

Welcome

The West Elk Loop Scenic and Historic Byway has been described by a forest ranger as "the closest you can come to a wilderness experience in a passenger car." The 204 miles of two-lane roads through rural western Colorado touches three designated Wilderness Areas and passes through thousands of acres of National Forest. The road skirts canyon rims, follows white water rivers, plunges into deep forests, and traverses desert and sagebrush plains.

The West Elk Loop provides immersion in the scenery, history and culture of Western Colorado. The Byway follows the narrow alignment of long gone railroad grades, the faint wagon tracks of the earliest explorers and the ancient pathways of Ute Indians. Recreational opportunities abound with skiing, hiking, backpacking, photography, cycling, rock climbing and wildlife viewing.

Please Be Kind

We need your help to maintain the features that make this a special place: its scenery, peace and quiet, wildlife and history. Following a few simple guidelines will ensure that future visitors will enjoy their trip as much as you enjoyed yours.

- Pack out your trash (and a little extra). Remember, it's the little things that count — pop-tops, cigarette butts, and food scraps.
- Stay on existing travel routes. Driving off of the road can destroy vegetation and cause erosion.
- Archeological resources depend on you for their long-term preservation. Laws prohibit collecting arrowheads and other archeological and historical souvenirs on federal lands. Please respect the past.
- Some sites along the Byway are located on private property. Bureau of Land Management and U.S. Forest Service maps generally depict the location of private lands. Avoid trespassing on private property.
- Enjoy and protect your public lands.

Then and Now

The West Elk Loop derives its name from the West Elk Mountains, which the Loop circumnavigates. Major geological upheavals created the rugged landscape and rare natural beauty encompassed by the Loop.

The northern tail of the Loop is defined by the Crystal River Valley and the massive sedimentary layers of the Colorado Plateau. Rising dramatically above Carbondale is Mt. Sopris (12,953 ft.), an igneous intrusive formation that rose 70 million years ago and weathered into the formidable mountain peak that rises dramatically above Carbondale and the lower Crystal Valley.

Aspect, elevation and climate determine the great variety of creatures living along the West Elk Loop. The Byway contains numerous micro-climates, temperatures can vary so be prepared with jackets and layers. Carbondale has relatively scant snowfall, while Redstone and Marble are often inundated. Although Paonia is known as the "Banana Belt," nearby Crested Butte and Kebler Pass receive up to 400 inches of snow a year and are lush and verdant in summer.

Evidence of human life followed the retreat of the last glacial Ice Age 10,000 years ago. The Utes, indigenous people of the region, were moved onto reservations by the early 1880s, a result of increasing pressures from white settlement of the area. To find out more detailed information about the Ute people, consider a visit to the Ute Indian Museum in Montrose (phone 970-249-3098).

Land Conservation on the Byway

We need the land for good health — places to play and explore, to exercise and let go of stress. We need the land for vibrant communities — gardens, parks, and trails that draw people, where neighbors get together. We need the stories rooted in the land, so we can explore who we are. We need the beauty of the land to inspire us.

— Land Trust Alliance



Carbondale

“Gateway To Crystal Valley”

Carbondale stands on an alluvial plain created by the Crystal and Roaring Fork Rivers. The People, the Nuche, habited these valleys for 15,000 yrs. They may have even followed the sloths and mastodons into Snowmass, in early times. Nuche are part of the same People who were known for their Clovis Point technology.

In 1860, Captain Richard Sopris, for whom the landmark peak, Mt. Sopris (12,953 ft.), is named, explored unsuccessfully for gold. Later, he became Governor of Colorado. He had good taste in mountains.

Surveyor Ferdinand Hayden of the U.S. Geological Survey visited the area in 1873-74, providing the first photographs of the area by the legendary photographer William Henry Jackson. William Dinkel, from Virginia, opened his first store in Satank in 1881, then moved to Main Street, becoming a noted businessman and politician.

As the town grew, a rough stage road built by Aspen silver mining magnate Jerome B. Wheeler soon connected Carbondale to Aspen. By 1883, 20 families had settled, and by 1887, two railroads - the Denver & Rio Grande and the Colorado Midland - passed through Carbondale. In 1886, the Crystal River Toll Company built a road along the Crystal River to Redstone.

