



Hiking Utah Road Trip (U23A)

Back in 2020, I began my spring trip to Utah with a ten-mile hike, and then took a handful of additional hikes on that trip. After finishing all my planned activities for the trip, I headed over to Utah's Horseshoe Canyon where I did a bit more hiking – and broke a bone in my foot. That break healed, but in the next year I broke another bone in each foot, neither of which has healed, and I was diagnosed with Charcot Foot. Charcot Foot is a permanent softening of the bones in your feet, and thus they can easily break. I figured my hiking days were over.

I began taking vitamins and eating prunes with an eye towards improving bone strength. Custom medical CROW boots and canes gave me some mobility, and I began doing some limited hiking in 2022, slowly, carefully, and with a boot on each foot and a cane in each hand.

For this trip to Utah, I made it all about hiking, mostly short hikes, but I included a pair of relatively ambitious hikes. I didn't plan on much else for this trip, as I need a lot more time for hikes than before, and I also wanted to make sure my feet had some recovery time. I ended up with about 21 miles of trail hiking on this trip. The feet aren't "better" and never will be, and I would have hiked about 30 miles if I had healthy feet, but 21 miles is a far cry from the zero miles I had expected just a couple years ago.



So, if you run into someone out on the trails hiking with the help of two custom medical boots and two canes, it might just be me.

My first hike for the trip was over 6 miles long. Some years back I headed up to Kanab, Utah for a few days. I got there early enough in the afternoon that I thought I'd check out the Ryan, Arizona ghost town. There was nothing to see there, but along the way I saw a sign for Gunsight Point. I looked into that when I got home, and decided to check it out on some future trip, which turned out to be on the way home from a 2019 return to Kanab.



You may recall the picture on the left. Gunsight Point sits above the confluence of Snake Gulch and Kane Creek Canyon, which then heads south (ahead) to the north rim of the Grand Canyon. The picture on the right looks up the approx. 35-mile-long Snake Gulch canyon from Gunsight Point. I knew that Kane Creek looked more ordinary to the north because it passes through Kanab. But on my maps, I saw a road that terminated near the head of Snake Gulch. In 2021, I thought I'd check that out on yet another Kanab visit. Expecting to be looking into the canyon from the rim, I instead found that the road eased into the canyon and stopped at a hiking trail that led through Snake Gulch. Signs promised lots of rock art along this trail, especially between 3 and 6 miles in – a 12-mile round trip that I added to my “someday hikes” list for after my foot fully recovered from the first break. Just a few weeks later, I found out that I had been walking around on broken bones and was diagnosed with Charcot Foot.

Until this trip, my longest bootied hike was just over three miles. I knew I wouldn't do 12 miles, but I wanted to go at least 3 miles in (6 round trip) so I'd at least sample some of the rock art. The trail itself was very easy for the most part – healthy feet could cover a mile in 15-20 minutes, or longer if you're looking carefully for rock art.

I ended up seeing some shelters, one ruins, and a handful of petroglyph and pictograph sites, although I didn't see some of the best pictograph panels based on published photos I've seen. So, I haven't taken the trail off the “someday” list just yet.

The boots are heavy, adding about 8 pounds to each foot. And because I use the canes for actual support, my upper arms and shoulders got quite the workout from this hike. I learned that I need to factor these into my future hiking plans.



The hiking trail in Snake Gulch. In spite of the name, I didn't see any snakes. But with hiking at just about one mile per hour, the sage brush that filled the canyon bottom seemed endless.



This shelter panel features petroglyphs carved on top of a panel of pictographs. The pictographs were likely Basketmaker Culture (1500BC to 750AD), and the petroglyphs were likely Ancestral Puebloan, which followed Basketmaker.



I found this Basketmaker Culture pictograph close to my turnaround point.

For the next day, I planned on just limited hiking along the Paria River/Cottonwood Canyon. But with rain clouds in the area, I killed some time waiting for things to clear up. There's a lot of bentonite clay in the soil out that way. When wet, bentonite clay is extremely slick, making the road impassable (oil drills use bentonite clay as a lubricant).

What really struck me were all the wildflowers I saw. Utah had its wettest winter on record, and I was seeing a superbloom in an area where wildflowers were mostly non-existent most years.



Left, May 17, 2022, is the typical springtime grey and beige that I find in this area; right, May 16, 2023, is part of the superbloom I found this spring in several places in Utah, including here along Cottonwood Road in Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument.



