

# Wyoming's Buffalo Bill— Yellowstone Country Scenic Byways



A travel guide to the  
three Scenic Byways  
in Wyoming's Absaroka  
and Beartooth Mountains.

# Exploring the Buffalo Bill–Yellowstone Country Scenic Byways

**Cody Country is traversed by three Scenic Byways: the Beartooth, the Chief Joseph and the Buffalo Bill. The town of Cody is the Wyoming access point for all three of these routes. The Beartooth Scenic Byway also begins on U.S. 212 near Red Lodge, Montana.**

All three Scenic Byways are open during the summer and most of the spring and fall. The **Chief Joseph and Buffalo Bill Scenic Byways** are open in winter. The **Beartooth Scenic Byway** is closed during the winter. On almost any given day during the winter season travelers can observe both elk and deer along the Chief Joseph Highway near Dead Indian Mountain. This entire country provides a natural backdrop for visits to the Nez Perce National Historic Trail and other sites of historic importance to Native American and frontier American history. Buffalo Bill State Park, the Washakie Wilderness, the Absaroka-Beartooth mountains and wilderness, the Shoshone, Custer and Gallatin national forests, and the Clarks Fork of the Yellowstone (a Wild and Scenic River) are just some of the areas that can provide a splendid driving experience, or a most tempting region to explore at leisure.

**Pilot and Index Peaks flank Beartooth Scenic Byway (cover).**

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**The Indian Paintbrush is Wyoming's state flower. The Wyoming Scenic Byway program adopted the Indian Paintbrush as its logo. As you tour Wyoming's Scenic Byways, the Indian Paintbrush will identify your route.**

Yellow-bellied marmots, pikas, rosy finches and mountain bluebirds abound in this area. Grizzlies, black bears, even mountain goats frequent the shrubby slopes and alpine meadows near the timber and can sometimes be seen from the highway.

Both the Beartooth and Chief Joseph Scenic Byways—after leaving Cody—

**A tranquil alpine lake near the Beartooth Scenic Byway.**

The diverse wildlife that inhabit this region of northwestern Wyoming is amazing. Many elk and deer make this area home. Throughout Sunlight Basin, below the western side of Dead Indian Pass, visitors are reminded that they are in grizzly bear country. Bears are occasionally seen near the highway in the springtime. Large numbers of elk can sometimes be spotted in the aspen and mixed conifer forest. Moose also inhabit these areas in winter and early spring.

Mountain goats, year-round residents of the Beartooth Mountains (right); rugged high country dotted with alpine lakes as seen from U.S. 212 (far right); and a ptarmigan (below left).



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traverse through two life zones—sage-grassland and mixed evergreen forests. Several different ecosystems, such as wetlands, riparian areas and grasslands, are interspersed along the Byways. The alpine life zone is visible in the background from time to time along the routes. A variety of wildflowers adds seasonal accents to the outstanding landscape and provides attraction for photographers.

Nearby Yellowstone National Park is renowned for its wildlife, natural wonders and one-of-a-kind scenic attractions; however, the country covered by these three Scenic Byways also offers stunning high-country views, abundant wildlife, lakes, streams, waterfalls, canyons and lush valleys that compare with any other natural attractions in Wyoming—or the United States for that matter.

## Beartooth Scenic Byway

The Beartooth Scenic Byway, U.S. 212, is the northernmost route across the Shoshone National Forest in the Beartooth Mountains. The 70 miles of the Scenic Byway run from Red Lodge, Montana to the eastern border of Yellowstone National Park. Beginning at Red Lodge, the Absaroka-Beartooth Wilderness and the Custer and Gallatin national forests lie to the north as the road heads southwest into Wyoming. The North Absaroka Wilderness lies to the south as the road follows the Clarks Fork of the Yellowstone River toward Yellowstone Park. Allow at least three hours driving time from Red Lodge to Yellowstone Park on this Byway.

