

Pygmy Panther Trail

Photos on the *Pygmy Panther Trail* page at www.pryormountains.org might be helpful.

The Pygmy Panther Trail is west of Bear Canyon on the southwest slope of Big Pryor Mountain between 5,000 and 6,000 feet elevation. It provides an opportunity for interesting hiking - including in the early spring and late fall - except during and shortly after occasional snowstorms. The trail was named "Pygmy Panther" by a Montana Conservation Corp group working in the area. There are a variety of hike options ranging from 4 to 6 miles. Loop hikes include one way on the Bear Canyon 4WD route - which the Bear Canyon Ridge Hike also follows. Below we describe a 6 mile loop hike following BLM's Pygmy Panther (PP) trail, an extension north into USFS managed land, and return walk on the Bear Canyon Rd. (A-F, G, A)

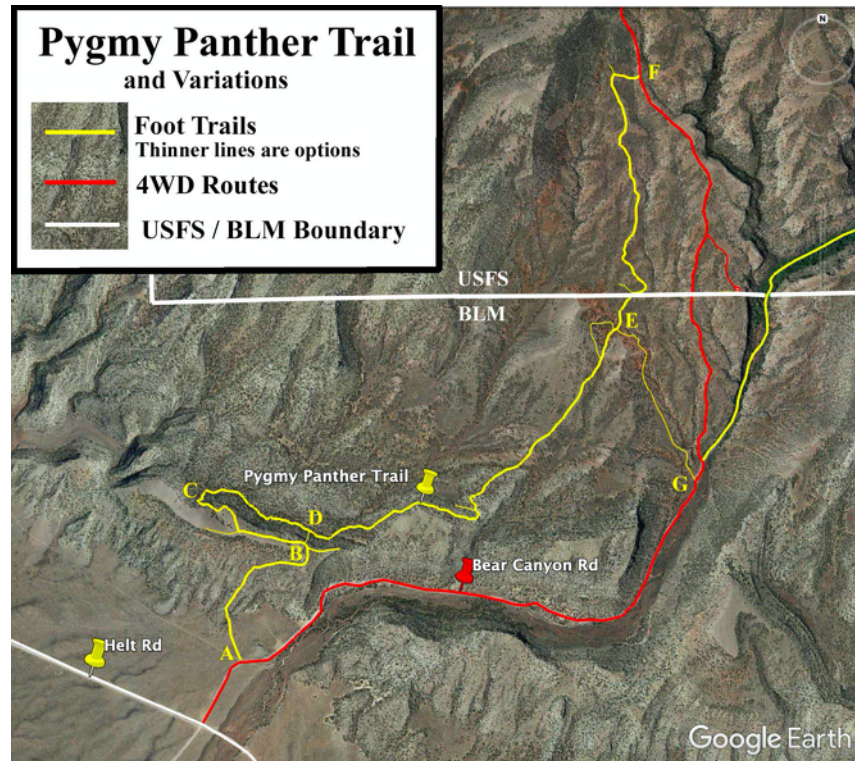
Other Alternatives:

BLM's PP Trail (without the FS extension) and back on Bear Canyon Rd is about 4.5 miles. (A-E,G,A)

The road often has only light, or no, motorized traffic on week days.

Possible motorized commotion (especially weekends) can be avoided by hiking both ways on the PP Trail. That is 6 miles (round trip) for the extended route (A-F-A), and 4.8 miles for just the BLM part (A-E-A). Either can be easily shortened by 0.7 mile with a (D-B) shortcut on the return (described below).

The PP Trail and FS extension can be used to bypass 3 miles of motor legal route (either or both ways) on the Bear Canyon Ridge Hike described on the Bear Canyon Hikes page.



BLM has begun signing this trail (early 2022). Both trailheads have "Pygmy Panther Trailhead" signs. There are several "Trail" signs in the first mile. (A couple had fallen down in late April.) Beyond that a short section of the the trail is obscure and without signs. The directions below should help. Hopefully BLM will make progress on signing soon.

Getting there:

These directions are the same as directions to the Bear Canyon hikes.

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 0.2 miles - about half way to the mouth of Bear Canyon where the Bear canyon hikes begin. The trail up the ridge is visible to the left of the road as you approach the trailhead.

