

## Spring Break in the Four Corners Region (U18A Part 2)

The rest of my Four Corners trip focused on Utah destinations. I started my Utah swing with a 3-night stay in Blanding, in southeast Utah, where I planned to focus on ruins sites in the Cedar Mesa/Bears Ears National Monument area.

Last year when I first planned out my return to this area, most of my Blanding-area stops were in the then-newly created Bears Ears National Monument. But since then, President Trump ordered an 85% reduction in the area covered by the monument.

My first stop, though, Mule Canyon Cave Towers, is on a smallish piece of land managed by the State of Utah School and Institutional Trust Lands Administration. Although it was for a short time surrounded by Bears Ears National Monument, it was never actually part of the monument.

Cave Towers isn't on most of my maps, and it barely registers with the few maps I have that it does appear on. I did learn that it was a ruins site – the ruins of seven stone towers are located at the head of a side canyon to Mule Canyon – so I wanted to check them out.



Currently there aren't any signs along Highway 95 that indicate that this gated road accesses anything interesting, let alone the Cave Tower ruins. The gate may keep away some visitors, but there aren't any No Trespassing signs. Just make sure that you leave the gate in whatever open or closed position you found it.

A not-too-rough road leads to a parking area. From there you can walk a half mile to the ruins site or take a much rougher/high clearance road.

I recommend the walk.

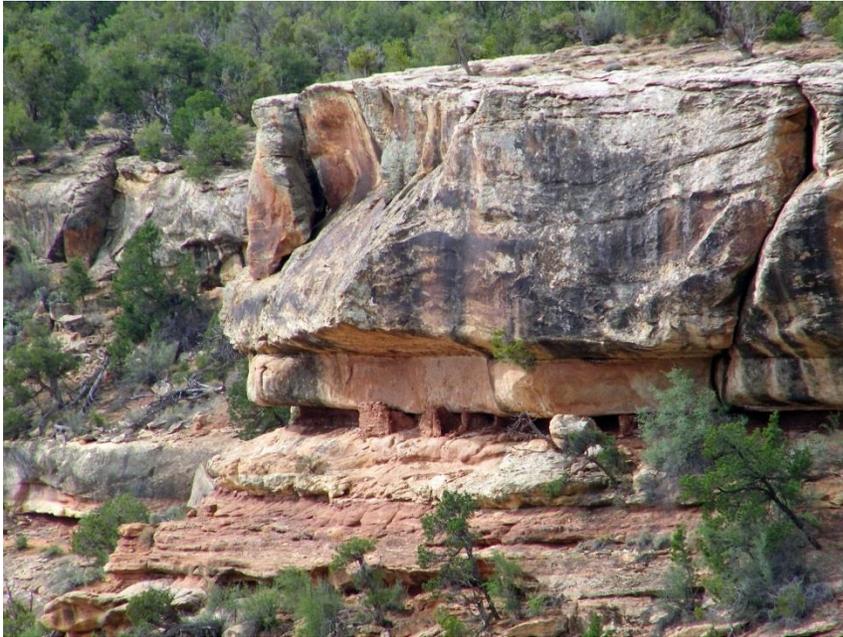


View from the head of a side canyon where it leads into Mule Canyon. Imagine a canyon like this near where you live – and yet here the Mule Canyon Cave Tower site doesn't even get a mention on most maps or in most local tourism brochures I've picked up.



Two of the seven tower ruins at the head of the side canyon. Four of the towers still have some standing walls. The other three towers are little more than foundations and rubble at this point.

I could have ended my visit after seeing the towers, but along the canyon wall in the distance I saw what I suspected were granary ruins built into a crevice on the side of the canyon. With 15x optical zoom on my camera I still had a hard time determining if they were ruins. But that prompted me to walk along the canyon rim and scan its walls to look for any other ruins sites. I ended up spotting ten different ruins sites on the ledges and in the alcoves of the canyon, these in addition to the seven tower ruins.



The granary ruins that I originally had noticed from much further away.



Two sets of pueblo ruins.

Up-canyon, Mule Canyon is not nearly as deep and features a south fork and north fork. The south fork is a popular hike (I took it some years back) especially because it leads to the “House on Fire” ruins site.