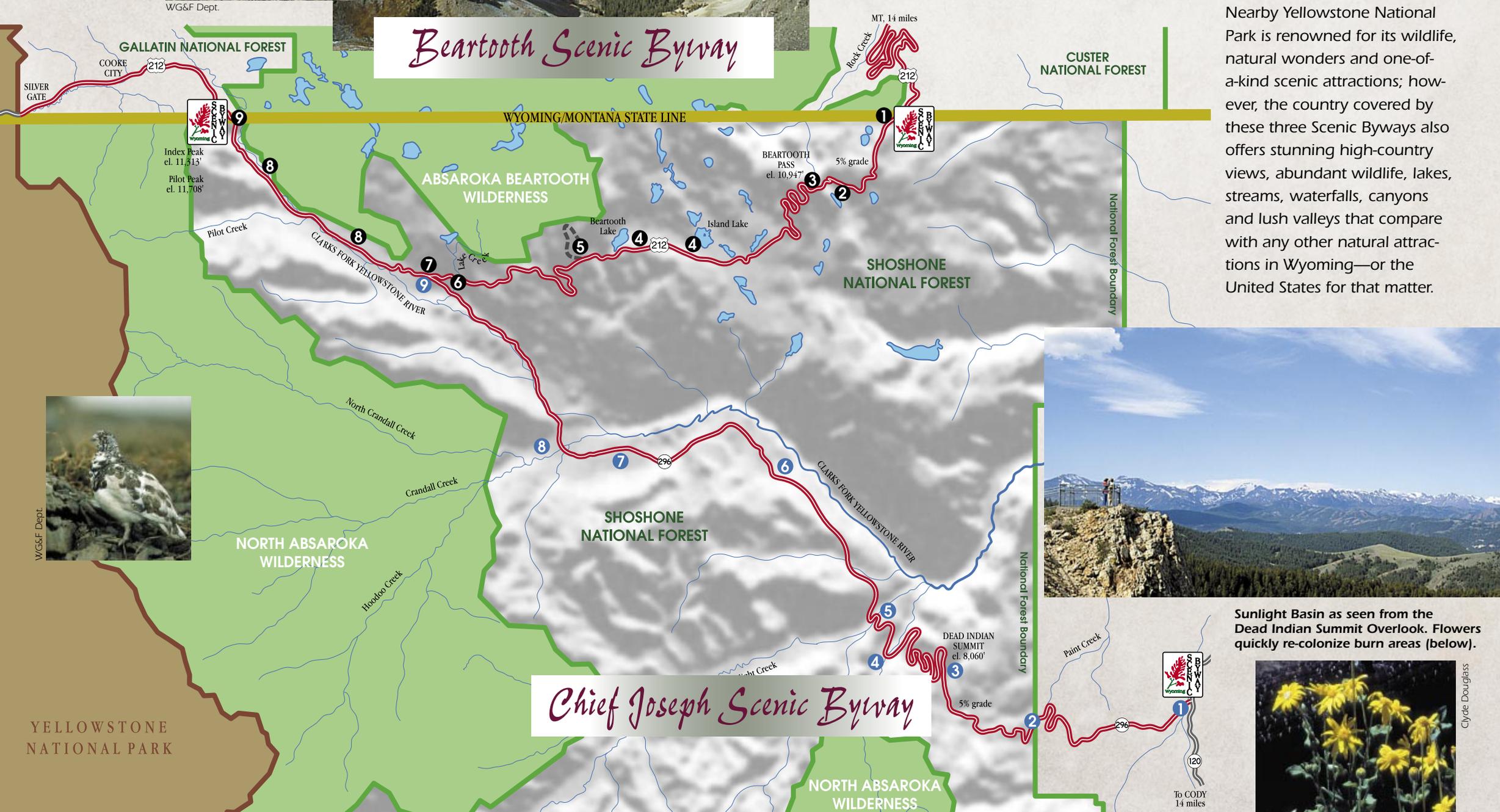
U.S. 212 is the highest paved, primary road in Wyoming, cresting at 10,947 foot Beartooth Pass. The scenery along this two-lane paved highway proves that the beauty of Yellowstone National Park does not diminish at its borders. The alpine country and high mountain lakes are accessible to highway travel only from late May to mid-October due to heavy snows.