By 1888, Carbondale, the town was officially founded, population 400. In 1892, the Crystal River Railroad Company was incorporated and a year later pushed rails as far as Avalanche Creek, then on to Redstone in 1898. The railroad grade can be seen across the river from Highway 133.

Carbondale's economy includes a focus on a healthy lifestyle, the arts and festivals such as Potato Day and Mountain Fair, held yearly. In 2016, Carbondale became a Colorado Creative District. Be sure to visit the Carbondale Museum, the old jail, and the Thompson House Museum, a National Registered Historic Property, located across Highway 133. The ranch estate, dating from 1896, seems frozen in time.

Biking
Fishing
Hiking
Camping
Horseback Riding
Picnic Areas
X-Country Skiing
Rock/Ice Climbing

Crystal River Hatchery

The Colorado Parks and Wildlife built the hatchery in 1941, which is the largest broodfish unit in Colorado. For the past 25 years, the unit has produced an average of over 14 million rainbow trout eggs per year. Fish from the Crystal River unit are stocked all over Colorado. Once the eggs have hatched and the fish have reached the 3 to 4 month fingerling stage, they are moved outside the hatchery and placed in cement raceways. Other raceways contain fish of different sizes, some up to 32 inches long and weighing 5 pounds (the broodfish). Spawning season (the time when fish produce their eggs) runs from early September through the middle of February. The crew may be observed "taking eggs" 5 days a week during the peak of spawning. Visitors are welcome to stroll around the hatchery grounds, feed the fish, watch the spawning operation and ask questions of staff. Please leave pets and fishing equipment in your vehicle.

Redstone

"Ruby of the Rockies"



Between Carbondale and Redstone on Highway 133, the Crystal River cascades through a granite gap. Across the river Filoha Meadows is a well-known elk and big horn Sheep refuge in the winter. Redstone is a National Historic District between the tall red cliffs of the Crystal River Valley.



John Osgood, born in Brooklyn in 1851 and orphaned at nine, first visited the Crystal Valley in 1882. He acquired an old mining claim and developed it into a personal fortune. Osgood built the town of Redstone modeling it on European architecture. Original worker's cottages still line the boulevard. The imposing Redstone Inn provided housing for bachelors. Just up river, Cleveholm Manor, also known as the Redstone Castle, was Osgood's palatial home now open for popular tours.

A depot, just completed in 2015 in Redstone's Elk Park provides a welcome to the town with historical and regional information for visitors, with ample parking and garden areas along the river. The historic coke ovens line highway 133 nearby. Visitors can cross a pedestrian bridge and enjoy Redstone Park and its playground area for children in the heart of town. Redstone is a walking town, with shops, galleries, and restaurants along the mile-long boulevard. In the winter months an ice skating rink and warming hut are well used by all ages.

Marble

Marble is home to the Yule Marble Company (est. 1906) a quarry operated by the Colorado Stone Quarries. The pure white stone cut from this quarry was used in numerous monuments and buildings across the USA, including the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Arlington National Cemetery, the facade for the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, DC, and the state capitol buildings in Denver. During its heyday, it was the largest marble mill in the world, and was served by the Crystal River Railroad from Carbondale. Today quarry debris in town is a reminder of the important role this town has played in the construction of numerous buildings that are on the National Register of Historic Places.

Summer events include an art festival, piano recitals, the Marble Sculpting Symposium, as well as an opportunity to visit with artisans in their studios, galleries and shops.

Hiking
Fishing
Wildlife Viewing
Camping
Picnic Areas
X-Country Skiing
Snowmobiling
Biking

McClure Pass

South of Redstone, the Crystal Valley flattens into a broad expanse of alluvial basins and glacial fill beneath majestic Chair Mountain (12,721 ft.), a glacially sculpted igneous intrusive formation. Highway 133 - and the West Elk Loop - veers west and switchbacks up McClure Pass (8,755 ft.).