One of my “House of Fire” ruins site photos. The site gets its name from the colors and patterns in the rock that hangs over the ruins. A late day sun really brings out the reds and golds in the rock, giving it a fire-like appearance. Alas, I think visitors are loving this site to death by getting too close to and even leaning against or entering the ruins – I can see differences between my 2004 pictures and more recently taken pictures others have posted online.

I drove past the south fork trail head, which was lined with vehicles, and parked where the road intersected with the north fork. I was the only one there, and I didn’t even know if there was anything to see here.



In the distance I hiked in Mule Canyon’s north fork, I came across a bit of rock art as well as four small ruins sites – including this one.

Notice the buildup of soot from ancient fires on its walls and ceilings. When looking for ruins sites, keep an eye out for soot buildup in alcoves (although there won’t be soot at granary ruins sites).

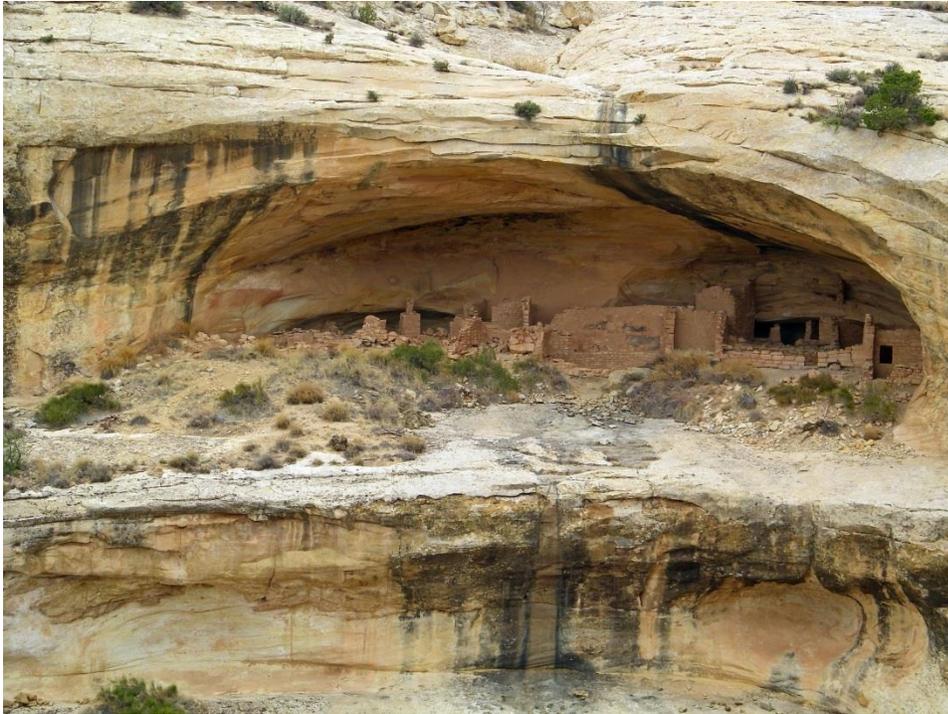
Not House on Fire, to be sure, but few visitors to the area will see this one.



At one of the sites past visitors placed found objects – pottery fragments, scraper tools – on a rock. They're interesting to see, of course, but this is an archaeological site no-no. Original locations of such things help archaeologists better understand these sites. Loss of context results in loss of information.



Butler Wash Ruins have a well-signed parking area, and it's only a half-mile (albeit mostly uphill) hike to get to an overlook area to view the ruins in these alcoves.



Ruins in a Butler Wash alcove.



On my way back to Blanding I briefly checked out the north end of a back road that follows the east side of Comb Ridge (a planned drive for some future trip) and immediately came across this small dinosaur trackway.

Here you can see three dinosaur tracks heading away from where I'm standing.



The west face of Comb Ridge, a monocline. Comb Ridge remains in the reduced Bears Ears National Monument. But my hiking destination just to the west, the Fish Creek Canyon Wilderness Study Area, was cut from Bears Ears.



During my hike into Fish Creek Canyon I came across the ruins of a granary and two pueblos, including this pueblo.



They're hard to see in this picture, but the white blotches on the wall above the small ruins fragment are numerous reverse handprint pictographs.

A dye was made with rock powder mixed with a liquid. Put a hand on the rock. Put one end of a tube (e.g., hollowed out bird bone) in the liquid, and use a second tube to across the free end of the first tube. This creates a crude aerosol sprayer. Spray the hand and rock, and you end up with a reverse handprint pictograph.

