



Paddle season typically begins on the upper Buffalo National River in spring and moves downstream through the summer.

The River Wild

The Buffalo National River marks 50 years of conservation and outdoor adventures

BY KATHERINE RODEGHIER

As early as the 1890s, engineers floated ideas to dam the Buffalo River in northern Arkansas, but conservationists opposed the plans. Debate ebbed and flowed through the decades, and in the early 1960s the National Park Service weighed in with a report that declared: “Here lies the last opportunity for preservation of a river typical of the Arkansas Ozarks, and, indeed, the opportunity for preservation of a river considered by many to be the most outstanding free-flowing stream in the Southwest.”

Visitors today will readily see why Congress eventually agreed and designated it America’s first national river on March 1, 1972. Beginning in the Boston Mountains, the enchanting waterway runs roughly 150 miles east to the White

River. A 135-mile section is managed by the National Park Service, which also oversees nearly 95,000 acres of land around it in the Ozark Mountains. Outdoor lovers can enjoy the park year-round, but particularly in spring and summer.

“It’s one of the last undammed waterways in the lower 48 states,” said Cassie Branstetter, the park’s branch chief of interpretation. Had President Richard Nixon not signed the law creating the park 50 years ago, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers might have gone forward with its plans to impound the river. Townships would have been inundated, lakes would have formed, and the river’s wild beauty would have been erased, she said.

Bluffs of sandstone, dolomite, and limestone rise as high as 500 feet above the river’s banks, much to the delight of

kayakers, canoeists, and rafters. Float trips last from a few hours to several days, and equipment can be rented from outfitters just outside the park. Anglers fish for bass, perch, catfish, and trout. Hikers explore caves, cliffs, and waterfalls on more than 100 miles of trails. Motorists pull over to watch herds of elk graze in river valleys. And outdoor experiences don’t end at night, with stargazers enjoying the show thanks to a reduction in light pollution in the park, which became Arkansas’ first International Dark Sky Park in 2019.

In addition to enjoying the park’s natural wonders, visitors can step back in time to explore its rich history in several places, including the Boxley Valley Historic District, where the cabin of pioneer James A. “Beaver Jim” Villines and a gristmill still stand. In the Jasper area, guests can tour the Parker-Hickman Farmstead dating to the 1840s, and the Rush Historic District offers a glimpse of what’s left of a ghost town where mines once produced the most zinc ore in Arkansas.

Events celebrating the park’s half-century birthday will greet visitors this year. Art in the Park weekend, June 10–12, will showcase artwork inspired by the area and will include a music festival on June 11 in the Tyler Bend area. On October 8 and 9, the Park RX Weekend will focus on the physical and mental rejuvenation that the park and its natural resources provide.

“We are excited for folks to join us on our 50th anniversary,” said Branstetter, “and hope it inspires all of us to enjoy the park for the next 50 years.”

KATHERINE RODEGHIER is a contributor from Chicago.

If you go

For more information about the Buffalo National River, call (870) 439-2502 or visit nps.gov/buff.