

## Bear Canyon Hike Guide:

Revised October 2011

Access to this hike only requires driving four miles off paved roads. The four miles of good gravel road is passable most of the year. Neither a high clearance vehicle nor 4WD is needed. Download driving directions to Bear Canyon at [www.PryorMountains.org](http://www.PryorMountains.org).

The hike does not require cross country route finding or bushwhacking. It is entirely on trails except for one short optional section. The first three miles of this hike is within an Audubon Society designated Important Bird Area.



Lower Bear Canyon Scenery – Photo by Dick Walton

Bear Canyon is a good place to hike in the spring and fall, and often during the winter when other places may be snowed in. If you go in July or August be prepared for very hot weather. Take lots of water.

### Bear Canyon Hikes:

**A. 0.0 miles: Mouth of Bear Canyon.** 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.

If you meet people on ATVs or driving 4WD vehicles, please be courteous. This route is legal for motorized use – as long as they stay on the designated trail. Some of us would call anything open to four-wheeled motor vehicles a “road”. But the USFS calls these rough routes open to ATVs “motorized trails” or just “trails”.

*Please contact Custer National Forest and ask that these trails (#2492 and #2814) be designated for non-motorized use only. There are an abundance of other scenic motorized trails up Big Pryor Mountain including one about three miles east, two more a couple miles west, and four more around the “corner” north of the limestone quarry on the west slope. The Forest Service should serve hikers by designating quiet hiking trails in the Pryors also.*

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.

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

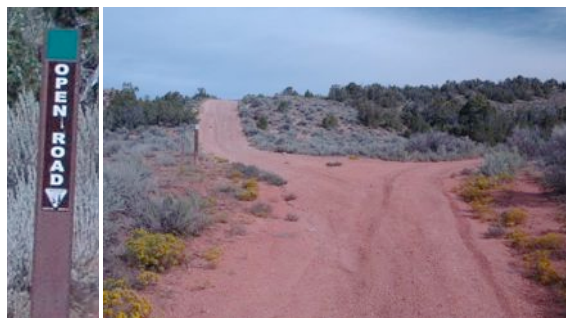
### B. 1.4 miles: Junction.

**Left fork: Bear Canyon Ridge Hike** (See page 2)

**Right fork: Bear Canyon Creek Hike** (See page 3)

Warning: another two-track route (not motor-legal) branches to the left about 250 ft. before this junction. The “false” junction has no sign. At the “true” junction the left fork has a small “Open Road” sign.

*If you drove to this point – even with a 4WD – we recommend you park and walk from this junction. The trail up the ridge can be driven with some 4WDs, but there are very rough spots that have convinced some 4WD drivers not to drive that route again. You came to hike. Driving also defeats the purpose of hiking, and disrupts the peace and quiet for other hikers. When you want a drive in the Pryors, we encourage you to use one of the many other spectacular motorized routes. Leave this one for hikers as many of us do.*



**Bear Canyon Ridge Hike:** 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.



**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 increases with elevation. The Bighorn Mountains are visible to the southeast.



**E. 3.1 miles: Junction.** Take the right fork, trail #2814. The left fork is #2492. 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.



**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 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.

*View from Bear Canyon Overlook – Photo by Dick Walton*



### **Return Hike Options:**

You can return the way you came - or continue farther north first. Another alternative is to walk off-trail 1/3 mile toward the west across open, but rocky, grassland. It is downhill to the easily visible trail #2492. (Or continue north 1/2 mile on #2814 to #24923 which goes left to #2492.) Follow trail #2492 left (south) about a mile back to the junction E where you left it on trail #2184. Then follow #2492 back to your vehicle. This loop alternative gives views of the Absarokee and Beartooth Mountains to the west.

**Bear Canyon Creek Hike with optional climb to east Canyon Rim Viewpoint:** Follow the **right fork** (Junction B), past the log barrier fence, 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.

People familiar with this route before the massive Spring 2011 flooding will be amazed by the changes. The first half mile to a fence was a motor-legal route on BLM land. The next mile on USFS land had been driven regularly, but illegally, for years. Much of the road has been washed out and replaced by newly cut rocky stream channels. Although BLM has closed the road at the junction with signs and log barriers, it is still open for hiking, and it is a pleasure to know that beyond the barriers there will be no motorized disruptions.

*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 “Velcro” 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 hiking is somewhat rougher than before the flood, but still mostly fairly easy. The trail is sometimes overgrown with grass and other vegetation. Other times it simply follows the rocky stream bottom. Occasionally it is necessary to scramble up or down the sides of a stream channel. From mid-summer to fall these channels should be dry. It remains to be seen whether these new channels will carry water in the spring.



*Two trail scenes. Photos by Dick Walton*

**C. 1.9 miles: Fence and Gate.** About ½ mile from the junction (B) leaving the “ridge” hike and the log barrier, there is a fence and gate. There is an “Unauthorized Trail” sign. Read the fine print. It only applies to motor vehicles, which no longer can get this far anyway. Hikers are welcome to continue. The fence is the boundary between BLM land to the south and USFS land to the north.



