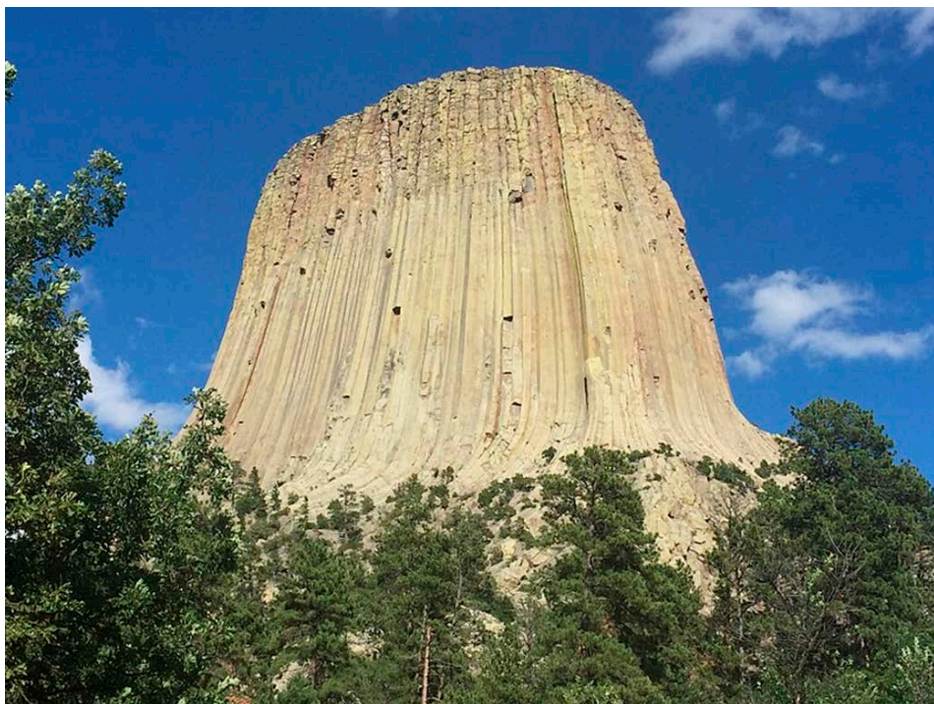


Devils Tower



You may remember the film *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, when Richard Dreyfuss fills his living room with dirt and garbage to sculpt a replica of Devils Tower. Later in the movie, the tower becomes the landing platform for alien spaceships.

But it had otherworldly connections centuries before that.

Many Plains Indian tribes gave the tower mystical significance. Most of their stories revolve around children being chased by a giant bear.

They climb atop a rock, and to save the children, the gods make the rock rise from the prairie. The angry bear scratches its claws on the tower, creating its signature fluted sides.

This legend gave rise to the Crow, Arapahoe, and Cheyenne name for the tower: Bear Lodge.

Geologists tell a different story:

The tower began as a shaft of hot magma that formed in sedimentary layers near the surface. The magma slowly cooled underground around 40 million years ago, forming the columns on its outer surface. Eventually the sediments around it eroded away, exposing the tower, which rises more than 800 ft above the plains!

Today, the tower's long cracks and columns make it one of the world's foremost rock-climbing sites—except during the month of June, when climbers respect Native American traditions and leave the tower to their ceremonies.

One October long ago, I tried climbing it myself. We got within a hundred feet of the top before snow turned us back. Perhaps the sacred bear didn't want us in his lodge that day.

In 1906, President Theodore Roosevelt declared Devils Tower the first National Monument in the United States. For more than a decade, Native American tribal members requested that the name of the sacred site be changed to *Bear Lodge National Historic Landmark*, but this name has not received congressional support.

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BUREAU OF
ECONOMIC
GEOLOGY

Background: Devils Tower

Synopsis: You may have seen Devils Tower—what looks like an 850-ft-tall tree stump—in the 1977 Steven Spielberg movie *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*. Since long before the movie, however, this massive rock column in the northeastern corner of Wyoming has been a sacred site for Native Americans and an inspiration to nature lovers.

