



# MarkHitsTheRoad

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## Southeast Utah and the Four Corners Area Road Trip (U19A-2)

After finishing up in Blanding, Utah I headed for Grand Junction, Colorado where I planned to spend a couple nights. This was intended to be a couple-days' break from the hiking, focused more on sightseeing, although a few short hikes fit into the schedule.

I took a backroads route from Blanding to Grand Junction, much of it following the Unaweep-Tabogauche Scenic and Historic Backway, i.e., Highway 141, between Naturita and Highway 50.



The La Sal Mountains in Utah. The La Sals along with the Abajo and Henry Mountain ranges were all created by an igneous rock upwelling into thick sandstone layers at some point in the last 30 million years. Much of that sandstone has since eroded away, exposing the mountains.

Mount Peale, the tallest of the La Sals, is the third highest mountain in Utah.



Heavy traffic in Utah's Lisbon Valley, one of two cattle drives I encountered before I reached the Colorado border.



Colorado's Paradox Valley, named because the Dolores River cuts across the valley instead of running the length of it as you might expect. Massive amounts of underground salt created a dome here that slowly collapsed over millions of years. The collapse was slow enough that the Dolores River was able to stick to its ancient course as the valley was created. Spanish Valley (Moab) to the northwest formed in a similar way, which explains why the Colorado River cuts across rather than runs through that valley.





The Unaweep-Tabogauche scenic highway was indeed a pretty drive as it passed through the San Miguel River, Dolores River and Unaweep Canyons, which run alongside and through the Uncompahgre Plateau area south of Grand Junction.

This is the ghost town (of sorts) of Uravan, Colorado. Once a vanadium and uranium mining town, Uravan provided uranium for the Manhattan Project's first atomic bomb. Now a Superfund site, no buildings from the town remain.



Hydraulic gold mining requires a lot of water and strong water pressure. In the 1880s, the Montrose Placer Mining Company built a wooden flume (open water chute) along the canyon walls above the Dolores River to provide these. It ran for 12 miles starting from a dam on the San Miguel River and connected to a six mile long ditch.

It cost \$100,000 to build and used 1.8 million board feet of lumber. It transported 80 million gallons of water/day, but it was used for just three years because the mining project only made \$80,000.



This part of the country had a wet, snowy winter. I'd see a lot of snow in the mountains on this part of the trip. And even more was added over the next several days.





After finishing up the scenic drive I thought I'd check out some of the canyon scenery in Dominguez-Escalante National Conservation Area, a site I learned about but drove past last fall as I made my way from Delta, Colorado to Moab, Utah on that trip.

Alas, within a few minutes after I reached the first overlook it started raining.



Many of my plans for my Grand Junction stay focused on checking out some area state parks for future reference. But most of them were of the "let's put some campsites and picnic tables next to a reservoir" variety, fine for a quiet weekend next to a lake, but not the kind of places I'm much interested in.

Rifle Falls at Rifle Falls State Park was pretty, but after checking out the falls and some nearby caves, there wasn't much else to see here.



James M. Robb Colorado River State Park consists of five units along the Colorado River in the Grand Junction area. Boat ramps, picnic tables, camping.

This is a view at the Fruita unit of the northern edge of the Uncompahgre Plateau, site of Colorado National Monument.



