



Sacred TREASURE

in the

BIG HORN MOUNTAINS

BIGHORN NATIONAL FOREST



MEDICINE WHEEL

The Medicine Wheel is located between Sheridan and Lovell, Wyoming on Wyoming Highway 14A. There is a designated parking area at the beginning of the trail to The Medicine Wheel. The road (FDR 12) is narrow and not recommended for trailer traffic. It is necessary to walk 1-1/2 miles from the parking area to the Medicine Wheel National Historic Landmark.

At almost 10,000 feet above sea level, the weather can change rapidly. Dress appropriately as snow has been known to fall during the summer months and the winds can be brisk at this altitude. It is recommended you take a jacket. Walking can also be difficult at this altitude. If you are physically challenged, speak to the interpreter at the junction.

The sanitary facilities are limited at the Medicine Wheel. There is no water available at the site and it is recommended you use the facilities at the parking area before you begin your hike. Taking a canteen is advisable.

Rocky cliffs and fissures surround the Medicine Wheel. Watch your step! And be sure to watch your children.

Leave the site cleaner than you found it. Please carry out what you carry in. There are no trash receptacles at the site. Thank you for your help and cooperation. Enjoy your visit to the Medicine Wheel located in the Bighorn National Forest.

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Medicine Wheel Alliance

Medicine Wheel Coalition



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Bighorn National Forest



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There are many who believe the circle is a reflection of the essence of life and that creating a circle is a sacred action. Such a sacred circle exists in North central Wyoming and is revered by Indian People. This circle, Medicine Wheel, is a place of communion with the Great Spirit, a place to obtain strong spiritual medicine. The importance of this circle can be felt in the following quote by Black Elk, a Lakota Sioux:

'Everything the Power of the World does is done in a circle. The sky is round...the earth is round like a ball, and so are all the stars. The wind, in its greatest power, whirls. Birds make their nests in circles, for theirs is the same religion as ours. The sun comes forth and goes down in a circle. The moon does the same, and both are round. Even the seasons form a great circle in their changing, and always come back again to where they were. The life of a man is a circle from childhood to childhood, and so it is in everything where power moves.'

—Black Elk

(Reprinted from Black Elk Speaks, by John G. Neibardt, by permission of the University of Nebraska Press.)

The circle is the essence of the Native American life. The Medicine Wheel structure embodies this. It is a place where many have experienced their vision quest, a place of ritual, a place of prayer, a place of lasting vision.



Looking from the parking area, pictured here is the vast landscape and the 1-1/2 mile path which leads to Medicine Wheel that sits atop Medicine Mountain.



Located near the top of a mountain in Wyoming is the Medicine Wheel, a large wheel measuring approximately 80 feet in diameter. In this area of intense beauty, game is plentiful and the hills are filled with life. From the Wheel a magnificent view of distant, high peaks and the vastness of the Big Horn Basin can be seen below. The Wheel is somewhat isolated and lacks large stands of shrubbery, water or shelter. The trees and plants that thrive here are bent and beaten annually by mighty snows and winds that are common at altitudes of 9,642 feet above sea level. There is solitude here, where the Medicine Wheel sits above timberline on Medicine Mountain. It is a sacred site, an historic site and an archeological site.

The Medicine Wheel was designated a National Historic Landmark in 1970. It was probably constructed between 1,200 and 1,700 A.D. An exact date has not been determined. It is approximately 245 feet in circumference with a central cairn, a small donut-shaped structure. From this central cairn 28 spokes radiate to the outer rim of the circle. Placed at varying intervals around the rim are six smaller cairns. Five of the peripheral cairns touch the outer rim. One is located approximately ten feet outside the circle. Of these six cairns, four face the center of the circle, one faces north, and one faces east. The central cairn is much larger than the rest and measures 12' x 7'. Some of the cairns may have been covered with skins supported by wooden posts.

There are many legends and traditions which may explain the Wheel's origin. But there are no specific artifacts which determine exactly when or who constructed this unusual landmark. It is clear that this place has been visited by many people over the last few hundred years because of the well-traveled trail that parallels the current access road.

There are some who suggest the spoke-like structure resembles the "Sun Dance Lodge" or "Medicine Lodge". The Sun Dance Ceremony is a celebration which is part of the fabric of Native American culture and religion. Some researchers have also suggested the Medicine Wheel is an aboriginal astronomical observatory.

A contemporary Cheyenne cultural leader stated, "the tribes traditionally went and still go to the sacred mountain. The people sought the high mountain for prayer. They sought spiritual harmony with the powerful spirits there. Many offerings have always been left on this mountain. The center cairn, once occupied by a large buffalo skull, was a place to make prayer offerings. Vision questors would have offered prayers of thanks for plant and animal life that had, and would, sustain them in the future. Prayers of thanks were offered for all of creation. Prayers are made for families and for loved ones who are ill. Atonements are made for any offense to Mother Earth. When asking for guidance, prayers for wisdom and strength are always part of this ritual. All of this is done so that spiritual harmony will be our constant companion throughout the year."

A Crow Chief stated that Medicine Wheel was built "before the light came." Other Crow stories say the Sun God dropped it from the sky. And still others say it was built by the "Sheepaters," a Shoshonean band whose name is derived from their expertise at hunting mountain sheep. Many Crow feel it is a guide for building tipis. Some explain the Wheel was built by "people without iron." At present there are no concrete answers as to who actually constructed this landmark.

One Crow story speaks of a man named Scarface. He was handsome and was fond of strutting in his finery before young women. One day while entering his mother's tipi, he fell into the fire which severely burned his face and was thereafter embarrassed to be seen. Shamed at his appearance, he left his people and went to live in the mountains. Scarface lived alone for many years. One day while a young woman and her grandmother were hunting berries, they became separated from their people and couldn't find their way back. They traveled along a trail which took them into the mountains. They occasionally saw Scarface and one day made contact with him. Scarface later married the youngest woman. On their travels back to his people, Scarface supposedly built the Medicine Wheel as their shelter. On the second day he built another tipi near the Big Horn River in the valley below. The tipi rings are believed to still exist.

It is also said that Red Plume, a great Crow Chief during the time of Lewis and Clark, found great spiritual medicine at the Medicine Wheel. The legend states that following four days without food or water, Red Plume was visited by little people who inhabited the passage to the Wheel. They took him into the earth where they lived and told him that the red eagle was his powerful medicine guide and protector. He was told to always wear the small feather from the back of the eagle above its tail feathers. Thus Red Plume received his name. Upon his deathbed, he told his people his spirit would live at the Wheel and that they might communicate with him there.

You can do your part to protect the Medicine Wheel. Do not disturb or remove any cultural resources within or around the historic site. Respect the privacy of others at the Wheel. Do not remove the sacred prayer offerings left by Native Americans.

The Medicine Wheel and Medicine Mountain reflect 10,000 years of Native American culture. The site is sacred and revered by Indian people. It is important that the Medicine Wheel be treated with the utmost respect given any holy place. The site is protected by Federal Laws such as the Antiquities Act (1906), Historic Sites Act (1935), the National Historic Preservation Act (1966), the Archeological Resources Protection Act (1979) and the American Indian Religious Freedom Act (1978). Since 1993 the road which leads to the Wheel has been closed to vehicular traffic. A one and one-half mile foot trail now leads to the summit.

