Dark Canyon

Trail ❖ Guide

Published by Canyonlands Natural History Association

Dark Canyon is jointly administered by the Bureau of Land Management and U.S. Forest Service.

The trail descriptions and maps in this publication are for general reference purposes only; this guide should be used in conjunction with appropriate scale maps of the area to be travelled. Trail and weather conditions vary. Visitors to the Dark Canyon should be aware of and prepared for the inherent risks of backcountry travel and know their limitations.

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How to Use This Guide

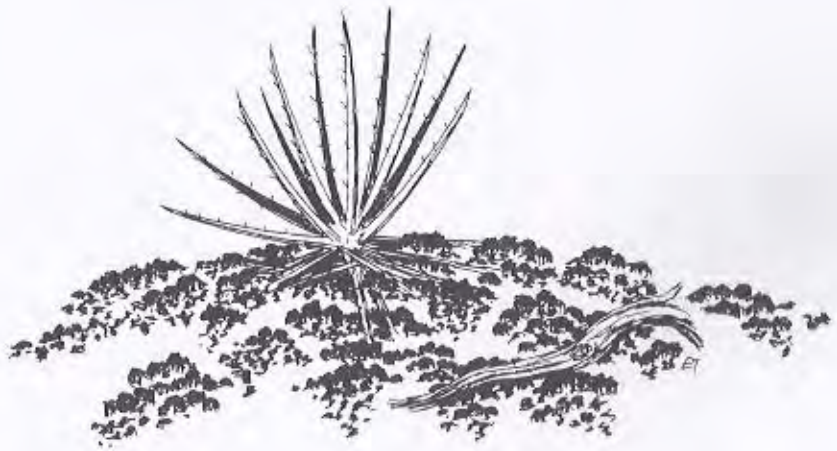
Tread Lightly, Travel Safely

Welcome to Dark Canyon. This trail guide aims to inform you, the visitor, of several routes into and through Dark Canyon, to encourage you to consider some of the natural and other hazards of travelling in this wilderness, and finally, to enlist your informed support in helping preserve this incredible landscape and ecosystem for future generations.

The guide is divided into two main sections: the first provides some background on the natural and human history of the area called Dark Canyon, as well as suggestions for low-impact, safe travel and exploration of the area. The second section offers descriptions of several trails that access Dark Canyon.

Each trail description begins with a list of the topographic maps for that particular trail. This is followed by a brief outline and background on the trail, suggested approaches to the trailhead, accessibility, and commonly encountered road conditions. A physical description of the trail itself follows, indicating features, landmarks, and other aspects of the route.

We hope that you have a safe and enjoyable trip. Many who visit Dark Canyon are drawn by the promise of solitude and the restorative qualities of the wilderness. Please do your part to protect these qualities through considerate and conscious travel across the private and public lands.



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Dark Canyon

Introduction

Area Description

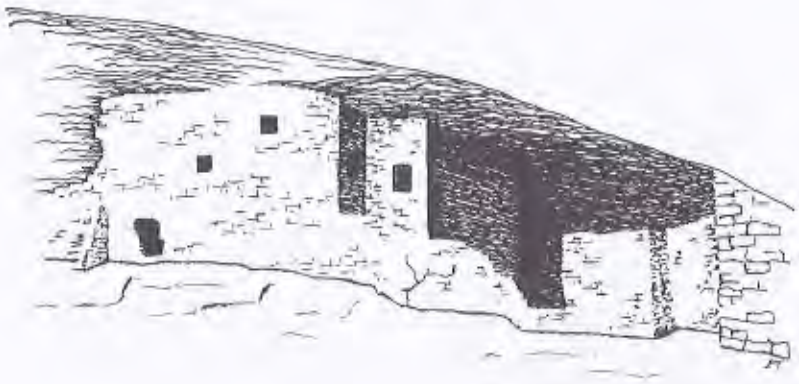
Dark Canyon is the name given to a large canyon system in Southeastern Utah's San Juan County. This canyon system begins high on the edge of Elk Ridge, a plateau that reaches 8,800 feet in elevation in the ponderosa, aspen, and fir forests.

Dark Canyon and its tributaries cut through layers of sandstone and limestone to lower elevations, ending at 3,700 feet elevation in the desert environment of upper Lake Powell. With the descent come striking changes of vegetation, geology, and topography. The lower end of Dark Canyon is truly unique with its clear, flowing stream with plunge pools and waterfalls.

The Dark Canyon drainage is primarily administered by the US Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management. The Forest Service manages the upper end of the canyon; the USFS Dark Canyon Wilderness Area contains 45,000 acres and is federally designated wilderness.

The Bureau of Land Management administers the lower end of the canyon as a Primitive Area; The Dark Canyon Primitive Area contains 62,000 acres. The BLM portion of Dark Canyon is also a Wilderness Study Area and has been recommended by the BLM for designation as wilderness.

The extreme lower end of Dark Canyon is within the Glen Canyon National Recreation Area. It is administered by the National Park Service, and has also been recommended for designation as wilderness.



Dark Canyon History:
Ancient Dwellers, Cows, and Cowboys

If you look carefully at the rock ledges and caves in the canyon walls, you will see signs of the ancient inhabitants. Small storage buildings of stone and adobe—many with intact roof beams, doors, and windows—and painted or chipped designs on the canyon walls are scattered throughout Dark Canyon and its tributaries. Some ruins are built on ledges so high that they are best viewed from the canyon rim using binoculars. Why would anyone build at sites that seem so inaccessible?

The first permanent human inhabitants of the canyons were probably early Pueblo or Anasazi Indian people. Starting around AD 600, they lived in small farming villages in the upper reaches of the canyon during the summer. They probably moved to larger settlements at lower elevations during the winter. By the 1200s, the people were living deep in the canyons and building the store rooms and cliff houses that are most evident today. Shortly after this time, the Pueblos abandoned the area and headed far south to Arizona and New Mexico.

This abandonment of the area is the subject of much speculation—perhaps farming in the upper reaches of the Colorado Plateau became impossible, perhaps warfare among themselves or with outsiders made it necessary to move. Whatever the reason, these people had largely abandoned the area by AD 1300, leaving it to nomadic groups of Paiute, Ute, and Navajo people who moved into the region a century or two later.

If you visit the ruins, keep in mind that they are the ancient homes of people whose descendants still live in the Four Corners area. The cemeteries and ceremonial places of the ancient people are still sacred to the modern Hopi, Zuni, and other Pueblo tribes—treat them with respect. Remember that the wood, adobe, and stones in the ruins are over 700 years old and are quite fragile although they may appear well preserved.

