

South Central Utah (U17A Part 2)

After finishing up with my Courthouse Wash hike at Arches National Park I headed for Green River, a nearby town on I-70 where I'd stay the next four nights. On my last two Utah trips I drove I-70 across an area known as the San Rafael Swell, and highway overlooks suggested a rugged, empty land that just called out to me to explore it.

The San Rafael Swell is an anticline, basically a bulge in the layers of the earth that started eroding even as it bulged upwards. The erosion exposed rock layers in the middle of the swell that were now at much higher elevations than newer rock layers just to the east and west. The erosion created some impressive canyons and land formations, and along the eastern edge the uptilted layers of rock formed the San Rafael Reef.

Twice the size of Rhode Island, I-70 is the only paved road through the swell, and there are no permanent residents. Indeed, Green River and Salina, the cities on either side, have signs that warn drivers that the next services are 106 miles away. Native Americans, however, left their mark through petroglyphs, pictographs and shelter ruins scattered around the area.



Here's a picture of a small anticline southwest of Moab, taken on a 2009 trip. Note the curved rock layers. The Colorado River helped erode away the center of the bulge, exposing older layers of rock.

On the way to Green River I stopped at Mill Canyon Dinosaur Site, where I made a repeat hike of its Dinosaur Trail and then checked out its Dinosaur Trackways site for the first time.



These sauropod tail bones are among many dinosaur bones visible along Dinosaur Trail.



These theropod tracks are among dozens of theropod, sauropod and ancient crocodile tracks visible on this partially exposed layer of rock, once a mudflat.

It was too early to check into my Green River motel, so I headed for Lower Gray Canyon along the Green River and the Tusher Canyon in the Book Cliffs (west of Sego Canyon) to check out the Nefertiti rock formation and some petroglyph panels.



Nefertiti



Some of the Tusher Canyon petroglyphs.

On Saturday I first headed to Nine Mile Canyon, a 40-mile long canyon called the “World’s Longest Art Gallery” because of the 1,000 known (and 10,000 estimated) rock art sites along and near the canyon, many dating back 1000 years or more. I started exploring the canyon some years ago but construction forced me to turn around before I made it to its best known petroglyph panel at the end of the canyon.



