



MarkHitsTheRoad

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A Return to Southeast Utah Road Trip (U22A)

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit in early 2020, the Navajo Nation in NE Arizona, SE Utah and NW New Mexico imposed some tough travel restrictions on Navajo lands. For that reason, for my 2020 and 2021 spring road trips through Utah, I skipped my usual stays in Blanding, Utah and Page, Arizona, both of which are very close to the Navajo Nation. With a general easing of the pandemic in early 2022, I decided to return to both cities so that I could continue to explore the surrounding areas. I also made my usual stop in Green River, Utah.

I first visited Utah in 1991. One of my stops on that trip – the Island in the Sky District of Canyonlands National Park – inspired one of my big goals for this trip. I had a great day exploring the sites along Potash Road and Shafer Canyon Road in Canyonlands area back country. Beyond that, I enjoyed a number of sites related to my usual interests in geology, archaeology, dinosaurs, history and hiking. There is even something for any chocolate lovers reading this.



1991 picture of Shafer Canyon from Canyonland's Island in the Sky District. There's a road down there that climbs the canyon wall below where I'm standing. I thought it would be interesting to take that road someday, and finally got around to it on this trip.



I took two days to get from Las Vegas to Green River, Utah, as I wanted to make a return visit to Utah's Fremont Indian State Park, which includes a section of Clear Creek Canyon, long used by Native Americans to travel through the mountains between the Colorado Plateau and Great Basin (Hwy I-70 passes through this same canyon today). Its walls are lined with several archaeological sites, especially rock art panels. I first stopped in this park for a quick visit on the way home back in 2016, and wanted to see more of its panels, such as this one at the Arch of Art. The rock art on the left combines petroglyphs (pecked rock) for the white triangles and pictographs (paint) for the red triangles.



This pictograph is 14' by 6', and can be seen from I-70.

Downwinders



In the 1950s and early 1960s, students attending schools in Bicknell often watched beautiful orange clouds move across the valley. These attractions were remnants of mushroom clouds coming from above-ground nuclear explosions at the Nevada Test Site, located 65 miles northwest of Las Vegas.

With a day to get to Green River from Richfield, Utah, I followed Hwy 24 east across Capitol Reef National Park. Along the way I stopped at a small park in Bicknell, Utah, where one of its historical markers was about the above ground atomic bomb testing at the Nevada Test Site in the 1950s and early 1960s. Clouds from those bombs drifted eastward across Utah and Arizona, including Bicknell. About half the people who attended local schools during those years would go on to get and often die from cancer.



Panorama Point at Capitol Reef National Park. I only made the one stop in the park, as I did a lot more sightseeing here the last couple years.



I'm not sure that this Capitol Reef outhouse is truly gender neutral when it only depicts the two most popular of the 7 ½ genders out there.



For my first of three sightseeing days out of Green River, I returned to the San Rafael Swell. I first took the Red Canyon Loop Road through Red's Canyon to Hondu, which I had visited via a different route back in 2020.



Hondu was home to the Tomsich Uranium Mining Camp, home to several abandoned uranium mines.



Next up was the Historic Spirit Railroad Complex at the opposite end of the Swell. The site preserves some of the remains of an 1880s railroad construction effort that ultimately was never completed.

I seem to get at least one flat tire on almost every trip I take that includes exploration of the San Rafael Swell area. Many of the roads are pretty rough, but this flat happened on an easy stretch of gravel road towards the end of the day as I was returning to the highway. So, my Sunday began with me getting my tire repaired, killing most of the morning. I cut some back roads plans for the day as I found out that the very dry conditions have left lots of deep sand pockets on a lot of back roads in the area.

I did visit a couple historic sites in Hanksville, south of Green River, and then did some hiking in Blarney, Leprechaun and Morocco Canyons further south along Hwy 95. Increasingly strong winds produced a sandstorm later that day as I was returning to Green River, often reducing visibility along the highway.



Hiking in Leprechaun Canyon

Following Highway 279 southwest out of Moab, Utah, you pass some arches, rock art sites, trailheads and camping areas before reaching the Intrepid Potash, Inc. facility. At that point, the highway ends, but backroads begin, including the Potash Road, a 4WD, high clearance (in places) road that crosses through Shafer Canyon, sometimes along cliffs high above the Colorado River, until it reaches Shafer Canyon Road inside Canyonlands National Park's Island in the Sky District. Shafer Canyon Road leads to the head of the canyon, where it then climbs 1400 feet up the face of the cliff, making a series of six hairpin curves as it does so. Road conditions were best here along the 18-mile route, but in many places the road up the cliff face is pretty narrow – although not so narrow that you couldn't comfortably pass a cyclist peddling in the other direction.

