

Geographical Features in the Western U.S.

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Bryce Canyon National Park, Utah

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Bryce Canyon National Park

What's a hoodoo? Would you ever guess it has something to do with rocks?

Utah's Bryce Canyon National Park owes much of its beauty and character to the process of erosion - the wearing away of a surface by forces like water or wind. Hoodoos are strangely shaped pillars that often resemble goblins or other supernatural characters. In fact, the Paiute Indians, who lived in this region, called them "Legend People."

Although they may resemble people, these rocks were formed by nature. Water has physically and chemically broken down the ancient rock of the Paunsaugunt Plateau by dragging bits of gravel and debris across its surfaces and by entering small holes in the rock and dissolving it. Various layers of rock differ in strength, so erosion does not wear away at them all at the same rate. Therefore, odd and irregular shapes have been formed. In addition to hoodoos, other shapes include fins, spires, and pinnacles.

Wyoming's Old Faithful

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Credit

The Castle Geyser, Upper Geyser Basin, Yellowstone National Park.

What is Old Faithful and why have millions of people traveled to Wyoming to see it?

Yellowstone National Park, part of which is in Wyoming, is home to more geysers than any other place in the world. The most famous geyser is Old Faithful, which got its name because its eruptions can be so reliably predicted. A geyser is a spring that sprays out blasts of heated water and steam. The park has plenty of hot springs. In a geyser, steam and water build pressure beneath a narrow passageway in the ground. Steam forces the water up, and sudden changes in underground water temperature create violent explosions of water and steam on the surface. Some geysers erupt in bursts, some at angles, and some from cone-shaped rock formations, such as Castle Geyser, pictured here. Yellowstone's hot springs also form steam vents, mudpots, and vividly colored pools. The park's geysers, like Steamboat and Old Faithful, however, are far more famous.

Glacier National Park, Montana

The text is from the "America's Story from America's Library" by the Library of Congress.



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Glacier Lake McDonald

In 1910, Congress established Glacier National Park in Montana. Conservationist George Bird Grinnell played a key role in the creation of this park in order to preserve the land's natural beauty. Native Americans have always revered this region. The Blackfeet, Salish, and Kootenai tribes, who have lived in the area for hundreds of years, consider it a sacred place.

Glacier National Park is named for the glaciers that produced its landscape. A glacier is a moving mass of snow and ice. It forms when more snow falls each winter than melts in the summer. The snow accumulates and presses the layers below it into ice. The bottom layer of ice becomes flexible and therefore allows the glacier to move. As it moves, a glacier picks up rock and gravel. With this mixture of debris, it scours and sculpts the land it moves across. This is how, over thousands of years, Glacier National Park got all its valleys, sharp mountain peaks, and lakes. There are more than 50 glaciers in the park today, though they are smaller than the huge ones that existed 20,000 years ago.

In addition to its glaciers, mountains, and valleys, Glacier National Park covers approximately 1.4 million acres and includes 200 lakes and streams. The park is also home to many different types of wildlife, including black and grizzly bear, moose, golden and bald eagle, bighorn sheep, mountain goat, and whitetail and mule deer.

Colorado's Rocky Mountains

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Rampart Range is part of the Front Range of the Rocky Mountains in Colorado

Many people know that the Rocky Mountains make up an enormous chain of mountains in western North America that extends 3,000 miles from Canada through the United States to Mexico. But did you know that the tallest mountain in Colorado, part of the Rocky Mountains, is called Mount Elbert, which is 14,433 feet high?

The Rocky Mountains form the Continental Divide, the mountainous ridge that runs north to south along North America and causes water to drain in separate rivers flowing to different sides of the continent. Eventually, these rivers lead to the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans as well as the Gulf of Mexico.

In 1915, Congress designated some of this mountainous area in Colorado as Rocky Mountain National Park. The tallest mountain in this park is Longs Peak, which is 14,256 feet high.

Idaho's Natural Wonders

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The Sawtooth Mountains of Idaho

A gorge is a narrow, steep-walled canyon. And the deepest gorge in North America is in Idaho. Do you know about it?

Idaho is well known for its natural beauty and rugged landscape. The state's Sawtooth Mountains are a part of the Rocky Mountains, and several peaks in these mountains exceed an elevation of 10,000 feet. Another of Idaho's natural wonders is the Snake River. This river flows in a great arc and has created extensive valleys throughout its run.

The Snake River has also made gorges, such as Hell's Canyon, which, at 7,900 feet, is North America's deepest gorge. Various wildlife inhabit the rugged landscape of Idaho, including elk, bighorn sheep, mountain goats, moose, black bear, cougar, and antelope. Smaller animals include beaver, river otter, red-tailed hawks, and golden and bald eagles. Do you know how the canyon got its name?

If you guessed that the name refers to the canyon's depth, you were wrong. The name comes from the fact that a wild journey is in store for any boat that travels the river!

Mount Mazama and Crater Lake

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Crater Lake is the deepest lake in the United States.

Did you know there was a volcano in Oregon? And that when it erupted and collapsed it created a lake?

Around 7,000 years ago, the volcano Mount Mazama erupted and collapsed and, as a result, formed Crater Lake. Molten lava cooled and sealed up the bottom, forming a huge bowl-shaped crater. Over the years, rainfall and melting snow have filled it with over four trillion gallons of water, making it the deepest lake in the United States. The lake is also known for its deep blue color.

Accounts of the eruption of Mount Mazama are found in stories handed down by the Klamath Indians, who are descendants of the ancient Makalak people. According to Makalak legend, there was a battle between Skell, the spirit of the sky, and Llao, the spirit of the mountain. When Skell defeated Llao, the spirit of the mountain's home, Mount Mazama, erupted and collapsed.

Crater Lake is now a national park and draws approximately 500,000 visitors a year.