Sego lilies blooming near the White House Trailhead



Globemallow along Cottonwood Road; I remembered seeing miles of Salt Valley in Arches National Park filled with globemallow in bloom back in 2007, and made sure that I included globemallow in my own desert landscaping after I moved to Las Vegas.

The next day was a driving day as I repositioned myself from Kanab to Blanding, Utah, a day of rest for my feet. As I approached Page, Arizona, I stopped at Glen Canyon National Recreation Area's Wahweap Overlook so that I could see how Lake Powell was faring after the wet winter.



Left is May 2022, Right is May 2023; the lake level is noticeably higher, and it's risen several feet in the weeks since I took the 2023 photo, but much of the flat land immediately beyond the marina should be underwater, so there's still a long way to go. I'll note, that after Utah's wettest winter ever, I experienced some rain 11 of the 13 days of this trip, and there was rain in the region the other two days.

My route took me through the Navajo Nation Reservation. I stopped at Goulding's Trading Post at Monument Valley for lunch. Although I normally just look at Monument Valley as I pass it along the highway, I had some time today, so I stopped at Monument Valley Navajo Tribal Park to take in some of the scenery (I last toured the park back in 2004).



West Mitten Butte, East Mitten Butte and Merrick Butte, a classic Monument Valley vista

I first visited the Cave Tower ruins in 2018. Seven Ancestral Puebloan tower ruins stand at the head of a side canyon to Mule Canyon. While there, I noticed a granary ruin near the top of the canyon's west wall, so I hiked along the canyon rim towards it to get a better look. That's when I noticed several cliff dwelling ruins along the canyon's east wall, ruins not mentioned in most of the sources I read on the site, thus a wonderful surprise. But this also delayed me from later plans for that day.

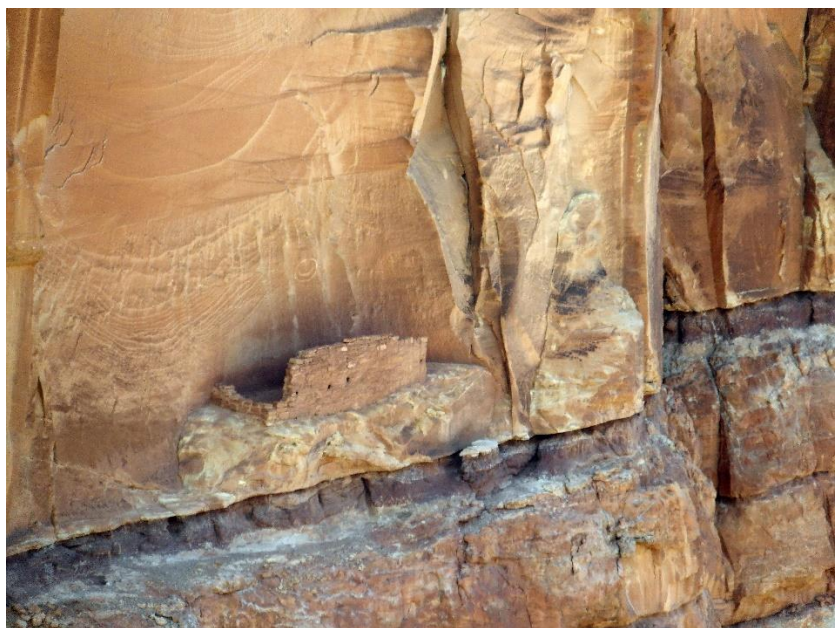
For this trip, I headed back to the Cave Towers site, this time to look for cliff dwelling ruins along the canyon's west wall. In two miles of hiking, I was able to add a couple more ruins sites and a couple rubble piles to the list, but nothing on the west wall comparable to what I had seen on the east wall.



This small side canyon of the much larger Mule Canyon is home to numerous ruins.



Ruins of three Ancestral Puebloan towers at the head of the side canyon are visible here.



One of the cliff dwelling ruins I saw on this visit that I missed my first time here.



The forecast said that there would be rain in the area, but that it would stay to the north of where my plans were to take me. Instead, bad weather moved in pretty quickly, faster than I could hike back to the car. I waited it out in my car, drying out a bit as I had lunch and studied my maps.

I wasn't sure if I'd be able to get to my next stop at Arch Canyon, as it took several miles of sand and dirt roads to get there, roads that don't usually hold up well with heavy rain. But I did get there with hopes to see the Arch Canyon Interpretive Site, just a short hike into the canyon.



