

The Big Sky and Big Sky Ridge Trails

The two trails diverge at the “T” Junction, 1.8 miles from the trailhead.

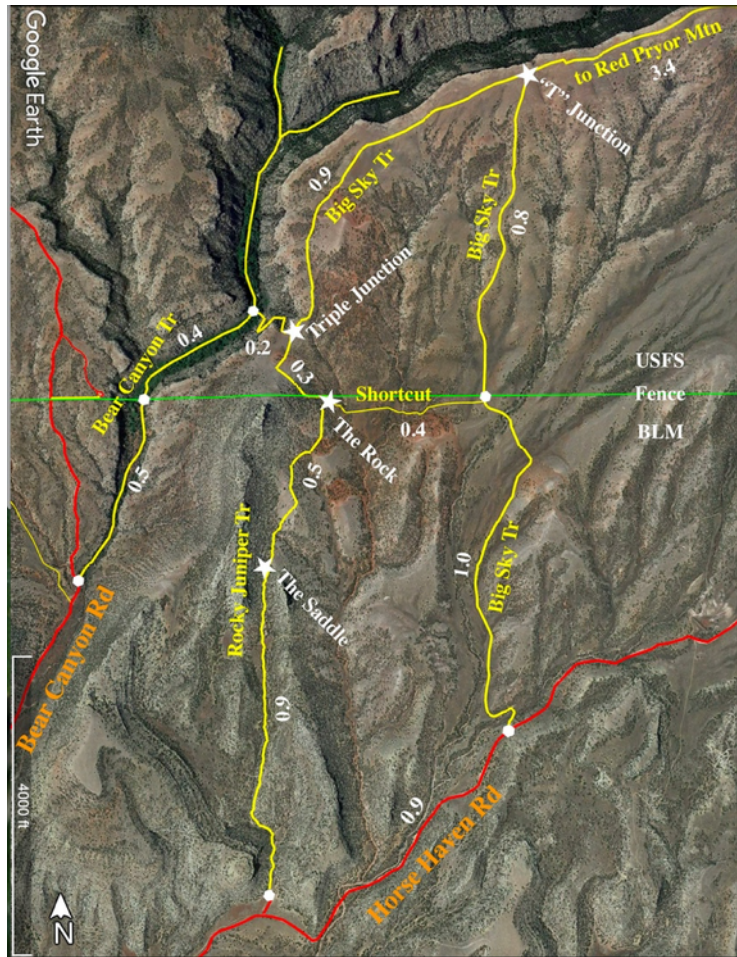
Revised 11/2022

The 2021 the Bureau of and Management (BLM) Travel Plan for the Pryors officially designated the Big Sky Trail, which the Pryors Coalition had proposed about 2010. It is designated for foot-travel only (human and horse). Mountain bikes and motorized vehicles are not permitted. In 2022 BLM installed a Big Sky Trailhead” sign and marked a parking area.

The **Big Sky Trail** in the **Hikers' Haven Area** has wide open views of the Montana and Wyoming big sky, the SW slope of Big Pryor and Red Pryor Mountains, the Beartooth Mountains, and much of Wyoming. One mile from the trailhead the trail enters the USFS **Bear Canyon Recommended Wilderness Area** (RWA). It is a 2-mile one-way hike (630 ft. elevation gain) to the “T” Junction on the rim of the main (east) fork of Bear Canyon. The hike can be extended a little, or a lot farther with a great views of several forks of Bear Canyon.

The trail to the west from the “T” follows the rim of Bear Canyon west and then south to the Triple Junction. From there either the Rocky Juniper or Bear Canyon Trails can be followed back to Horse Haven Rd, or Helt Rd. for loop hikes.

The trail to the east from the “T” climbs to the top of Red Pryor Mountain – a 10 mile round-trip from the trailhead (3,000 ft elevation gain). Hike as far up as you want, then sit and enjoy the Pryors’ wilderness solitude and expansive views.



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

Getting There:

The Big Sky Trailhead is on Horse Haven Road, 1.8 miles from Helt Road.

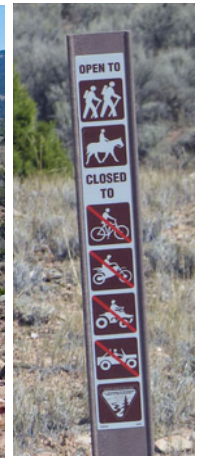
Detailed maps and driving directions to Pryor Mountain hiking trailheads are available on the hiking Overview page at PryorMountains.org.



Trailhead Parking Area on Horse Haven Rd



Big Sky Trailhead and beginning of trail.



The Hike:

0.0 miles: Trailhead (elevation: 5,500 ft.). The track winds in a large “S” crossing the draw and around a low hill, then heads mostly north through a wide flat valley of juniper, sage and grasses. For the first mile it climbs very gently.