There are more ruins sites further along the canyon, but rain showers were moving into the area – rain could make impassable the clay/dirt road I followed to get to the trailhead.



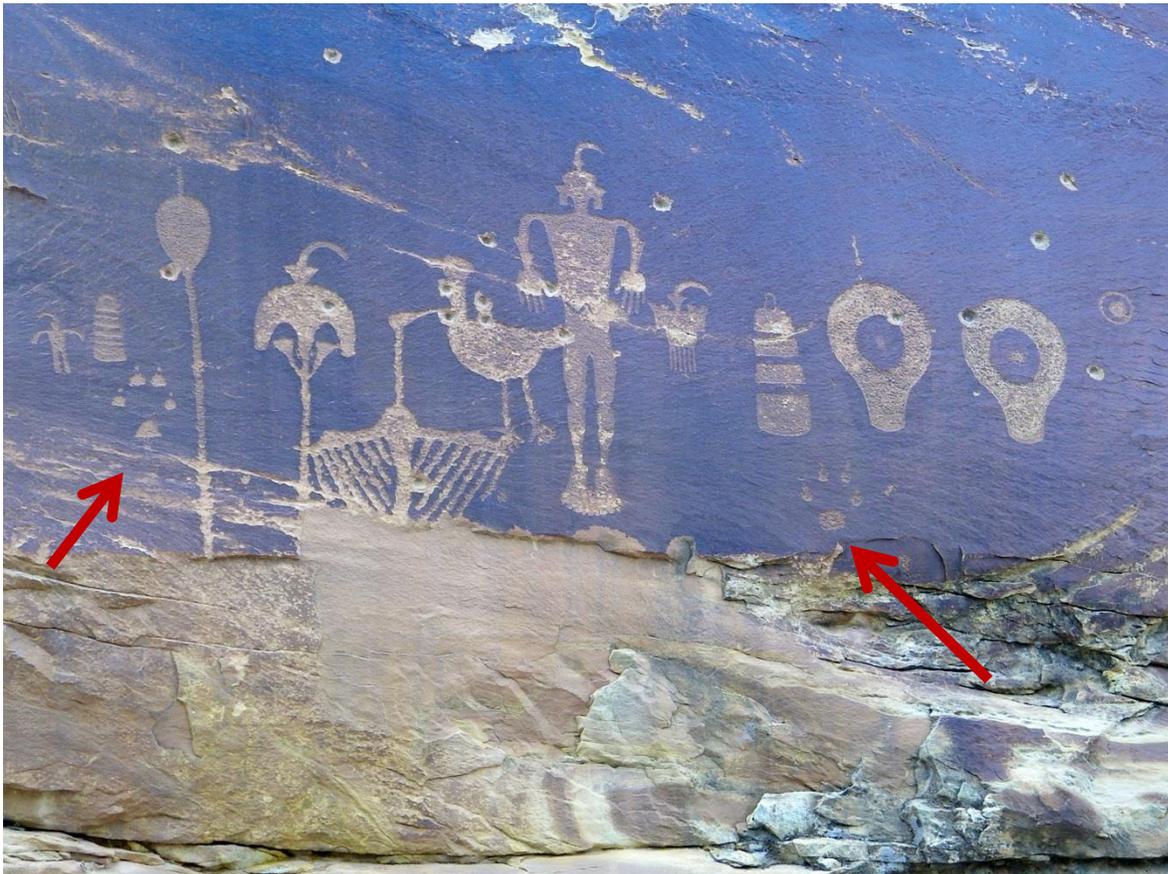
At the south end of Comb Ridge's east side is a trail that leads to the "Wolfman" panel of petroglyphs. The trail passes this view of a ruins site.



The trail down to the petroglyphs hugs the wall of this canyon. I was glad that it wasn't a popular trail.



These petroglyphs don't look much like any petroglyphs I've seen elsewhere.



Are these wolf paw print petroglyphs the reason this is known as the Wolfman Panel of petroglyphs?



From Blanding I head to the town of Green River. I made my usual photo stop at Church Rock along Highway 191. Church Rock was one of the first “unusual” features I came upon during my first visit to Utah in 1991.