Before it was improved in 1947, McClure Pass was little more than a rough wagon road. The Ute Indians had used the pass as their route between the Muddy and Crystal Valleys. "Mac" McClure built and ran a two-story hotel at nearby Bogan Flats on the Crystal Railroad line in the early 1900s. The pass is named for him. The original road, easily identified by a series of switchbacks, served for many years as a cattle trail.

McClure Pass crosses an ancient shoreline of coal-bearing Mesaverde sandstone and Wasatch Formation, which continues through the Muddy Region and into the North Fork Valley. The Muddy Region lies west of the dramatic escarpments of Ragged Peak (12,641 ft.) and is comprised of a vast area of rolling hills and mesas where Muddy Creek flows chocolate brown and gives the region its name.

Paonia State Park

The Bureau of Reclamation built Paonia Reservoir in 1960 to provide flood control on Muddy Creek and to act as a silt trap for the creek before it flows into the North Fork River. Water in the reservoir irrigates over 12,000 acres of farm and ranch land in Paonia and Hotchkiss.

Paonia State Park is managed by the Colorado Parks and Wildlife, and the US Bureau of Reclamation. Facilities include primitive campsites, picnic area and boat ramp (bring your own drinking water). Boating and fishing are popular activities, and the nearby Raggeds Wilderness offers many miles of hiking trails.

Mixed conifer forest, aspen and Gambel oak shrublands are common in the park, providing shelter for birds such as hawks, eagles and songbirds. Mule deer and elk are commonly seen, as are cottontails, marmots, raccoons, skunks and coyotes.



Somerset

Somerset, a coal mining town founded in the mid-1880s, is named for Somersetshire, England. Originally a “tent city,” Somerset became a permanent town in the early 1900s with the arrival of the Rio Grande Railroad.

By 1910, 135 miners worked at Somerset and lived in 85 company-owned cottages, with a boarding house for single men. As the coal beds were developed, Somerset became the largest underground mine in Colorado. In 1911, Somerset still served only by railroad, was believed to have the only US Post Office without a wagon road connecting it to other towns in the region.

Somerset was a classic company town that was built for one purpose - the mining of coal. As you drive through Somerset, look for miners cottages that line the narrow streets. In the 1950s, these homes were transferred to private ownership, ending the era of the company town.

Bowie

Bowie, named for Scottish coal baron Alexander Bowie, sprang up in the early 1900s several miles east of Paonia. Built around a coal mine, the town included a boarding house, bunk house, stable, blacksmith shop and steam-powered plant. The mine reached peak production in 1920 with 110 miners producing 103,622 tons.

The vagaries of the coal economy eventually conspired to shut down the Bowie mine. In 1974, the entire operation - town and all - was sold to the Adolph Coors Company. Local support encouraged saving the old Bowie schoolhouse. It was moved to Paonia and now serves as an exhibit at the Paonia Historical Society Museum.

Biking
Fishing
Camping
Hunting
Wildlife Viewing
Orchards
Winter and
Summer Trails

Paonia

Pioneer Samuel Wade gets most of the credit for settling Paonia in 1881, carrying delicate fruit trees with him. He found a gentle climate, rich river valley and fertile mesas. He and Enos T. Hotchkiss planted the first orchards in 1882. Paonia was incorporated in 1902 and named after the peony flower. Paonia is a mile off Highway 133 in the North Fork Valley. That same year, the Denver & Rio Grande Railroad pushed into the North Fork, thus starting a boom in fruit production as growers could ship their award-winning fruit across the nation.

The North Fork Valley is now recognized as "The Farm-to-Table Capital of Colorado" because of its focus on producing organic fruits and veggies. The land also provides grazing for livestock, deer and elk. The town, part of a Colorado Creative District, attracts artists, musicians and crafts people, and is becoming an entrepreneurial hub for artisanal food, wine and beer. The local theater, the Paradise, is a venue not only for movies but also for live music, original plays and other community events.

A lively town with a strong volunteer ethic, Paonia is home to several thriving nonprofits, including KVNF public radio, Solar Energy International, and High Country News. It hosts events such as a traditional July 4th Cherry Days celebration, Mountain Harvest Festival, Oktoberfest, and a Christmas downtown celebration that features a craft market, hay rides and visits with Santa.