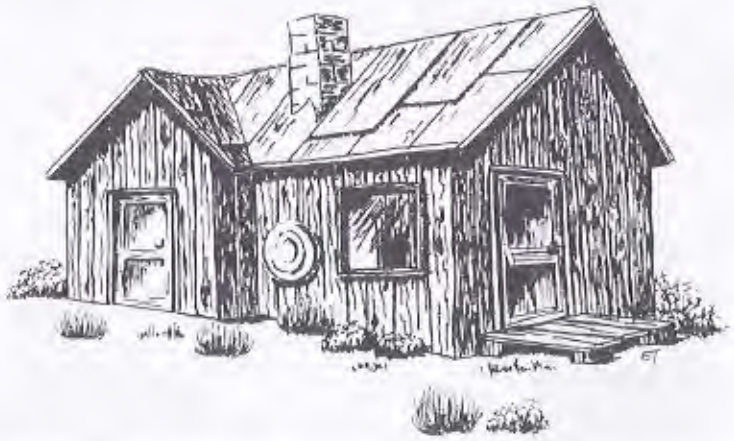
Enjoy the silent, ancient places but treat them with care. With your cooperation, these fragile sites will remain awe-inspiring for many years to come.

When the first pioneers arrived in this area around 1870, they were attracted to Elk Ridge and the adjacent canyon bottoms because of the lush grass and good water. These were the Texas cattlemen, who brought enormous herds of longhorns in to fatten on the grasses, then moved the cattle to the nearest railhead or town to sell. Though the first cattlemen explored all the canyons, they did not settle down.

The first real settlers were the families who founded Bluff, Monticello, and Blanding in the 1880s and 1890s. They drove collectively owned cattle herds onto Elk Ridge in the summers. One of these ranchers became very skilled at raising cattle in the rugged canyons west of Elk Ridge; J.A. Scorup was his name. With his brother he built up one of the largest ranching companies in the state.

Dark Canyon was in the heart of Scorup's operations, headquartered at Dugout Ranch on the north side of Elk Ridge. The Scorups named Woodenshoe Butte because its shape reminded them of their mother's Dutch shoes.

In 1924, the Scorups and their partners, the Somervilles, made a camp site in Dark Canyon for their cowhands and in 1930 they moved an oil company cabin there from Rig Canyon. The site, now known as the Scorup Cabin, was used as a summer cow camp until the 1970s, when it was returned to the Forest Service for management.



The cabin has been preserved in the Wilderness Area for its historical value; visitors are asked not to camp or stay overnight in the building. Also in upper Dark Canyon are traces of several other historical sites including an early Forest Service cabin, a 1905 cow camp just west of Scorup Cabin, and a 1916 homestead cabin.

Geology

Dark Canyon and its tributaries were formed mainly by the action of water. Millions of years of erosion have resulted in the spectacular canyon walls, sandstone spires, and arches.

The red shales and siltstones comprising the slopes at the top of the canyons in the Dark Canyon Wilderness are known as Organ Rock Shale. These rocks were deposited late in the Permian Period (245-286 million years ago). The red muds and silts were originally eroded from the Uncompahgre Uplift in what is now western Colorado.

The white cliffs that form the canyon walls are Cedar Mesa Sandstone. This white, fine-grained sandstone was most likely deposited by marine currents during the middle part of the Permian Period. The orientation of the cross-bedding indicates that currents from the northwest deposited the sand.

In lower Woodenshoe Canyon and in Dark Canyon from just above the mouth of Trail Canyon, you will encounter the gray limestone of the Elephant Canyon Formation. These limestones are lower Permian in age and contain numerous fossils.

Look closely and you will see brachiopods, crinoids, and other marine fossils. You will also see a large amount of red chert in the limestones of the Elephant Canyon Formation. As you travel down Dark Canyon into the deeply cut canyon of the Primitive Area the Honaker Trail Formation, consisting of gray, cherty limestone with thin beds of sandstone and lavender sandy shale, is exposed.

Grazing

The 1964 Wilderness Act states: "The grazing of livestock, where established prior to the effective date of this Act, shall be permitted to continue subject to such reasonable regulations as are deemed necessary by the Secretary of Agriculture."

The legislative history of this language is very clear in its intent that livestock grazing, as well as activities and the necessary facilities to support a livestock grazing program, will be permitted to continue in National Forest wilderness areas, when such grazing was established prior to classification of an area as wilderness.

In compliance with this direction, the Manti-La Sal National Forest's Land and Resource Management Plan states: "The Dark Canyon Wilderness would be managed to protect its wilderness character for present and future use and enjoyment. Livestock grazing on suitable range would continue within compatible use levels and schedules."

Currently, the grazed portion of the wilderness is under a rest rotation grazing system where it is totally rested once every three years. Use in the wilderness area is closely monitored and is not to exceed 40% utilization.

Livestock use of the BLM administered Dark Canyon Primitive Area is very limited because of the extremely rugged terrain and lack of forage. Grazing occurs primarily in Fable Valley and on mesas above the canyons. A cattle trail through Fable Valley is used each year to move livestock between Beef Basin and the Dark Canyon Plateau. Grazing use is restricted to winter and spring. Lower Dark Canyon is not grazed by livestock.

Please leave gates as you find them and do not harass cattle, either in the canyon or on the mesas.

Wildlife

The Dark Canyon complex provides habitat for numerous wildlife species from lowly beetles and pesky mosquitoes to more majestic animals such as black bear, cougar, desert bighorn sheep, goshawk, and golden eagle. Mexican spotted owls and peregrine falcons, both federally listed threatened and endangered species, inhabit the area.

Other interesting creatures include mule deer, coyotes, cottontail rabbits, short horned lizards, and many species of bats. As you hike, identify the various habitats available to animals and plants—most species are found more commonly in one habitat type than another.

Canyons provide habitat for a variety of wildlife. Look for tracks and other signs of deer, coyote, cougar, and various rodents. Check the skies for soaring golden eagles, red-

tailed hawks, and turkey vultures. These large birds of prey (raptors) nest on ledges in canyon cliffs. American kestrels build nests in cliff holes, and "air sailors," such as white-throated swifts and violet-green swallows, also take advantage of the caves and cracks in the canyon walls for roost sites and homes.

Wood or "pack" rat nests may also be observed in crevices and rock piles. Dark brown, sometimes shiny looking middens (mounds of droppings and debris) mark the site of a woodrat nest.

Where the canyon widens, one finds sagebrush communities on flat benches and piñon pine and juniper forests on adjacent ridges and side slopes. These habitats harbor a number of different creatures. Listen for Brewer's sparrows and blue-gray gnatcatchers singing or calling from perches among the sagebrush.

Reptiles such as short-horned lizards stalk through sand and stone seeking insect prey.

In the piñon and juniper trees, rufous-sided towhees remind visitors to "Drink your tee-ee-e," while the chipping sparrow strings out his rapid series of chips. To find this sparrow, scan the trees for a small grayish bird sporting dark eyeliner and a rufous cap.

In higher elevations surrounding Dark Canyon, the forest is composed of larger trees such as ponderosa pine and aspen. Here, solitary vireos and western tanagers glean insects from foliage of taller shrubs and trees. The Grace's warbler, with its striking yellow throat and black eyeliner, forages among needles of ponderosa pine.