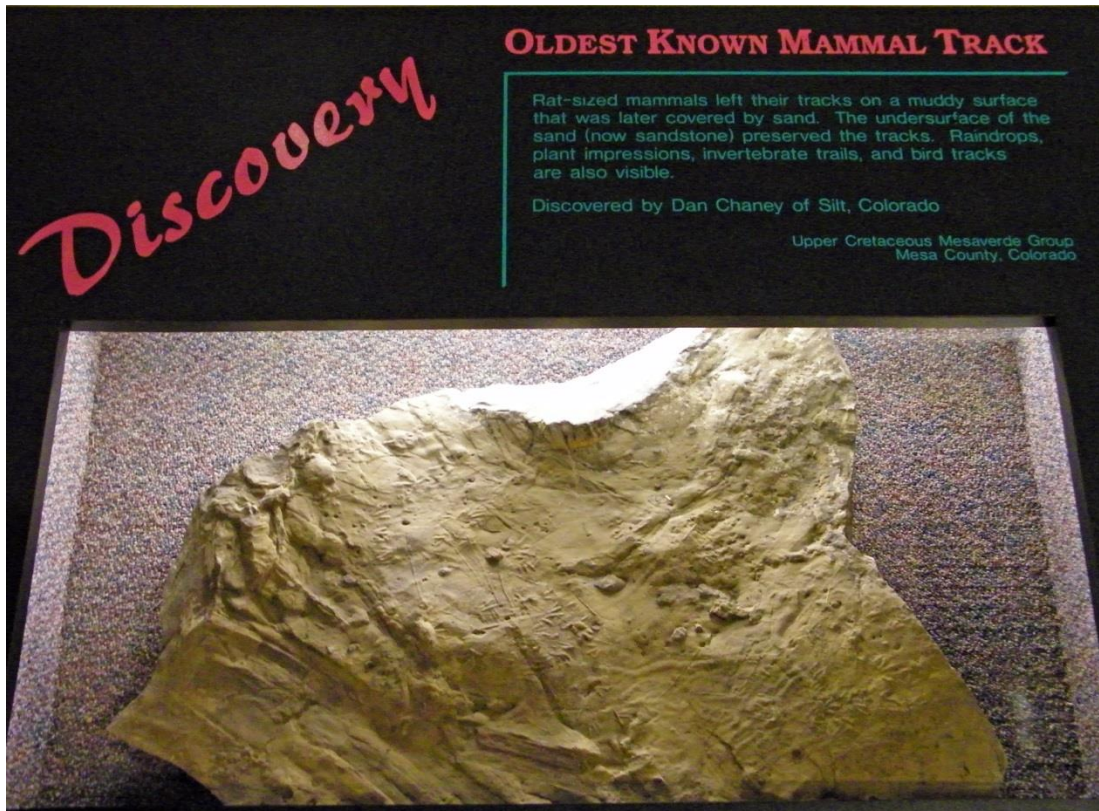


The Grand Junction region is also famous for dinosaur finds. I checked out three related sites.

The Dinosaur Journey Museum in Fruita was small but actually pretty good (some museums focus so much on entertaining kids, that they're nearly worthless for educating curious adults; this museum achieves a much better balance).

Numerous fossils and tracks were on display, along with information on dinosaur quarries. A few full-scale animated "dinosaurs" were entertaining – after all, who can resist the sight of a realistic-looking Utahraaptor tearing the head off of its prey.

Below are some early mammal tracks. I do family tree research, so I filed this one with my genealogy records as I keep taking the tree further and further back in time.







A hike at Dinosaur Hill passes this dinosaur quarry site. An apatosaurus discovered here is on display at Chicago's Field Museum.



A brachiosaurus quarried here at Riggs Hill is also displayed at the Field Museum.



This is the Grand Junction-area trailhead for Kokopelli's Trail, a 142-mile mountain bike trail that crosses the backcountry between Loma, Colorado and Moab, Utah. Not something on my to-do list, but it's food for thought for any readers who mountain bike.



On my way to my next stop at Green River, Utah I checked out a couple remote Colorado River access points in Utah. The Cisco Takeout area, pictured, is the endpoint for whitewater rafting trips through the 17-mile Westwater Canyon. In addition to rapids, there are caves, isolated cabins and petroglyph sites in the canyon.

There's also a geological unconformity in the canyon, where Chinle Formation rock sits directly on top of Precambrian basement rock. Such big unconformities are rare, but can also be found in the bottom of the Grand Canyon and next to a road on the east side of Las Vegas.



The Colorado River winds its way across 420 miles of Utah. Dewey Bridge was one of only three bridges that crossed the Colorado in the whole state. It was replaced by a modern Dewey Bridge in 1988. The original Dewey Bridge's deck was destroyed by fire in 2008.





