

Bear Canyon Hike Guide:

Bear Canyon Ridge, and Bear Canyon Creek Hikes.

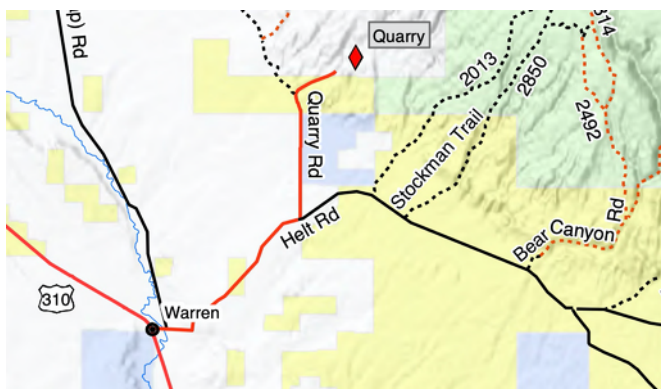
Bear Canyon includes a riparian oasis in the arid south Pryors - the driest area in Montana. Bear Creek runs in spring and early summer. It can, rarely, be a torrent if there is a cloudburst upstream. The canyon is a favorite for bird watchers with "breeding populations of more than a dozen species on the Montana Priority Bird Species List." The first three miles of the hike is within the Montana Audubon Society designated Important Bird Area. (See link to more information at www.PryorMountains.org.) There are great views of Bear Canyon, much of Wyoming and the Beartooth Mountains.

Like the hikes in nearby Hikers' Haven, Bear Canyon is a good place to hike in the spring and fall when other Montana trails may be snowed in. Access to Bear Canyon only requires driving four miles off paved road. The good gravel road is passable most of the year. Neither a high clearance vehicle nor 4WD is needed. The drive from Billings MT to the mouth of Bear Canyon takes about 1 ½ hour.

Getting There:

For detailed directions to this, and other, hiking trailheads in the Pryors, download "Pryors Trailheads: Maps and Driving Directions" from the "Hiking in the Pryors" page at www.PryorMountains.org.

Drive to Warren MT, 21 miles south of Bridger MT on Highway 310. There is no "town" at Warren. Look for the Montana Limestone Company sign. Warren is where limestone from the quarry at the southwest corner of Big Pryor Mountain is loaded onto the railroad cars.



At Warren turn east onto Helt (or Quarry) Rd. Follow the pavement 2.7 miles. Paved Quarry Rd curves left. Instead go straight (NE) on Helt Rd., now narrower and gravel. Drive 3.5 miles from the pavement on Helt road to a "Bear Canyon Road" sign. Turn left for ½ mile to the mouth of Bear Canyon.

It is possible to drive farther into the canyon, but few people would want to take highway vehicles over the several very rough rocky sections. *You came to hike.*

Bear Canyon Hikes:

A. 0.0 miles: Mouth of Bear Canyon. The Pryor Mountains suddenly rise from the plains ½ mile from Helt Road on Bear Canyon Road. Start walking on the "road" into the canyon. All hiking mileages below are measured from this point. There is no trail sign at the beginning of the hike which is on Bureau of Land Management (BLM) land.

For the first 1.4 miles the trail follows the broad sagebrush flat in Bear Creek valley bordered by cliffy limestone ridges vegetated with juniper and bunch grass. The elevation gain on the section is about 250 ft.

Although this segment of the hike is legal for motorized use, we recommend you park and walk from the canyon mouth even if you have a 4WD. If you meet people on ATVs or driving 4WD vehicles, please be courteous.

