

# Wyoming's Tongue River

*After exploring the trails in Bighorn National Forest, head underground.* **BY VANESSA HASTINGS**

A shiver runs down my spine as I peer into the dark through the 5-foot-high entrance of Tongue River Cave. The cave is cool and I can hear the trickle of water in the distance. The Tongue Canyon Trail

brought me to this bat-laden hollow in a mountainside.

To some, the trail is merely the beginning of a 9-mile route that cuts through Bighorn National Forest's Tongue Canyon, a way to get to the top of the Burgess Junction and take in some Wyoming scenery. For others, Tongue Canyon Trail leads to a

spelunking adventure, and a change of pace during a weekend hike up to Horse Creek Ridge. The latter is what I'm looking for.

As a resident of the area, I've heard plenty of tales about this cave. Jerry Elkins, a hard-core spelunker from nearby Sheridan, has toted diving equipment through the 6,500-foot Tongue River Cave to explore one of

the two sets of waterfalls created by the Little Tongue River. Several inexperienced and ill-prepared explorers have been injured or lost in its recesses. Many, including Elkins, believe the cave has a second entrance that has yet to be found.

I decided to explore the cave with a guide, Forest Service Archeological Technician Larry Richards, although professional accompaniment is not necessary. We pass through the open gate and my eyes adjust to the darkness, pierced only by the sparse light of my headlamp. Soon Richards and I are sliding on our bellies through a series of long, sandy crawl spaces. He leads the way, and I try to avoid getting kicked by his flailing feet. The hard limestone ceiling hanging only inches above my head is not particularly comforting.

The most claustrophobic moment comes at the Mousehole, a 3-foot-wide slit near the bottom of the cave wall. To get through it I have to crawl down head first, then abruptly up and out into the next room, my body momentarily contorted in a U-shape.

A few yards past the Mousehole, we enter the spacious Boulder Room, the most confusing passage in this cave. Huge chunks of rock cover the floor, and Richards says false passages lead away in many directions. Even so, it's hard to get lost in this cave. Those who do can blame their predicament on lack of preparation—not enough light sources or batteries. "If you're climbing in the Boulder Room you'll eventually find your way back out," Richards says. Explorers should travel carefully since "there are drops, and you can catch your legs between boulders and fall forward."

This travel warning echoes throughout Bighorn National Forest, since



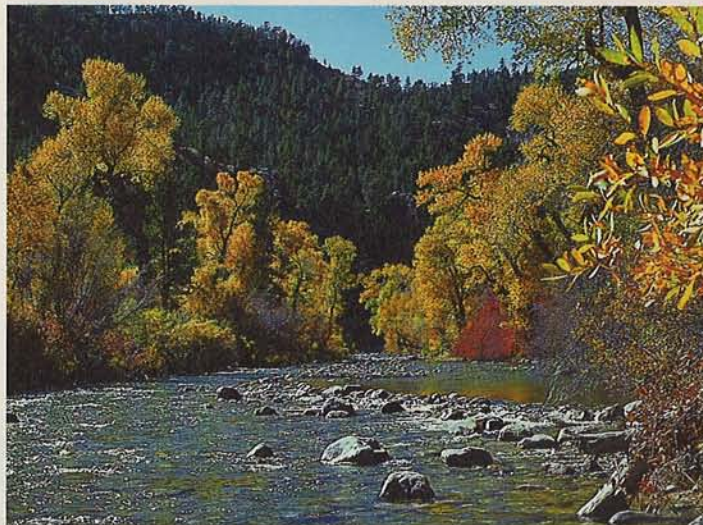
**If caves aren't your thing, there are 300 miles of trails to hike, and the Tongue River to cool your heels.**

**Getting There:** From Casper, Wyoming, drive north on US 87 until you pick up I-90 north. Get off the Ranchester/Dayton exit about 13 miles north of Sheridan. Follow US 14 past Ranchester for about 12 miles. Just before the bridge that leads to Dayton, turn right at the dirt road, which will lead into the canyon and to a parking lot where the Tongue Canyon Trail begins.

**Management:** Bighorn National Forest, 1969 S. Sheridan Ave., Sheridan, WY 82801; (307) 672-0751.

**Maps:** A "Bighorn National Forest" travel map (\$1) is available from the national forest office. The USGS quads "Dayton South" and "Skull Ridge" cover the area.

**Equipment:** You will need a helmet with a chin strap and headlamp, flashlight, plenty of batteries, and gloves. Let someone know you're going caving.





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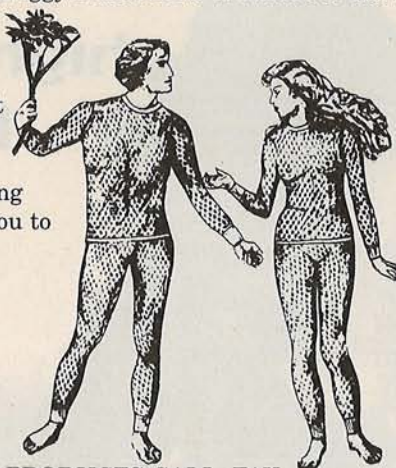
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## weekendwilderness

Tongue River Cave isn't the only one of its kind here. Eighty other caves are located in the national forest's 1.1 million acres, but Tongue River Cave is probably the most accessible.

For those with claustrophobic tendencies, the national forest also has more than 300 miles of above-ground paths to explore. The Tongue Canyon Trail connects to other challenging routes that intertwine through the mountainous area. With camping allowed in most areas, you're sure to find an open-air experience that rivals the mental and physical challenges of crawling around underground.

The sound of rushing water grows louder as we near what is believed to be the Little Tongue River, a clear, cold stream about 5 feet wide. We head downstream to the big falls rather than explore the little falls upstream.

The travel is slow and dangerous. The cool, hard walls sustain our hands and feet as we slowly lower our bodies down to hop across rocks in the river. Before I know it, I'm hanging out on a ledge across from the falls. I strain to see where the water lands 25 feet below. Richards takes me to a spot directly above the falls where I can see the water disappear under a wall.

This is one underwater passage Elkins has tried to explore unsuccessfully. His diving explorations into the Siphon, a tube-like passage located beneath the upper falls, have revealed five rooms. The first four are not completely submerged in water, but the fifth is, making it difficult to reach. He has not ventured beyond that point, and for all his efforts, Elkins hasn't found the mythical second entrance.

## LEAVE NO TRACE

Keep noise levels down and refrain from using fires in caves to avoid disturbing the bats that inhabit most of the caves. Don't touch active rock formations and don't break off speliotherms, the icicle-shaped formations that jut up from the floor and down from the ceiling of the caves. Along the trail, camp in well used spots where there is sparse vegetation and soil is compacted. If this isn't an option, look for a durable, pristine area and set up your tent on hard ground or grasses rather than woody and leafy plants. Naturalize the area before leaving camp. Camps must be a half mile from all paved roads and a quarter mile from gravel roads. Camp at least 200 feet from all trails and waterways. Hike on established trails where possible. For more information about Leave No Trace, call (800) 332-4100.

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