Growing in the wet meadows are Indian Paintbrush, monkeyflower, senecio and buttercups, while lupine, arrowleaf, balsamroot, beardstongue and forget-me-nots are found in drier areas. Snowbanks often remain until August near Beartooth Pass and some remnants of drifts may remain all summer. A pink color often appears on the snow later in the summer caused by the decay of microscopic plants that grow on the surface of the snow.

**Services**—All services are available in Red Lodge, Cooke City and Silver Gate, Montana. Numerous Forest Service campgrounds along the Byway accommodate a variety of recreational vehicles and tent campers. A motel-campground-store-gas-station operates a few miles west of Beartooth Pass.

## Beartooth Scenic Byway

## Chief Joseph Scenic Byway



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Sunlight Basin as seen from the Dead Indian Summit Overlook. Flowers quickly re-colonize burn areas (below).



Clyde Douglass



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YELLOWSTONE NATIONAL PARK

## Special Attractions

**Red Lodge, Montana**—This historic mining town lies in a narrow valley along Rock Creek, a major drainage of the Beartooth Mountains. The first European settlers arrived there in the 1880s, attracted by the discovery of coal. Before the settlers, Crow Indians used the area as summer campgrounds.



Beartooth Lake and Beartooth Butte.

**Rock Creek/Granite Peak**—From the highway one can see Rock Creek in the valley below. This cascading mountain stream took thousands of years to carve its way through the Beartooth Mountains, which are 50-60 million years old. They were created when metamorphic rock was heaved upward, forming a huge plateau.

**Custer National Forest border**—About seven miles south of Red Lodge, the Scenic Byway enters the forest

and passes several campgrounds. The road switchbacks through the canyon, often hugging the mountain wall on one side and offering an unobstructed view of Rock Creek ribboning below on the other. After about eight miles of climbing, the road comes to the Rock Creek scenic overlook and offers a spectacular panoramic view of this vast mountain country.

(Beartooth Scenic Byway map bullets are black.)

### 1. Wyoming border/Shoshone National Forest.

Just under five miles past the overlook, the Byway enters Wyoming. Far below on a mountain shelf travelers can see Twin Lakes. Most alpine lakes visible from the highway can't be reached from the road.

**2. Beartooth Loop Trailhead.** A mile past a local ski area, a marker points the way to this trailhead—a hiking and horse packing route, one of many in the area. The route traverses the 350,488-acre North Absaroka Wilderness, though much of the area has no marked trails. Most of the existing trails are primarily used for horse travel. This country is part of the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem and wildlife is plentiful, including grizzly bears.

**3. Beartooth Pass.** Two miles past the trailhead marker is the highest point of the Scenic Byway. It's worth the time to stop and walk around the summit rest area to see the tundra-covered Beartooth Plateau, the highest contiguous stretch of highway in North America. Travelers are advised to take any light-headed sensation seriously—altitude sickness is a common phenomenon at these heights.

### 4. Island Lake/Beartooth Lake campgrounds.

The turnoffs for these campgrounds/trailheads lead the hiker into a trail system accessing many area alpine lakes. Automobile travelers usually use the established forest service campgrounds, but backpackers may venture farther into the backcountry and camp nearly anywhere in this vast wilderness. Nearby, at Top-of-the-World, is an appropriately named convenience store that provides gas, food and lodging.

# Chief Joseph Scenic Byway

The Chief Joseph Scenic Byway, Wyoming 296, links the town of Cody with the Beartooth Highway and the Northeast Gate of Yellowstone National Park. The

**5. Clay Butte Lookout.** When this dirt road is dry, automobiles can maneuver this four-mile side trip, but RVs or vehicles with trailers are not recommended. No guardrails block the view of the Absaroka Mountains or Clarks Fork Valley at this mountaintop perch, which once served as a fire lookout. The views from atop this old fire lookout are spectacular.