Hairy woodpeckers and Northern flickers drum on resonant wood where larger trees are present. The Northern goshawk, a USFS sensitive species, nests and hunts in these forested areas. An adult goshawk may be identified by size (as large as a red-tailed hawk), color (gray back and wings; finely barred gray breast), and by its overall proportions (relatively long tail and short, rounded wings).

Goshawks will vigorously defend their nest so avoid disturbing these sensitive birds. Aspen forests are favored by elk for the cover and forage they provide. These forests are quiet sanctuaries where elk give birth to their calves in June.

Riparian areas, such as springs and streams, are the richest and most scarce wildlife habitat in this arid environment. These areas, defined by sedges, willows, cottonwoods, and other water-loving plants, often have a great diversity of plant life. In the west, more than 70% of wildlife species are directly dependent on these productive areas.

As important wildlife areas they deserve special courtesy on the part of the Dark Canyon visitor. Looking through a willow thicket you may view a mule deer drinking or catch a flash of yellow, white, and black identifying the yellow-rumped warbler. Along streams and near springs at lower elevations, the elusive ringtail cat and the shy desert bighorn sheep may come seeking water.

Wildlife hours continue after dark when creatures are more easily heard than seen. Mammalian and avian predators, such as bats and owls, venture abroad to hunt. The great horned owl hoots a series of 4 or 5 low notes, the northern pygmy owl repeats a single low whistle, and other owls hoot, bark, or whistle. The common poorwill, although not an owl, calls at night, repeating its name in two-note phrases. Coyotes may also be heard howling and yipping.

Allow space for wildlife. The diversity of Dark Canyon is enhanced by the presence of many interesting wildlife species. Your ability to enjoy wildlife and to conserve wildlife habitats will be increased if you follow some guidelines:

- ❑ Do not camp within 300 feet of seeps and springs, as your presence may keep animals from using these important riparian areas. Instead, take an early morning walk to these areas, find cover, and sit quietly to observe wildlife.
- ❑ You are a visitor to the home range of cougar and bear. Keep these animals wild and avoid negative encounters by keeping a clean camp and packing out all food and garbage.
- ❑ Respect the nesting sites of birds. If you know a nesting raptor is near the area, move your camp.
- ❑ Keep dogs under control at all times.
- ❑ Keep pack animals from defecating in water and from feeding on the vegetation in riparian areas.
- ❑ Report sightings of unusual wildlife species such as peregrine falcons and desert bighorn sheep to the US Forest Service or the Bureau of Land Management in Monticello.

  Please note that hunting—in conformance with state law—is legal in Dark Canyon.

Weather

Elevations in Dark Canyon range from 8500 feet to 3700 feet. Consequently, it is difficult to give weather information that covers the entire area. In general, the lower elevation trailheads are extremely hot in summer; spring and fall are the preferred times to travel.

The upper trailheads at the top of Dark Canyon are often inaccessible in spring; while they are pleasant in the summer, the lower in elevation that one hikes, the more oppressive temperatures become.

Seasonal rains come from mid-July to September. This may cause flash flooding and lightning. Winter on Elk Ridge brings snow, closing the roads and thus the higher elevation trailheads.

Minimum Impact Camping and Hiking Techniques

The canyon country is a particularly sensitive environment and requires the utmost in minimum impact camping techniques. Please use these guidelines in undertaking your trip:

Water: Water is precious in the canyon country. It must be boiled, filtered or chemically treated before drinking. The camper must adjust consumption to the size of the water source. If the source of water is small, such as a pothole, it should be used only for drinking in emergencies.

When water is more plentiful it may be used for washing, but always away from the source in order to prevent contamination. Wash bodies and dishes at least 200 feet away from water, taking the water away from the source to use. Do not use soap, if at all possible. Never use soap (even biodegradable soap) in streams or other water sources. Drain all wash water into dry soil or sand.

Selecting a campsite: Always use an existing campsite if one is available. If several campsites are available use the site which shows the most use. By doing this campers can minimize their impact on the area. If a previously unused site is absolutely necessary find an area free of vegetation in a durable place (such as rock or bare sand).

By all means avoid trampling the sparse desert vegetation. Camp at least 300 feet away from water when possible and get out of sight of the trail. When you reach camp put on light weight shoes. Make your stay short — one night is enough for a pristine spot. Pack out every bit of trash and all food.

Human waste: Dig a 4—6 inch hole in a sunny location where organic soil is present. Locate your cat hole at least 200 feet from all water sources and trails. Toilet paper should be carried out with the trash.

Campfires: In canyon country where wood is scarce campfires are usually not advisable. Use of a portable stove is recommended. If a fire is absolutely necessary build one only where fuel abounds. Make your fire small using small sticks of dead wood. Use an existing fire ring or build the fire in bare mineral soil. When it is cold and has burned to ash, scatter the ashes. A better method is to use a fire pan and pack out the ashes.

Never build a fire against rock as it scars the rock. Keep in mind that fires are rarely necessary for warmth in this country; by bringing a camp stove, the use of fires for cooking is also eliminated.

Cryptobiotic crust: In many sections of the Dark Canyon area (and throughout the desert southwest), you will notice a crusty brown surface on the soil. This is cryptobiotic crust — it is a living organism that holds the soil in place and provides nutrients so that plants can thrive. It is easily crushed with a single step. Please avoid stepping on the crust. Use established trails wherever they exist.

Archaeology: Signs of ancient civilizations and historic remains are found in the Dark Canyon area. Visitors must

be especially careful of these relics of the past — they are truly irreplaceable. All artifacts must be left in place and sites must be left undisturbed.

The visitor must also be careful of unintentional damage to ruins, rock art, and artifacts.

Do not climb or lean on roofs or walls of ruins; use existing trails in archaeological sites. Never camp, cook, or build a fire in or near a site. Never touch rock art or historic signatures (the oils from your skin damages them). Do not rub or chalk these ancient drawings.

Carving, chalking, or scratching your signature on rocks and trees is vandalism. Leave all artifacts where they were found, whether it be a corn cob, a potsherd, or a piece of fiber. If you see any vandalism of our heritage, please report it to the US Forest Service or the BLM.

Federal law prohibits disturbing or defacing archaeological sites, or collection of any object of antiquity. A fine of up to $20,000 and/or imprisonment for up to two years may be imposed upon conviction for the removal or destruction of cultural resources located on public lands.

Safety

- ❑ Please register at the trailhead where you enter by signing in at the register box.
- ❑ Always be cautious with fires as they may get out of control. Make sure they are dead out.
- ❑ Be sure you know dependable water sources before you travel. Packing in water may be necessary in some areas of Dark Canyon. **All** water in Dark Canyon must be treated.
- ❑ Be aware of flash flooding. If you are in a canyon during a heavy rain, get to high ground.