Alas, that short hike followed an off-highway vehicle route that was also the bottom of a wash, a wash now filled with water running through it due to the rain in the area. Not the kind of hiking route that would be good for my medical boots. So, instead, I invented a hiking route in the area near the mouth of Arch Canyon.



It paid off as I found a pair of ruins sites, neither very good, with this one being the better of the two.



On the drive back to the highway, I had a nice view of the west face of Comb Ridge. Comb Ridge is an 80-mile-long monocline, the tilting of a large block of earth. In this area, where it is part of Bears Ears National Monument, the top is about 600 feet above the land just to the west. I hiked to the top back in 2019 in search of petroglyphs. Cars don't have to climb as far. In the photo, you can see that a notch has been blasted through Comb Ridge here that Highway 95 passes through.

I first started exploring the archaeological sites along the east side of Comb Ridge back in 2018, and visited a few more in 2019. In 2022, I drove the length of the ridge on Butler Wash Road between Highways 163 and 95 for the first time, and I got my first look at Fishmouth Cave. I read that there are some ruins sites along the trail approaching Fishmouth Cave, but most accounts say that there are none to be found in the cave itself. With the boots, I figured I couldn't make it up to the cave, anyway, but I could try hiking the approach trail far enough to check out some of the ruins along the way.

This part of the trail wasn't difficult other than it descended and then climbed out of a handful of washes. As my boots don't let my feet bend at the ankles, slopes can be a real problem for me. At best, they really slow me down. At worst, they're cause for me to turn around.



Butler Wash Road is a 23-mile dirt, sand and rock road that follows the east side of Comb Ridge between Highways 163 and 95. It can become impassable when wet, so the rain visible in the distance was a bit concerning.



Fishmouth Cave, on the east-facing side of Comb Ridge, can be seen from the trailhead here, upper left-of-center. The trail began with a couple steep slopes down into a wash followed by one back up.



The first ruins site was a bit underwhelming, featuring fragments of four walls.

The highlight of the hike was a rock overhang that protected the ruins of several structures.



This natural rock shelter houses an impressive Ancestral Puebloan ruins site.



The small structure upper-center was a new one for me. Too small to be housing, but too big to be granary, in my opinion.



Some housing structure ruins. The reddish color in the structures under the dust suggests that the site had burned. The soot on the ceiling could have been from such a fire, but soot-covered ceilings are common in such shelters as they were often the result of centuries of cooking and heating fires.



People aren't supposed to collect pottery shards at these sites. Once you lose the location context, you lose the chance of learning anything about the story behind it. But people can't help themselves. Said someone to me once, "I don't see the point of letting people step all over them."



With some time to kill when I got back to Blanding, I headed a bit north of town to the Devil's Canyon Campground to hike a short nature trail there. I saw the ruins of a granary in the canyon wall, not surprising as I've seen ruins elsewhere in Devil's Canyon.

My planned route home from visiting my Midwest relatives in October 2022 passed through Colorado, where I visited some dinosaur-related sites near Cañon City, and then planned to take Highway 50 through the mountains to Montrose, Colorado, which I had planned to use as a base for exploring some Gunnison River-related sites. As I was sightseeing near Cañon City, a strong winter storm was hitting western Colorado, so I instead headed south into New Mexico and skipped the western Colorado sites.

For the next part of this trip, I headed for Montrose from Blanding, crossing the Dolores River Canyon and through the San Juan Mountains. I've seen some beautiful pictures of the San Juans taken from a vista point along Highway 62, so I took that route. I knew I wouldn't get the "great picture" on this trip. Those photos were beautiful because the leaves of the quaking aspen turn golden in the fall, whereas I'd be getting fresh spring green. Or, as it turned out, I got rainy, overcast, low clouds grey.



One of my photos of the San Juans taken from the vista point is on the left. On the right is a photo taken in October 2021 and posted to Google Maps by a Bruce Wessel, much cropped to more closely match my photo. Wessel's picture gives you an idea of the October scenery I missed last year.

I got to Montrose with enough time that afternoon to visit the Ute Indian Museum, which tells the story of the Utes. All of today's Colorado was at the heart of Ute territory when American settlers pushed their way into the region. Within 40 years, the Utes were assigned to four reservations in Colorado and Utah that covered just a tiny fraction of traditional Ute territory.



"We lost Colorado in less than 40 years."