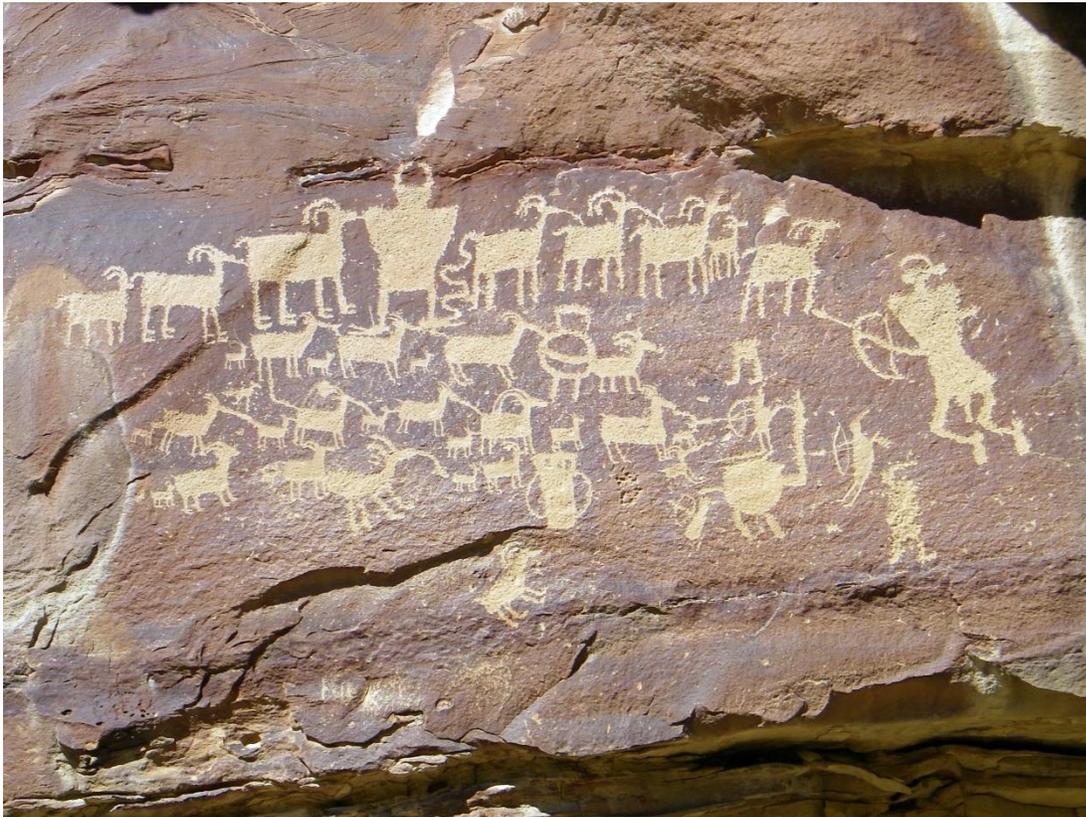
A Nine Mile Canyon petroglyph



Nine Mile Canyon pictographs



Unfortunate pictograph damage on private property just 30 feet from public land. After the site had been repeatedly damaged and vandalized, the landowner asks some teens to put up some No Trespassing warnings. They painted this warning over one of the ancient pictographs the landowner was trying to protect. To add salt to the wound they misspelled “Trespassing”.



The Great Hunt Panel, which I missed during my first visit to Nine Mile Canyon.

After exiting the canyon I headed for the Cleveland Lloyd Dinosaur Quarry, located at the north end of the San Rafael Swell. Erosion at the swell exposed Jurassic era layers of rock, rock rich in dinosaur bones. More than 15,000 dinosaur bones have been excavated at the site already, although only small areas are being excavated at any given time. Short hiking trails let visitors explore the landscape some.



Dinosaur bones in one of two enclosed quarrying areas. I did see one fairly intact bone and a handful of bone fragments on the trail I hiked.



“Privy” and “private” share the same morphological root – “priv”. And yet this privy certainly is not private, leaving you exposed to the elements, passing tourists and hungry wildlife. A linguistic mystery for you to contemplate should you ever find yourself ever needing to use this anything-but-private privy.

On Sunday I focused on sites in the San Rafael Swell north of I-70.



San Rafael Reef is the tilted ridge of rock layers that mark much of the eastern edge of San Rafael Swell.



My first stop here was a short hike to check out the pictograph panels in Black Dragon Canyon, named for the reptiles that zealously guard the panels. Black Dragon Canyon is one of several short canyons that cut into or through San Rafael Reef.



More pictographs from Black Dragon Canyon, which is really named for a pictograph of a dragon-like creature.



In the center of San Rafael Swell, a mix of eroded canyons and range land. Cattle grazing is permitted in the Swell.



More pictographs, these in the heart of the Swell in the canyon at Buckhorn Draw.



The San Rafael River itself doesn't look like much, but it helped carve the "Little Grand Canyon of the San Rafael", a sizeable canyon in San Rafael Swell.

My last stop of the day was a hike out to the Rochester petroglyph panel.



My hiking destination comes into view.



The incredibly impressive Rochester petroglyph panel. More petroglyphs were located nearby.

The next day I focused on San Rafael Swell sites south of I-70.



I started at Temple Wash, which cuts through the San Rafael Reef, where I checked out this pictograph panel. The damage is generally due to natural flaking of sandstone. It does make me wonder how much rock art we've lost – to natural causes, well-intended pioneers and tourists, vandals, etc.



A view along the Behind The Reef Road shows how much the rock layers have tilted at the eastern edge of San Rafael Swell.

My first hike was down some distance into Crack Canyon, which cuts into the reef.