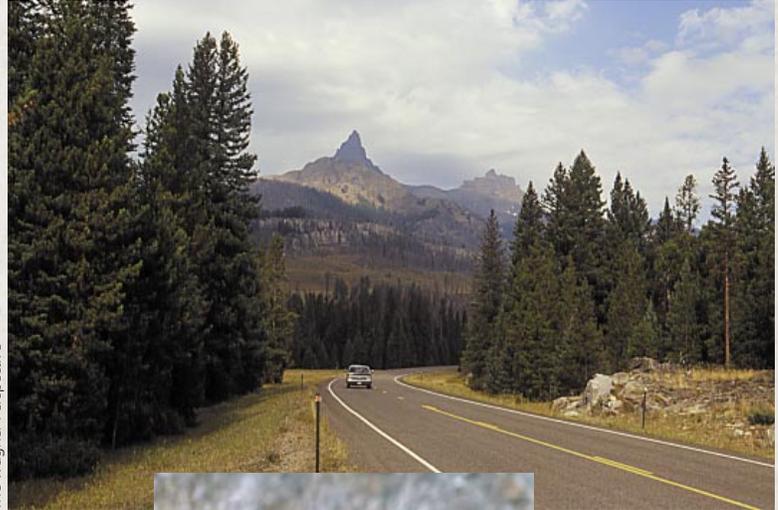
**6. Lake Creek Bridge and overlook.** About four and half miles past the Clay Butte overlook, another highway pullout offers a convenient stopping spot. A short hike provides views of a high waterfall along Lake Creek.

**7. Junction of Wyoming Highway 296.** About a mile past the waterfall, in the Clarks Fork Valley, the Beartooth Scenic Byway meets the western end of the Chief Joseph Scenic Byway.

**8. Crazy Creek/Fox Creek campgrounds.** The Forest Service campgrounds lie two and a half, and four and a half, miles west of the junction with Wyoming 296. The vegetation in the area has a charred look because this country was included in the great fires that burned much of Yellowstone National Park in 1988. The approach to the Montana border offers a look to the south at Pilot and Index peaks, elevation 11,708 feet.

**9. Montana border/Gallatin National Forest.** The Chief Joseph campground, which features wildlife exhibits, is visible as the Byway re-enters Montana. Colter and Soda Buttes campgrounds are just down the road. The towns of Cooke City and Silver Gate were founded as mining towns, but today tourism drives them, and their services are a welcome sight for travelers about to enter the vast Yellowstone National Park.

**Yellowstone National Park/Wyoming border**—The Scenic Byway ends at the Park border and becomes a Yellowstone National Park road. A ranger station and fee collection booth are located at the gate to the Park. A short distance into the Park, the road leaves Montana and re-enters Wyoming.



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Index and Pilot Peaks along the Beartooth Scenic Byway (above) and a foraging silver-tip grizzly bear.

route crosses the Shoshone National Forest through the Absaroka Mountains to the Clarks Fork Valley. The 47 paved miles of the Scenic Byway run from the junction with U.S. 120, 17 miles north of Cody, northwest to their connection with U.S. 212, the Beartooth Highway. The Beartooth Mountains and the Clarks Fork of the Yellowstone River lie to the north of the road, and the Absaroka Mountains and North Absaroka Wilderness are to the south. Allow one hour minimum driving time over this stretch of Byway.

The most predictable times to travel this highway are during the summer and fall. During the winter months snow plows keep the roadway open to just east of the entrance to Yellowstone National Park. The road is at



Trail riders crossing a creek in the Sunlight Basin (above) and red rock formations along the route to Dead Indian Summit (right).



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times steep and winding, and boasts the highest highway bridge in Wyoming—over Sunlight Creek. The road crests at 8,060-foot Dead Indian Pass. The Pass is a good place to observe some 25 rugged peaks rising more than 12,000 feet above sea level.

**Services**—All services are available in Cody. Numerous Forest Service campgrounds can accommodate a variety of recreational vehicles and tent campers. Minimal services (gasoline, small store, restaurant) are available at the small settlement of Crandall and at the Painter Store at the junction of U.S. 212 and Wyoming 296.

