

Spring Utah Hiking Road Trip (U24A-1)

Southeast Utah Sites near Page, Arizona and Blanding, Utah

For scheduling reasons, I swapped my planned April annual Utah trip and my planned May central Nevada trip, which worked out well, because I ended up with great weather for both trips. In the case of the Utah trip, the weather was especially comfortable for hiking. And I hiked quite a bit. About 30 miles of trail hiking, which was fairly typical before I developed Charcot Foot. That situation has stabilized (although it will never be cured), so I've been taking advantage of it.

You'd think that after as many times as I've stayed in the towns I stayed in, I'd be repeating a lot of my activities from past trips. But while there were some repeats, I still had quite a few first-time sites.

I began the two-week trip with a drive to Page, Arizona, where I stayed for three nights. Along the way, I made several photo stops and took a short hike at a minor archaeological site along US Highway 89 in southern Utah. It's a pretty drive, and for this trip, most of my Page-area activities were found along that stretch of highway.



For the first of my two full days in Page, I headed for a hike to the Nautilus, a formation along a wash in the White House Trailhead area I recently had heard of. After that, I did some hiking in the White Valley/White Rocks area of Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument.



The hike through the wash was quite pretty with different layers of sedimentary rock, and sometimes a lot of color variation within a single layer (e.g., the amount of iron in layers that started as petrified sand dunes can lead to color variations ranging from white to dark red).



The Nautilus is a spiral-shaped slot carved through the rock.



Unfortunately, it's hard to photograph a spiral slot in a way that fully captures the shape of the slot.



The rock outcropping that is home to the Nautilus is sometimes referred to as the White Wave due to the erosion pattern and lack of iron in the rock. It hints at what I'd find that afternoon on my White Valley hike, one of three hikes I'd take in the area just to the north of Church Wells.



The White Valley hiking trail follows a wash through a rather white landscape, an area that contrasts sharply with the colorful (or even tans and greys) landscape not far in any direction from here.



More White Valley scenery



As I'm approaching about a mile into the hike, I start getting hints of the more colorful hoodoos (rock columns and "mushrooms") that the trail leads to, as I begin to see some pinks, oranges and reds.



I knew that at a mile there was an old dam built across the wash, and that I might have to turn around there, although some trail info sources said that there was a way around it. Turns out that the "way around it" is the broken, hand-made ladder at the left.

Alas, ladders and medical boots don't mix. The boots are designed to minimize how much my feet can bend at the ankles, making slopes and big steps up or down a problem. And because of the bones that are permanently broken, I keep my weight on my heels as much as possible rather than use the front part of my feet to support weight. Ladders tend to put more emphasis on using the front part of feet. So, this ended up being my turnaround point, missing the hoodoos that are the highlight of this trail.



So, I hiked back to the car, and then headed for the nearby White Rocks trail for some more hiking. I actually hiked part of this trail a couple years ago, my first “big” hike after a couple years in the boots. It’s an easy hike, but incoming clouds downplayed the whiteness of the area.



The next morning, I headed for the Bureau of Land Management’s Big Water Visitor Center to check out its dinosaur displays. The visitor center is usually closed on days I’m in the area, so it was nice to finally see it. Then I headed for Cottonwood Canyon, where the Paria River follows the Cockscomb monocline (a tear in the earth’s crust), where I usually do a hike when I’m in the area. Last year, this area was covered with wildflowers, a “superbloom” after a wet winter. Utah had another wet winter this past winter, but I didn’t see anywhere close to the same level of blooming that I saw last year.



Cottonwood Canyon Road approaches the Paria River and Cockscomb monocline.



After lunch, I headed back to the White Valley/White Rocks area for another hike. Entering the area from the south is the Little White Rock Canyon, which actually looked like an area where white rocks transition to red rocks, so I wanted to check it out. There isn't actually a hiking trail here, but I could just follow the wash as my trail – except where it was filled with tumbleweeds, a number of which appear in the foreground of this photo from the hike.



The Southwest has been experiencing a decades-long drought, reducing the flow of the Colorado River. This resulted in the two biggest reservoirs along the Colorado River reaching record low water levels a couple years ago – Lake Mead near Las Vegas and Lake Powell near Page. But then, the region experienced an exceptionally snowy winter of 2022-23, filling upstream reservoirs and bringing water levels in Lake Mead and Lake Powell up several feet. This past winter wasn't as snowy, but it was still nicely above average, which is helping these reservoirs even more as snow melt gets underway.

Glen Canyon National Recreation Area's Wahweap Overlook provides great views of southern Lake Powell, including the Glen Canyon Dam and – pictured – Wahweap Marina. It's a nice spot to see how well Lake Powell is doing. Upper left is from May 2022, and upper right is from May 2023. Below is from May 2024. The red arrow marks the same spot on a rock ridge/peninsula in each picture.



Is the drought over? Two good winters in a row isn't enough to conclude that. In any event, it will take several good winters and improved water conservation before these reservoirs will be full again.