- ❑ During winter months, travel can be extremely hazardous due to ice- and snow-covered rock. Keep in mind that roads are often dangerous or impassable at this time.
- ❑ Most hunting seasons occur during the fall. Wear bright colors should you be hiking the upper portions of the canyon in the fall.
- ❑ Be forewarned that Dark Canyon is very remote and not very well travelled; therefore, rescues are difficult, costly, and time consuming. Be sure of your abilities before you set out.

Regulations

Commercial outfitters are required to have a permit from the US Forest Service and/or BLM prior to travelling in Dark Canyon.

Private parties are encouraged to register at trailheads, but are not required to have an advance permit. Groups of ten or more are encouraged to contact the US Forest Service or BLM in Monticello prior to their trip.

Groups are encouraged to restrict their size to no more than fifteen people in order to reduce impact.

The Peavine Corridor is a forest road open to mechanized travel by licensed vehicle or mountain bike. Mechanized use is permitted on the road within this 66-foot wide corridor. Please remember that all mechanized travel (including mountain bikes) is forbidden and unlawful at all other locations in the Dark Canyon Wilderness Area and Dark Canyon Primitive Area.

Please leave gates as you find them and do not harass cattle, either in the canyon or on the mesas.

Major Roads and Their Conditions

With the exception of the Sundance Trail, all other access routes into Dark Canyon are accessible via the Elk Ridge Road. This road crosses the ridge from north to south and can be reached from either end. To reach the Elk Ridge Road from the north, drive on Utah 211 (towards the Needles section of Canyonlands National Park). Twenty miles from the junction of Utah 211 and US 191, turn left onto the North Cottonwood Creek Road—it is marked "Beef Basin, Elk Mountain." Gooseberry Guard Station is 31.2 miles south of the turnoff at Utah 211.

To reach the Elk Ridge Road from the south, drive on Utah 275 (towards Natural Bridges National Monument). This road comes off Utah 95 approximately 30 miles east of Blanding, Utah. Follow Utah 275 for 0.7 miles to the Bears Ears Road (San Juan County 228: Elk Mountain).

Proceed on San Juan County 228 for 7.8 miles until it intersects with FR (Forest Road) 088 and FR l08. You are now on South Elk Ridge.

Road conditions vary greatly with the weather. In general, roads are slippery when wet. High-clearance vehicles are recommended and slick road conditions may require four-wheel drive, but most trails are accessible by regular passenger cars under dry road conditions.

Elk Ridge reaches 8800 feet and the road is generally open only from May through October. Certain portions of the road are in shade and snow melt comes late. Check first with the Forest Service or BLM before using these roads in spring or late fall.

More detailed maps showing road and trail access are available at the US Forest Service and BLM offices in Monticello, at the Monticello Multi-Agency Visitor Center, or by mail or phone order from Canyonlands Natural History Association, 3031 S. Highway 191, Moab, Utah 84532; (800) 840 8978.

Trails into Dark Canyon

from the Hite Area

Sundance Trail/BLM

Maps: The USGS 7.5 minute maps for this area are Indian Head Pass, Bowdie Canyon West, and Black Steer Canyon.

The Sundance Trail is the primary access route into the lower portion of Dark Canyon. After descending into Dark Canyon, the hiker can go downstream 3.5 miles and reach Lake Powell, or go up the canyon. The Sundance Trail is a relatively popular way to get into Dark Canyon.

Driving to the trailhead: The Sundance Trail can be reached from Utah Highway 95 by a series of dirt roads. Although generally passable by a passenger car, these roads may at times require up to six inches of clearance. The Sundance Trail can be approached by one of two dirt roads off of U-95:

1. From the turnoff to Natural Bridges National Monument, travel west on Utah 95 for approximately 35.0 miles to the sign marking the Glen Canyon National Recreation Area boundary. Drive about 1.4 miles west of the Glen Canyon National Recreation Area boundary sign and turn right onto the first dirt road after the White Canyon bridge (near milepost 53 on U-95). It is marked "San Juan County 208A—Horse Tanks." Travel this road for 4.8 miles, where you will come to a major intersection.

2. If coming from Lake Powell, travel 1.25 miles from the road to Hite Marina. Directly across from milepost 49 on Utah 95, turn east onto a dirt road. This road is labeled "San Juan County 213a—Brown Rim." Travel this road for 4.0 miles to a major intersection.

Both these access roads meet at the same intersection. From this intersection, continue southeast on San Juan County 208A. At 4.2 miles, turn left on "San Juan County 209A—Lost Canyon." Note: you will also intersect San Juan County 209A 3.0 miles from the intersection. It is quicker and smoother to pick 209A up at 4.2 miles from the intersection.

Proceed on San Juan County 209A, travelling 2.5 miles northeast. The small spur to the Sundance Trail is marked with two rock cairns. Turn left on this spur and go 0.2 miles to a stock pond. Park your vehicle here. The trail crosses the dam of the pond and is marked by cairns.

Accessibility: The Sundance Trail is generally accessible year-round, although very heavy precipitation may make the road impassable. The Sundance Trail crosses very open terrain and is very hot during the summer months.

Description: It is 2.0 miles from the parking area to the rim of Dark Canyon. In this 2.0 miles, the trail drops approximately 300 feet in elevation. From the rim of Dark Canyon to the canyon floor, the trail descends a 50° talus slope, dropping 1,120 vertical feet in less than a mile. The trail on the rim is well defined. When the trail descends the talus slope, it is steep and primitive; it is marked with rock cairns. Once in the canyon, the trail follows the canyon floor. Please stay on the most heavily used trails to avoid further impact to the canyon.

There is no water on the trail until the hiker is in Dark Canyon. Be sure and carry water from your car. Dark Canyon has a flowing stream from 1.0 mile upstream of Youngs Canyon to Lake Powell. Water in side canyons in the Primitive Area flows intermittently from springs.

Once in Dark Canyon, numerous campsites can be found in the area between Lean-To and Lost Canyons. Between Lost Canyon and Youngs Canyon, campsites are very scarce because of the narrowness of the canyon. This is also true of the area between Lean-To Canyon and Lake Powell. Please choose previously-used campsites.

Trails into Dark Canyon

from the Dark Canyon Plateau

Fable Valley is actually a tributary of Gypsum Canyon; however, it is part of the BLM's Dark Canyon Primitive Area. Fable Valley is across the Dark Canyon Plateau from Dark Canyon itself and is a "gentler" version of that canyon. The valley is approximately 8.0 miles long, and can be reached by one of two trailheads. Of these two trailheads, the southern one from the Dark Canyon Plateau is more easily accessible; the trailhead on the northern side of the valley from Beef Basin is very hard to reach.

Fable Valley from the Dark Canyon Plateau

Maps: The USGS 7.5 minute map for the Valley itself is called "Fable Valley." A larger scale map will be necessary for finding the roads to the trailhead.

Driving to the trailhead: The Fable Valley Trail leads into Fable Valley from the Dark Canyon Plateau. To drive to the trailhead, access the Elk Ridge Road. Five miles north of the Gooseberry Guard Station, or 2.5 miles south of the Beef Basin turnoff, you will find FR 091 (North Long Point). Head west on FR 091. At 8.7 miles, you will cross a cattle guard which marks the USFS/BLM boundary.