## Special Attractions

**Cody**—The town of Cody is the Wyoming gateway to all three of these Scenic Byways. This bustling tourism center is named after its favorite son, William F. Cody, better known as Buffalo Bill. His legacy is everywhere in the community and culminates at the Buffalo Bill Historical Center, a “must see” for any visitor to the area. Cody is the only town in Wyoming that hosts a nightly rodeo from June 1 through August 31.

(Chief Joseph Scenic Byway map bullets are blue)

**1. Wyoming Highway 296, the Chief Joseph Scenic Byway.** The Byway departs Wyoming 120 north of Cody and ventures west and north. The road was named for Chief Joseph of the Nez Perce Indian Tribe. Interpretive signs situated along the Byway describe his significance to Wyoming and to the history of the United States. The Nez Perce Historic Trail parallels the highway and is noted with unique markers.

**2. Shoshone National Forest border.** About eight miles west of the start of the Scenic Byway, the road rises, leaves the grassy plains and passes through ever-thickening pines to meet the border of the Shoshone National Forest. The Forest comprises 3,800 square miles of summer and winter public recreational opportunities. A few sites within the corridor provide day-use recreational opportunities.

### 3. Dead Indian Summit Overlook.

At an elevation of 8,060 feet, Dead Indian Summit Overlook, a paved turnout at the high point of the Byway, provides a spectacular panorama of the Absaroka and Beartooth mountains. The 220-degree view from this point is among the most dramatic in the West and is a major attraction along this Byway. Various legends claim the origin of this famous Wyoming placename. Most versions of the legends agree that a skirmish between early prospectors or the U.S. Army and a party of Bannock Indians occurred here in 1878. One of the Bannocks died and was left at the summit. A totally different version says one of the mountain peaks off in the distance looks like the profile of a Native American. A good imagination always enhances a Wyoming vacation. At the first switchback below the pass summit is a small pullout that allows a view into the canyon of the Clarks Fork Yellowstone River, Wyoming’s only designated Wild and Scenic River.

**4. Dead Indian Campground.** This campground is one of several managed by the Forest Service. It marks the beginning of a trailhead leading to some of the

wildest and most pristine areas in America, accessible only on foot or horseback. Hundreds of square miles of public land provide recreational opportunities year-round. Fishing, hiking, hunting, off-road vehicle use, horseback riding, snowmobiling and Nordic skiing, along with camping, picnicking, photography and just plain nature-viewing complete an a la carte menu for this area. Guide books and maps are available in Cody and Yellowstone Park.

**5. Sunlight Creek Bridge.** When water battles rock, water always wins, as evidenced by this deep gorge cut in the solid rock by Sunlight Creek. To cross this immense gorge, the highest bridge in Wyoming was constructed in 1986. A highway pullout allows a place to take a closer view of this award-winning bridge. It's an engineering feat and an attractive structure, too.

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Virtually all of the area around this Byway has been affected by the action of glaciers. Glaciers rounded the Beartooth Mountains and formed the flat-bottomed valleys like Sunlight Basin. Each spring and summer the water from melting snowpack tumbles down the mountain sides, joins larger streams and tributaries and eventually pours into waterways like Sunlight and Crandall creeks. Other forces of nature—including wind and gravity—help the water erode the topography, and the resulting sediments are carried east—toward the Atlantic Ocean!

**6. Clarks Fork of the Yellowstone River.** The Byway reveals a quick view of the gorge of the Clarks Fork Yellowstone River, as deep as 1,200 feet, visible where the water has eroded the rock. Spectacular views abound. Fall is an especially picturesque time for this drive when the aspen leaves blaze yellow and orange against a quilt of dark green pine and spruce.

