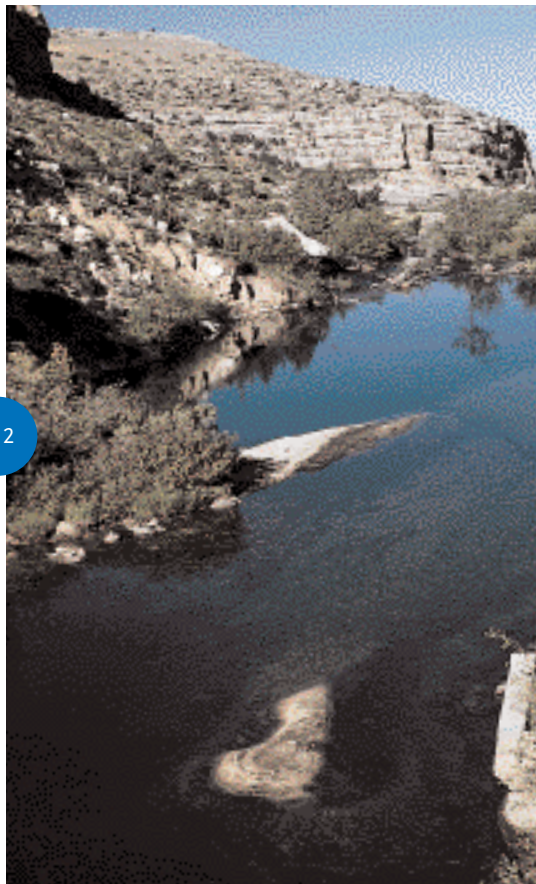


Sinks Canyon

6 miles southwest of Lander on Wyo. 131

- 600 acres ▫ Year-round ▫ Scenic canyon with disappearing river
- Hiking, wildlife viewing, fishing (license required)



The Sinks, fed by glacier melt

High in the Wind River Range, the Middle Fork Popo Agie River begins among glaciers, rock, and alpine meadows. It is a lovely river, but only one of many streams pouring out of these well-watered mountains. What sets this one apart is an unexpected trick. Having entered a narrow canyon on the east side of the range, the river turns suddenly to the right and dives into a yawning cavern called The Sinks. Half a mile away, it quietly returns to the surface in a deep green pool called The Rise.

It seems obvious that The Sinks and The Rise would be connected, yet it took years and several attempts to prove the case. Even now the underground picture remains a matter of conjecture. Tracer dye poured into the river above The Sinks turns up in The Rise as expected, but it takes two

hours to get there, and the water comes out warmer than it went in. There is also more water coming out than entering, suggesting additional underground sources and a complicated network of passages—perhaps a large subterranean reservoir.

Even without its centerpiece geologic stunt, Sinks Canyon would make a worthy state park. Stretched out for more than 2 miles along the river, it lies sheltered beneath high buff-colored walls of sandstone and limestone. Its sunny, south-facing side has elements of a desert environment, with juniper, limber pine, and sagebrush. The shady, north-facing slope, being cooler and wetter, supports Douglas-

HIGHER AND DEEPER: The road that climbs Sinks Canyon provides an overview of Wind River Range geology. From Lander to Switchback Overlook is nearly 4,000 feet of different rock layers. The mountains were formed by uplifting of a block of old granite tilting through younger sediments that now dip basinward on the flanks of the range, so hiking the canyon takes you to older rocks as you climb higher. The trip begins with brilliant red Triassic shale and sandstone, yielding to Tensleep sandstone at the canyon entrance. The Sinks are formed in Madison limestone, while farther up-canyon, the road switchbacks through Devonian and Cambrian sediments before emerging at the overlook among Precambrian granite and spectacular views of the Wind River Range.

fir, cottonwood, aspen, and willow. These, together with the riparian zone, provide a wide range of wildlife habitat. Elk, moose, deer, and bighorn sheep live in the canyon's narrow confines, along with mink and muskrats, rainbow and cutthroat trout, prairie rattlers, and 94 species of birds.

What to See and Do

Start at the **Visitor Center** (*Mem. Day–Labor Day*), but first walk the short distance to **The Sinks**. At its normal summer level, the river is much smaller than the cavern, and it's hard not to feel a little spooky shiver as you stand watching the water disappear into that yawning darkness. The Visitor Center's excellent displays interpret the underground story in addition to the natural history of the area.

Next stop is **The Rise**, located a half-mile drive down the canyon. A platform provides a good view of

the pool. Huge rainbow and brown trout drift like happy whales in the spring water. No fishing is allowed in this stretch of the river, but food pellets are available for tossing, and the trout enjoy them.

