

The Arkansas River's Great Bend

Inch Deep, Mile Wide

The Arkansas River is one of America's iconic rivers, coursing 1,469 miles before merging with the Mississippi River. Here in central Kansas, its steady east-southeast flow is interrupted by a wide northward sweep called the "great bend." The city of Great Bend lies at this meander's northernmost point.

A wild mountain stream as it surges from the Rockies, the Arkansas transforms in the Great Plains into a braided river, much like the Platte and Canadian Rivers. In a braided river, several small channels wander within a broad, shallow river bed. Indeed, the Arkansas River flood plain widens to nearly eight miles in eastern Barton County!

The Arkansas River carries sediment from the Rockies, which drops out as the river slows along the "great bend." Dispersed by floods, these sediments build fertile soils. This region's only river, the Arkansas has shaped much of what you see along the Byway.



Arkansas River
Ted Lee Eubanks



Arkansas River/Jerry Segraves

"Ar-Kansas"

Here in Kansas, we pronounce the river's name, "Ar-Kansas." Ask Kansans why, and they might tell you, "Because we don't live in "Kan-saw!" Our pronunciation sensibly combines the state's name with its most prominent feature—the sweeping "arc" the river makes through this region.



Wagon Crossing/Kansas State Historical Society

Fording the Arkansas

As the river crosses this region, a low limestone bluff lines its north bank. In the 1800s, this limited the places where wagons could cross. Just east of Ellinwood, a gap in the bluff became the region's first wagon "ford."



Sand Hills/Jerry Segraves

Motion and Change

Many hundreds of years ago, drought gripped this region. The Arkansas River ran dry. Strong winds pushed riverbed sands into a huge dune field that stretched between Dodge City and Wichita (including Barton and Stafford Counties), an area now called "The Great Bend Sand Prairie."



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