Preserving the past

On July 4, 1974, the North Fork Historical and Preservation Society was established to protect historical resources of the Paonia and North Fork area. An interpretive museum and the relocated schoolhouse from Bowie, a defunct company town for coal miners, are located near the Highway 133 entrance to Paonia.



Hotchkiss

Enos T. Hotchkiss was one of the first white men to set eyes on the North Fork Valley when he rode in on horseback in 1879.

Hotchkiss staked out a ranch in 1881 and established the North Fork as a prominent cattle/sheep and fruit-growing region.

The Duke brothers, followed Mr. Hotchkiss in 1881 and planted 500 acres with apples, peaches and pears. The Dukes and Mr. Hotchkiss owned lots in town and some on surrounding mesas.

Hotchkiss provided a diverse economy that included cattle, fruit and mining. The Denver & Rio Grande Railroad introduced rail transport by 1902. The Hotchkiss Fruit Company promoted Hotchkiss fruit as far away as New York City and Chicago.

Today, Hotchkiss is a rural, quiet community of about 1,000 residents. Its livelihood is primarily agriculture and tourism. Hotchkiss is home to the North Fork Pool and Recreation District with adjoining Soccer Fields. The Delta County Fairgrounds are located in Hotchkiss, home to the County Fair the first full week of August, and a Farm to Fiddle Festival downtown that same week. Summer kicks off in May with the Hotchkiss Sheep Camp Stock Dog Trials, and ends in September most years with the Colorado Grand, a classic car tour.

The Hotchkiss/Crawford Historical Museum

The Hotchkiss Historical Society, established 1975, operates the local history museum. The museum displays a wide array of photographs of the early years, and features exhibits that tell the story of the settlement and development of the area. A nearby cabin is furnished as it might have been during the frontier days. Of special interest is the extensive Indian and barbed wire collections, saddles, and antique quilts and kitchen items that will invite the visitor to reminisce what life might have been like in days gone by.



Biking
Dining
Wildlife Viewing
Museums
Orchards
Wineries
Galleries
Winter and
Summer Trails

Crawford

Crawford, on Highway 92, was founded primarily on cattle, hay and grain. Too high for economically viable fruit growing, and far from North Fork coal deposits, Crawford was cattle country, and still is. The region was first settled by cattlemen who grazed herds of shorthorn cattle on summer mountain pastures and wintered them on the "dobies," or adobe hills, that range in gentle undulations down toward the North Fork Valley.

Crawford was established on the Smith Fork of the Gunnison in the early 1880s. The town was named for Captain George Crawford, an early pioneer who, in passing through in 1882, remarked to town founder Harry Grant that the growing community needed a post office. The post office was established in 1887.

Today, Crawford remains a ranching and agricultural community - quiet, rural and remote. Crawford Pioneer Days is held annually to celebrate the heritage of the community. Tourism adds to the local economy thanks to recreational amenities at Crawford State Park and the Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Park. Crawford provides the necessary attractions and support for a great recreational experience.

Look for a prominent butte to the east of Crawford. Needle Rock is the weathered remains of a volcanic neck. An interpretive trail near its base provides an opportunity to explore.



NORTH FORK VALLEY



Crawford State Park

The Bureau of Reclamation built Crawford Reservoir in 1963 for storing high water runoff for irrigation. Located one mile south of Crawford on Highway 92, it is managed by the Colorado Parks and Wildlife and has two campgrounds, Clear Fork and Iron Creek. Both campgrounds have accessible facilities, showers and flush toilets, but only Iron Creek has water and electric hookups at each campsite. There are two boat ramps with loading docks, a ski beach, a swimming beach and hiking trails. Entry fees and camping fees are charged. A visitor center offers information, modern facilities and exhibits.

