Route 1039



2.0 miles: The Ridge and Route 1039. The trail intersects the obvious ATV Route 1039. There is no sign. Follow the route to the west (right) down toward Bowler Flat.

CCW Note: There is no sign, or visible trail, to indicate where to leave Route 1039 to find the switchbacks down through the cliffs. Route 1039 has been climbing steeply and levels off close to the invisible junction. The photos should help find the route. Look for cliffs that match the photo. The route soon becomes clear away from the road.

CCW Hike route north from route 1039. No visible trail. View NE from Route 1039. Hike route is left of photo.



CCW hike route down appears beyond above photo.

Route 1039: CW hikers go down west. CCW hikers came up.



3.7 miles: A Trail Sign. A BLM sign identifies the route you have been following as “Bent Springs Route 1039.” A two-track continues past the sign heading southwest. Don’t go that way. Instead turn sharply to the west (right) and follow that track about ½ mile to Railbed Rd.

White arrow behind sign points ½ mile to south trailhead on Railbed Rd.

Note for CCW Loop Hikers: There was no sign at the south trailhead on Railbed Rd because the first 0.2 miles is private property. At 0.5 miles from Railbed Rd the trail sign indicates the route up the ridge.

4.2 miles: The South Trailhead on Railbed Rd. It is an 0.9 mile walk north then east on Railbed Rd to the north Trailhead where the hike began.

5.1 miles: Return to North Trailhead.



¹ BLM calls ATV Route 1039, “Bent Springs Rd.” But it does not go to Bent Springs. Stockman Trail climbs from Bowler Flat to the spring. It is 3.5 miles from the closest point on Route 1039 to the spring via 4WD Miller and Stockman Trails. Stockman Trail was called “Bent Trail” until BLM changed its name to Stockman Trail. (See 1996 USGS Bowler Quadrangle Topo Map.) The Bent family were homesteaders in the Bowler area just west of the Pryors.

² The Pryors Coalition and supporters proposed that this loop hike be designated as a “non-mechanized” foot-trail in BLM’s 2021 Pryors Travel Management Plan. That would have increased the BLM designated foot-trails in the Pryors by 4 miles (36%) - from 11 miles to 15 miles. It would have been only a 2.5 mile (2%) reduction in the more than 120 miles of BLM designated motorized routes in the Pryors. (The 1.7 mile two-track east from the north trailhead, PM1134, was not open to public motorized use prior to the 2021 Travel Plan.)

In their Travel Planning Environmental Assessment BLM stated:

“BLM proposes to design and implement a trail system ... that would focus on a balance of motorized and non-motorized use....” (EA 2-8)

“... the proposed travel network ... provides a balance between motorized and non-motorized uses. (EA 2-7)

Did BLM achieve their proposed and claimed “balance”?

In their Environmental Assessment BLM’s explanation for designating these two unconnected routes for motorized use rather than for a foot-trail loop was:

“Bent Springs Road and PM 1134 provide a different experience for motorized users. Bent Springs varies from other routes on the western slope because it provides a vast scenic overlook a top (sic) a ridge not provided by Miller or Stockman. PM1134 follows below the ridge of the Bent Springs Route and provides the only open BLM access to various rock formations and prairie lands.” (Underline emphasis added.)

Apparently BLM’s default decision is: If a route is interesting, then it should be designated for motorized use. Only uninteresting, left-over, routes are suitable for designation as foot-trails for hikers and equestrians. Numerous motorized routes in the Pryors provide access to “vast scenic overlooks, ... various rock formations and prairie lands,” – but only 11 miles are designated for foot-travelers.

Might future, more enlightened, BLM managers revise this decision and designate a “non-mechanized” foot-trail loop?