

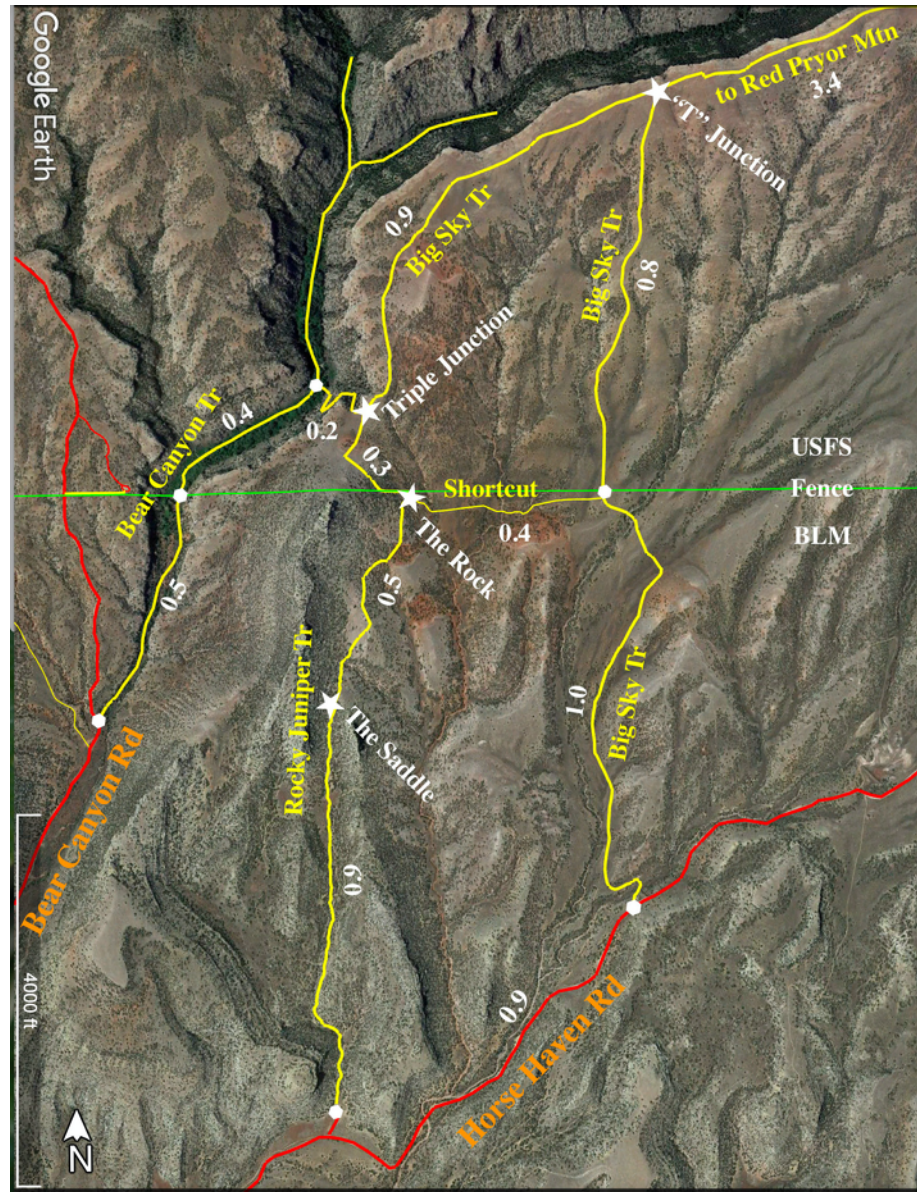
Loop Hikes: Rocky Juniper, Big Sky, and Bear Canyon Trails

Revised 11/2022

(A loop hike on the *Doug Fir* and *Big Sky Ridge Trails* is described at the end of their hike guides.)

The **Rocky Juniper, Big Sky** and **Bear Canyon Creek Trails** begin from three different nearby trailheads on Horse Haven and Bear Canyon Roads., and traverse very different landscapes. But all three trails converge in the same area on the east rim of Bear Canyon. We call this convergence the “Triple Junction” or “The Junction.” (GPS coordinates: about 45.0910°N, 108.5146°W) This convergence provides opportunities for loop hikes - to The Triple Junction on one trail and out on another trail. This requires either hiking between two trailheads, or having two vehicles for a short shuttle drive.

All three of these routes begin on BLM managed land, but cross into Forest Service managed land. BLM’s 2021 Pryors Travel Plan designates all of these, previously undesignated, trails as “non-mechanized” routes – i.e. exclusively foot-trails (human or horse). No wheeled vehicles (motorized or not) are allowed. So mountain bikes are not permitted.



Rocky Juniper, Big Sky Area Trails Map. (Mileages are shown in white.)