Geology of the Area

The many mesas of the southern West Elks near the Black Canyon are remnants of mud flows from the West Elk Volcano. The area lies on the lower aspects of a sloping ramp fashioned with the rising of the Gunnison Uplift, a major geologic upheaval that elevated Precambrian rock, where the Gunnison River sliced a deep canyon over the last two million years. These flat mesas were later capped by "welded tuff," the residue of volcanic ash from the San Juan Mountains to the south, which hardened into an extremely durable rock. Softer rock and adobe mud eroded from the sides of the mesas, leaving more durable table-tops separated by sheer walls and canyons.



Biking
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Wildlife Viewing

Depending on the time of year and time of day, you are likely to see wildlife at any point along the Byway. In wintertime, you may see large herds of elk and deer in the Gunnison Basin or in pastures in the Crawford area.

There are a few things to remember when observing wildlife. Your car makes a good blind for observation, especially for animals you see along the highway. Many times the animals will tolerate your presence as long as you remain in the vehicle. Use binoculars or a spotting scope to get a closer view and thereby keep a comfortable distance from the animals.

Wildlife include elk, mule deer, black bear, bighorn sheep, mountain goat, mountain lion, bobcat, ermine, beaver, muskrat, red fox and pine marten. A profusion of wildflowers includes Colorado columbine, lupine, wild geranium, bog orchids and hundreds more. Lakes and streams are home to trout, kokanee salmon and mountain whitefish. Bird life is abundant with blue herons, Canada geese, bald and golden eagles, American dipper, gray jays, Steller's jays and hummingbirds.

When an animal changes its behavior as a result of your actions, you are too close. If you want to get photographs, use a telephoto lens for that close-up shot. Never chase or flush the animals to "improve" the photo.

To get a very detailed and delightful experience of the Byway, pick up the book *"Elk Mountains Odyssey"* by Paul Andersen and Ken Johnson. The book is available for purchase at Visitor Centers and in some area bookstores. You may also order a copy of the book by calling the Western Colorado Interpretive Association at (970) 874-6695.





The Black Canyon of the Gunnison

Gunnison Gorge National Conservation Area (NCA)



The NCA encompasses diverse and scenic landscapes along the Gunnison River. Within the NCA, the Gunnison Gorge Wilderness provides a dramatic and challenging setting for whitewater boating, Gold Medal trout fishing, hiking, rafting, backpacking, and wildlife photography. Other areas within the NCA offer a multitude of trails and primitive roads for hiking or for your OHV, mountain bike, or horse.



Access to the NCA is possible from Highway 50 on the west side and from Highway 92 on the east side. Due to the primitive roads and seasonal closures, visitors should call BLM (970-240-5300) for information prior to their trip. Special regulations and fees apply in the Wilderness.



Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Park

The North Rim is accessed via a signed turn-off on Highway 92, two miles south of Crawford. An 11-mile road (the last five miles are unpaved and closed in winter) climbs through ranching country to the canyon's rim. Your first stop should be the ranger station, where an orientation map is available.



Hikes into the inner-canyon are extremely strenuous and require a permit. The moderately difficult North Vista Trail follows the rim to Exclamation Point, which offers one of the most dramatic views to the river. Several easy trails along the rim drive lead to marked overlooks that provide breathtaking views of the canyon. The North Rim is especially popular with expert rock climbers, who are drawn to its sheer, high cliffs. A campground is located near the ranger station. The South Rim, accessed from Highway 50 east of Montrose, offers additional overlooks. A visitor center is open year around.

Hiking
Fishing
Wildlife Viewing
Camping
Horseback Riding
Picnic Areas
X-Country Skiing
Rock/Ice Climbing

Curecanti National Recreation Area

South of Crawford on Highway 92, the Byway meanders along the rim of the Black Canyon of the Gunnison. This fjord-like setting is home to the Crystal and Morrow Point Reservoirs within Curecanti National Recreation Area.