Maps in this museum exhibit show the shrinking Ute territory and then reservations over 40 years of treaties with the U.S. government.

People who visit the popular south rim overlooks at the Grand Canyon marvel at how wide the canyon is where it cut through layers of sedimentary rock. They may also notice that once it hits the so-called “basement” metamorphic schist rock, the canyon isn’t much wider than the river. It isn’t that the Colorado River used to be a lot wider; rather, sedimentary rock erodes and calves much differently than the much harder schist.



View of the Colorado River from my 1991 hike down into the Grand Canyon to Plateau Point. Plateau Point sits just above where the sedimentary rock layers meet the much harder metamorphic basement rock.

In western Colorado, an uplift brought basement rock close to the surface. Volcanic activity buried the area in ash and volcanic debris and also altered the course of the Gunnison River about 15 million years ago. Another uplift about 2-3 million years ago caused the Gunnison to cut more quickly through the volcanic cover until it reached the basement rock. Its course set, the Gunnison then carved a deep canyon into that rock, Black Canyon, a narrow canyon like what the Colorado River carved through the basement rock in the Grand Canyon.

But if you think that Black Canyon must be full of schist, you’d be wrong. Although there is some schist present, here the basement rock is primarily gneiss, another hard metamorphic rock. In fact, Black Canyon may be one of the gneiss-est canyons you might ever get the chance to see. With the gneiss at about 1.7 billion years old, Black Canyon certainly has some of the oldest rock you can see.



Black Canyon and the Gunnison River at the Chasm Overlook in Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Park.



The view at the Pulpit Rock Overlook in Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Park. The north/left side of the canyon here is steeper than the south/right side not because of the river but because of the weather's role in eroding these canyons.

During winter, the sun is low to the south, so only the north side catches any of its rays, quickly drying out the north side. The snow/ice and water from any daytime melting tends to cling to the south side walls, with the water refreezing at night. Water expands as it freezes, widening any cracks in the rock that it may have gotten into. Expand enough, and those cracks break off the rock, eventually resulting in a more gradual slope on the south side. Sedimentary rock is especially susceptible to this. Millions of years of this weather-based erosion is the main reason that the Grand Canyon is so wide in the sedimentary layers, not because the Colorado River was ever any wider than it is today.



The Painted Wall on the right gets its name from the light-colored streaks. Magma was pushed up into cracks in the overlying rock and hardened into what are now streaks of pegmatite. Pegmatite gets its color from a mix of quartz, feldspar and mica.

By the way, Painted Wall is the tallest vertical cliff in Colorado. At 2,250 feet, it's more than 50% taller than the Empire State Building.

There are three dams across the Gunnison River upstream from the national park. The tallest, the Blue Mesa Dam, creates Blue Mesa Reservoir, the largest body of water in Colorado, and the heart of Curecanti National Recreation Area.



Blue Mesa Reservoir is part of the Colorado River water system, and it has suffered from several recent years of drought. But the heavy snows of this past winter are beginning to melt, and water levels are rising quickly here. According to the ranger I spoke with, the reservoir's water level will likely be within five feet of "full" by the time this year's snowmelt has finished, good news for downriver folks like me.



The Blue Mesa Dam, the Gunnison River and Black Canyon at Curecanti National Recreation Area



Downstream from the two parks, the Gunnison River flows through Dominguez Canyon in Dominguez-Escalante National Conservation Area. No Black Canyon, but still beautiful, remote and rugged.



I-70 heading west out of Colorado towards Utah passes through McInnis Canyons National Conservation Area. Right off the interstate is the Rabbit Valley Research Natural Area, home to the Mygatt-Moore Dinosaur Quarry and the Trail Through Time, a trail that passes and describes fossils and other Jurassic Age features of this area. Here, several neck vertebrae fossils (between red arrows) and a front limb bone fossil (green arrow) of a *Camarasaurus*, a 60-foot-long plant-eating sauropod, are visible along the Trail Through Time.

Speaking of dinosaurs, my second major hike planned for this trip was the trail to the Dinosaur Stomping Ground, just north of Moab, Utah and Arches National Park. There are a handful of official track sites in this area, once mudflats along the shore of an ancient inland sea. Estimates suggest that there are more than a million dinosaur tracks just in this area, although many are not yet exposed.