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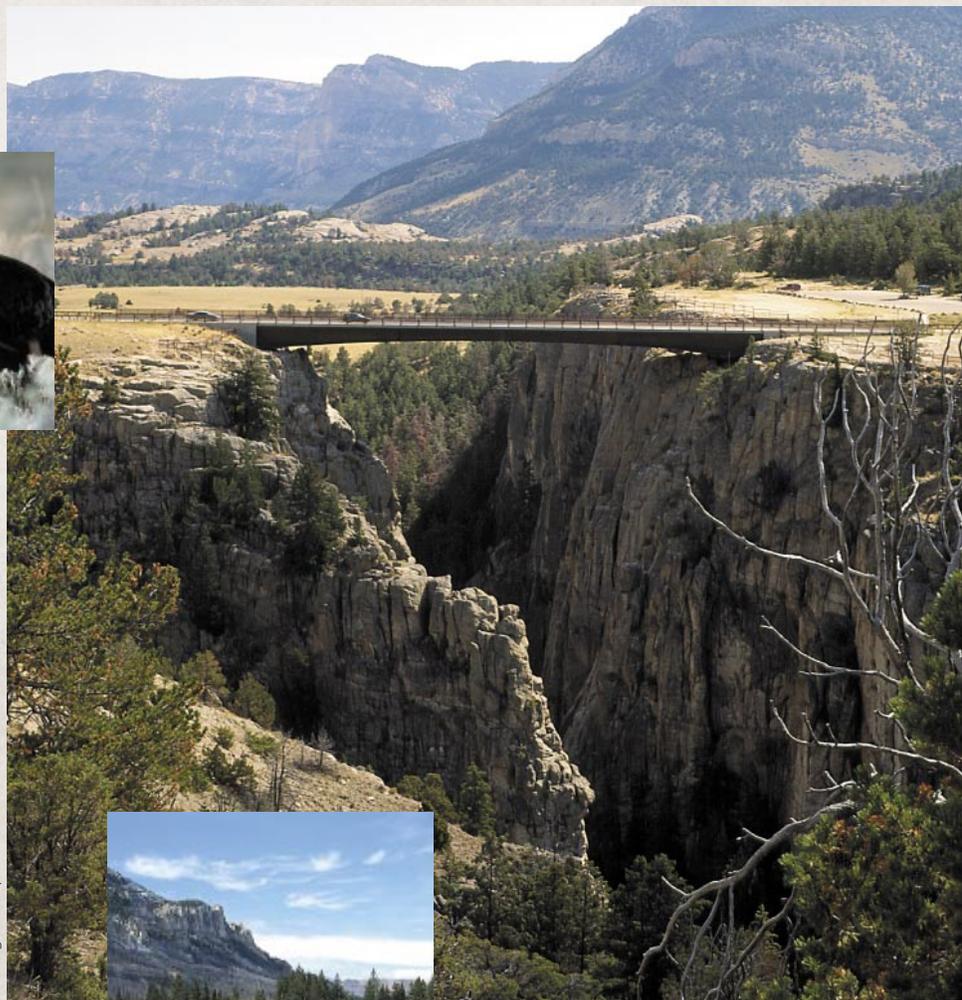


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**7. Swamp Lake Botanical Area.** Located below Cathedral Cliffs is a wetland and ideal location to observe an occasional sandhill crane or trumpeter swan along with a host of waterfowl and shore birds. Rare plant species, warm springs and fishing opportunities make this a site worth visiting.

**8. Crandall Creek Area.** The route has now completed its steep descent, and lakes and marshes become



Golden Eagle (above left), Sunlight Bridge and Sunlight Creek Gorge (above), and Swamp Lake Botanical Area (left).

visible. The river flows near the highway at this point; this is a great section of river to fish or perhaps see a moose or other wildlife. Crandall Creek Ranger Station, Lake Creek, and Hunter Creek campgrounds are all nearby. Even though the river is rough and wild here, trout anglers and white water kayakers find spots to pursue their recreation.

**9. The Beartooth Scenic Byway.** This route forms the east-west crossbar to this three-way intersection, signaling the end of the Chief Joseph Scenic Byway. To the east lie the Beartooth Mountains and Red Lodge, Montana. To the west is Yellowstone National Park.

## Buffalo Bill Cody Scenic Byway

The Buffalo Bill Cody Scenic Byway, U.S. 14/16/20, follows the North Fork of the Shoshone River through scenic Wapiti Valley to the East Entrance of Yellowstone National Park. The 27 miles of paved Scenic Byway start about 25 miles west of Cody at the Shoshone National Forest border. Normal driving time from the forest boundary to the Park is approximately 45 minutes.