1.0 miles: Fence at BLM/USFS boundary, and shortcut trail to the Rocky Juniper Trail (5,700 ft.). South of fence is BLM managed land. North is Custer Gallatin NF Recommended Wilderness. There are two options beyond this point.

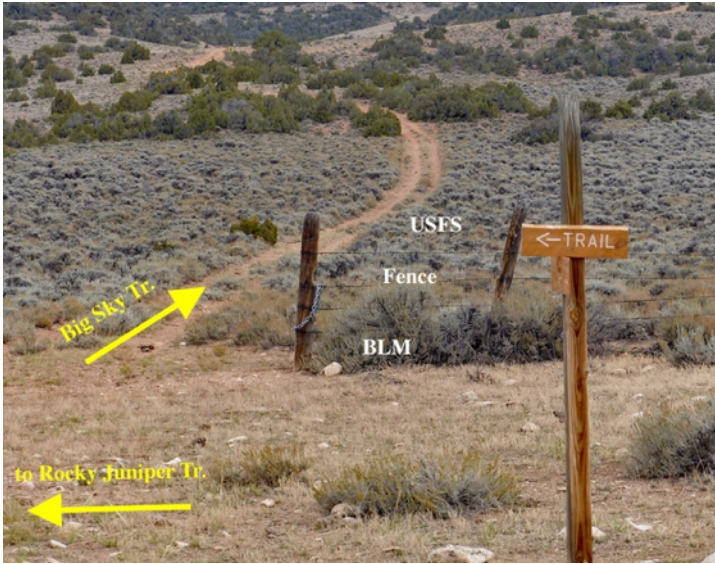
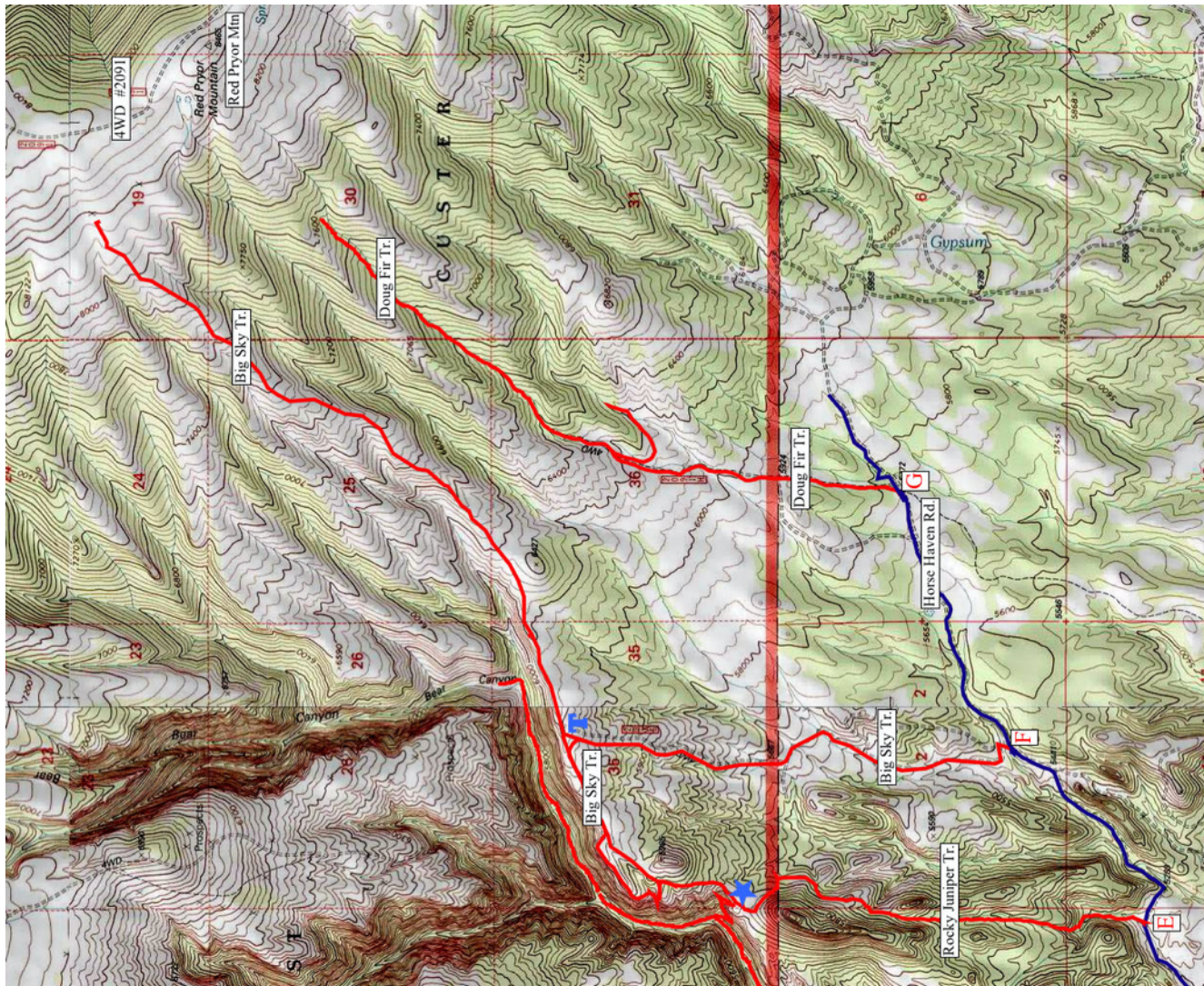