My hike was about four mile round-trip. After crossing a wash, it was a gradual uphill climb to the stomping ground, much of it on exposed sandstone like that shown here (my car is at the arrow). For normal feet, it's a generally easy climb. But this sandstone is quite uneven, and at several places I had to go a bit out of my way to avoid required climbs or leaps, or simply to reduce the amount of slope.

This hike did leave my feet feeling rather sore. I think I used, stretched and twisted ligaments and tendons a lot more than they've been used, stretched and twisted in the last three years.

A dinosaur stomping ground is a dinosaur track site where numerous dinosaurs left tracks and trackways, so there was quite the abundance of dinosaur tracks spread across the site. Unfortunately, the tracks here have experienced a lot of erosion, so they generally were not as crisp-looking as tracks I've seen at other sites. This is what happens as dinosaur tracks are exposed to weathering.



Theropod (three-toed) tracks were usually from meat-eating dinosaurs.

Continuing up the slope for another 1/3 of a mile, I reached the rim, which featured a terrific view down into Salt Valley and across the valley towards the north end of Arches National Park.



View of Salt Valley, created by a collapsed salt dome. Stress from the collapse led to vertical cracks in layers of sandstone. Erosion widened these cracks creating sandstone walls, or fins, through which further erosion sometimes carved out arches. This is how Arches National Park ended up with the largest concentration of sandstone arches in the world.



After returning to my car, I headed for the road through Salt Valley, which I took until I reached the northwest end of Arches National Park, near its Klondike Bluffs area.



The Salt Valley Road enters Arches National Park near the Klondike Bluffs area where I've hiked the Tower Arch trail a few times in the past. From there, I had views of the distant Devil's Garden area, including the Dark Angel (left). On three past Devil's Garden hikes, I've taken the spur trail out to the Dark Angel, including in 2004 (right).



I headed back to I-70 following the Valley City Road to Thompson Springs and the Book Cliffs, the longest continuous escarpment in the world. Its canyons are home to a number of archaeological sites and mining ghost towns.

For the next day, I planned to do an easy hike in the Cottonwood Wash area of San Rafael Swell. Within a mile of the trailhead are ruins, rock art and arches. The tough part would be getting there, as the road can require high clearance. Old online photos showed that a vehicle comparable to my Jeep Cherokee had made it there at one time. Although I didn't have problem reaching the Smith Cabin area, I had to turn around a few miles later as gullies that cut across the road made it impossible for me to proceed.

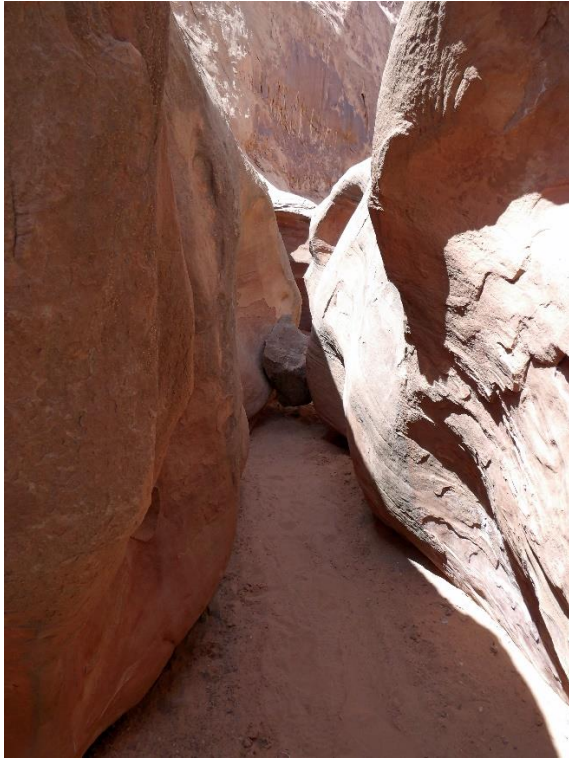


Smith Cabin

So, I pulled my next day's plans forward, and headed south of Hanksville to Leprechaun Canyon, where a trail leads to a slot canyon after about a mile or so. I hiked a bit of this a year ago, but at the time I was putting a lot of limits on my hiking, so I only got about halfway to the slot then.



This side canyon is probably a slot-in-the-making canyon. Come back in a few thousand years.



I made it to the mouth of the slot canyon, but not much further. I didn't expect to, as it quickly becomes a technical slot canyon, one that typically requires climbing skills and equipment.