Then I headed for Canyon Rims Recreation Area, which features several great views of Canyonlands National Park and the Indian Creek and Kane Creek areas. Canyon Rims is another area that was originally included and then later cut from Bears Ears National Monument.



View of Grand View Point and the mesas of Canyonlands National Park’s Island in the Sky unit.



View of Canyonlands’ Needles District, a favorite hiking and photo destination.



More Canyon Rims views.

The La Sal Mountains are one of several ranges in the region that resulted from volcanic/igneous intrusions into once much thicker layers of sedimentary rock. Over millions of years thousands of feet of sedimentary rock has eroded away, revealing what are now these mountain ranges.



The Colorado River enters Canyonlands National Park.



One of my favorite views is this anticline. The layers you see in the distance really are curved. A very large bubble-like dome or fold was pushed up here and then much of it – especially in the middle – eroded away over time.



The Anticline Overlook also features views of Kane Creek Canyon. The creek flows into the Colorado River (seen center, upper left). The bumps in the distance above that point are the formations of the Windows Area in Arches National Park. If you enlarge the picture you can see South Window Arch.



I drove up into the Kane Creek Canyon area a few years ago, but had to stop here where the creek (ribbon of trees) crossed the road due to high water levels from then-recent rains. The La Sal Mountains are in the distance.



A dinosaur track, one of a number of tracks on the Willow Springs Road Dinosaur Trackway on the western edge of Arches National Park.



Crystal Geyser, on the east bank of Green River southeast of the town of Green River, is a cold water geyser. There's a lot of carbon dioxide in the groundwater. As the gas is released it builds up. The pressure occasionally pushes water up through the ground – and now through this pipe. Eruptions are unpredictable but can push water up as much as 30 feet or more into the air. And it's cold groundwater, unlike hot steam geysers found elsewhere.



Minerals in the erupting water have created a colorful layer of travertine limestone between the geyser and the waters of the Green River.



The San Rafael Swell is a large (75x40 miles) anticline that I've started exploring these last few years. Like the anticline I showed earlier, much of the interior has eroded away. The tilted rock layers of its eastern edge – the San Rafael Reef – feature a number of canyons that cut through the rock layers.



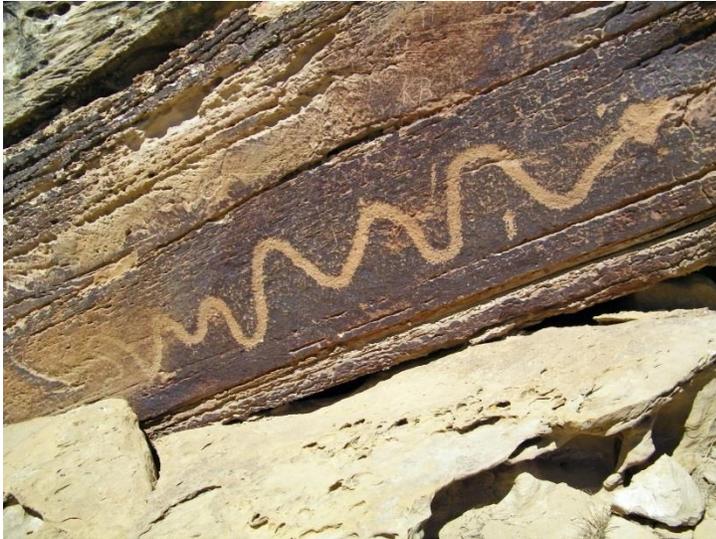
Looking south along the reef and into this small gulch, and you get a better sense of how many upper layers of rock have eroded away over time, at least above ground.



Three Fingers Canyon is one of the canyons eroded through San Rafael Reef that I did some hiking in. Its petroglyph panels at the mouth of the canyon were why I chose Three Fingers. A crude Kokopelli is seen in the upper right. The figure in the upper left appears to have a colorful pictograph line painted from its upper left to mid-right.



Sloped rock leads up to the panels, providing close up views of many of the petroglyphs. But watch where you walk as the sloped rock itself features numerous petroglyphs, too.



Towards the west end of San Rafael Swell are the Dry Wash petroglyphs. Among the petroglyphs is this very large snake.

Watch where you walk. (sssssss!) 😊



This is Molen Reef, located along the western edge of San Rafael Swell. It's not nearly as eye-catching as San Rafael Reef. But there are a number of archaeological sites in the area that I'm just beginning to explore.