B. 1.4 miles: Junction.

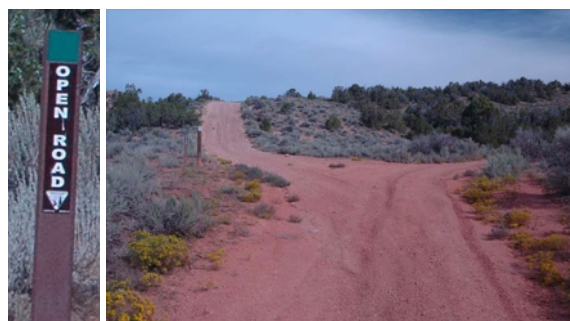
Left fork: Bear Canyon Ridge Hike (See page 3)

This route is legal for motorized use, but is worth the hike. Great views of Bear Canyon, the Beartooth Mountains, and Wyoming. (Avoid weekends and holidays if possible.). The entire round-trip hike from the mouth of Bear Canyon, including the 3-mile loop on the end (shown in purple on the map), is about 10 miles and 1,700 feet elevation gain. It can be shortened by cutting across the loop wherever desired. (e.g. red line on map).

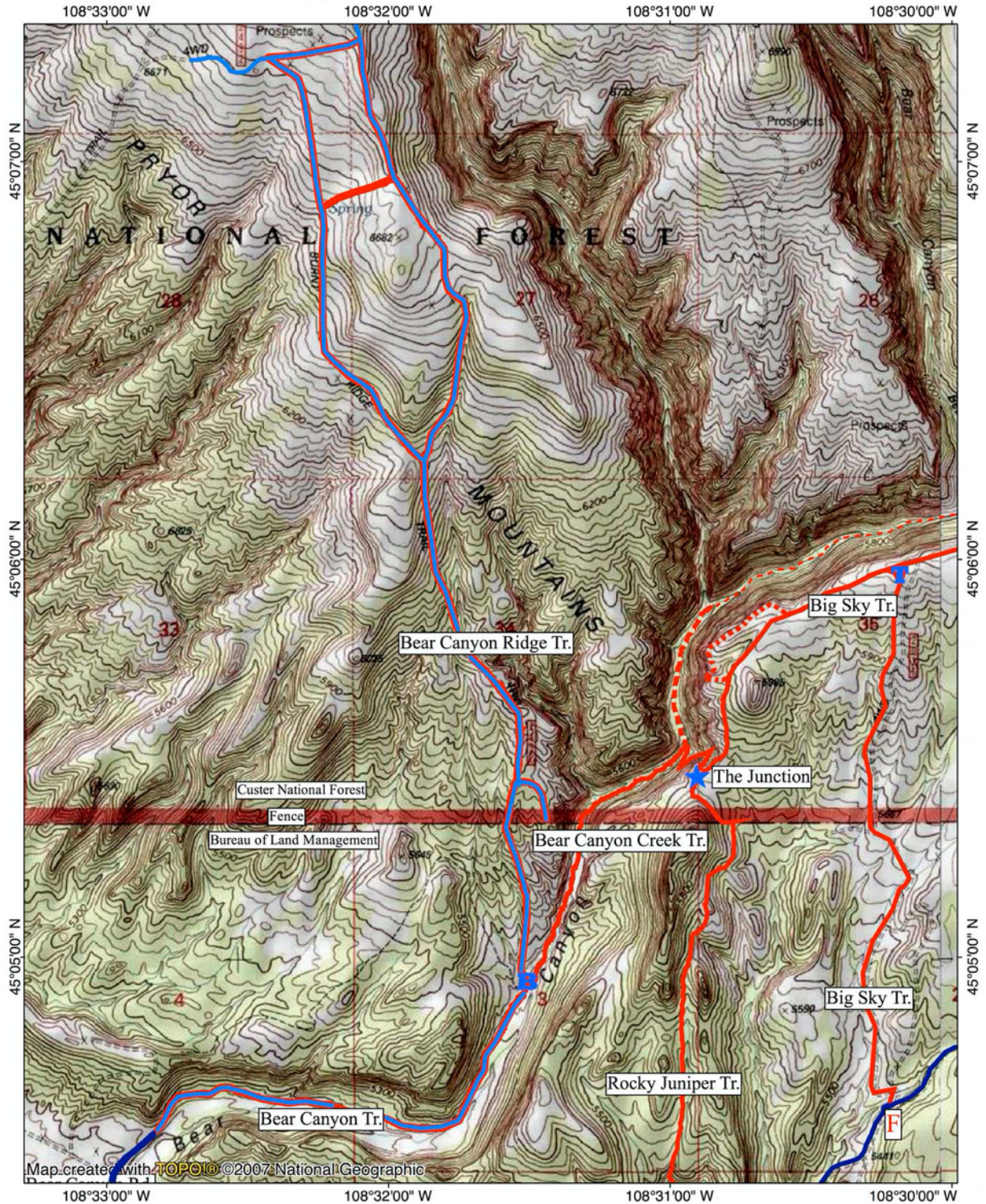
Right fork: Bear Canyon Creek Hike (See page 4)