After finishing up my Page-area plans, I headed for Blanding, Utah, where I'd spend the next four nights, giving me three full days in that area for hiking and sightseeing. It rained for much of the drive, and I even encountered some snow flurries, especially near Monument Valley Navajo Tribal Park on the Navajo Nation Reservation. You can see here that some of the park's red rock mesas, buttes and spires were dusted with snow. Fortunately, the rain and snow stopped by the time I reached Blanding, and I'd enjoy good weather for the next several days.

Like the Cockscomb, Comb Ridge is a monocline, a tear in the earth's crust where basically a chunk of land tilted up. The west side exposes colorful layers of rock underneath a sandstone cap. The east side shows the tilted sandstone cap. Erosion has cut a number of small canyons and rock coves into the east side, many of which would become home to small Ancestral Puebloan communities. A number of unmarked/unsigned hiking trails lead from parking areas along the dirt and rock Butler Wash Road to these archaeological sites. To find the right trailhead, keep an eye on your odometer once you leave the highway, although some of the distances posted online are off a bit.



Pictures of Comb Ridge from past trips...

Comb Ridge's colorful west face rises about 600 feet (2007)



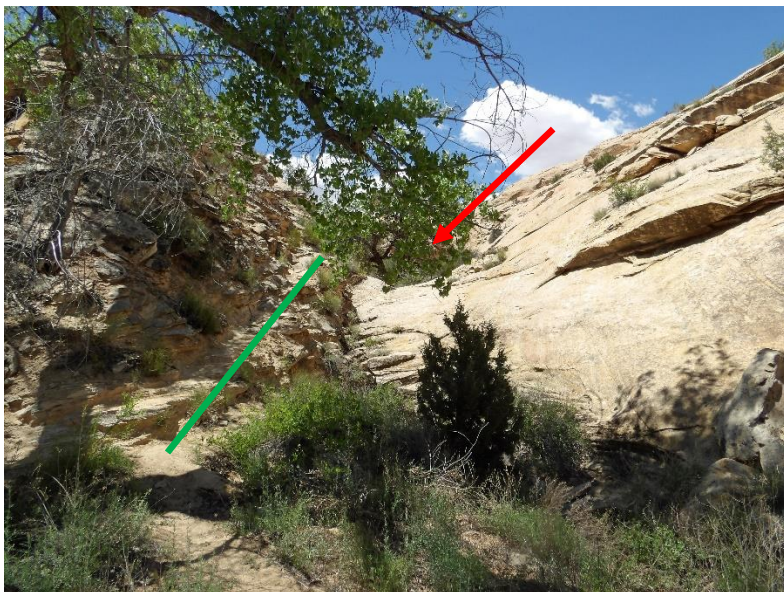
Comb Ridge's white/buff sandstone cap on the east side hides a number of Ancestral Puebloan archaeological sites (2023)



View west from when I hiked to the top of Comb Ridge in search of petroglyphs (2019)



I started exploring sites along Comb Ridge's east side in 2018, and had only two major archaeological sites left to visit – Cold Spring and Split Level. Unfortunately, a source whose distance measures had never failed me before put me at the Moqui House trailhead rather than Cold Spring. After hiking what should have been more than enough to reach the ruins, I concluded I was on the wrong trail and turned around. I did spot one minor ruins site along the way, as well as this – a wickiup. Wickiups are extremely rare archaeological survivors because both their approach to construction and their construction materials make them incredibly fragile. This is only the third wickiup I've come across.



After lunch, I found the Cold Spring trailhead, and hiked the trail towards the alcove where the main ruins were. Much of this hike was in a tree-shaded wash, which would come back to bite me. Literally.

The alcove is just behind that branch of a tree marked with the red arrow. Unfortunately, to get there, I'd have to go up the slope marked with the green line. Too narrow, too much slope and too big of steps for my boots. So, I had to turn around here.

Only one of the sources where I read about this trail mentioned that early on, the Cold Spring trail cut through an ancient pueblo site. I made note of a suspected site early in this hike, and explored it more on my way back to the car.



It doesn't look like much, but this was one of a cluster of oddly located sand mounds along the early part of the trail. As an ancient stone pueblo falls to ruin, if it's in an area with blowing sand it can become partially or completely buried in sand.



But over time, rain and wind can also wash away some of the sand. I didn't see any remnants of the old pueblo's walls, but the ground around this mound was littered with pottery sherds and some scraper tools as much as 800 years old or older. I may have missed the archaeological site I came to see, but at least I didn't go home empty-camera'd.



I returned to Comb Ridge the next morning to hike out to Split Level Ruin, a site with six sets of ruins in two alcoves. Unlike Cold Spring, here the steep-sloped final approach was all sand, which gives me more control over foot angle and step-size. Still slow going, but at least it's doable.





Among the many petroglyphs found at this site are these unusual ones (heavily photoshopped to make them easier to see). Two pregnant women (pink arrows) with one man (blue arrow). I don't think I've seen pregnant petroglyphs before.