In spring, the river floods The Sinks and fills an overflow channel. You can see this along the 0.25-mile **Sinks to Rise Trail**, and learn about native vegetation in the process. For a longer self-guided walk (just under a mile), head for the **Popo Agie Nature Trail** near the upper campground. A booklet describes many aspects of the canyon's natural history.

Treks of greater length begin with the **Middle Fork Trail**, which begins at Bruces Camp parking lot, outside the park, and leads into the Popo Agie Wilderness and beyond. Just 1.5 miles up the trail, **Popo Agie Falls** marks the head of the canyon. Connecting the Popo Agie and Middle Fork Trails is the 4-mile **Canyon Trail** loop.

Throughout the park, watch for bighorn sheep. The canyon should be an ideal wintering ground for them; its south-facing slope stays relatively warm and free of snow,

while the rocks and lack of forest provide the sort of open, rugged country in which they feel secure. However, sheep have not had an easy time here. The original population died out many years ago. In the 1980s, a new herd of 54 animals was brought here from the north end of the Wind River Range. Yet they have not thrived, and currently

PARK TIP: Try boulder hopping along the seldom visited overflow channel between **The Sinks and The Rise**.

number only about a dozen animals. One problem is their failure to discover migration routes to summer grazing in the high mountains. As a result, they stay year-round on range that cannot provide sufficient forage.

Contributing to their decline are the recent increase in human contact and an outbreak of pneumonia, which killed a third of the population in 1992.

Camping

Sinks Canyon has 30 tent and RV sites in two campgrounds. May–mid-Oct., with limited sites open through winter. Available on a first-come, first-served basis. Camping fee.



Overlooking The Rise

Nearby Sights

Above The Sinks, Wyo. 131 gives way to a seasonal forest road that climbs to the head of the canyon. The road wanders through rolling country of forest and meadow, past several alpine lakes, campgrounds, and trailheads to Wyo. 28 near **South Pass**, an important landmark in Western history. Here, emigrants on the Oregon, California, and Mormon Trails crossed the Continental Divide. Despite the considerable difficulties still facing them, they must have been encouraged to know they had topped the ridgeline of the continent.

In 1867 prospectors found gold near South Pass. The discovery set off a gold rush that, at its peak, involved thousands of miners, a dozen stamp mills, two stage lines, and the usual assortment of saloons, hotels, promoters, lawyers, and grocers. The only thing lacking was enough gold to support expectations, and by 1875 fewer than 100 people clung to diminished hopes. Despite several attempts at revival, including one energetic fraud, South Pass never hit the big time. Today, the **South Pass City State Historic Site** (42 miles S via Wyo. 131 and US 28. 307-332-3684. Mid-May–Sept.; adm. fee) protects 27 original, restored, or reconstructed buildings crammed with artifacts. Check in at the Visitor Center, a former store and warehouse, before exploring the buildings and history of South Pass Avenue.

Ask park staff about other historical landmarks in the area, including **Pony Express stations**, visible **ruts of the Oregon Trail**, further mining relics, and **Willie's Handcart Site**, where Mormon emigrants pulling handcarts to Salt Lake City were caught—and many killed—by early winter storms in October 1856.

Sinks Canyon State Park, 3079 Sinks Canyon Rd., Rte. 63, Lander, WY 82520; 307-332-6333; <http://wyoparks.state.wy.us>

Guernsey

1.5 miles north of Guernsey, off Wyo. 26

- 8,602 acres ▫ Year-round ▫ Entrance fee (spring through fall)
- Historic buildings ▫ Oregon Trail ▫ Hiking, swimming, boating

Located near the main route of the Oregon Trail, Guernsey State Park takes in a pleasant, serpentine canyon rimmed with sandstone cliffs and shaded by stands of ponderosa pine and juniper. The North Platte River, impounded as a reservoir here, laps placidly at the base of the cliffs and offers an inviting respite from the heat of the Wyoming plains.

During the 1930s, the Civilian Conservation Corps built trails, roads, bridges, and rustic buildings throughout the park. Much of the CCC's work survives, including the lovely stone-and-timber Visitor Center overlooking the reservoir.

Starting in the 1840s, waves of Oregon Trail emigrants traveled this way as they followed the North Platte River through southeastern Wyoming. Just a few miles south of the park, they

A LIGHTER YOKE TO BEAR:
When traffic along the Oregon Trail was at its height in the 1840s and '50s, emigrants jettisoned a large variety of high-quality trash between Fort Laramie and modern Glenrock. The route was strewn with bar-iron and steel, anvils, bellows, crowbars, drills, augers, gold-washers, chisels, axes, trunks, grindstones, plows, ovens, cookstoves, kegs, barrels, clothing, books, and food. Why did people with overloaded wagons wait until this point to reduce their burden? With the mountains looming ahead, the trail became steeper—and the trash piles rose.