The Pygmy Panther Trailhead is on the left (west) side of the road. Look for a log barricade and signs. (Elevation 5,100 feet)

The Hike:

These directions are intended to help someone follow the trail even if there are no signs. When, and if, the trail is well signed these directions may be simplified.

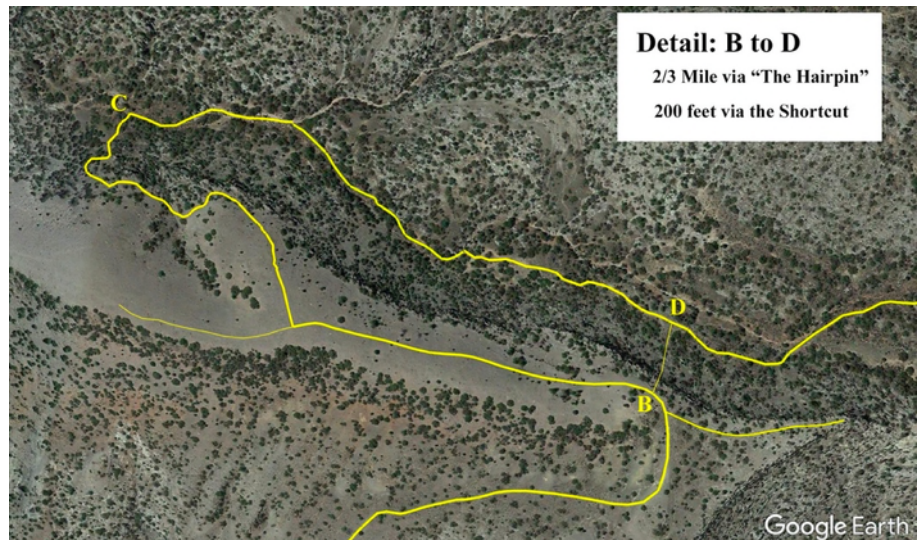
A. BLM Trailhead #1 (0.0 miles): An obvious single-track trail heads northwest from the trailhead. It soon becomes an old two-track, and starts north steeply up the hill. Where the ground is very rocky, the trail may be more difficult to see. Look for gaps through the juniper bushes. It becomes more obvious where the ground is less rocky.

B. Top of Ridge (0.5 miles): The ridgetop is about 270 feet elevation above the trailhead. A “Trail” sign points west along a broad grassy ridge with scattered juniper. The north rim of this ridge is steep rocky cliff. Look north down over the cliff to an east-west two-track paralleling the ridge less than 100 yds north. That is point D on the trail.

Optional Side Trip: There is a nice viewpoint 0.1 mile east from the “Trail” sign at the ridge top point B

Optional Shortcut: It is not hard to find a way to scramble down through the rocky rim to the easily visible track at point D. This shortcut “saves” about 0.7 miles of hike, but misses an interesting 0.7 miles of hike. If you take the shortcut, turn right (east) on that track to continue.

From point B, the “Trail” sign at the top of the ridge, follow the two-track west along the ridge paralleling the cliffs with good views of the Beartooths and the windfarm. After about 0.2 miles the ridge splits - the more obvious track continues west on the “main” ridge. But turn right (north) on the side ridge. (There may be a “Trail” sign pointing right.) At first the trail may not be obvious, but a clear single-track trail soon appears. It goes to the end of the side ridge then meanders and switchbacks down (about 150 ft elevation) to the bottom of a drainage. (In April 2022 there was a “Trail” sign pointing back up the way you came, and another pointing to the right (east) up the drainage.)



C. Bottom of Drainage (0.9 miles): The next section of the route from C to D is the hardest to follow. Much of the way there is no track to follow. The key is follow closely below the rocky cliffs on northern rim of the ridge west from B. (Remember the view of the track at point D only about 60 yards from point B.)