I first saw this road during my first visit to Arches and Canyonlands National Park back in 1991, and thought that it might be an interesting drive someday. Later in the 1990s, I found that my then-Dodge Spirit sedan was not appropriate for the Potash Road. Since getting my Jeep Cherokee in 2016, I knew that it was just a matter of time before I finally traveled this back country route.

The next morning, I visited Dead Horse Point State Park, which sits on a plateau above Shafer Canyon – much of my route is visible from park overlooks, so I wanted to see the route from that perspective.



Potash Road starts out passing through the Intrepid Potash facility, which includes a number of evaporation ponds.



Along the way



I got a nice Jeep-y photo of my car that I could use in an ad whenever I decide to sell my car. Or, I could provide some information about the Jeep online, and Carvana will get back to me with a cash offer in less than two minutes.

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View of the Colorado River from Fossil Point a.k.a. Thelma & Louise Point.



Dead Horse Point State Park is centered on top of that mesa. It is from there that Thelma & Louise drove into the “Grand Canyon” in that movie’s iconic final scene. But they weren’t allowed to film at the actual Grand Canyon, so they filmed it at the state park. Either way, the Colorado River carved some pretty nifty canyons here, too.



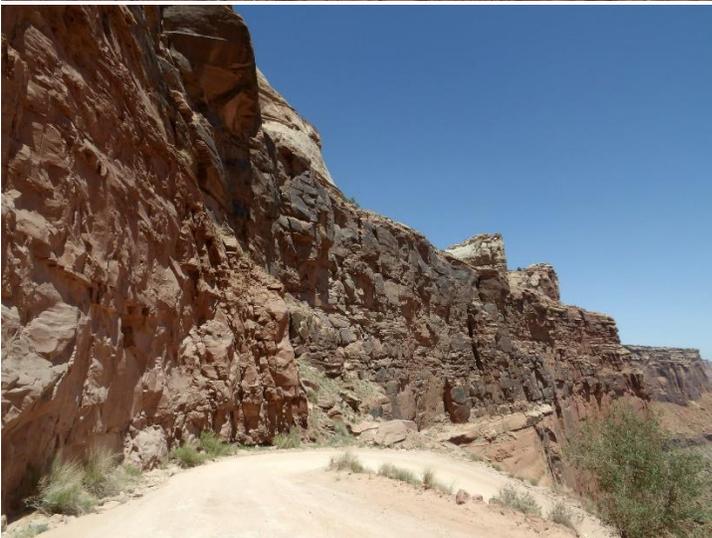
View of Fossil Point and the Colorado River from up at Dead Horse Point, near where the *Thelma & Louise* movie ending was filmed.



More scenery along Potash Road



Here's another view from Dead Horse Point State Park. Potash Road climbs out of a sub-canyon, where it hits a T-intersection. Turn left, and one travels on the White Rim Road to the left and eventually out of the picture. Turn right onto Shafer Canyon Road, and you drive towards the head of the canyon, where the road then hugs the canyon wall as it climbs 1400 feet.



One of the half dozen hairpin curves as the road climbs out of Shafer Canyon.



This is Shafer Canyon Road as it climbs the wall at the head of the canyon.

The hairpin curve in the last picture is the one at the far left (yellow arrow).



Shafer Canyon. Red arrow is Dead Horse Point. Green arrow marks where Potash Road emerges from the sub-canyon. Blue arrow marks the T-intersection, where turning left leads to White Rim Road and turning right leads this way and eventually out of the canyon. Purple arrow marks the rather anti-climactic final stretch of this road (and a nice place to stop to stretch your legs and get some pictures).



Also in the Green River/Moab area, I stopped to check out the Intestine Man/TV Sheep rock art panels. It's not clear whether the Intestine Man (center figure, left) pictograph (painted rock art) is really showing off his intestines or if it represents some decoration on his wardrobe. Or perhaps even a map of the road leaving nearby Shafer Canyon. The TV Sheep petroglyphs (pecked patterns in the rock) certainly weren't intended to look like TVs. Rather, this boxy representation of big horn sheep is more characteristic of Ancestral Puebloan than Fremont cultures.



Moab Man (left) is featured on a petroglyph panel found near the golf course in a Moab, Utah neighborhood. "Moab Man" isn't a terribly original name for it, but it probably beats being called "Intestine Man".