Continue on the main road for approximately 6.3 more miles. At a total of 15.0 miles from the Elk Ridge Road, you will reach the Fable Valley trailhead. The trailhead is located on the north side of the road and is marked with a sign and a register box.

FR 091 and its BLM continuation are generally suitable for high-clearance vehicles; four-wheel drive is not required under most conditions. There are some patches of sand past the Sweet Alice Hills that may require careful driving of two-wheel drive vehicles.

Accessibility: The trailhead is located at 7620 feet in elevation. However, to reach the trailhead, one must drive up over Elk Ridge. The Elk Ridge road is usually not cleared of mud or snow until late May or early June. The road is closed by the first significant snowfall. This makes the trailhead accessible usually from May through October.

Description: The trail starts off by going down an old road, which is now closed to motorized and mechanized vehicles. This old road goes for 2.0 miles to the canyon rim. After about 1.0 mile, the old road passes a developed spring and then two corrals. At the second corral (a brush corral), the trail goes through the corral and descends into Fable Valley from the back of the corral.

The trail into Fable Valley is an old, constructed stock trail. It is steep, with some erosion, but is generally in fairly good condition. Once on the bottom of the canyon, the trail passes through some thick sagebrush for about 0.5 miles. At the confluence of the trail and the main channel of Fable Valley, the trail crosses over to the east bank of the intermittent stream. From this point, the trail is generally free from brush.

The trail descends 1100 feet in elevation from the parking area to Fable Valley. Fable Valley stream course carries water only occasionally. However, Fable Spring, a reliable water source, is on the east side of the valley about 3.0 miles down the valley. The stream course is more likely to carry water below Fable Spring.

Fable Valley does not get extensive back country use. It has been historically used by cattle; currently, livestock do not graze here on a regular basis, although it is sometimes used as access to Beef Basin. When choosing a campsite, please pick an already impacted area and practice low impact camping techniques.

Fable Valley from Beef Basin

Maps: The USGS 7.5 minute map for this area is Fable Valley (a small portion of the valley is Bowdie Canyon East). A larger scale map will be necessary for finding the roads to the trailhead.

Driving to the trailhead: To reach the northern trailhead into Fable Valley a high-clearance, four-wheel drive vehicle with low-range gears is required. From the Elk Ridge Road, take FR 093 toward Beef Basin. This road continues onto BLM lands. At 9.0 miles, there is a BLM register box.

After registering, turn left (south). At 1.9 miles from the register box (just after a large developed spring), bear right; at 2.4 miles from the register box, turn right again. At 3.2 miles from the register box is the intersection with Ruin Canyon. Take a soft right at the multiple intersection here; the road you want passes between two sandstone knobs. Continue on the main road; at 6.0 miles from the box, the road heads in a northerly direction.

At 7.0 miles from the register box, a faint two-track road goes to the left (west). This is the side road that leads to the Fable Valley trailhead (the side road can be found at the crest of a sandstone knob).

The faint two-track road goes 0.8 miles to the marked trailhead. There is a trail register box as well as a sign. Park here.

Accessibility: The trailhead is at about 6,100 feet. However, the access road through Beef Basin ascends to 8274 feet. This makes the road inaccessible from November through early May, when snow and mud are present.

Description: The trail starts off on the road; however, the road soon becomes indistinct. The trail into Fable Valley is unmarked and is confused by various cattle trails. At the beginning, the hikers should keep to the left of a large, unnamed drainage; stay on the left bench. In about 2.0 miles, the trail reaches a point above the confluence of Fable Valley and Gypsum Canyon; it then turns south and gradually descends into Fable Valley. Hikers using this entrance to Fable Valley should have a topographical map and good route-finding skills.

Water is sometimes available in the Fable Valley stream course; however, it is not a reliable source. Fable Spring, approximately 5.0 miles up the valley, is a permanent source of water.

Trail Canyon
USFS: Trail 007

Maps: The USGS 7.5 minute map for Trail Canyon is Warren Canyon.

Trail Canyon is a 4.0 mile access route to the bottom of Dark Canyon. It leads into Dark Canyon from the notch between North Long Point and the Dark Canyon Plateau.

Driving to the trailhead: From the Elk Ridge Road, turn west on FR 091. This road, marked "North Long Point," is 2.5 miles south of the Beef Basin turnoff, or 5.0 miles north of Gooseberry Guard Station. Proceed for 8. 7 miles until you reach a large old corral. Park near the corral. The trailhead is across the road (south side) and starts at the sign and visitor register box.

Accessibility: The trailhead is at 7846 feet in elevation. However, it is accessed only by the Elk Ridge Road which, even from its northern end, reaches 8499 feet. Therefore, the trailhead is accessible only when the Elk Ridge Road is clear of mud and snow, usually from May through October.

Description: The trail enters Dark Canyon down an old, well-constructed cattle trail (hence the name "Trail Canyon"). The trail is rocky, but very well-defined. It is very scenic, with white sandstone bluffs surrounding heavy forest on the canyon floor. The canyon makes for relatively easy walking and is totally clear of brush. Trail Canyon descends 1300 feet to its intersection with Dark Canyon; most of the descent (900 feet) is within the first mile.

Trail Canyon is usually a dry stream course. Water may be occasionally available at a few very small springs shown on the topographical map. Camping spots are not readily available in the upper parts of Trail Canyon because it is so narrow.

Trails into Dark Canyon

From the Elk Ridge Road

Three popular trailheads lead into the upper reaches of Dark Canyon from the Elk Ridge Road itself. These will be described from north to south. It is a fairly common hike to go down one trailhead and exit the upper reaches of Dark Canyon from another trailhead.

Horse Pasture
USFS Trail 025

Maps: The USGS 7.5 minute map for Horse Pasture is Poison Canyon. The trail itself is not shown on the 7.5 minute map.

Horse Pasture is a 3.5 mile access route to the bottom of Dark Canyon; it joins the main canyon near the historic Scorup Cabin. Horse Pasture is a beautiful side canyon, with towering sandstone walls above a lovely green meadow bottom.

Driving to the trailhead: From the Bears Ears intersection (FR 088 and FR 108), take FR 088 east 3.8 miles to the Elk Ridge Road. Here, FR 088 takes a sharp northerly turn. Proceed north on FR 088 for 13.2 miles. (You will pass "The Big Notch" at 8.0 miles from the northerly turn.) When you get to Duck Lake (on the east of the road), you will see FR 154. This is signed "Deadman Point and Horse Pasture Trail."

Go 1.5 miles to the trailhead register box, which is on the left side of the road. You will pass an old corral on the left at about 1.0 mile down the Deadman Point road. If coming from the north, FR 154 is 1.0 mile south of the Gooseberry Guard Station.

