

AAA Magazines

# 10 ways to experience the Buffalo National River



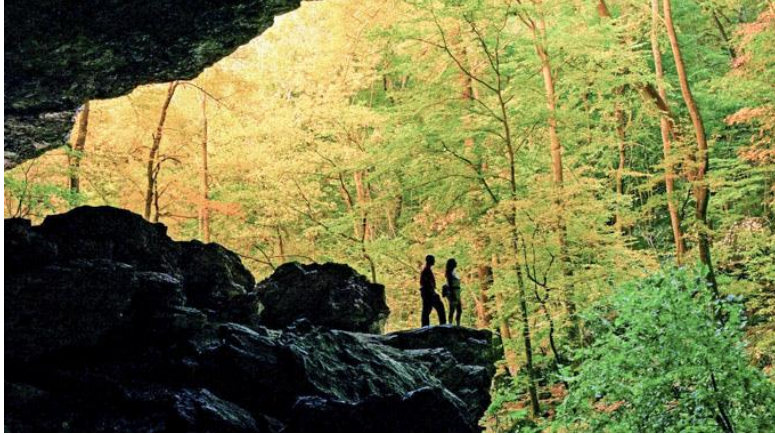
Paddlers flock to the Buffalo National River, which became America's first national river in 1972. | Photo courtesy Arkansas Department of Parks, Heritage and Tourism

**By Katherine Rodeghier**

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Recognizing the distinct beauty and natural significance of the Buffalo River, Congress designated it as America's first national river 50 years ago, and it's just as deserving of a visit now as it was then. The National Park Service manages 135 miles of Buffalo National River, which flows across northern Arkansas, and more than 95,000 acres of adjacent land. Outdoor lovers come for on-water and land-based experiences within the park and the surrounding Ozark Mountains, from paddling and zip lining to stargazing, hiking, and encountering wildlife.

## 1. Hiking



Discover caves and waterfalls along the park's Lost Valley Trail. | Photo courtesy Arkansas Department of Parks, Heritage and Tourism

The trail to Whitaker Point, also known as Hawksbill Crag, leads to a rock ledge that ranks among Arkansas' most-photographed spots and is one of the region's most-visited [trails](#). It lies within the Ozark-St. Francis National Forests near the Upper Buffalo River. Nearby Lost Valley Trail travels through a box canyon with caves, waterfalls, and spring wildflower displays. In the Middle Buffalo district, the Old Railroad Trail follows the river east from Gilbert along the relatively flat former track bed of the Missouri and North Arkansas Railroad. See places where ancient peoples found shelter along the Indian Rockhouse Trail in the Lower Buffalo region.

## 2. Biking



The Upper Buffalo Mountain Bike Trail laces through forests near the Buffalo National River headwaters. | Photo courtesy Arkansas Department of Parks, Heritage and Tourism

Buffalo National River permits bicycles, including e-bikes, on park roads and some administrative roads, but it has no mountain bike trails. But in the surrounding Ozark Mountains, the [\*\*BOC Ponca Downhill MTB Trail's\*\*](#) 11 miles of interconnecting paths weave below cabins of the Buffalo Outdoor Center, which offers bike rentals. In the Ozark-St. Francis National Forests, the [\*\*Upper Buffalo Mountain Bike Trail\*\*](#) has 35 miles of trails, and the [\*\*Syllamo Mountain Bike Trail\*\*](#) offers 50 miles along 5 interconnecting loops. Starting in Gilbert, the multi-use [\*\*Ozark Grinder Trail\*\*](#) runs more than 140 miles south to Fairfield Bay, mostly on gravel, while gaining more than 11,000 feet in elevation.

### 3. Swimming



Enjoy swimming holes along the Buffalo National River, including in the Tyler Bend area. | Photo courtesy Arkansas Department of Parks, Heritage and Tourism

Cool off in [\*\*swimming holes\*\*](#) all along the river, many below towering bluffs. At the Steel Creek access, find deep pools beneath Roark Bluff near the campground and more pools in the boat-launching area adjacent to the creek's confluence with the river. At Pruitt Landing off Arkansas Highway 7, take a dip below Pruitt Bluff. Across from the bluff, tables provide a good picnic spot. Off Arkansas Highway 43, the deep pools at Ponca Low-Water Bridge are easy to access, and if you're lucky, you might spot elk drinking from the swimming hole.