Coal Cliffs are located along the western side of San Rafael Swell. Colorful, if you accept that grey is a color.



Little Wild Horse Canyon is one of the canyons that cuts through San Rafael Reef. Although many of these canyons require some technical skills to complete, Little Wild Horse Canyon is billed as family friendly. And I indeed saw several adults shepherding groups of little kids along the trail.

Right after you enter the canyon, you encounter this 6 feet deep hole (it was hidden by muddy water when I stopped here a year ago). Some folks were balanced enough to edge their way around this without falling in.

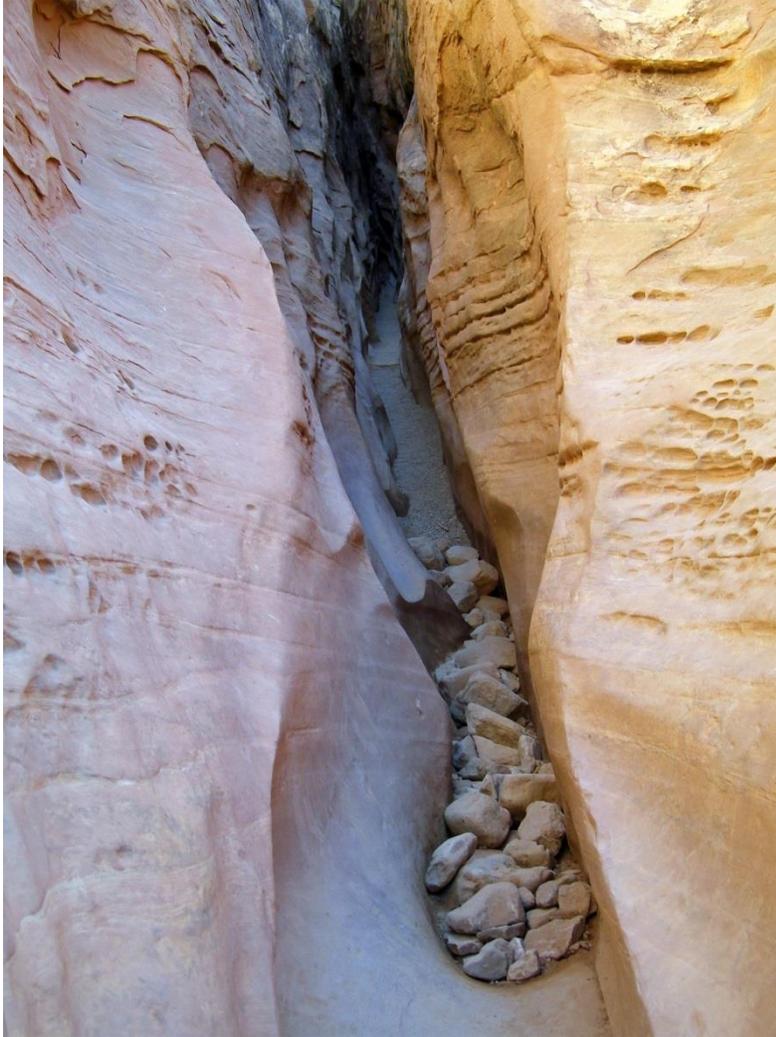


The other way to get around it was a steep, narrow trail that climbed several feet above the canyon, not one that I'd want to have to guide a bunch of little kids across.

Once past that, there is some easy hiking, including a stretch through an increasingly narrow slot canyon.



That initial slot canyon emerges in this wide space, which some end up using as their turnaround point.



They turn around because the trail continues through this slot canyon. It's indeed pretty narrow.

If you're a bigger hiker and plan to hike the Little Wild Horse Canyon Trail, I suggest wearing clothes with lots of vertical stripes. They say that vertical stripes are slimming.



But I was wearing horizontal stripes, so I decided to backtrack to where Bell Canyon splits off of Little Wild Horse Canyon.

Early in my hike into Bell Canyon I saw what may be a Fremont granary ruin, although I have yet to come across a description of the trail that mentions it.



Reached by a drive through a wash, Ding and Dang Canyons cut through San Rafael Reef. I only had about an hour for hiking here, but I enjoyed the colorful rock layers as the trail reached the reef.