Inside a crack in Crack Canyon.



My next hike was down into Chute Canyon, which also cuts into the reef.



The Chute Canyon hike was more colorful as the sun eventually came out, but it cuts through the same layers of rock that Crack Canyon does. If you hike just one of the canyons I recommend Crack Canyon.



Temple Mountain, on the “behind the reef” side of the reef near Temple Wash.



After finishing up at San Rafael Swell, I headed for Fossil Point south of Green River. It's an unmarked butte where the surrounding rock includes a number of petrified dinosaur bones. The site is out of the way and unsecured, so while it can be fun to "discover" bones on your own, a number of bones have clearly been removed, lessening the experience for future visitors.



A simple sighting tube on a post along Highway 24 can help visitors identify geological features and ruins sites in the landscape.

Obviously this tube's sign was scarred by vandals with a very childish sense of humor.

So let's have a look at Brigham Butte.



Oh.... That must be Brigham.



Heading south on Highway 95 to the Bullfrog area of Glen Canyon National Recreation Area, I stopped at the Bull Creek Pass National Back Country Byway where I discovered Little Egypt Geological Site.



The highway crosses Trail Canyon, which includes slot canyons like this one. Some of the slots here are as little as 6 inches wide. When hiking through such a slot, hikers have to climb up and over such narrow areas.

I'd be worried about slipping and getting stuck, but on some future trip I would like to check out the fringes of Trail Canyon.



Back at Glen Canyon I finally hiked the Pedestal Trail. I picked up a trail guide for this trail 20 years ago, but finally returned to actually use the trail guide on this trip to check out the trail's rock pedestals.



I spent a night in Hanksville. While there I checked out the Dirty Devil River near where it starts at the confluence of the Fremont River and Muddy Creek.



Driving west towards Capitol Reef National Park, Waterpocket Fold – another monocline – comes into view. The Aquarius Plateau a.k.a. Boulder Mountain is in the background.



At Notom Road I headed south to Burr Trail Road, which climbs the Waterpocket Fold as it heads into Capitol Reef National Park and Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument beyond that. I tried this climb 20 years ago, but then-recent heavy rains had damaged the road far too much for my old Dodge Spirit to handle.

Pictures in Capitol Reef along Highway 24 and the park's scenic drive:



Navajo Dome (left) and another dome



The Castle, I believe



Along the scenic drive behind Capitol Reef. The tilted landscape reminds me of what I saw behind San Rafael Reef at San Rafael Swell.