But I was stopped by a large boulder wedged between the two walls of the canyon, its top about chest high for me. There was no way I'd be able to climb over that – heck, I would have been challenged by it even with healthy feet.

So, this day had turned into a bit of a bust, although I still enjoyed this hike. Almost any hike is a good hike.

For my last day, I used my rainy-day fallback plans, heading to Price, Utah to see its Prehistoric Museum and then to the northwest part of San Rafael Swell, for a return to the Cleveland-Lloyd Dinosaur Quarry, now part of Jurassic National Monument. This drive included a stop in East Carbon, Utah, home to the ruins of dozens of coke ovens in this coal-mining region.



Coke is essentially specially-baked coal, which converts it to carbon by burning off impurities. When coke is then burned as fuel, it generates intense heat but little smoke, ideal for producing steel.

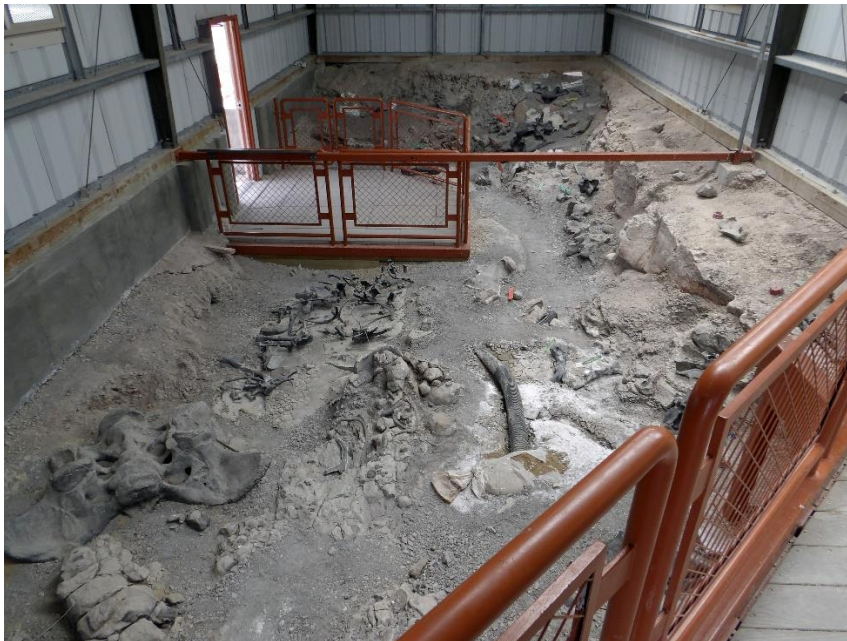


Price's Prehistoric Museum is a very good museum. About half of it focuses on early life with a special focus on dinosaurs, particularly those that once roamed Utah. Coal-based casts of dinosaur footprints are commonly found in area coal mines, as this museum display shows.



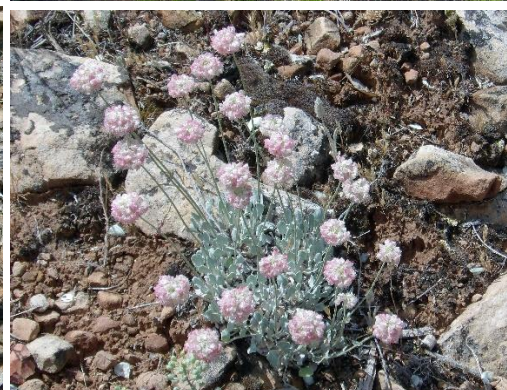
The other half of the museum focuses on human-related archaeology centered on the Paleo-Indians, the Fremont, the Ancestral Puebloans and others who had made their homes in what is now Utah. This display shows some of their art, etched into small flat rocks.

From there I made a return visit to the Cleveland-Lloyd Dinosaur Quarry, where a large number of allosaurus fossils have been found. Active quarries are protected by these buildings.



I can't say that much has changed here since it became Jurassic National Monument.

That pretty much ended my sightseeing. I headed home the next day. I was generally pleased with the hiking accomplishments, although my feet were achier than I would have liked after the Dinosaur Stomping Ground hike. I'll have to make sure the tendons get some R&R.



Thanks to Utah's wet winter, wildflowers were abundant this spring, including (clockwise starting at the upper left) Sego Lilies, Purple Sand Verbena, Mormon Tea (technically not flowers), Cushion Buckwheat, Evening Primrose, Firecracker Penstemon, Claret Cup Cacti, and Indian Paintbrush.