I had planned to hike the 3-mile Amphitheater Loop Trail northeast of Moab, Utah in the Colorado Riverway Recreation Area when I was in the area last fall, but instead spent my hiking time at an impulse stop earlier that day. So I fit the hike in on this trip. I had hoped the patchy sun would hold, but a thunderstorm with lightning hit minutes after I reached the highest, most open point on the trail. I hurried to find some shelter until the worst of it passed.

Rain would disrupt my plans for two full days of hiking and sightseeing out of Green River. As one of the trails was an all-day hike reached by a 40-mile clay and dirt road, I cancelled that hike for the third trip in a row. The other hike was shorter and more accessible, so I figured I could work it in Monday morning before rain was forecast to hit that afternoon. But when I got up and checked the weather early that morning, I found that it was already raining where I planned to hike. So instead I used the plans I had come up with to replace the other hike as my first day's activities out of Green River.





I crossed the San Rafael Swell towards Ferron. In Ferron Canyon west of town I saw a couple petroglyph panels. It's a nifty enough panel (except for the modern graffiti), but I did wonder why it was marked on my main map when so many more impressive rock art sites are left off.



Near Orangeville I headed west up to Joes Valley Reservoir, checking out a couple mining memorials along the way.



At Huntington I started out on The Energy Loop: Huntington/Eccles Canyons Scenic Byway, which climbs up and then heads back down the Wasatch Plateau. I wasn't that far out of Huntington when I encountered some snow along the road, which got progressively deeper the further I drove. As it had now started lightly raining and temps were hovering just above freezing, I paid a lot of attention to road conditions, but I was able to safely cover the entire scenic byway.

Here is Electric Lake. Or I should say, "the sparkling blue waters" of Electric Lake, according to the brochure.



On the way back down off the plateau I passed a coal mining operation that uses this covered conveyer belt to transport coal several miles to a train track.



With sunshine forecast to last only until mid-afternoon, I came up with some new plans for the Hanksville area, south of Green River, for my second Green River day.

The road to Hanksville passes San Rafael Reef, the eastern edge of San Rafael Swell. I've got plenty of pictures of the reef, but between the morning sun and the distant clouds I couldn't resist getting another one.



Looking across Muddy Creek towards the Henry Mountains.

They should probably call it Quicksand Creek. Almost every place where it looked like you could cross some sand to get to the water's edge I found quicksand.





I get curious about odd things, especially geology-related things. Wherever I could easily see the Dirty Devil River near Hanksville, it didn't look like anything special, and it was only approachable by dirt roads for much of its length. But then I got a good look at it from the air when flying from Las Vegas to Dayton, Ohio back in 2016. At which point I knew I'd head out on one of those dirt roads someday.

No dirt road quite yet here. This is where the Fremont River and Muddy Creek merge, becoming the Dirty Devil River. Thus this is where the Dirty Devil River begins its 80-mile journey to the Colorado River and Lake Powell.

Those are the Henry Mountains in the background.



This is the Dirty Devil, just a few miles downstream from Hanksville. Dirt road this time. The landscape is getting a little more interesting here, but no canyon carving yet.

This was actually my last stop of the afternoon after I finished all my other plans as I have pictures of this spot from past trips and weather was clearly rolling in. As I was walking back to my car I saw an interesting weather phenomenon pass about 50-feet in front of me. A “gustnado”. Like a dust devil, but bigger and more powerful (and formed differently). Seeing how it impacted trees in its path I’m glad I wasn’t any closer as I watched it go by.



A different dirt road, this one leading to Burr Point Overlook. Although here I’m looking back towards the Henrys. The Henrys are tall enough that they’re weather makers, so I kept an eye on the skies.





The Henry Mountains



When I reached this canyon I first thought I would be looking down at the Dirty Devil River. Nope. It was dry. This is little more than a side gully of Poison Spring Canyon, which in turn leads into the canyon carved by the Dirty Devil.





