

SCENIC DRIVE

Enjoying nature, wildlife along the Beartooth Highway



Switchbacks on the Beartooth Highway along Rock Creek Canyon offer a good vantage point. | ROBIN AND ARLENE KARPAN PHOTOS

TALES FROM THE ROAD



ARLENE & ROBIN KARPAN

One switchback after another took us higher and higher as the highway snaked up the mountain pass. The air became progressively cooler as green grass and forest gave way to rocky slopes blanketed in snow.

In places, the highway was like a tun-

nel as we drove between three-metre high banks carved by snow plows. Stopping at a viewpoint, we gazed over the sweeping wintry scene. Yet this wasn't winter, but mid-June.

These conditions are not unusual on the Beartooth Highway, which crosses some of the highest and most rugged landscapes in the United States, and is always included in lists of the most scenic drives in the country.

Only 110 kilo-metres long, the highway runs between Red Lodge (south of Billings) and Cooke City, Montana, with the centre part of the road passing through northern Wyoming.

Cooke City is just a stone's throw from Yellowstone National Park, so

many visitors drive it as a scenic route to or from Yellowstone.

While the highway is paved and can be driven by any type of vehicle, it is only open for about a third of the year. The rest of the time it lies under a deep cover of snow. Opening day is usually targeted for the Memorial Day holiday (last Monday in May), but it is always weather dependent. Even under ideal conditions, it takes weeks for the road to be plowed.

The road is closed occasionally throughout the summer because of snowstorms, rock or landslides, avalanches, floods or forest fires. Winds and blowing snow can result in icy conditions.

By mid-October, the highway is closed for another season.

Completed in 1936, the highway was considered an engineering feat. It was built in part as a make-work project during the Great Depression, and also to provide another route to Yellowstone National Park.

Unlike many other scenic routes constructed for some commercial purpose, the Beartooth was built primarily for the scenery.

The relatively short length of the highway can be misleading when planning the drive. Much of it is up and down and slow going around curves and hairpin switchbacks, plus the landscapes are so spectacular that you'll want to stop a lot.

Winding through the Absaroka and Beartooth Mountains, several peaks along the way top 12,000 feet, with the summit of the highway at Beartooth Pass just short of 11,000 feet.

The name of the highway comes from a narrow pointed rock along the plateau that is likened to the tooth of a bear.

Because this is relatively undisturbed wilderness, there is always the chance of seeing black bears and grizzly bears, along with elk, moose, mule deer and mountain goats.

The highway has several pullouts at lookout points, picnic sites, campgrounds and hiking trails. Campgrounds at the higher altitudes don't open until July. When we were through in June, it wasn't possible to get far off the road in many places because of the snow cover.

Some campgrounds close to the Cooke City end are designated as hard-sided units only after an incident when tents were mauled by grizzly bears.

We found an especially nice area to camp at the north end of the highway, south of Red Lodge, where several sites line Rock Creek, a popular area for fly-fishing in Custer National Forest.

When planning to drive this route, it's a good idea to check on road conditions first.

For more information, visit www.beartoothhighway.com.

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Do you know how much a cow pie weighs or how many seeds are in a bushel of canola? The answers can be found in Robin and Arlene Karpan's latest version of their book, *Western Canadian Farm Trivia Challenge*. For more information, visit www.parklandpublishing.com.

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Volunteers are needed for a minimum of half day shifts or up to 3 full days, 8:00 AM to 12:00 noon or 12:00 noon to 5:30 PM

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