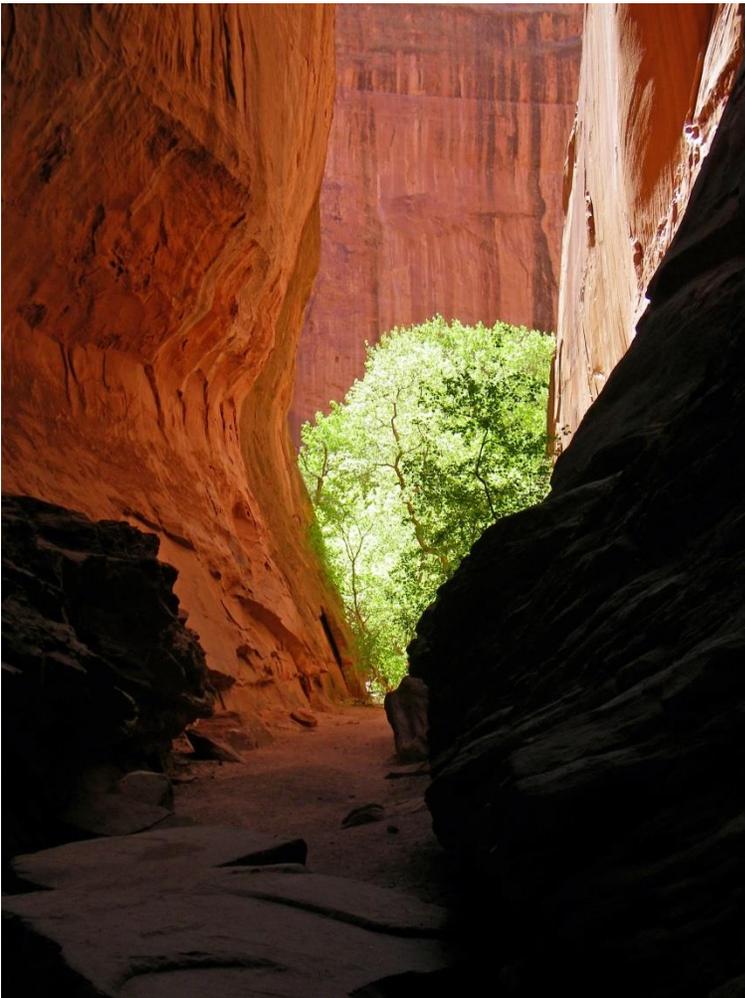


Some ruins at Anasazi State Park Museum at Boulder Town.

From Boulder Town I headed east on Burr Trail Road to the Capitol Reef park boundary. I drove this stretch of roads some years back, but it was an overcast afternoon then. Sunny skies but approaching clouds today.



View into Long Canyon, which is where I was heading



Inside a small slot canyon feeding into Long Canyon.



Burr Trail Scenery from the Long Canyon Overlook.



Burr Trail Scenery



Scenery from the Hogsback Overlook along Highway 12



More scenery along Highway 12.

Is it any wonder that this region was the last area in the Lower 48 states to be mapped.

I spent two nights in Escalante. For my main day there I started at Escalante Petrified Forest State Park, where I hiked its nature trail – a hike a couple hundred feet up to the top of a plateau. On top of the plateau the trail passes a number of examples of petrified trees.



Petrified wood along the nature trail.

I then followed Hole-in-the-Rock Road for several miles. It was a route originally taken by Mormon pioneers sent to colonize southeast Utah in 1879. It was a relatively straightforward wagon route until they reached the Colorado River. There they had to cut a notch through the rock cliffs (the “hole in the rock”), resulting in a very steep road down to the river.



I made a return stop to Devil’s Garden along the road, which is about as far as I went the only previous time I drove along Hole-in-the-Rock Road.



Old Mormon pioneer wagon tracks are still somewhat visible along this route in the center of the picture.



While construction of the “hole” was underway, Mormons camped near Dance Hall Rock, a natural amphitheatre in a large rock outcropping. The pioneers listened to music and held dances here.



I had planned on some hiking, but I spent too much time driving the road. So I stopped at the Hurricane Wash Trailhead for a colorful hour-long out-and-back hike.

For what turned out to be my final sightseeing day, I headed south on Highway 12 to Cannonville and then headed south on Cottonwood Canyon Road to Grosvenor Arch.



View of Powell Point, part of the Pink Cliffs.



Bryce Canyon – on the Pink Cliffs – comes into view. But I didn't visit Bryce Canyon on this trip.



Grosvenor Arch, towards the north end of Cottonwood Canyon Road. My Paria Box hike early in the trip was towards the south end of Cottonwood Canyon Road. I had driven the whole road back in 2000, and didn't originally plan to do so on this trip. But having already covered about half of this road, which follows the Cockscomb, on this trip, as a spur of the moment decision I decided to take this road south and then head west to St. George.



Cads Crotch. Don't stare.



The Cockscomb, part of the East Kaibab Monocline.



In a gully-turning-into-a-canyon, I saw a layer of rock just a few feet thick consisting of petrified seashells in an area that is now well above sea level.



Cactus flowers at the Paria Box, where I had gone hiking along the Paria River almost two weeks earlier.

Although I had plans for a couple sightseeing stops near St. George for my drive back to Las Vegas, I woke up to overcast skies. I can easily hit those sites on a future trip, so I decided to head straight home from St. George.