

Exploring the Eccentric

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The White River Badlands of South Dakota are situated in southwestern South Dakota and have been carved by the White, Bad and Cheyenne rivers. The stark, intricately eroded pinnacles are so extraordinary that they confuse visitors to this nearly 250,000 acre National Park. Are they the result of an uplift with the lower areas already eroded away? In truth, visitors to the Badlands are perched along the edge of a geologic formation called the Wall. The vast grasslands that fill the flat portions of the Park comprise the largest protected mixed grass prairie in the country.

Badlands National Park is a refuge for many examples of Great Plains wildlife, most notably the American Bison (*Bison bison*), pronghorn (*Antilocapra americana*), Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep (*Ovis canadensis*), prairie rattlesnakes (*Crotalus viridis*), burrowing owls (*Athene cunicularia*), and others. The black-footed ferret (*Mustela nigripes*), considered to be the most endangered mammal in North America, is currently being reintroduced to wilderness areas within the Park. This small, nocturnal creature relies on the prairie dog (*Cynomys* spp) as its main food source. Specifically, in the Badlands, the black-tailed prairie dog (*Cynomys ludovicianus*), is a rotund rodent that can easily be found at Roberts Prairie Dog Town, which is located in the Park's northwestern corner.

Perhaps most notable at Badlands National Park are the fossil resources. Paleontologist-scientists, who study ancient life, have discovered abundant evidence of mammal life that lived in this region between 25 and 50 million years ago. The predominant time period studied at Badlands is the Oligocene Epoch, which falls within the Age of Mammals. While some visitors are disappointed to learn that there are no dinosaurs in the White River Badlands, they are then intrigued to learn that the richest Oligocene mammal fossil beds in the world are found here. Three toed horses, giant pigs, early rhinos, tiny deer, and prehistoric loons once called this formerly warm, moist terrain home. More than 250 species of mammalian fossils have been described in scientific reports. The year 1996 marks the 150th anniversary of fossil research in Badlands, which is considered to be the birthplace of the science of vertebrate paleontology.

Lastly, over 11,000 years of human history is documented in the Park's landscape through scattered worked stone

fragments, remnants of ancient campsites, weathered fencing and abandoned homesteads. The Lakota people have traveled through the Badlands since their arrival on the South Dakota plains around 1775 and still call the southern half of the Park, called the Stronghold District, home. The descendants of those early homesteaders also remain as today's rancher's.

At first glance, the White River Badlands of Badlands National Park are strange, eccentric. After spending some time, they become familiar. The natural process at work on them create a slightly new landscape almost daily. One visit isn't enough.

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