In 2022 BLM installed signs at all three trailheads and at appropriate locations along the trails. They also cleared and substantially improved the trailbed on the Rocky Juniper Trail so it is much easier to follow. Unfortunately Custer Gallatin National Forest (CGNF) has not designated these trails, so there are no signs or marked trails north of the USFS/BLM boundary fence (green line on the map above). Hopefully that will change in the future. Then these complex instructions may be unnecessary. All these trails in the Forest are in the CGNF designated **Bear Canyon Recommended Wilderness Area**.

With the hike guides the three trails are fairly easy to follow from their trailheads to The Triple Junction. The reverse hike on a different trail from The Junction can be a problem for people not already familiar with a trail since there are no signs, or even trails on the ground, at The Junction on CGNF managed land.

Assuming you arrived at The Triple Junction on one of the three trails. The least interesting way to get back to your vehicle is the way you got here. The goal of the instructions, map, and photos below is to help hikers find their way out from The Junction on each of the three trails. These instructions are meant to supplement the hiking guides for each trail. We recommend having those guides too. Of course a compass and map should help also.

Return via Rocky Juniper Trail:

This route is much easier to find from the Triple Junction now that BLM has improved and signed the BLM part of the Rocky Juniper Trail, but there is still no marked route on the FS section. The “east/west” FS/BLM boundary fence is visible on the north slope of the rocky topped hill to the south of The Junction (see photo below). Walk up to the fence and follow it to the left (east). Depending on where you begin following the fence, it is about 0.1 mile to a large, isolated, limestone boulder, “The Rock,” less than 100 ft south of the fence. (see photos).



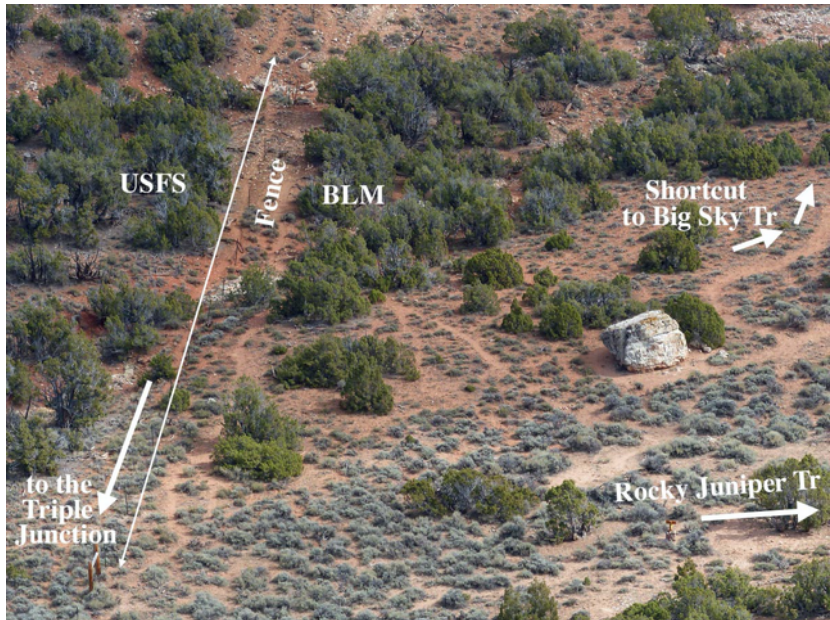
Photo (left): The Junction and the rocky-topped hill as seen looking south. White arrows mark USFS/BLM fence line.

Apparently, to save labor during construction, the fence does not follow the east/west BLM/USFS boundary line high on the hill. Instead the fence contours around the hill much lower, and thus deviates to the north of the east/west boundary.. Regardless, following the fence will take you to The Rock. To the east of the hill the fence really is east/west. The fence is not in good condition. You may also notice another perpendicular fence heading south on the BLM side. Just ignore it.

The Rock



The Rock, Fence line, and Trails.



Look for a wood BLM “Trail” sign about 50 feet west of the rock. There are two signs with arrows on the post. One points eastish past the rock. This is the BLM shortcut to the Big Sky Trail. The other sign points southish. This is the Rocky Juniper Trail. Follow the trail south about ½ mile to the Rocky Juniper Saddle, and another 0.9 miles to the Trailhead. (See the Rocky Juniper Trail Guide.)