In 2013, it was announced that a blood engorged mosquito trapped in amber for 10s of millions of years had been found by a geology graduate student named Kurt Constenius. Dinosaur DNA in the petrified blood was used to recreate a small herd of dinosaurs that roam the grounds of Moab Giants (right). Thanks to science, it's all perfectly safe. Alas, the museum and other features of Moab Giants that I saw were pretty underwhelming.

After relocating to Blanding, Utah, my first stop was at the Navajo Parks & Recreation visitor center at Monument Valley. I found out about the Casa del Eco ruins site on Navajo lands online, but was suspicious when the websites I saw made no mention of getting permits or using guides. The Navajo require permits to visit back road sites and guides to visit archaeological sites, which I confirmed at the center. And I couldn't get a permit for an Arizona site for later in the trip at the Monument Valley visitor center (had to do that a few days later at Cameron, Arizona). That took a chunk of the morning.

There were two museums in Blanding that I've wanted to see for a while, but only The Dinosaur Museum was well worth the visit, one of the better dinosaur museums I've been to, even if one of its exhibits – *Dinosaurs in the Movies* – was really about our pop culture than about dinosaurs.



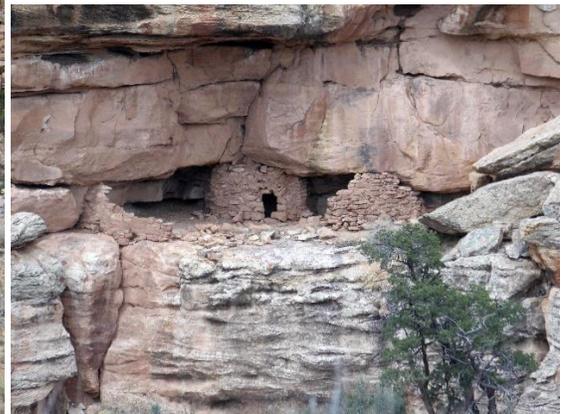
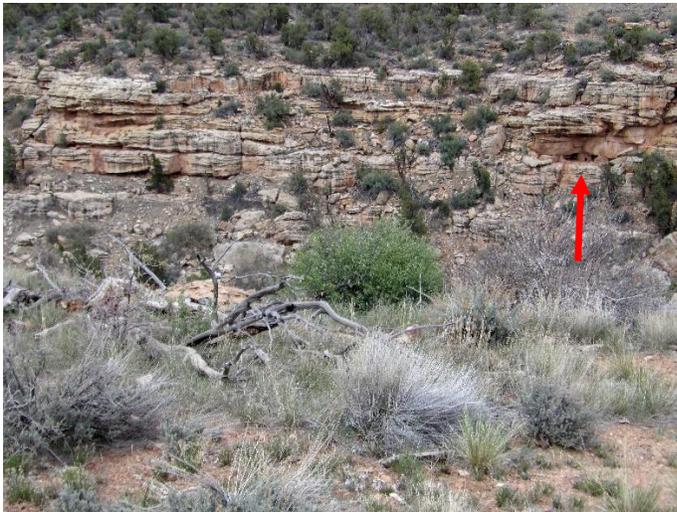
This set up showed how early dinosaur stop action scenes were filmed, along with what the resulting image actually looked like.

I spent the rest of the afternoon looking for archaeological sites in the canyons east of Blanding.



This archaeological site at Alkali Ridge doesn't look like much now – the digs were backfilled, as is often the case. Originally thought to be a Chaco Culture outlier, finds at Alkali Ridge proved that it was much older, with the site showing the transition from pit-style dwellings to Puebloan II above ground, multi-story buildings, making it an especially significant archaeological site. It was for a time one of the largest villages in the northern reaches of the Southwest. (The haze is from an approaching sand storm.)