This route is not legal for motorized or mountain bike use.

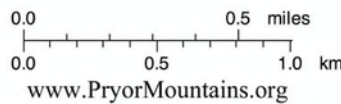
B. Left fork: Ridge Hike. Right fork: Creek Hike.



Bear Canyon Trails



- Trails
- - - Alternate Routes
- Roads
- Trails and 4WD Roads



- B** Bear Canyon Junction
- ★ **The Junction:** Bear Canyon Creek, Big Sky and Rocky Juniper Trails

TN | MN
10.5°

Bear Canyon Ridge Hike: At junction **B**, follow the **left fork** which climbs steeply out of the canyon.

C. 1.9 miles: Fence and Gate. At this boundary you leave BLM land and enter Custer National Forest. There is a sign indicating that this is USFS Trail # 2492.



C. BLM / USFS boundary fence. Route 2492.

D. 2.1 miles: Junction. Trail #24922 to the right is an 0.2 mile (one way) spur to a nice viewpoint overlooking lower Bear Canyon. The ridge hike continues on trail #2492. As you continue to climb the ecosystem changes gradually but significantly. Sagebrush decreases. Some limber pine can be seen, and Douglas fir eventually becomes abundant. Lovell, Cowley and most of Wyoming can be seen as the view expands with elevation. The Bighorn Mountains are visible to the southeast.



D. Junction: Short spur road to Bear Canyon overlook.

E. 3.1 miles: Junction. Take the right fork, trail #2814. (The left fork is #2492. You will return on this trail if you follow the loop option below.) Trail #2814 continues to climb through a timbered draw. In about half a mile, with a turn to the left, it breaks out of the draw, out of the trees and enters open grassland. About half a mile farther the trail levels on the rim overlooking the west fork of Bear Canyon to the right (east). This is Upper Bear Canyon Overlook.



E. Junction #2814 and #2492: Right (#2814).

F. 4.1 miles: Upper Bear Canyon Overlook.

The elevation here is 6700 ft., a total elevation gain of about 1600 ft. from the mouth of Bear Canyon. Pick your own spot to stop, sit and enjoy the view of much of the south slope of Big Pryor Mountain both above and below you. The highest point on the skyline ridge to the east is the peak of Red Pryor Mountain. The Absarokee and Beartooth Mountains can be seen just over the rise to the west. Depending on the time of year wildflowers may be on display. You may see arrow-leaf balsamroot, sky-blue flax, white sego lilies and others.



D. Lower Bear Canyon Overlook. (dw photo)

Return Hike Options:

Turn around wherever you wish and return the way you came. Or follow the loop route (purple) on the map. Note that the 1/4 mile, two-track segment from #2814 to #2492 has had signs missing. (It is officially #24923.). Alternatively simply head east, off-trail about 1/3 mile, from #2814 to #2492 wherever you want. (See red line on map.). The loop alternative provides more views of the Absarokee and Beartooth Mountains to the west.

Bear Canyon Creek Hike

...with optional climb to east Canyon Rim Viewpoint and Loop hikes with the Big Sky or Rocky Juniper Trail.

Follow the **right fork** (Junction B), past the jack-leg barrier, into the bottom of the canyon.

The canyon narrows, the vegetation changes becoming noticeably more lush. Cottonwood, aspen and ash trees, and clematis vines become abundant. In the spring the creek is often running. It is a great place to look for birds, butterflies, and wildflowers.