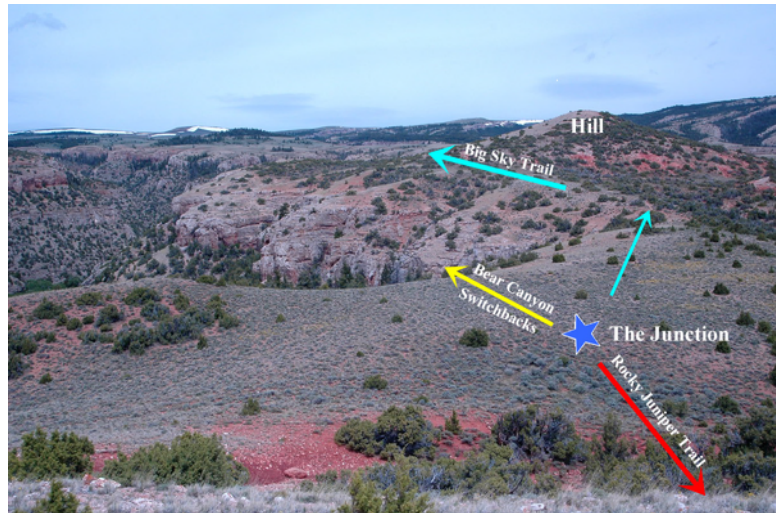
Return via Big Sky Trail:

Two Alternatives:

a) The shortcut: Follow the above directions for the **Return via Rocky Juniper Trail**. Except follow the shortcut trail east from the Rock about 0.4 miles to the Big Sky Trail. Then turn right (south). It is 1.0 mile to the Big Sky Trailhead.

View of the Triple Junction looking north from the BLM/USFS boundary fence.

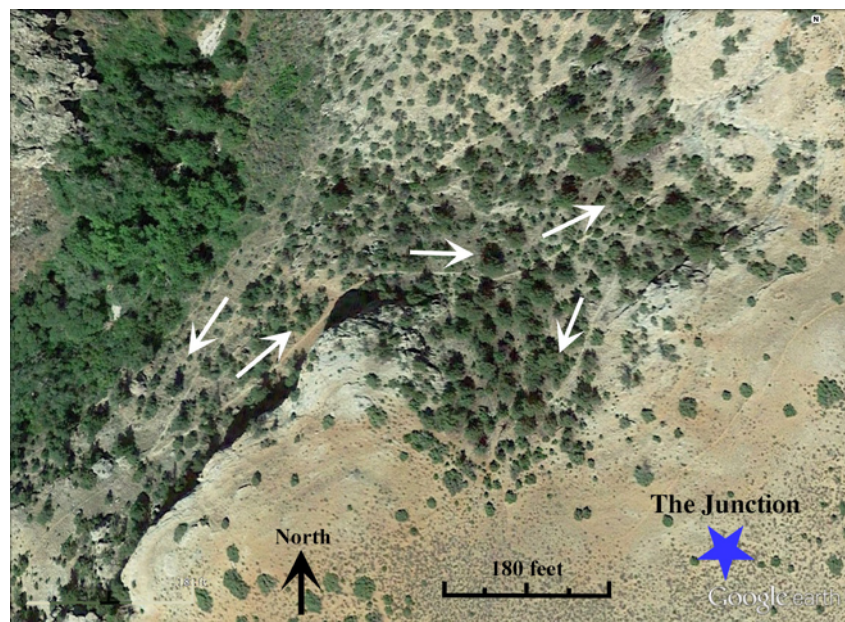
b) The long way: To return via the Big Sky Trail, follow the turquoise arrows (see photo) north from The Junction using whatever game trails are convenient. Keep the canyon cliffs on your left (west) and the hill on your right (east). Within a quarter or third of a mile this should lead to the end of an abandoned (for motorized use) two-track route which is the Big Sky Trail. This track curves right around the north of the hill and follows the rim of the main fork of Bear Canyon to the east. (See map.) What makes finding this “easy” is the canyon on your west and its turn to the east keeping you from going far off course to either the west or north. Just go around the landmark hill.



Don't miss the "T" Junction about a mile from The Triple Junction, ½ mile from the hill. (See map.) There may be a small cairn nearby. At the “T” turn south away from the canyon and follow the two-track Big Sky Trail 1.8 miles to the trailhead on Horse Haven Road.

Return via Bear Canyon Creek Trail:

To return via the Bear Canyon Creek Trail follow the yellow arrow (see photo) down into the canyon. The switchbacks are not visible from the top, but you should soon intersect the top switchback. Follow the switchbacks down the slope. At the bottom the trail vanishes in the brush. Push west through the brush a couple hundred feet to the “trail” in the canyon bottom. Follow the trail left (south) past the BLM/FS boundary fence and gate (0.4 miles), and the BLM barricade (another 0.5 miles). Then it is 1.4 miles on motor-legal 4WD Bear Canyon Rd to the mouth of Bear Canyon. It is usually not worth driving in this rough 1.4 miles to the BLM “Bear Canyon Trailhead” sign and log barrier preventing motorized access.