Accessibility: The trailhead for Horse Pasture is at 8600 feet; the elevation at the bottom of the canyon is 7152 feet. The trailhead can be accessed only when the Elk Ridge Road is clear of snow and mud; this is usually from late May to late October.

Description: From the trailhead register box, the trail generally follows the edge of the Horse Pasture Canyon. The trail is marked with blazes and cairns; it is generally about 50 yards from the canyon's edge. The trail drops down several hundred feet very gradually, going through aspens, firs, and oaks. After about 1.5 miles, the trail reaches the top of a distinct white layer of sandstone.

Here, the trail descends into the canyon proper on a very well-constructed trail, going down rocky and sandy ledges. In another mile, the hiker reaches the canyon floor, where there are many trees and thick, green grass. The constructed trail ends here, but the hiker merely turns left (southwest) and heads down the canyon through the grass.

The canyon joins Dark Canyon at Scorup Cabin. (Note: if headed up canyon in Horse Pasture from Dark Canyon, look for the trail to ascend where the trees completely fill up the canyon, on the eastern side of the canyon between two tall pieces of sandstone.)

Water is not available in Horse Pasture Canyon until one reaches Scorup Cabin, where there is a reliable spring. Campsites are most readily available in Dark Canyon itself; Horse Pasture Canyon is suitable for camping, but does not have water.

Dark Canyon (Big Notch) Trail
USFS Trail 006

Maps: The top of the Dark Canyon Trail is contained on the USGS 7.5 minute maps Kigalia Point and Poison Canyon. To continue all the way to Lake Powell requires USGS 7.5 minute maps Warren Canyon, Black Steer Canyon, Indian Head Pass, and Bowdie Canyon West.

The Dark Canyon, or Big Notch, Trail follows the length of Dark Canyon from its start on the side of Elk Ridge. It descends from an elevation of 8278 feet, reaching the canyon bottom at 7600 feet in about 0.5 miles. From here on, the hiker gently descends deeper and deeper into Dark Canyon.

Driving to the trailhead: The trailhead starts at "The Big Notch," a very obvious neck of land on Elk Ridge. The Big Notch is 8.0 miles north of where FR 088 makes its northerly turn; it is 7.4 miles south of Gooseberry Guard Station on FR 088. The Big Notch is marked by a sign and there is a cattle guard in the road at this point.

The trailhead is located 60 yards south of the cattle guard, on the west side of the road. There is parking south of the cattle guard on the east side of the road. The trailhead register box is hard to see from the road itself.

Accessibility: The Dark Canyon Trail cannot be accessed until the Elk Ridge Road clears of snow and mud. This means that it is open (usually) from late May through late October.

Description: The Dark Canyon or Big Notch Trail descends steeply through scrub oak and ponderosa pine. The trail is smooth with very little rock underfoot. About 1.5 miles from the trailhead, the hiker has the choice of walking in the drainage or on the benches above the creek. Hiking on the benches through the grass and sage is very easy, although several deep ravines from side drainages must be crossed.

As one proceeds down canyon, the cliffs becomes more pronounced and dramatic. About 3.5 miles from the trailhead, Drift Trail Canyon joins from the east. An historic stock trail (shown on some maps) has now virtually

disappeared, although with good route-finding skills it is possible to find the rim. About 1.0 mile downstream from Drift Trail Canyon, the trail on the east bench passes very close to the cliffs, and one begins to see signs of the area's ranching history. Scorup Cabin is at the northeast corner of Horse Pasture Canyon and Dark Canyon. From the cabin, Dark Canyon continues its journey to its outlet at the Colorado River, some 40.0 miles or so from The Big Notch.

Water is usually available in the upper reaches of Dark Canyon stream course. At Scorup Cabin, there is a reliable spring very near the waterfall in the stream. From Peavine Canyon to just above Trail Canyon, water is available intermittently in the stream bed. There is a spring just above the junction with Trail Canyon. From Trail Canyon to Woodenshoe Canyon, there is no dependable water.

From Woodenshoe to 1.0 mile above Youngs Canyon, water is intermittent in the streambed. From Youngs Canyon to Lake Powell, there is a stream in Dark Canyon with water available year-round.

Campsites are plentiful the entire way down Dark Canyon (with the exception of right near The Big Notch, and in the narrow sections between Youngs and Lost Canyons and between Lean-To Canyon and Lake Powell).

Little Notch Trailhead
Peavine Corridor Motorized Access
USFS Road 089

Maps: The USGS 7.5 minute map for the Little Notch trailhead is Kigalia Point.

The Peavine Corridor is a route which bisects the USFS Dark Canyon Wilderness. On the road within this 66-foot wide corridor, mechanized travel is permissible. The Peavine Corridor starts at the Little Notch trailhead and proceeds down Peavine Canyon to Dark Canyon and then to its terminus at an old, now unused drill rig in Rig Canyon.

In addition, a spur of the corridor goes upstream in Dark Canyon to Scorup Cabin. Although it still is clearly a narrow road, it receives very little vehicular traffic and makes for a fine hiking route.

Driving to the trailhead: From the intersection of FR 088 and 108, go 3.8 miles east to the Elk Ridge Road. Here, FR 088 turns sharply north. Proceed north 2.0 miles on FR 088 to Little Notch. Turn left (west) on FR 089. If you are coming from Gooseberry Guard Station, FR 089 is 13.0 miles south of the station. There is a trailhead register box at the beginning of the corridor.

Accessibility: The Peavine Corridor cannot be accessed until the Elk Ridge Road clears of mud and snow, usually from late May to late October.

Description: The Corridor starts at 8240 feet in elevation, high on the east side of Kigalia Canyon. It descends quite gradually (900 feet in 2.0 miles) through ponderosa pine and oak. It receives very little traffic and has fine views down Peavine Canyon. In about 1.0 mile, Kigalia Canyon joins Peavine Canyon. The route is very easy to follow, and makes a very gradual descent to Dark Canyon; it drops only 500 feet in the 6.0 miles to Dark Canyon.

Near an old corral where Peavine Canyon joins Kigalia Canyon is the posted trail back up through the upper reaches of Peavine Canyon (This trail is called "Peavine Canyon"). About 0.25 miles down from the corral, and 50 yards after the road crosses Peavine Wash for the second time, the Brushy Knoll Trail peels off to the west. (See separate trail descriptions for Brushy Knoll and Peavine Canyon to find these trails from the top).

Water is very scarce in the Peavine Corridor and the lower reaches of Peavine Canyon; it is available only very intermittently in the stream bed. However, excellent dry campsites abound.

Trails into Dark Canyon

From the Road Toward Woodenshoe (FR 108, 181)

Three trailheads lead into upper Dark Canyon from its south side. The Woodenshoe Canyon Trail is a very popular access route into Dark Canyon. The Peavine Canyon Trail, not to be confused with the Peavine Corridor, also receives moderate use. The Brushy Knoll Trail is quite obscure and is seldom used.