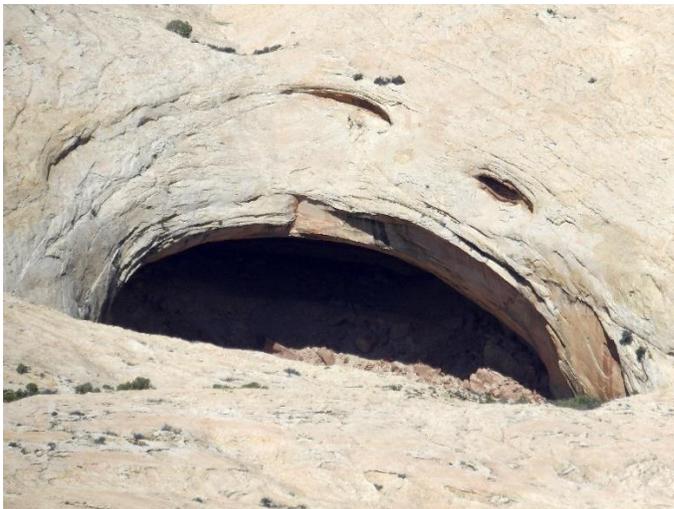
What was also discovered here was cacao residue in some of the pottery found here. Quite a bit of it, actually. Chocolate comes from Central and South America. Given when things were dated, and this appears to be the earliest known chocolate found in what is now the United States. Did migrating tribes from the south bring it with them? Or were extensive trade networks established much earlier than believed? Something to think about the next time you enjoy some chocolate.



While exploring the Alkali Ridge area, I stopped the car at arbitrary places and scanned the cliff faces for ruins site. At this Devil Canyon stop (left), I spotted three ruins sites. Two were pretty minor, but the third one (red arrow in the left photo) was a good one (right).



The next morning, I took the Butler Wash Road north along the east side of the Comb Ridge monocline – another 4WD, high clearance road about as long as my Shafer Canyon route, but still a much easier drive. In 2018 and 2019, I covered the southern 6 miles as it provided me with access to four hiking trails leading to archaeological sites. This drive was mostly to get a feel for the rest of the route.



About halfway along the 20-mile route is Fishmouth Cave, which was likely used as an ancient shelter, but it does not contain any ruins or rock art. However, the hiking trail to Fishmouth Cave passes four ruins sites.



At the north end of Butler Wash Road is this small dinosaur trackway site.

After finishing here, I then scouted out the Fish and Owl Canyons Trailhead for future reference, but still had enough time left in the day to take the scenic drive through nearby Natural Bridges National Monument once again. I've seen the bridges a few times before, so this time I focused on spotting more archaeological sites on the canyon walls, but I only spotted a couple.



Owachomo Natural Bridge. At 180 feet wide, Owachomo is the smallest of the park's three natural bridges.



One of the unmarked ruins I spotted in the park

I've driven along Montezuma Canyon Road a couple times in the past, visiting Three Kiva Pueblo Ruins, and spotting a few other archeological sites along the way. This time I did the drive in the morning so that the east-facing canyon wall was getting the full sun. I ended up finding seven more archaeological sites, mostly minor ones, that featured rock art and/or ruins.



There are several ruins on this section of Montezuma Canyon wall.



Some white and one black pictographs



It took one of the roughest drives I've put my Jeep through to get to the Cannonball Pueblo Ruins site, but it was worth it to see this impressive ruins site in Canyons of the Ancients National Monument.



I couldn't get a permit to visit Casa del Eco Ruins on the Navajo Nation Reservation on my own, but it is right above the San Juan River, the northern boundary of the reservation near Bluff, Utah. I scouted out a spot on the Bluff side and found that I could get a distant view of the ruins from about 2000 feet away.



I've driven through Valley of the Gods four time before, but always in the afternoon and entering from the west. As I repositioned myself to Page, Arizona, I drove through it again, this time entering from the east with the morning sun. Cedar Mesa in the background is mostly undeveloped and is home to thousands of archaeological sites. It is at the heart of Bears Ears National Monument.



Classic highway view approaching the Navajo Nation's Monument Valley Tribal Park from the north on Hwy 163.

Page, Arizona is home to the Glen Canyon Dam which creates Lake Powell Reservoir on the Colorado River. Page pretty much exists only because of the dam and lake. But several years of drought have taken their toll. Many of the boat ramps no longer reach the dropping lake. I was on the highway between Hanksville and Green River on both a Friday and Sunday, and I should have seen a lot of boats being towed to and from the Hite and Bullfrog boat ramps on the lake's north side along the way, but I didn't see a single one on either of those days as those ramps are closed. Most of the boat ramps in the Page area are closed, too. Even a pedestrian ramp to a small harbor for tour boats is closed. During my stays in Green River and Page, I noticed that tourism was clearly way down when compared to past visits.



Views of the Wahweap Marina from Wahweap Overlook in 2018 (top) and 2022 (bottom). For all the drought talk, water use in the Southern California hydrologic region, which includes Los Angeles and San Diego and gets some of its water from the Colorado River, was up 27% in March 2022 over March 2020.