**Services**—All traveler services are available in Cody. Food, lodging and horseback services are available at commercially operated lodges along this Scenic Byway. In addition, numerous Forest Service campgrounds along the route easily accommodate most recreational vehicles and tent campers.

## Special Attractions

**Cody**—All travelers on their way to Yellowstone National Park via its East Entrance pass through the town of Cody—a vacationer's paradise with accommodations, restaurants and outdoor activities catering to a variety of interests. Raft trips

**William "Buffalo Bill" Cody (right), bighorn sheep (inset) and North Fork of the Shoshone River (bottom).**



Wyoming Division of Cultural Resources



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are available on the Shoshone River along the Scenic Byway, both above and below Buffalo Bill Reservoir.

**Shoshone Canyon**—Departing Cody westward, U.S. 14/16/20 follows the Shoshone River between Rattlesnake and Cedar mountains. These mountains rise



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Horseback riders enjoying an autumn outing along the North Fork of the Shoshone River.

## Buffalo Bill Cody Scenic Byway

3,700 feet above the canyon floor and surrounding terrain.

**Buffalo Bill Dam, Buffalo Bill Reservoir and State Park**—Buffalo Bill Dam was the highest dam in the world when it was built in 1910. It was also the first concrete arch dam ever constructed. The Buffalo Bill Dam Information Center, located at the site, offers visitors a wildlife exhibit and area touring information.

Wyoming's premier wind surfing lake, made possible by the Buffalo Bill Dam, is the dominant feature of Buffalo Bill State Park. The Park offers boating, camping, fishing, picnicking, wildlife viewing and a paradise for geology buffs.

**Plants and Wildlife**—In the Wapiti Valley and the Shoshone and Absaroka National Forest areas that surround this Byway are a greater number and variety of plants and wild animals in their natural habitat than anywhere else in the 48 contiguous states. Public preservation of American lands all started right in this region of

Wyoming with the creation of the nation's first National Park—Yellowstone, and the first National Forest—Shoshone.

Opportunities exist to discover, view and photograph some 60 animal species including black and grizzly bear, moose, deer, elk, buffalo, antelope, coyote, pine marten, badger, ground squirrel and river otter. Bald and golden eagles, sandhill cranes, white pelicans, owls, ducks, trumpeter swans and many other forms of bird life also make this area home.

The North Fork of the Shoshone River, running parallel to the Buffalo Bill Cody Scenic Byway, is truly a blue ribbon trout fishing waterway.

**Wapiti Valley**—The road to Yellowstone winds through ranch land, hay fields and weathered rock—formed into bizarre shapes known as "hoodoos." All along the North Fork of the Shoshone River road signs point out colorful rock formations described as "Playground of the Gods," "Chinese Wall," "Palisades," "Holy City," "Chimney Rock," and "Henry Ford Rock" that test visitors' imaginations.

## 1. Wapiti Ranger Station and Shoshone National Forest Boundary.

The Forest boundary is the official beginning of the Buffalo Bill Cody Scenic Byway. At the Wapiti Ranger Station is the Grizzly Bear Interpretive Facility—a great place to learn about grizzly bear habitat, the habitat of many other local wildlife species, and recreational opportunities in the area.

Shoshone National Forest was designated in 1891 by the federal government as the Yellowstone Park Timber-



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The “Holy City” rock formation in Wapiti Valley along U.S. 14/16/20 (above) and the North Fork of the Shoshone River (left).



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land Reserve and it holds the distinction of being the first National Forest in the United States. The Wapiti Ranger Station is the first—and oldest—ranger station built in the United States, constructed in 1903. A stop here is important for vacationers who plan to camp, picnic or hike in the Shoshone National Forest. Back country enthusiasts are especially encouraged to visit the Center to learn how to avoid bear encounters. Informational brochures are available. The facility features modern restrooms.