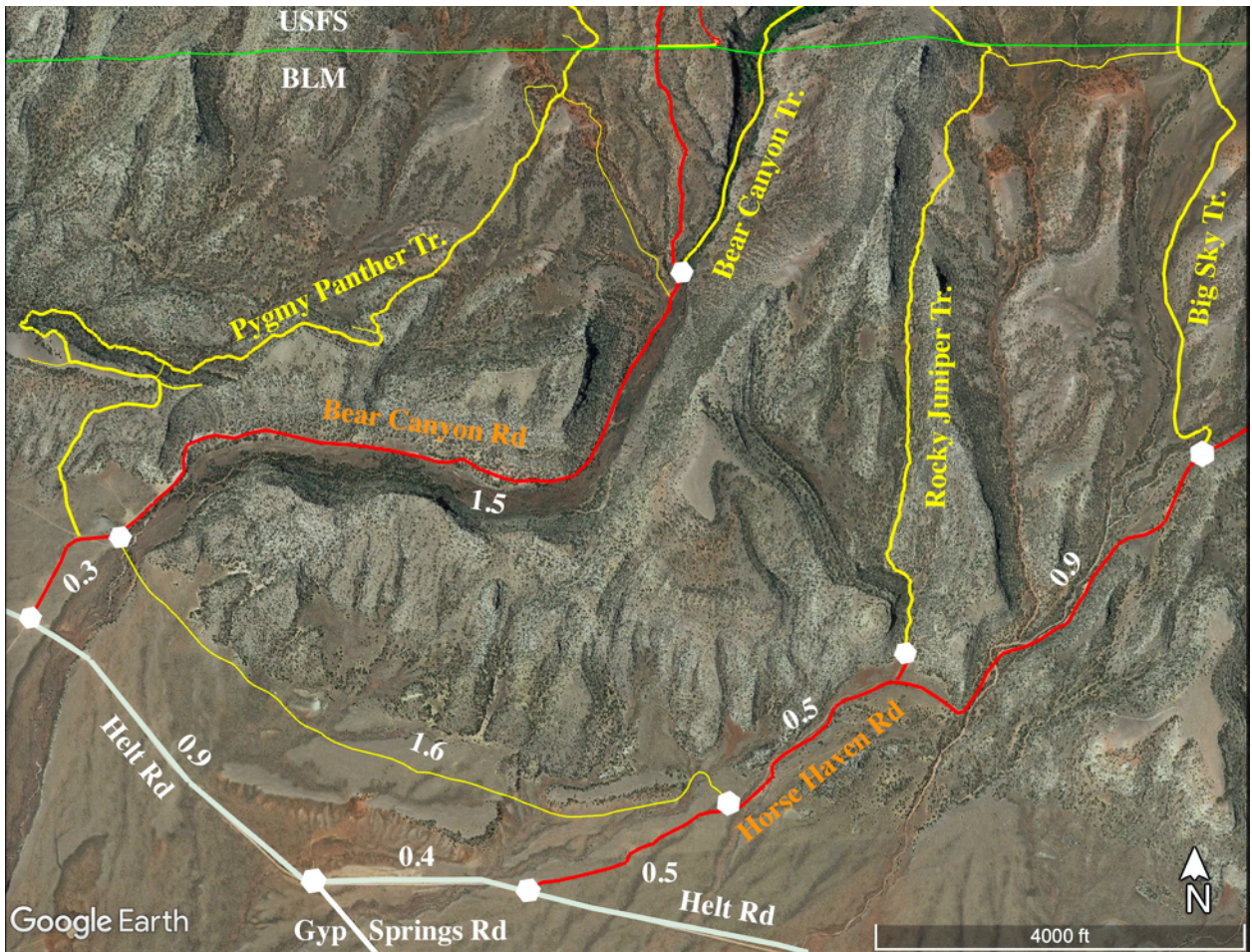
The switchback trail climbing out of the canyon is visible beside white arrows.

Getting back to your car:

It is an easy 0.9 mile walk on Horse Haven Road between the Big Sky and Rocky Juniper trailheads.

Walking between the Bear Canyon Trailhead and the Rocky Juniper Trailhead is considerably farther. So it might be desirable to consider a car shuttle with two vehicles (or one vehicle and a bike?).

If you want to walk: There is a 1.6 mile walkable track along the base of the mountain between the Bear Canyon and Horse Haven Roads. Then it is another 0.5 mile on Horse Haven Rd to the Rocky Juniper Trailhead. The Bear Canyon Trail includes 1.5 mile on motor legal 4WD road from the canyon entrance to where the trail is foot-travel only. That adds up to a 3.6 mile walk between the Rocky Juniper and Bear Canyon foot-trailheads (and 4.5 miles to the Big Sky Trailhead).



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