Picnic tables are available at Pioneer Point and trails lead to overlooks of the Curecanti Needle, once the icon for the Denver and Rio Grande's railroad "Scenic Line of the World". Beginning in 1882, narrow-gauge steam engines chugged their way along the canyon bottom pulling their loads of supplies and travelers between Gunnison and Montrose. The line was abandoned in 1949 and the 469-foot high Morrow Point Dam was completed in 1967



Zachary Frank / Alamy Stock Photo

Blue Mesa Reservoir, the largest body of water in Colorado, is Curecanti's centerpiece. It's 96 miles of shoreline offers year-round activities. Marinas and a Visitor Center are available at Lake Fork and Elk Creek. An anglers' paradise, the waters are rich in kokanee salmon, and rainbow, brown and lake trout.



Michael Underwood

On the north side of the reservoir, the weirdly eroded Dillion Pinnacles are the remnants of volcanic flows from the West Elk Mountains.



Gunnison

East of Blue Mesa Reservoir, the Gunnison River passes through a narrow canyon, then meanders into an open valley with the City of Gunnison at its center. Hay meadows intermixed with rolling hills of sage and rabbitbrush join the grasslands on the edges of town. These hills connect to pine-forested mountains surrounding the entire Gunnison Basin. Spectacular views of the West Elk and Fossil Ridge Wilderness Areas and the Continental Divide can be seen from town.

Deposits of placer gold and silver lured thousands of hardy miners seeking their fortune to the area in the 1860s through 1880s. The cattle industry prospered with the turn of the 20th Century, and many Gunnison ranches remain in operation today. It isn't unusual to encounter a cattle drive during spring and fall.

You can't drive into Gunnison without noticing the huge "W" on Tenderfoot Mountain, indicating this is the home of Western State Colorado University.

Gunnison attracts sportsmen year around and has an active summer visitor season. Fairs, recreational events, arts festivals, college conferences and community programs fill a busy summer calendar. Cattlemen's Days Rodeo, one of the oldest rodeos in Colorado, turns Gunnison into a cowboy's dream for one week every July.

Gunnison's two main streets are very wide, and if you're traveling through during winter you might observe "windrows," a center divider made of snow in the middle of the street. Tomichi Avenue (Highway 50) and Main Street (Highway 135) were constructed to handle "windrows" during the winter months. Gunnison is also known for the Gunnison Valley Observatory, Hartman Rocks Recreation Area and Whitewater Park where the annual celebration of the county's rivers takes place during the Gunnison River Festival.

Biking
Camping
Kayaking
Fishing
Wildlife Viewing
Museums
X-Country Skiing
Rodeos

Gunnison Pioneer Museum

The museum offers an opportunity to learn about ranching and homemaking from the late 1800s and early 1900s. A narrow-gauge steam train and depot are highlights amongst a dozen buildings from the area's past.



Almont

In 1893, Almont became a resort boasting restoring waters, an excellent climate and great fishing. The town had a post office, a railroad depot and a zinc mine that operated during World War I. At an annual fish fry in 1940, 10,000 guests turned out to hear Wendell Wilkie, a Republican presidential candidate, announce his campaign. Today, Almont is a popular summer resort offering rafting and fishing at the crossroads of two spectacular river valleys — the Taylor and East River.

Roaring Judy Hatchery

The fish hatchery is located along the East River north of Almont. Young salmon and trout can be viewed in the ponds and raceways, and in late October to early November visitors can view the milking and egg fertilization of Kokanee salmon. In spring and summer bird watchers can view a variety of shorebirds and songbirds along the marshy willow bottoms.



Crested Butte

“Wildflower Capital of Colorado”

The charming western Victorian town of Crested Butte nestles in a wide glaciated valley, surrounded by spectacular peaks. Crested Butte is known for friendly people, great arts, and abundant recreation enjoyed during the snowy winters, wildflower summers and vivid golden autumns.

In the 1860s, hopeful gold and silver miners found their way north to the valleys and gulches of the upper East River Valley. Crested Butte became a prominent supply depot, lumber producer and smelting center for the many mining camps that sprang up.

Crested Butte prospered initially from silver mining, but high quality coking-coal gave it staying power into the 1950s. Remnants of the coke ovens can still be seen on the east side of Big Mine Park at Third and Bellevue, near the skate park and ice rink.