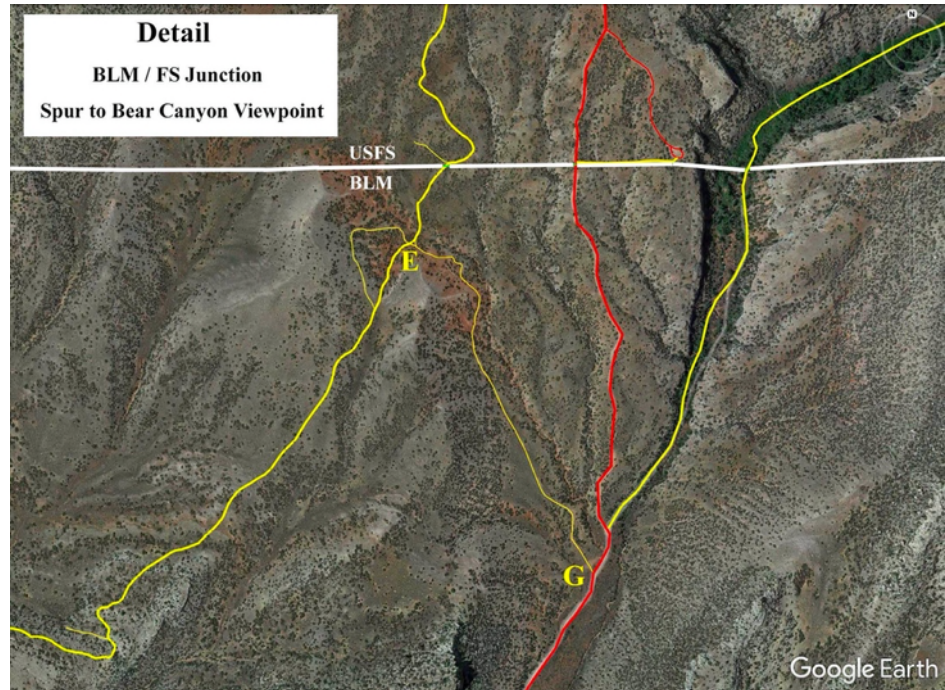
From C follow the drainage east for about 0.1 mile. Then turn right into a side drainage (following the rocky rim above). Follow this side drainage eastish for another 0.1 miles to an obvious left curve. After the curve the left bank is very rocky. Just past a dead tree on the right, climb out of the gully and continue eastish following the rocky rim above. Soon a track becomes obvious and gradually becomes a two-track. It is another 0.1 miles from the gully to point D from the climb out of the side gully.

An Alternative: Instead of following the curve in the side gully, leave the gully just before the curve and follow a bit of single track on the side hill, then turn soon left to where the other route comes out of the gully.

D. Track Below Point B (1.2 miles): From here most of the two-track is easy to follow with two exceptions:

1. After about ½ mile the track curves sharply left in a rocky area where it is not obvious. Then shortly there is a sharp right turn. A possibly more obvious track continues straight but soon ends. (See lower left corner of GE map Detail.)

2. After another approximately ½ mile an easily missed track continues straight dropping into a basin with more junipers to point E in 0.1 mile. The more obvious track turns left and then loops back to point E in 0.2 miles. So it doesn't matter much either way. (See GE detail.)



E. BLM / FS Junction (2.4 miles): Continue north from E on the obvious track 0.1 mile to the BLM/FS boundary fence and gate. (The obvious track east from E is the final section of the BLM designated Pygmy Panther Trail down to the trailhead on Bear Canyon Rd. at point G.).

The route on north from point E is not a designated trail by either BLM or FS so it will not be signed. But foot travel is permitted. It is 0.7 mile from the boundary fence and gate to the intersection with Bear Canyon Road at point F. The final segment to the road is a fairly obvious track less than 0.1 mile to the east. It is a right angle right turn downhill from the more obvious track that continues a little farther north. (Highpoint elevation: 5,900 feet)

F. Bear Canyon Rd. (3.2 miles): There is a post beside the 4WD route with the remains of a sign indicating that the two-track to the west is not open to motorized use.

At point F turn right (south). The route is obvious 2.8 miles back to the trailhead at point A. The 4WD route, with views into Bear Canyon, is the western boundary of the new FS Bear Canyon Recommended Wilderness Area.

From point F it is about 0.6 miles to the FS/BLM boundary fence, and another 0.5 mile down to the bottom of Bear Canyon and **BLM PP Trailhead #2** at point G.

Options:

Approximately ½ mile down Bear Canyon Rd from F, a side road, #24922, leads to a nice overlook view of Bear Canyon. (See GE detail.) An easy shortcut back to the main road on down to the trailhead is to follow the FS/BLM boundary fence from the overlook west 0.1 mile to the road.

A left turn (north) at point F joins the Bear Canyon Ridge hike. Hikers on the Bear Canyon Ridge hike wanting to take the PP trail back to their car could use this post to find the trail.