### 4. Paddling



Paddling adventures showcase the river's beauty, including bluffs that rise as high as 500 feet above the river's banks. | Photo courtesy Arkansas Department of Parks, Heritage and Tourism

Grab a paddle and hit the river for [canoeing and kayaking](#) trips, mindful of changing water levels. Excursions can last from several hours to several days. Fed largely by rain rather than natural springs, the river's levels fluctuate, with the most whitewater beginning in March in the river's upper portion, which begins in the Boston Mountains and flows east to the White River. Authorized concessioners rent canoes, kayaks, tubes, and rafts, and offer shuttle service along the way.

## 5. Fishing



Anglers are drawn to the river for its trout, bass, perch, and catfish. | Photo courtesy Arkansas Department of Parks, Heritage and Tourism

The clear waters of the free-flowing river provide habitat for at least 59 species of fish, including 12 game fish. [Angle](#) for smallmouth bass, perch, and

catfish along the Buffalo's length. Rainbow and brown trout prefer the Lower Buffalo where it meets the White River. Fishing is in accordance with state regulations, and a license is required for those 16 and up. Several outfitters offer [guided fishing trips](#).

## 6. Stargazing



Stargazers appreciate the Buffalo National River because of its designation as an International Dark Sky Park. | Photo courtesy Arkansas Department of Parks, Heritage and Tourism

Outdoor experiences don't end at nightfall, thanks to some of the darkest skies in the state. Buffalo National River became the first [International Dark Sky Park](#) in Arkansas in 2019 after the National Park Service reduced its use of artificial light. Astronomy groups across Arkansas supported work to reduce light pollution, leading to the designation by the nonprofit International Dark-Sky Association. Join astronomy programs led by park staff and outside organizations to learn about the night sky and observe the heavens through telescopes.

## 7. Visiting historic sites



A ghost town in the Rush Historic District recalls the area's zinc-mining days. | Photo courtesy Arkansas Department of Parks, Heritage and Tourism

Pioneers settled along the Buffalo River in the 19th century, and their stories still resonate in several park areas. The Villines family farmed and operated a gristmill that still stands in the [Boxley Valley Historic District](#). The cabin of James A. "Beaver Jim" Villines sits near the river access point at Ponca. Near Jasper, self-guided tours of the Parker-Hickman Farmstead include an 1840s-era home that may be the oldest house along the national river. Find remnants of a ghost town, once the state's largest producer of zinc ore, at the 1,316-acre Rush Historic District near Rush Landing.

## 8. Elk viewing



In the Boxley Valley, glimpse the state's only wild elk herd. | Photo courtesy Arkansas Department of Parks, Heritage and Tourism

The state's only wild [elk herd](#) grazes across north-central Arkansas, with about 500 near the Buffalo National River. Pull off the road in the Boxley Valley around dawn or dusk to view them in fields. Elk also have been spotted at the Erbie campground, near the Carver Bridge, and south of the river in the Gene Rush Wildlife Management Area. At the [Ponca Nature Center](#), learn about Arkansas wildlife, including Rocky Mountain elk introduced in the 1980s to replace now-extinct native Eastern elk. Exhibits include hands-on displays and full-body elk mounts.

## 9. Zip lining



Sail through the forest on the thrilling Buffalo River Canopy Tour. | Photo courtesy Buffalo Outdoor Center

Connect to a cable via a harness to soar through the treetops in the Ozark Mountains on a [Buffalo River Canopy Tour](#), a thrilling 2-hour experience offered by the Buffalo Outdoor Center in Ponca. This system of cables and wooden platforms, many constructed around majestic hardwood trees, meets Association for Challenge Course Technology guidelines and is suitable for zip liners age 7 and up between 70 and 250 pounds.

## 10. Dining



Fill up on hearty fare in Jasper at the Ozark Café, which dates to 1909. | Photo courtesy Arkansas Department of Parks, Heritage and Tourism

Fuel up before or after your Buffalo River adventures with delicious local cuisine. Established in 1909, [Ozark Café](#) on the Jasper square serves classic country food and is known for its chocolate gravy, chicken-fried steak, deep-fried hamburger, and milkshakes. If you're hungry, sink your teeth into the Excaliburger, a half-pound burger tucked between two grilled cheese sandwiches and served with Ozark sauce (mayonnaise with Worcestershire sauce, pepper blend, and apple cider vinegar). Ten miles down the road, prime rib headlines the menu most weekends at the [Low Gap Café](#), which hosts live entertainment on most Saturday nights. Other choices include seafood, grilled lamb chops, spicy Cajun pasta, and more.

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