Here are some views of the canyon carved by the Dirty Devil, as seen from Burr Point Overlook. I'm about halfway between its Hanksville source and the Colorado River. There are actually hiking trails that lead from the rim down into the canyon, although I only hiked along the rim today.





This picture from my 2017 trip out here was taken from the Highway 95 bridge that crosses the Dirty Devil just upstream from where it finishes its journey to the Colorado River.

We'd probably see the beginnings of Lake Powell here if its water levels weren't so low due to persistent drought conditions in the Southwest.



From 2016, looking at the Dirty Devil River from the air as it heads south towards Lake Powell (blue arrow). I took the side gully photo at the green arrow and the Dirty Devil Canyon pictures at the red arrow. A standard road map or travel atlas doesn't convey anything at all about the canyons here.





I came across Little Egypt Geologic Site a couple years ago. I spent more time exploring it on this trip. Those are the Henry Mountains in the distance.



I've passed this abandoned RV several times over the years and didn't think much of it. But it's apparently become an art installation called "Magic Bus".

I can't say that it gives me a better appreciation for modern art.





I left Green River to start the drive home. It's a 420-mile all interstate drive which I did in one day last fall. This time I took some back roads for some sightseeing and made the trip home in three days.

This is Factory Butte, an Off Highway Vehicle Area, although I checked out the area behind the butte for views of North Caineville Reef, another tear in the Earth's crust (like Comb Ridge). That's what happens when I see a label on one of my detailed maps that piques my curiosity.



I don't really need another picture of The Cathedral, but it always catches my eye whenever I pass through Capitol Reef National Park.



Heading west on Highway 24.



# Pando!



I didn't realize I had driven through Pando until I was looking up some information in the hotel that evening. Luckily I made a photo stop while I was there, so I've now got a few pictures of Pando.

What is Pando? The Pando Aspen Grove is different than a lot of tree groves because most aspens in the grove share a single common root system that covers about 106 acres. Because the trees are suckers that came up from that root, they're effectively genetic clones of one another, all part of a single massive organism.

At an estimated 6600 tons, it's believed to be the world's heaviest single organism (Oregon's "humongous fungus" is physically larger, covering 3.4 square miles, but weighs less). Pando's root system is estimated to be 80,000 years old, making it one of oldest known living organisms.

Most pictures of Pando feature the aspens in their dazzling yellow fall colors, so they're looking a bit drab here. But I'm just glad I got the pictures I did. There's a lot to be said for dumb luck.



I passed through Pando on my way to Fish Lake. Six mile long Fish Lake formed in a graben, a valley created where a chunk of the Earth's crust dropped downward compared to the chunks on either side.



After Fish Lake I took a scenic route to Richfield, making photo stops at a handful of places along the way, including here at Kingston Canyon Wildlife Management Area.



For my last full day of sightseeing I planned a route from Richfield to St. George. By interstate it's only 166 miles. My more scenic route took me all day, but it featured stops that captured my interests in history, geology, ghost towns, petroglyphs and dinosaurs. So not a bad way to spend the day.



My first stop was outside of Delta, Utah at the Topaz War Relocation Center site, one of ten camps where the U.S. government interned 120,000 West Coast American citizens and legal residents of Japanese ancestry during World War II. There are no visitor facilities and limited information at the site, although foundations from some of the camp's buildings survive. A military unit comprised of Japanese-Americans, many of whom volunteered from the camps, was the most decorated unit relative to its size and duration in history.



Sevier Lake is a 188-square-mile lake that's fed by a couple rivers, but has no outlets, and is mostly dry. Or at least dry-ish, as some people find out when they ignore warning signs and try to drive across the lake bed.



My route touched on the Nevada border where I got lunch and a nice view of the Snake Range, home to Great Basin National Park.



Frisco is an old mining town, now ghost town. It actually had a longer life than most, active from 1879 to 1929, although the population peaked at about 6,000 in 1885. Silver, zinc, copper, lead and gold were all mined in the area.



Ruins of five charcoal kilns stand above the townsite. In addition to the townsite and kilns, one can see some of the old mines and visit the town's cemetery.