In ancient times, without TV to entertain them, Ancestral Puebloan families would gather together after dinner in front of a petroglyph panel. This one features an early episode of Maury Povich, where special rituals were used to divine who the man's baby-mama is. Or so I'm told. 😊



Note the pictographs in the upper right



In addition to the ruins, petroglyphs and pictographs, the site included additional archaeological features, including

Seed grinding areas



Pottery sherds



Tool-sharpening grooves (center right)



On my way back to the highway, I stopped at the Wolfman Panel trailhead. This is where I took my first hike on this side of Comb Ridge back in 2018. There's a great petroglyph panel at the end of the trail, although I wouldn't be able to reach it now with the boots. But I did hike it far enough to get another look at this ruins site. I had hoped to see it with the morning sun, but I was a little too late for that.



Too late for anything ambitious, I made a return visit to the Sand Island Petroglyph Panel. Signs direct visitors to a specific parking area, but I parked a bit away, and while walking I realized that there are petroglyphs along much more of the cliff face than I had realized during past visits.

After getting home, I read of yet another petroglyph panel in the area that includes a couple creatures believed by some to be woolly mammoths. If so, that would make them over 10,000 years old, so for now I'm skeptical. After all, I've seen plenty of fantastical creatures and humanoids in rock art elsewhere, so any resemblance to mammoths could just be coincidental. Something for next year.

“Biting gnats” have the same impact on me as bed bugs do. I get mosquito bite-like bumps, itching that is much more severe, and the skin at the bite spot eventually dies and scabs over. But it takes about a day for this all to hit. I ended up with more than 50 bites, all in the space between the top of my boots and bottom of my shorts or on my forearms, areas with exposed skin. All from hiking in the shaded washes at Cold Spring. When I was here last year, I woke up to a handful of bites around my knees the morning after I had hiked the Fishmouth Cave trail at Comb Ridge. At the time, I suspected bed bugs at the hotel. So, if some reader is inspired to hike to the archaeological sites along Comb Ridge, make sure that you bring insect repellent. Or an especially tasty hiking partner.



With rain still in the area, the day I arrived in Blanding I headed for its Edge of the Cedars State Park Museum. It is Utah’s official repository for southeastern Utah’s archaeological finds. It is also home to an Ancestral Puebloan ruins site, a small part of which has been stabilized and restored. The community here was Chacoan, i.e., affiliated with the Chaco Culture hub in northwestern New Mexico rather than the Mesa Verde hub in southwestern Colorado.

The museum has a number of informative displays, but it is also set up so that visitors can see into a room that holds many of its large collection of artifacts.



Part of the museum's pottery collection



One of its most unique artifacts is this ceremonial sash made from the braided feathers of a Scarlet Macaw, a parrot found in central Mexico. Dated to about 1150AD, it provides evidence of the extensive trade networks that existed back in those days.

They made a big deal about this trading, which ended up puzzling me. Just to the east of Blanding was the Alkali Point Ancestral Puebloan community that existed for several hundred years, long enough to show the transition from pit house dwellings to above ground multi-story pueblos. It is also where quite

a bit of cacao residue has been found in ancient pottery. As chocolate comes from Central and South America, this also suggests that there were extensive trade networks back into those days.

Except that this museum – the state’s official repository for southeastern Utah’s archaeological finds – has absolutely nothing on the Alkali site. Even though Alkali Point has been declared to be a National Historic Landmark, information about specific locations of the archaeological sites has been sorely lacking, maps have been removed from online materials, and so on. I’ve gone looking for its “Site 13” in particular in two past visits to the area without much satisfaction, finding the general location but no archaeological finds.

But I kept digging for information, and this time I came armed with more information and some plans on where to hike. Along my hike, I noticed what appeared to be a couple rubble mounds, but they were on the wrong side of a fence for me to check out. But as I rounded a small stand of trees, I spotted this:



Rubble mounds. It appeared to me to be the ruins of a couple structures with a handful of rooms each, somewhat but not completely hidden by shrub overgrowth.



Further evidence that I found part of the Site 13 community and not just some random rock pile were the pottery sherds found on the ground around the site. A few of these pieces look like they might have actually fit together at one point.



Some of the small stones here have been chipped into the shape of scraper tools.

With possible rubble piles on the wrong side of the fence, I've got reason to return at least once more.

For the last of my Blanding-area sightseeing, I headed for the road that leads to the Indian Creek area of Bears Ears National Monument and the Needles District of Canyonlands National Park. But I didn't go to either site. Instead, I checked out Hart Point Road, an obscure line on my map that got me to wondering if it might have some decent canyon views. I ended up making four stops along the road, taking short photo hikes at each one.



View from Hart Point Road area east to the La Sal Mountains



View southwest into a canyon that feeds into the Indian Creek Canyon area



View west across the Indian Creek Canyon area towards the Canyonlands Needles District



Church Rock

And that ends Part 1 of this trip summary. Next up are the Moab and Green River/Hanksville areas.