- President Teddy Roosevelt declared Devils Tower the first United States National Monument on September 24, 1906.
 - Congress had already named it a U.S. forest reserve in 1892.
 - The Tower rises out of the plains near the Bear Lodge Mountains of the Black Hills, standing 1,267 ft above the Belle Fourche River in Crook County, Wyoming.
 - Its summit is 867 ft above its base, and it stands 5,112 ft above sea level.
 - The monument includes 1,347 acres.
 - The top of the tower is 180 ft by 300 ft; its base has a circumference of about a mile.
- The first documentation of the tower was in 1859 by a scouting party from Captain William F. Raynolds' famous expedition to Yellowstone.
 - In 1875, Colonel Richard Irving Dodge led a full expedition to the site and named it *Devils Tower* when his interpreters mistranslated a native name into *Bad God's Tower*.
 - In the Lakota language, a bad god or evil spirit is called *wakansica*, and a black bear is *wahanksica*.
 - Since 2005, Native American tribal members have requested that this sacred site be renamed *Bear Lodge National Historic Landmark*, but this name has not yet received congressional support.
- Devils Tower is a flat-topped butte made of phonolite porphyry—gray-green igneous rock with white feldspar crystals. It has a mineralogy similar to that of granite but is much finer grained.
 - It formed 40.5 million years ago in the middle Eocene, intruding into Triassic and Jurassic sandstones and shales, some of which were turned up nearly vertically around its base.
 - Scientists aren't exactly sure how it formed and how much of it has been eroded.
 - It is not thought to be a volcano because there is no ash in any of the surrounding rocks.
 - We know it started out as hot magma emplaced within the surrounding sedimentary rocks and cooled slowly enough to form its white feldspar crystals (but not slowly enough to form granite).
 - ◆ The magma, shrinking as it cooled underground, formed four- to eight-sided vertical columns.
 - ◆ Around 5–10 million years ago, the surrounding rocks eroded to expose the full height of the tower.
 - ◆ Unsupported by the sediments, the exterior columns occasionally break and fall around the tower, leaving huge sharp-edged boulders at its base.
- Its unusual columnar cracks make Devils Tower one of the finest crack-climbing sites in North America.
 - William Rogers and Willard Ripley made the first ascent of the tower on July 4, 1893. They used a series of ladders attached to wooden pegs in the cracks between the columnar pillars of the mountain. Portions of these ladders can still be viewed from the base of the mountain.
 - Climbers today use safety ropes and steel pitons, but to preserve the face of the tower, no permanent installations are allowed.
 - Some trails are closed each spring to protect nesting sites for prairie and peregrine falcons.
 - The mountain is still sacred to Native American tribes, and a voluntary ban on climbing during June honors the sanctity of native ceremonies.

References: Devils Tower

The Tower: Many People, Many Stories, One Place | National Park Service
Devils Tower | Wikipedia
7 Majestic Facts About Devils Tower | mentalfloss.com
Devils Tower National Monument | travelwyoming.com

Contributors: Juli Hennings, Harry Lynch



Background: Devils Tower

- Devils Tower—or *Mathó Thípila*, meaning *Bear Lodge*—is important in the culture of several different Native American tribes and carries many other names (translated here from their languages):
 - Lakota (Sioux) names: Bear Lodge Butte, Great Gray Horn, Brown Buffalo Horn, Mythic Owl Mountain, Ghost Mountain
 - Crow: Home of Bears, Bear Lodge
 - Arapahoe: Bear's Tipi, Bear Lodge
 - Cheyenne: Bear's House, Bear's Lodge, Bear's Lair
 - Kiowa: Aloft on a Rock, Tree Rock
- Native American sacred narratives about Devils Tower include the following:
 - Lakota (Sioux)
 - A great warrior preparing for the future went into the wilderness to fast and worship with a ceremonial buffalo skull. After 2 days, he was frightened to find himself on top of the sacred rock with the buffalo skull, unable to get down. He fell asleep, then woke up at the base of the rock, realizing he had been in the bear's lodge.
 - Two little boys were chased by a bear and climbed onto a rock, praying to the creator to save them. The creator caused the rock to rise up, leaving the bear jumping up and scratching its side. An eagle flew the boys back to their home.
 - The Lakota have the most well-documented sacred connections to the butte—the Black Hills are their place of creation. The Lakota fast; pray; and perform vision quests, healing ceremonies, and sweat-lodge ceremonies at Bear Lodge. Their annual Sun Dance is also held at this place of renewal.
 - Crow
 - A big bear chased two little girls who had been playing outdoors. Just before he caught them, they climbed on a big rock and were saved by the Great Spirit, who made the rock grow out of the ground. Trying to reach them, the bear scratched the side of the rock, leaving huge claw marks. According to the legend, the little girls are still there today.
 - Arapahoe
 - The Crow would fast and worship at Bear Lodge and build small “dream houses” that would fit one person lying with his or her head to the east and feet to the west.
 - Cheyenne
 - A girl picked up a magical bison rib and turned into a bear. She scratched and fought with her sister, ultimately slipping off a big rock and falling on her sister, breaking the bones in her chest. The bear-girl climbed to the top of the rock and told her family that seven stars in the sky in the shape of a diamond (the Pleiades) would appear, with the first star farther away than the others—called *Broken Chest Star* in memory of the event.
 - On his deathbed at the base of Bear's Lodge, a great Cheyenne warrior, Sweet Medicine, foretold the disappearance of the old ways: buffalo replaced by slick animals with split hooves—horses—and white “Earth Men” who could fly over the planet, take thunder from light, and dig up and drain Earth until it was dead.
 - Kiowa
 - Seven little girls playing outside the village were chased by bears. They jumped on a low rock and prayed for it to save them. As it began to grow, the bears clawed at it but finally fell to the ground; their sharp claws fell around them and can be found there today. The rock eventually grew so high that the girls became the seven stars of the Pleiades that rise over the tower in midwinter.
 - The Cheyenne pushed the Kiowa tribe south to Oklahoma, so most tribal members have never seen Devils Tower, knowing it only from their rich legends.

References: Devils Tower

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