Photo: BLM / USFS Boundary Fence. Big Sky Tr. North. Shortcut West.

Option 1, Shortcut to the Rocky Juniper Trail:

Just south of the fence BLM has installed a “Trail” sign pointing to the west. (Another sign on the same post points south back to the Big Sky Trailhead). This sign indicates a shortcut trail to the Rocky Juniper Trail. This makes a 3.7 mile loop including the 0.9 mile walk on Horse Haven Rd between the two trailheads. This loop does not enter the Bear Canyon RWA and does not provide views of Bear Canyon. The shortcut connects to the Rocky Juniper Trail at “The Rock.” From The Rock the Rocky Juniper Trail continues (on USFS without trail signs - yet) to the Triple Junction where it connects with the Bear Canyon and Big Sky Trails. This provides loop hike opportunities. (See more about the shortcut trail in the Rocky Juniper Trail Guide.)



T T Junction
The Big Sky Trail and nearby trails

THE Junction

Option 2, into the Bear Canyon Recommended Wilderness Area: From the BLM/USFS boundary fence the Big Sky Trail continues mostly north climbing out of the valley, not quite as gently as before. As you climb turn around to see growing views of the Wyoming prairie, and the Bighorn, Wind River and Beartooth Mountains. Since Custer Gallatin National Forest has not designated this foot-trail, there are no trail signs.

1.8 miles: The rim of Bear Canyon and the “T” Junction. (Elevation: 6,130 ft.). The “cross” on the “T” is along the rim of the main fork of Bear Canyon.

Dramatic Bear Canyon, which has been hidden until you arrive at the “T”, is now practically under your feet. A little to your right (east) the main fork of intermittent Bear Creek flows south through the deep canyon, makes a sharp right turn to the west, and passes in front of, and below you. To your left (about half a mile west) the west fork drains south through another deep canyon and joins the main fork. The main fork turns left and together they flow south.

Left (west) Branch of “T”: This branch of the track follows the canyon rim west a little more than half a mile to views overlooking the junction of the main and west forks. This makes leisurely and enjoyable day hike. Allow time to relax and enjoy the quiet and scenery.

2.2 miles (0.4 mile west of “T”): The track turns a little south and gets farther from the canyon rim. An option is to leave the track at this point to follow the canyon rim for about 0.2 miles farther west to a viewpoint at the canyon junction. A small drainage to your left (south) gradually deepens between this rim route and the track you left. At the west end of this trackless ridge it is easy to cross the drainage back to the track and another viewpoint described below (2.4 miles).

2.4 miles (0.6 miles west of “T”): A “Y” in the two-track. Both branches disappear in a hundred feet or so. Continuing a short distance to the right (west) there is another viewpoint overlooking the junction of the canyons. The left branch soon turns into a single track game trail heading south. There is a prominent hill on the left (east) and the canyon on the right (west).

2.6 miles: The Triple Junction (0.8 miles from the “T”) where the Big Sky, Rocky Juniper, and Bear Canyon Creek Trails converge.

Return Hike Options from the Triple Junction: Returning the way you came is the least interesting option. See the Rocky Juniper and Bear Canyon Hike Guides for more information on the options below.

Return to the Big Sky Trailhead: Walk south, uphill, to the USFS / BLM boundary fence. Follow the fence east to “The Rock.” Take the BLM signed shortcut trail east to the Big Sky Trail. Turn south to the trailhead. This is about 1.6 miles.

Return to the Rocky Juniper Trail: Walk south, uphill, to the USFS / BLM boundary fence. Follow the fence east to “The Rock.” Take the signed Rocky Juniper Trail south to the trailhead. This is about 2.0 miles plus another 0.9 miles walk on Horse Haven Rd to the Big Sky Trailhead if that is where your vehicle is parked.