Just north of Hanksville I decided to head west on an arbitrarily-selected ("I wonder what's down this road?") dirt road where I ended up with this view of Muddy Creek.

Time to reposition myself from Green River to Escalante, Utah.



Maidenwater Slot, along Highway 276 south of Hanksville. I came across this slot canyon a year ago and thought I'd hike down to a place to enter it. I didn't have a map but I got a Google satellite view of the area – that unfortunately didn't show whether my planned hiking route was suitably hike-able for me. So I ended up exploring a bit of Trail Canyon instead.



View from Trail Canyon



I passed through Capitol Reef National Park on my way to Escalante, but I only made a few photo stops, including this stop at Navajo Dome.



One of the most rugged areas in the Lower 48 states is found between Boulder and Escalante, Utah. It was actually one of the last areas mapped in the Lower 48. Paved Highway 12 now crosses the area and includes stops like Boynton Overlook. From Boynton Overlook I got this view of the Calf Creek area, the patch of trees seen in the middle of this picture. I started my only full day in Escalante with a hike along Calf Creek to Lower Calf Creek Falls.



A small arch along the Lower Calf Creek Trail.



Colorful layers of rock make up the canyon walls along Lower Calf Creek Trail.



The trail guide highlights a pictograph panel across the canyon from the trail. Pretty cool, don't you think?

Can't see them? Good thing that my camera has 15x optical zoom.



That's better.

But a little earlier in the hike I thought I saw a different pictograph panel across the canyon, so I took some 15x zoom pictures and hoped I'd see something interesting when I could look at the pictures on a bigger computer screen.

Below is what I saw. Three distinct figures towards the right. But to the left you can make out some faded, largish, left-facing bighorn sheep pictographs, Photoshop-enhanced here a bit to make them easier to see.

It pays to keep your eyes open while hiking through the Four Corners' canyons, something I thought several times on this trip.





As hikers get closer to the falls, the trail passes through some wetlands. Here the trail is lined with “horsetail” plants. These tube-like plants are “living fossils”, existing back even in dinosaur times.

Which was confusing to the dinosaurs as they had no idea what horses were.



The relatively easy trail (just over six miles, round trip) leads to the 126 feet tall Lower Calf Creek Falls.



The Head of the Rocks Overlook along Highway 12 features this view of the Aquarius Plateau, the “top step” of the series of plateaus known as the Grand Staircase.



The view from Head of the Rocks Overlook towards the distant Henry Mountains features Highway 12.



My last major sightseeing stop of the trip was the Twenty Mile Wash Dinosaur Trackway, a few miles off Hole-in-the-Rock Road, southeast of Escalante. But finding dinosaur tracks here is not a sure thing. I'm at the parking area in this picture, and the only information provided at this stop says that there are no trails. Some previous visitor with a pen made his irritation with that known. So where are the tracks? Certainly not in the sand of the valley floor. But the rock rising to the right is about the same color as some trackways I've seen near Arches National Park. And because I'd expect tracks to be on a reasonably flat surface, I suspected that the tracks would be on top of that rock.



To get up there I figured I'd need to find a place where the slope to get up and down was reasonable. So I walked to the left for a bit until I found a spot.