In the early 1960s, Crested Butte was revived as a ski area, establishing recreation and tourism as the new economy. Preserving a rich history and opportunities for outdoor recreation are big priorities, as evidenced by the unpretentious authenticity of Crested Butte’s National Historic District and the miles of trails through acres of protected open space surrounding the town.

Crested Butte is also home to one of Colorado’s Creative Districts. An honor that only a few of the Colorado communities can claim The District was designated because of the dedication of locals to bring art front and center to create an economic benefit for the artists and the community.



Hiking
Fishing
Kayaking
Alpine Skiing
Windsurfing
Ice Climbing
Nordic Center
and More

New and old blend in interesting ways: beside the aged coke-ovens at Big Mine Park, a public skateboard park and Frisbee golf course entertain all summer and fall. Hockey rules the free ice rink come winter, alongside a great sledding hill and renowned Nordic Ski Center.

Crested Butte is the Colorado birthplace of mountain biking. The oldest mountain bike event in the world starts from Crested Butte every September - The Pearl Pass Tour to Aspen. Explore the Mountain Bike Hall of Fame housed inside Crested Butte's Mountain Heritage Museum. The museum is located in Tony's Conoco, a restored storefront at Elk Avenue and Fourth Street. Stop by the museum for a brochure and enjoy the self-guided walking tour or sign up for a guided walking tour.

Smartphone users can scan a decal found at historic buildings to begin the walking tour.

Recreation Along the Byway

Opportunities abound for a wide range of recreational activities along the West Elk Loop Scenic and Historic Byway: hiking, road/mountain/motor biking, horseback riding, camping, fishing, hunting, photography, wildlife and wildflower viewing, golf, tennis, rock climbing, kayaking, rafting, sailing, swimming, windsurfing, pleasure boating, ice fishing, ice skating, ice climbing, snowshoeing, alpine/telemark/cross-country skiing, snowmobiling and don't forget shopping for antiques and collectibles in numerous towns and shops along the Byway.





Kebler Pass

CLOSED IN THE WINTER

The 30-mile Kebler Pass road follows Coal Creek west from Crested Butte and climbs gradually past the old Keystone Mine. The pass is named for J. A. Kebler of the Colorado Fuel and Iron Company, which mined coal in the region.

The graveled road follows the old Rio Grande Railroad grade toward Kebler Pass and the once booming mining camps of Irwin and Ruby.

Only skiers and snowmobilers can travel through the deep snows.

If you plan to snowmobile the Kebler Pass Road, please remember the following:

- Do not snowmobile on plowed roads.
- Drive, park and unload at the Kebler Pass Trailhead (2 miles west of Crested Butte) or at the Watson Flats Trailhead (2 miles south of Erickson Springs).
- Observe and obey the posted speed limits for the Kebler Pass Road.
- Travel single-file on the right side of the groomed road corridor.

At the top of the pass, a road forks left toward Ohio Pass and Gunnison. The West Elk Loop goes straight over Kebler Pass and into the Anthracite Creek drainage, meeting Highway 133 at the Paonia Dam. The Irwin Cemetery is located on top of the pass and includes the grave of Mary Bambrough, who died in 1881 of scarlet fever at age 17. A poem adorns her grave marker.



Snowmobiling
Camping
Fishing
Wildlife Viewing
X-Country Skiing
Aspen Stands
Biking
Snowshoeing

Four miles from Kebler Pass to the north is beautiful Lake Irwin, set beneath the mountain peaks of Ruby and Owen. A Forest Service campground is on one end of the lake and the Irwin Lodge stands above it.

West of Kebler Pass is a prominent rock formation called "The Dike." This igneous intrusion stands as a wall just north of the highway where it adjoins 12,644-foot Ruby Peak. Laccoliths, dome-shaped bulges of igneous rock, are prominent in the northern West Elks.

As the pass descends toward Paonia, the road cuts through one of the largest contiguous aspen stands in the world. The aspen tree is a unique organism that produces clones from common root systems and reproduces rapidly to cover vast areas. This forest is made up of many thousands of clone colonies. The aspen leaves turn bright yellow with hints of orange and red in autumn, creating a brilliant mosaic. The oakbrush turn orange, red and russet to complement the scene.