Return to the Bear Canyon Trailhead: Take the Bear Canyon switchback trail west to the canyon bottom. Then hike the Bear Canyon Trail south to the Trailhead. Two vehicles for a car shuttle may be desirable between the Bear Canyon and Big Sky Trailheads. It is a ??? walk on motorized routes.

Right (east) Branch of “T”, the Ridge Trail: This branch of the track follows the canyon rim east past the bend and then follows a narrow ridge northeast between unnamed canyons, climbing steeply (about 1,000 ft/mile) toward the top of Red Pryor Mountain. Depending on your energy level, viewpoints along this ridge would make good places to stop, and enjoy the Pryors’ scenery and solitude before retracing your route down the mountain.

If you continue to the top of Red Pryor Mtn: (Elevation: 8,400 ft., total gain: 2,900 ft.)

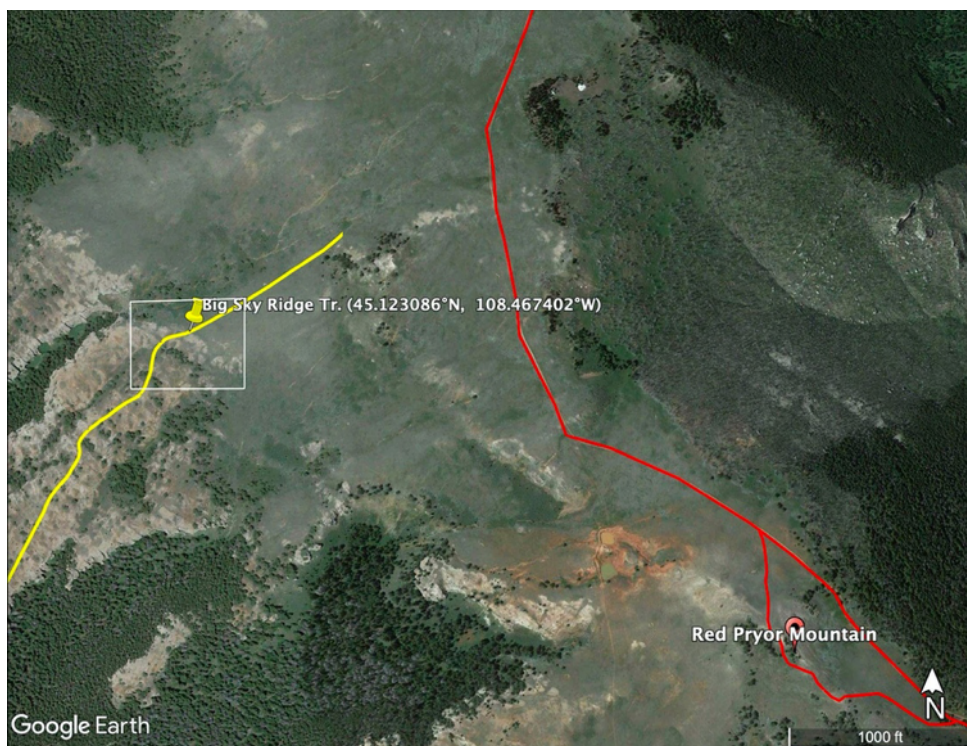
14.8 miles (3.0 miles from “T”): The Ridge Trail leads toward 4WD route #2091. But shortly before getting there, the ridge track fades as you ascend through open grassland. When the track disappears either continue eastward, for maybe 1/4 mile, to the 4WD route and turn south to Red Pryor Mtn., ... or head off-trail SE toward Red Pryor Mtn, the highest point in that direction. It is about 3/4 mile and about 300 feet more elevation gain. It is only a “bump” above the nearby ridge line.

Despite the 4WD route, the climb to the high point is rewarding. Big new views open of the Crooked Creek Valley and East Pryor Mountain, and of the Big Pryor Plateau to the north. Before May 22 the 4WD route is usually seasonally closed. No motor vehicles should be there.

Warning: If you go to the top of Red Pryor Mtn carefully note where you left the Big Sky Ridge Trail so you can find it for the return hike down the mountain. There are no signs. Off-trail routes could be much more challenging. The key is to get started down the correct ridge.

The Google Earth (GE) images below (dated 6/25/2017) may help find the top of the Big Sky Ridge Trail - especially for hikers who come up via the Doug Fir Trail and are looking for the Big Sky Trail for the return loop.

The first GE view shows the top end of the Big Sky Ridge Trail (yellow), and 4WD route #2091 (red). It is about 3/4 mile and 300 feet elevation gain between the yellow pin and the top of Red Pryor Mountain.



The second GE view zooms in on the white rectangle (without yellow trail) to show the two-track trail as of 2017. It was fairly clear for about 1/4 mile NE from the yellow "pin".