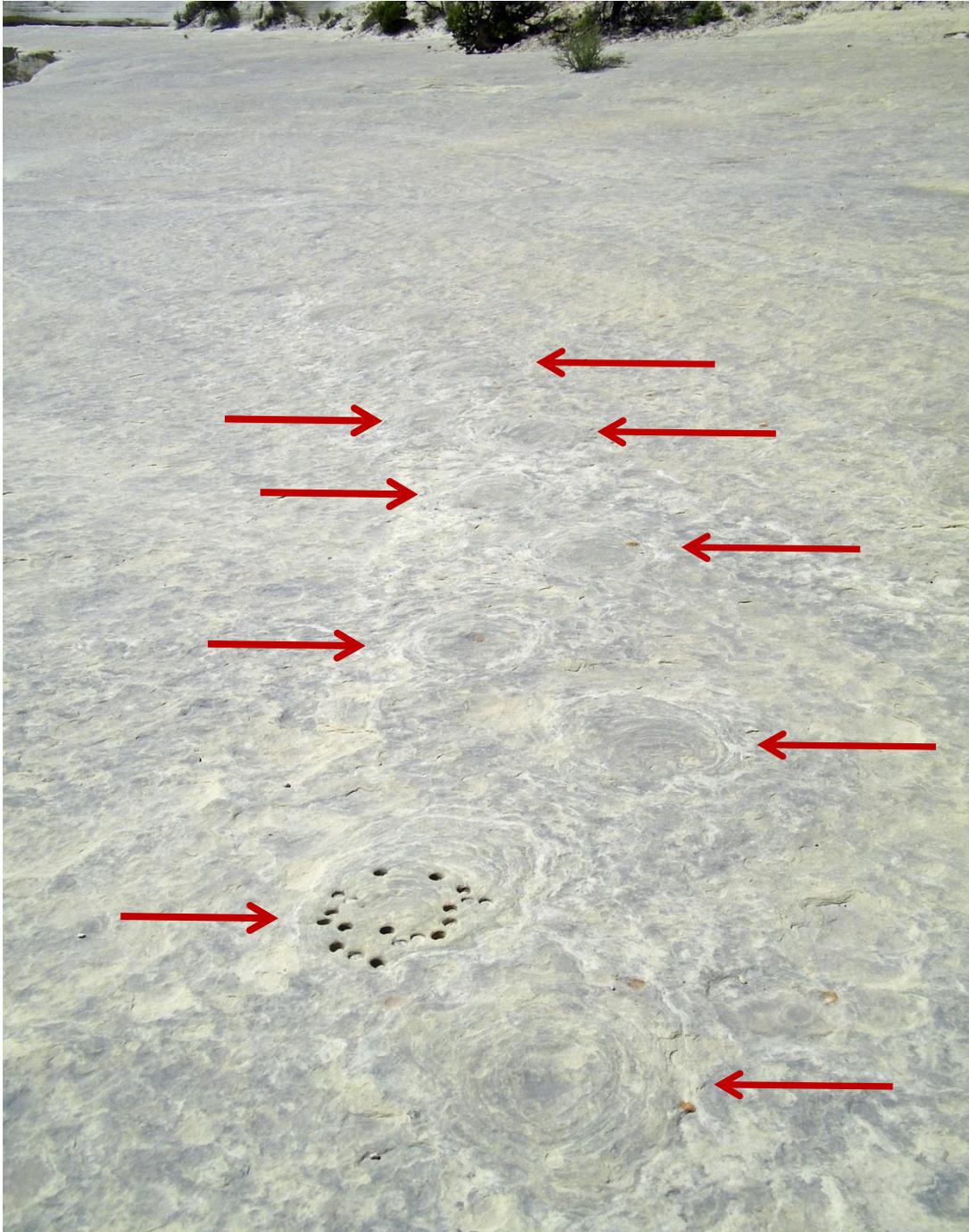
You can see where I parked (arrow). My hunch proved right. This dinosaur trackway has over a thousand tracks, more than any other trackway I've been to so far, and they were scattered across the upper layers of this rock. (btw, those are the Straight Cliffs in the distance)



A theropod (three-toed, initially carnivorous) dinosaur track. If you were standing here millions of years ago, you were probably about to be eaten. But I'd now be wondering what the strange tracks were that you left behind.



A couple more theropod tracks. Unlike tracks I've seen at other trackways, these didn't form deep depressions in the rock. That made them harder to identify, especially at first.



The sauropod (pillar-like legs, long necks, plant eaters) tracks were harder to identify in isolation, often looking like concentric circle-ish patterns on the rock. So I looked for sequences of these, which typically appeared as a left-right-left-right sequence of tracks.

One of these tracks had been bored into several times. I suspect someone was investigating what had filled the track. Or they were looking for details that would help them understand the footprints.



You can see some horizontal lines on this picture. Some information I read about the site indicated that there are some examples of dinosaur tail drags captured in the rock. Tail drags are rare as dinosaurs generally didn't drag their tails (in spite of some depictions). Are these tail drags? I don't know, but I would have expected to find them between or lined up with tracks. So I'm skeptical. But I also don't know what else these odd lines could be.



For my drive back towards Las Vegas I did make a short stop at Bryce Canyon National Park and took a walk along its Rim Trail. I'd been to the park several times and have hiked along its rim and down into the colorful hoodoos on many of those visits, so I've skipped the park the last few times I've passed through the area. I didn't see anything new here – but there are always lots of pretty views from the rim.