Noxious Weeds: *Unfortunately there is a significant infestation of invasive weeds in the bottom of Bear Canyon. Be careful not to collect and transport the seeds of hounds tongue and burdock beyond their current infestations. Usually you can avoid the plants, but check your clothes frequently and remove any seeds. Carry them out to dispose.*

The “trail” is rougher since a 2011 flash flood. At times it simply follows the rocky stream bottom.



B. Junction and barrier at start of Creek Trail. “Velcro”



E. Promontory at fork in canyon. Main fork is to right.

D. 2.3 miles: Alternative trail to East Rim Viewpoint. About halfway from the boundary gate (C) to the canyon fork, 0.4 miles past the BLM/USFS boundary gate, there is an old trail that switchbacks up the hill to the east canyon rim. There is no trail junction. You must push through the brush for a couple hundred feet from the gravel streambed/trail in the canyon bottom to intersect the switchback trail at the base of the slope. Look for the scene in the photo to the right below.

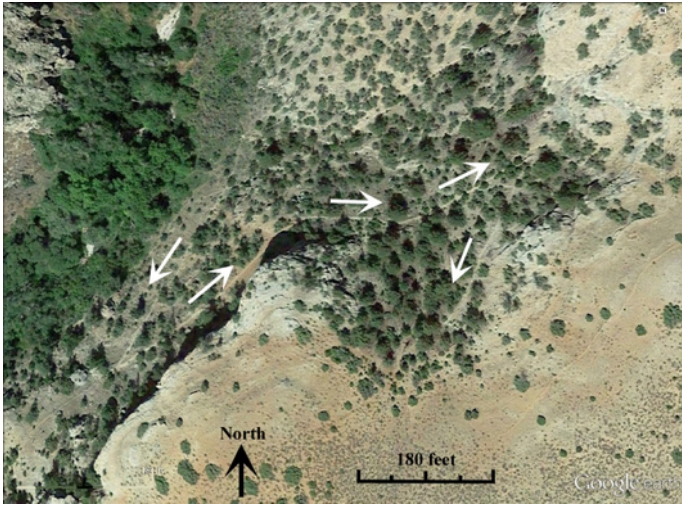
Photo: A short segment of the lowest switchback is barely visible sloping up and to the right between the two white arrow tips. The trail is not obvious from below, but is obvious when on it. (Photo taken from about GPS coordinates: 45.0923°N, 108.5160° W)



C. 1.9 miles: Fence and Gate. About ½ mile past the barricade at junction (B) there is a fence and gate. The fence is the boundary between BLM land to the south and USFS land to the north. North of the gate the canyon enters the USFS designated **Bear Canyon Recommended Wilderness**. *(If there is an “Unauthorized Trail” sign at the gate, it only applies to motor vehicles. Hikers are welcome to continue.)*

E. 2.7 miles: Fork in Canyon. 0.8 mile past the USFS boundary fence there is a major fork in Bear Canyon split by a high rocky promontory. The left (west) fork continues north without a trail. The right (main) fork turns to the east for ¾ of a mile, and then turns north again. The trail continues for a little farther, but soon fades into bushwhacking - especially after the 2011 flood. The total elevation gain from the mouth of Bear Canyon to this fork in the Canyon is about 450 ft.

Below: *Google Earth view of the switchback trail.*
White arrows parallel the trail pointing uphill.



It is about 0.3 mile and 250 ft. elevation gain to the rim on switchback trail. The views on the way up, and from the top, are well worth the climb.

Once on top the trail ends, and the open country invites exploration, but be careful not to “lose” the trail back down.

Return the way you came, or consider two loop hike alternatives: The East Rim Viewpoint at the top of the switchbacks is also THE Junction where the Big Sky, Rocky juniper and Bear Canyon Trails converge. You can return via either the Rocky Juniper or Big Sky Trail. See the Hikers’ Haven Loop Hike Guide for details on these loops.