Woodenshoe Canyon Trail
USFS Trail 165

Maps: The USGS 7.5 minute maps for Woodenshoe Canyon are (from rim to confluence): Woodenshoe Buttes, Warren Canyon, and Black Steer Canyon.

The Woodenshoe Canyon Trail is a popular route into Dark Canyon. Indeed, the most popular backpacking loop in the Wilderness Area is the Woodenshoe Canyon/Dark Canyon Trail. Woodenshoe Canyon travels 13.0 miles to its confluence with Dark Canyon.

Driving to the trailhead: When coming from the south, proceed to the intersection of FR 088 and 108 (7.8 miles from Utah 275 through the Bears Ears Pass). Turn left (west) on FR 108. In 2.0 miles, continue west on FR 181 (note: the road changes its number, but not its direction). In another 1.6 miles, you will come to the intersection of Woodenshoe Canyon Road. Turn right on this road, and go another 0.5 miles to the trailhead.

Accessibility: The trailhead is at 8,040 feet; however, to access the trail, Bears Ears Pass must be passable. This means that the Woodenshoe Canyon Trail is usually accessible only from late May to late October in most years.

Description: The trail passes through a gate and follows an old, closed jeep trail through ponderosa pine, sagebrush, and oak. The trail is well defined and easy to follow. The descent is gradual, with occasional aspen groves. The jeep trail soon becomes a single track. It is 4.0 miles through moderately heavy forest to the intersection of Woodenshoe and Cherry Canyons (elevation here is 6,840 feet).

In another 4.0 miles, Woodenshoe Canyon cuts through the limestone layer and becomes narrow and ledgy. In a total of 13.0 miles, Woodenshoe Canyon reaches its intersection with Dark Canyon.

Water is only seasonally found in the stream bed of Woodenshoe Canyon. There is a seep just inside the mouth of Cherry Canyon where it meets Woodenshoe. A mile upstream from the confluence of Woodenshoe and Dark Canyons is a spring emerging from a limestone layer and supporting a hanging garden. Campsites are plentiful.

Peavine Canyon
USFS Trail 157

Maps: The USGS 7.5 minute map for the top of the trail is Woodenshoe Buttes. Most of the trail is contained on Kigalia Point. (Note: the trail itself is not indicated on the USGS maps.)

Peavine Canyon Trail begins at the top of Peavine Canyon itself. The trail joins the Peavine Corridor Road and continues the entire length of Peavine Canyon until Dark Canyon is reached in a total of 9.0 miles. Peavine Canyon trail is an easy access route into Dark Canyon and is a very scenic route.

Driving to the trailhead: Drive to where FR 088 meets FR 108 (7.8 miles from Utah 275 through the Bears Ears Pass).

Turn left (west) on FR 108 for 2.0 miles to the trailhead. Park near the main road and go through the gate in the fence.

Accessibility: The trailhead is at 8,386 feet. The trail is not accessible until the road through the Bears Ears has been cleared of mud and snow. Most years, this means that the Peavine Canyon Trail is open from late May to late October.

Description: From the trailhead, go down an old logging road for 0.5 miles. Look for the sign marking the trail to the canyon bottom. The trail descends 400 feet in 0.5 miles on a well-defined trail through beautiful aspen groves. It reaches the canyon bottom about 1.0 mile from the trailhead.

Here one finds the wilderness boundary. It is 3.5 additional miles from the wilderness boundary to the Peavine Corridor Road. The trail crosses the stream bed many times and is quite scenic, with meadows, many wildflowers (in season) and a variety of trees. It is a thousand foot descent to the Peavine Corridor Road, but is very easy walking on a well-defined trail.

Water is available seasonally in the stream bed. Camping spots abound.

Brushy Knoll Trail
USFS Trail 023

Maps: The USGS 7.5 minute maps which cover this hike are Woodenshoe Buttes and Kigalia Point. The Brushy Knoll Trail is not marked on these maps, however.

The Brushy Knoll Trail is a little used and often hard-to-find trail into Peavine Canyon. It ascends 500 feet before descending into the canyon. However, the trail offers spectacular views from the northern end of Brushy Knoll, as well as from the neck of land which accesses the Knoll from the road. The hiker should be equipped with 7.5 minute maps in order to find this trail.

Driving to the trailhead: From the intersection of FR 088 and FR 108 (7.8 miles from Utah 275 through Bears Ears

Pass), turn west and go for 2.0 miles on FR 108. Just past the cattle guard and a large corral, FR 108 turns 90 degrees north. This is the road to Dry Mesa. Continue on FR 108 north to the Brushy Knoll trailhead.

Accessibility: The Brushy Knoll trail starts at 8771 feet in elevation. Since the Bears Ears Road must be clear of mud and snow, the trail is usually not accessible until late May. Snow usually closes the road in late October.

Description: Start by walking down the old roadbed until you can see the ridge leading to the Brushy Knoll summit (this is a high plateau to your north). Where the old roadbed makes a hairpin turn, walk across the ridge leading to the Knoll, noting the views into the canyon system and across the horizon to the Henry Mountains. Follow an old roadbed which goes to the top of Brushy Knoll, climbing about 500 feet in elevation. The trail continues across the top of Brushy Knoll toward the north.

The trail then descends the north side of Brushy Knoll. The trail turns sharply east and heads towards a point of land jutting into Peavine Canyon. The trail descends steeply into Peavine Canyon, joining the Peavine Corridor Road about 0.25 miles from the confluence of Peavine and Kigalia Canyons.

Water is not available along the Brushy Knoll trail.

While not a popular route into Dark Canyon, Brushy Knoll makes a fine destination in itself for a short day hike.

Historical Trails

SELDOM USED TODAY AND NO LONGER MAINTAINED

Historically, Dark Canyon was used for grazing. As a result, there were many stock trails which descended into the canyon. Many of the trails described above started as stock trails; however, there are many other old stock trails that are no longer used. Although not maintained, some of these trails are still negotiable by the very well-seasoned hiker and route finder. These trails are listed here for their historical interest.

Drift Trail Canyon

This was the location of one of the main driveways used by the Scorup-Somerville Company to move hundreds of cattle each year out of Dark Canyon. The cattle were gathered annually from the canyons south and west of Woodenshoe Butte and were taken home to Dugout Ranch in North Cottonwood Canyon, 25.0 miles to the north.

From Dugout, the cattle were driven north to the La Sal Mountains where they rested; ultimately they were driven through Moab to the railroad at Thompson. The last such cattle drive took place in 1950; very few traces of the driveway remain to be seen in the canyon today. This trail is overgrown and difficult to find today, especially on top.

The canyon can be negotiated by the hiker willing to bushwhack up the canyon from its confluence with Dark Canyon. Once on the plateau, however, it is necessary to route find back to the main road.

Poison Canyon Trail

A trail was built into Poison Canyon, but it was seldom used and is now impossible to find except in the lower end.