There are a number of petroglyph panels along the road at Parowan Gap. And unlike most petroglyph sites, some of these panels are actually interpreted. Southern Paiutes say that this panel tells of the Great Migration from old world to new.



A few miles up the road is a dinosaur track site where the layer of rock that features natural “casts” of tracks is up on a cliffside and is slowly sending boulders down below. Here a theropod apparently stepped on another theropod’s track before the depression was filled in and solidified.



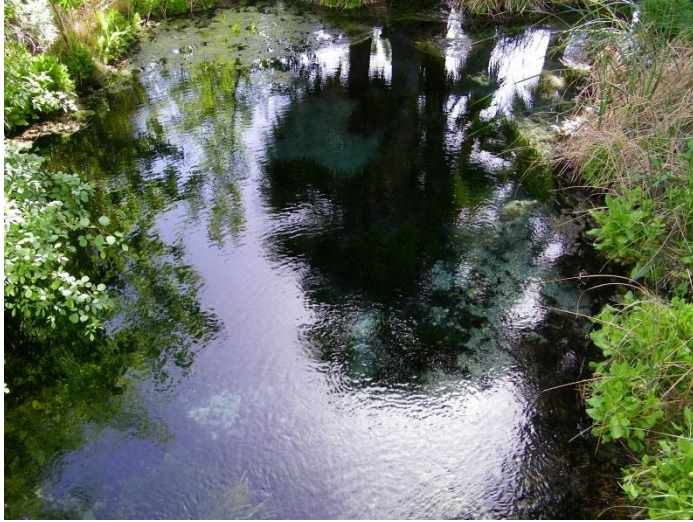


Some tracks were marked. Others were left for visitors to discover. I found this sauropod track as I explored the area. I suspect that there had been a cast of the footprint on it that over time either broke off or was broken off by collectors, a common problem at open fossil and track sites.

For the final day's drive home it is only a couple hours from St. George to Las Vegas, but I planned on a couple stops along the way. When I stopped to see them last August I found that neither was open during summer months, and one was only open on Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays during the time of year when it is open. So I had actually planned this trip to make sure I got to these stops on a Friday in May.

The Warm Springs Natural Area and Moapa Valley National Wildlife Refuge are located across the street from one another, and they effectively are protecting the same thing – a cluster of warm springs that support an oasis of palm trees and provide the only habitat of the Moapa dace fish. I hiked short trails at both sites.

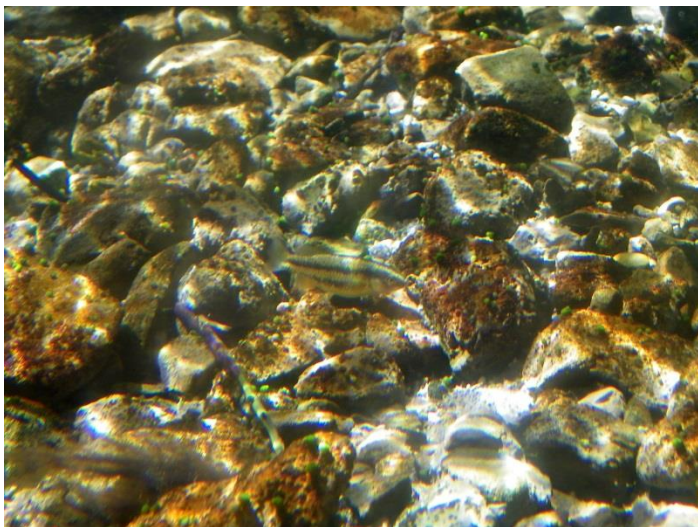




One of the springs – Little Spring – puts out 1.6 million gallons of water every day. The water eventually reaches Lake Mead through the Muddy River.



Here's a view of the palm oasis that surrounds the springs.



There's a Moapa dace fish in the middle of this picture. Interest in protecting the dace really took off after Hollywood released a popular movie about them: "Dace and Confused".

And on that note, that's the end of the pictures from this trip.