The New Wave formation at Glen Canyon near Page. And, no, this isn't the famous Wave. Not really close even, other than both feature eroded petrified sand dunes with some color in their cross-hatching.



Hiking at New Wave, I enjoyed some nice views of the north side of the Vermilion Cliffs National Monument in the distance.

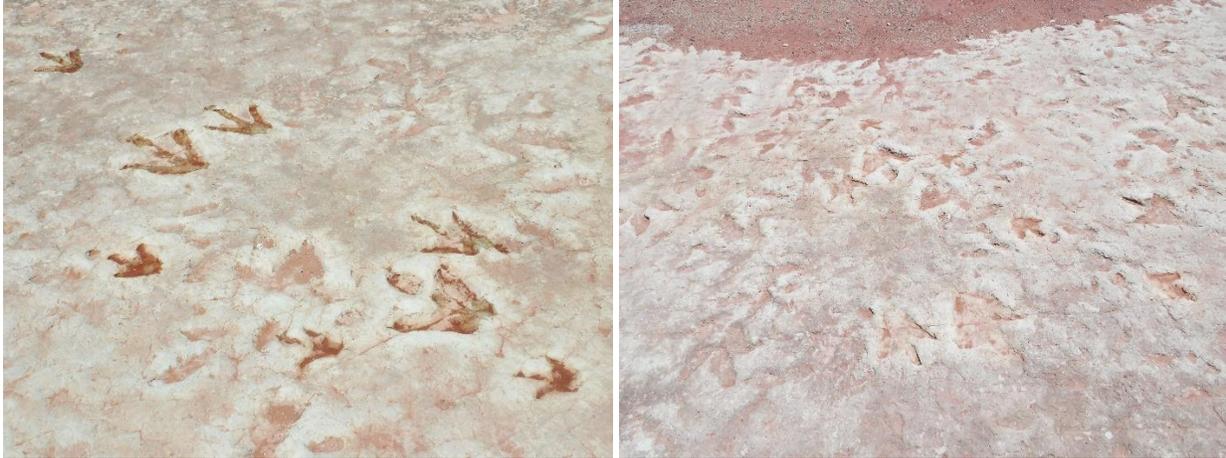


Hiking along the Wahweap Hoodoos Trail in the southeastern portion of the restored Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument. In 2017, President Trump reduced GSE by 53%; President Biden restored GSE to its original boundaries in 2021.



Hiking along the White Rocks Trail in Grand Staircase-Escalante.

I spent one of my Page days exploring some Navajo Nation sites, starting with the Navajo Moenave Dinosaur Tracks site. This is actually part of a major dinosaur trackway site that extends well-beyond the portion that is open to tourists.



Parallel trackways, enhanced with some water (left); several dinosaur tracks (right)

The site primarily features theropod tracks, carnivores of various types. It's free, but you'll likely be quickly intercepted by a tribe member who will provide a tour of the site for an expected tip before turning you loose to explore it more on your own. Seems like a good deal.

Except most of the information my guide gave me was wrong. I was immediately suspicious when he started naming the species of dinosaurs that made the tracks. With a few exceptions, paleontologists can identify classes of dinosaurs by the tracks they see, but not specific species. Finding fossils at the tracksite in the same layer of rock can sometimes help.

Among the dinosaurs he named were the Dilophosaurus, which lived in the area about 193 million years ago in the Early Jurassic period; the Pterodactyl, which appeared in the Middle Jurassic Period; and the Tyrannosaurus Rex, which lived in the Late Cretaceous period, or about 90 to 66 million years ago. The rock itself dates back to the time of the Dilophosaurus. But it's not possible for all these species to have made prints on the same mud flat. However, the T-Rex and Pterodactyls are tourist-cool dinosaurs.

Another guide suggested to some other visitors that some exposed "fossils" were ribs and a hip bone. Except that they're just unusually weathered sandstone.

My guide told me that the hardened mudflat was preserved when covered after the big meteor hit Arizona – but that meteor crater is only 50,000 years old. Another guide told his group that it was protected by a layer of volcanic ash, which is far more plausible.

The tip cost less than Navajo permits or tribal park entrance fees, and the guide did show me where the highest concentrations of tracks were, so that was something. The tracksite is definitely worth seeing.



I did get a Navajo permit at Cameron so that I could visit the rim vistas at Coal Mine Canyon.



I also made a photo stop at the Elephant Feet formation along Hwy 160 northeast of Tonalea on the Navajo Nation Reservation .