Rig Canyon Trail

This canyon's name dates back to 1927 when the Midwest Oil Company built a road into the canyon, drilled an oil well, and constructed several buildings. By 1930, they abandoned the operation, leaving some machinery behind. One of the houses was moved to the Scorup-Somerville cow camp in Dark Canyon; traces of the rest of the operation can still be seen about 1.5 miles up the old road in the canyon bottom.

The Rig Canyon Trail is a 4.0 mile trail leading from Cooper Spring (on Dry Mesa) into Dark Canyon. The trail was constructed at one time, but is very rough now. It reaches the remnant of an old oil rig on the canyon bottom, where it is joined by the Peavine Corridor Road. (The oil rig was the original reason for building the Peavine Corridor.)

Cherry Canyon Trail

Cherry Canyon is a very steep tributary of Woodenshoe Canyon (it can easily be seen from the Dry Mesa Road). At one time, it had a livestock trail running up it, but this route is very difficult to find or to negotiate today.

Kigalia Canyon Trail

This name comes from the Kigalia Springs which is located on the top of South Elk Ridge. The name is a corruption of Kaa'yelii, the name of a Navajo chief or medicine man who moved there in the late 1800's when the Navajos were desperately fighting for their land south of the San Juan

River. Little is known about the chief, other than that he kept a few sheep and lived near the spring.

The Kigalia Canyon Trail leads 6.0 miles from Kigalia Guard Station to Peavine Canyon. The trail is actually directly across Kigalia Canyon from the Peavine Corridor. It is difficult to find and seldom used.

Whatever route you use to enter Dark Canyon, please treat the canyon, its inhabitants, and its features with respect; it represents a precious and unique resource and is part of our heritage. Practice minimum impact techniques and use common sense at all times.

Important Contact Information

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496 East Central, PO Box 820
Monticello, Utah 84535
(435) 587 2041

Bureau of Land Management
San Juan Resource Area
435 North Main, P.O. Box 7
Monticello, Utah 84535
(435) 587 2141

Canyonlands Natural History Association
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(435) 259 6003
www.cnha.com

San Juan County Sheriff
Public Safety Building
117 South Main
Monticello, Utah 84535
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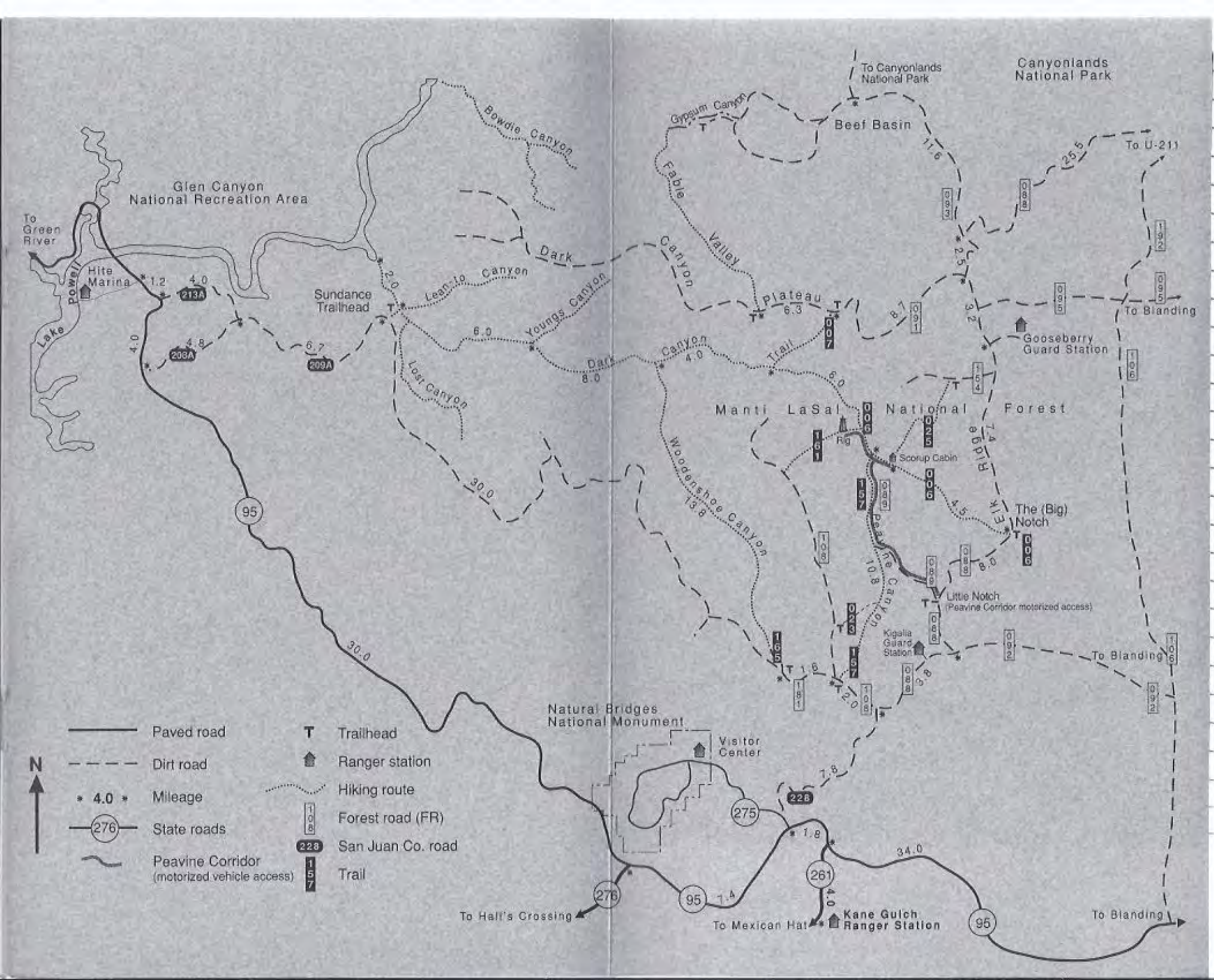
To Canyonlands National Park
Canyonlands National Park
Gypsum Canyon
Beef Basin
To U-211
Fable Valley
Bowdie Canyon
Glen Canyon National Recreation Area
To Green River
Lake Powell
Hite Marina
Dark Canyon
Lean-to Canyon
Sundance Trailhead
Youngs Canyon
Plateau
To Blanding
Gooseberry Guard Station
Dark Canyon Trail
Lost Canyon
Manti LaSal National Forest
Scorup Cabin
Ridge
The (Big) Notch
Peavine Canyon
Woodenshoe Canyon
Little Notch
(Peavine Corridor motorized access)
Kigalia Guard Station
To Blanding
Natural Bridges National Monument
Visitor Center
To Hall's Crossing
To Mexican Hat
Kane Gulch Ranger Station
To Blanding
Paved road
Dirt road
Mileage
State roads
Peavine Corridor (motorized vehicle access)
Trailhead
Ranger station
Hiking route
Forest road (FR)
San Juan Co. road
Trail
N