**D. 2.3 miles: Alternative trail to East Rim Viewpoint.**

0.4 miles past the BLM/USFS boundary gate (C) there is an old constructed trail that switchbacks up the hill to the east canyon rim. There is no trail junction. You must push through tall sagebrush for a couple hundred feet from the gravel streambed/trail in the canyon bottom to the start of the switchback trail at the base of the slope. Look for the scene in the photo to the right. The red arrow indicates a visible section of the trail sloping up and to the right. (Photo taken from about GPS coordinates:  $45^{\circ}05.536' N$   $108^{\circ}30.961' W$ )



*View from east canyon rim. Aspen in fall colors.*

It is about 0.3 mile and 250 ft elevation gain to the rim on a surprisingly good, but little used, 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.

**E. 2.7 miles: Fork in Canyon.** 0.8 mile past the USFS boundary fence there is a major fork in Bear Canyon. The left (west) fork continues north. The trail into the west fork which never went far is completely washed out. The right (main) fork turns to the east for  $\frac{3}{4}$  of a mile and then turns north again. The right (main) fork 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.

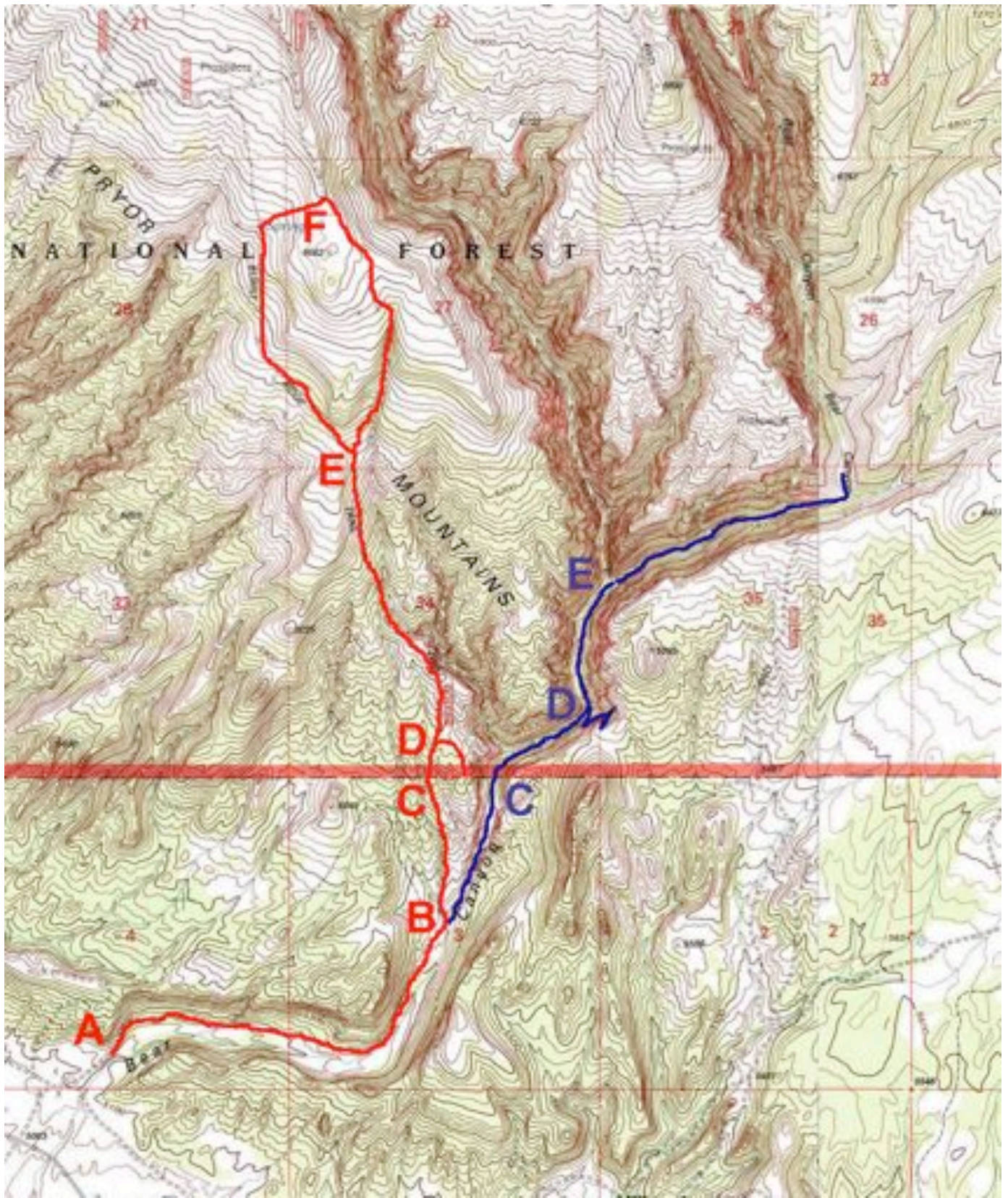


*E. Trail approaching canyon fork from south.*

*E. Beginning of right (main) fork trail.*



**After Your Hike:** Tell us about your hike. How did this hike guide help, or not? How could it be improved?



*Bear Canyon Ridge Hike: Red.*

*Bear Canyon Creek Hike: Dark Blue* Thin red grid is 1 mile squares