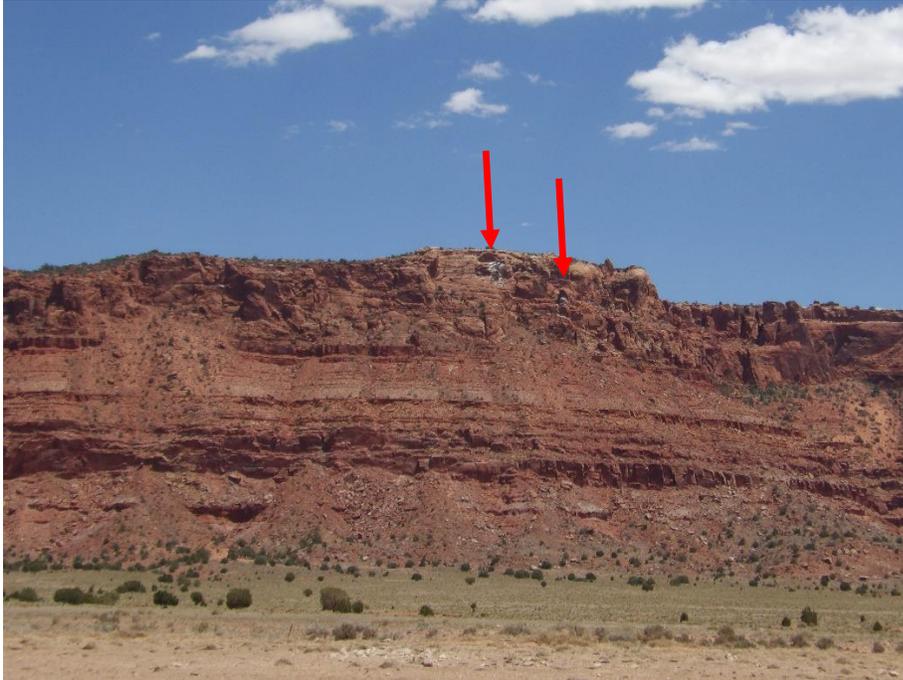
For my final day of sightseeing, I made the clockwise drive around Vermilion Cliffs National Monument (S US 89; W US 89A; N House Rock Rd; E US 89). I've made variations of this drive a handful of times over the years as I've targeted assorted hiking trails and other sites here. With a new camera with 67x optical zoom, I figured this was a good place to really test out that feature. Turned out that I couldn't hold the camera steady enough to take full advantage of its zoom capabilities, but it had been a while since I'd seen many of these sites, so I still enjoyed the drive.



Navajo Bridge crosses the Colorado River along Hwy 89A at the upstream reaches of Grand Canyon National Park. The Vermilion Cliffs are in the distance.



The Vermilion Cliffs along Hwy 89A



This was the first time I saw the California condors from the viewing site along House Rock Road. I zoomed in on parts of the Vermilion Cliffs streaked white with bird droppings. Alas, the zoomed photos were pretty grainy.



West Bench Pueblo ruins are along a side road that leads up to the Paria Plateau atop the Vermilion Cliffs. House Rock Road can be seen in the valley. This site was occupied about 900-1000 years ago.



Pottery shards litter the ground at West Bench Pueblo ruins. Here you can see the decorative texture of the pottery on one shard (lower left) and a painted pattern on another (upper right). I can't imagine anything I've ever worked on lasting for as long as a thousand years.

Except perhaps NetOwl.



To see the world-famous Wave at Coyote Buttes, you need to be lucky enough to score one of the few permits they issue per day and then hike several miles to get there. But the view of Coyote Buttes from House Rock Road is pretty nice.



Wire Pass Trail starts here and leads to a slot canyon that continues on to Buckskin Gulch and beyond that to Paria Canyon. I have hiked here a handful of times over the years. The trail to the Wave leaves from here as well.



Colorful scenery along Hwy 89 just east of the Comb Ridge monocline



For all the color elsewhere, much of the scenery along the south end of Cottonwood Road just north of Hwy 89 is grey or tan, as you can see above and in this photo of the Paria River along Cottonwood Road. Further to the east, the landscape turns white along the White Rock and Wahweap Hoodoos Trails before turning grey again along Smoke Mountain Road. Then a lot of orange appears as you approach Glen Canyon at numerous places such as New Wave.

There is so much geological variety to the landscape in this relatively small area, part of why it continues to be so appealing to me and why I keep coming back year after year.