## 2. Forest Service Campgrounds.

Many campgrounds, including Big Game, Wapiti, Elk Fork, Clearwater, Rex Hale, Newton Creek, Eagle Creek and Three-Mile, are within a few miles of each other along this stretch of the Scenic Byway. In addition to camping, they offer hiking trailheads and access to some great fishing in the nearby river. Horse Creek, Blackwater, Newton Springs and Sleeping Giant picnic areas provide improved spots to enjoy a picnic lunch or fish the North Fork of the Shoshone River.

**3. Blackwater Fire Memorials.** About 13 miles into the forest, two markers commemorate the sites where fifteen men died fighting an intense forest fire on August 21, 1937. The first stone and brass memorial is just beyond the Blackwater Pond Picnic Ground. The second marker is a few miles farther, along a fairly gentle trail that passes through rejuvenated, new-growth forest.

**4. Washakie Wilderness.** Sky-scratching mountain peaks, some up to 13,000 feet, cap this wilderness

country that encompasses 1,100 square miles. Trails leading off the Buffalo Bill Scenic Byway beckon hikers and horseback riders. One popular route is a long trail past the Blackwater Firefighter Memorials that leads to the Blackwater Natural Bridge.

**5. Pahaska Teepee.** “Pahaska” was Buffalo Bill’s Indian name. At the confluence of the North Fork of the Shoshone and Middle Creek is a well-preserved relic from his life. It’s a steep-roofed, log structure that can be visited by modern-day travelers. Bill Cody used the main building as a hunting lodge, and a guest house was available for travelers on their way to Yellowstone. From November to May, the Byway beyond Pahaska Teepee is closed to wheeled vehicles but open to over-snow vehicles.

**6. Middle Creek/East Gate.** This bubbling stream accompanies the Scenic Byway route for a short distance to the East Gate of Yellowstone National Park. A National Park Service Ranger Station and fee collection booth are located at this end of the Scenic Byway.

**Fortress Mountain towers above Wapiti Valley and the Blackwater Fire Memorial area.**



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American Bison or “buffalo.”

## Byway Travel Tips

- ▶ Drive times are approximately an hour on the Buffalo Bill and Chief Joseph Byways, and three hours on the Beartooth Byway. Allow additional time to enjoy the many scenic features the Byways have to offer.
- ▶ The Buffalo Bill Cody and Chief Joseph Scenic Byways are open year-round while the Beartooth Scenic Byway is closed during the winter.
- ▶ These routes traverse two of Wyoming’s famous mountain ranges. The steepest grade road grades on the Buffalo Bill Cody, Chief Joseph and Beartooth Scenic Byways do not exceed 5-6%.
- ▶ All three routes are modern, two-lane paved roads and have a number of turnouts, picnic areas and scenic views.
- ▶ Vehicles tuned for sea level may not perform as well at higher mountain elevations. Be prepared to pull over and allow faster traffic to pass if necessary.
- ▶ While driving in the mountains, use lower gears going uphill to avoid overheating the vehicle engine and use lower gears going downhill to avoid excessive wear on vehicle brakes.

# Byway Information

Shoshone National Forest maps may be obtained at the Forest Service offices in Cody and Wapiti.

Additional Wyoming travel and wildlife information may be obtained from:

**Tourism Division—Wyoming Business Council**  
**I-25 at College Drive**  
**Cheyenne, WY 82002**  
**(307) 777-7777 or 1-800-225-5996**

**Cody Chamber of Commerce**  
**836 Sheridan**  
**Cody, WY 82414**  
**PH: (307) 587-2777**

Open: summer 8 a.m. – 6 p.m. daily,  
10 a.m. – 3 p.m. Sundays

**Buffalo Bill Dam Visitor Center**  
Open, summer 8 a.m. – 8 p.m. daily.

**Shoshone National Forest**  
**808 Meadow Lane**  
**Cody, WY 82414**  
**PH: (307) 527-6241**

**Wapiti Ranger Station**  
**Visitor Center**  
**Wapiti, WY 82450**



Horse Creek Studio

Indian Paintbrush,  
Wyoming's State  
Flower.

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