



PO Box 16545 Portal, AZ 85632
Phone 520.558.1146 Toll free 866.900.1146 Fax 650.471.7667
Email info@naturalistjourneys.com

Utah Hiking Trip Report
September 22 – 30, 2012
Guide Carol Simon, with Seven Participants
Report by Carol Simon



Saturday, September 22 -- Grand Junction, Colorado

We all arrived by late afternoon, with many of us seeing the Blue Angels overhead at the very popular air show just 1/4 mile away from the Courtyard by Marriott, our home for the night. Our evening dinner, at the Ale House, was a joyous reunion for the group as many of us had previous connections -- mostly through earlier Naturalist Journeys trips!

Sunday, September 23 -- Colorado National Monument -- To Moab

Colorado National Monument is only one half hour from Grand Junction. In this lovely park we found towering monoliths, spacious plateaus and red rock canyons. We spent

the morning navigating the twists and turns of the Rim Rock Drive, but with many viewpoint stops and short hikes. At the Ute Canyon viewpoint we found the Ute Garden Interpretive Trail, learning about the Pinyon - Juniper forest and Mormon Tea, with its natural decongestant, pseudoephedrine. Other stops included Artist's Point and Grand View, where we were able to look deep into the rugged and colorful canyons below. Otto's Trail and the Canyon Rim Trail both allowed for short hikes. John Otto was the founder of Colorado National Monument, a designation which has been in place since 1911. Otto was named the park's first caretaker, a job he did for \$1 a month until 1927. The Rim Trail/Window Rock Trail looked down upon the impressive Wedding Canyon. We saw a Plateau Fence Lizard that had grown a new tail. Many lizards allow their tails to break off at fracture points when they are grabbed by a predator. The tail continues to wiggle, engaging the predator, and the lizard runs off to grow a new, not quite identical, tail.

After a picnic lunch on the back porch of the Monument Visitor Center we headed for a small museum, Dinosaur Journey, in Fruita, CO. We wandered amidst Triassic, Jurassic and Cretaceous dinosaur skeletons and tracks, as well as animatronic dinosaurs. Several of us longed to be time-travelers with the opportunity to see these animals in their natural habitats.

Heading for Moab, we traveled on Route I-70 W, turning onto the small Route 128, which mostly

follows the Colorado River to Moab. This was an excellent late afternoon choice. The lighting was lovely and we stopped for several photographs. And we saw lots: Pronghorn Antelopes, Common Ravens, Black-billed Magpies, Juniper Titmice, Pinyon Jays, and yes, Canada Geese. Our



Canadian participants, Joan and Margaret, were astonished to come so far to see the latter.

After checking into the Hampton Inn in Moab, we all headed to Zax Pizza, where we ate an interesting array of pies.



Monday, September 24 -- Arches National Park -- Moab

This morning we began a wonderful partnership with Canyonlands Field Institute, which would provide our national park authorized guides, a large van and our lunches. CFI's mission is to improve the quality of field-oriented, experiential teaching and learning for students and adults. We can attest to the fact they they do a great job! Our first guide, Tamsin, a knowledgeable geologist, accompanied us into Arches National Park, greatly enriching our experience there, and for the following two days as well.

Arches was created as a National Monument in 1929 and was re-designated as a National Park in 1971. The park is a wonderland of colorful rocks

with over 2,000 natural arches, hundreds of massive fins, giant balanced rocks and pinnacles of all sizes. While walking we saw Side-blotched Lizards, Plateau Spiny Lizards and the problematic, introduced Bullfrog. We hiked to the stunning Delicate Arch, which isn't very delicate at all, and afterwards had lunch in a park picnic area. Next we visited Double Arch, and then returned to our hotel to recover for the evening activity, a cowboy-style Dutch oven dinner and an evening/night boat ride with Canyonlands by Night & Day. The Colorado was quite shallow here, only two feet or so, but we did see some Beaver. We enjoyed hearing about the history of the area and viewing the light show on the towering rocks above the river.

Tuesday, September 25 -- Island in the Sky District, Canyonlands National Park -- Moab

After breakfast we were all pleased to see Tamsin as we loaded into the CFI van to head for the Island in the Sky, a broad mesa wedged between the Green and Colorado Rivers within Canyonlands National Park. Today another CFI employee was with us, Vista participant Curtis. We had a brief stop at the visitor center and then took a short walk to Upheaval Dome. Scientists cannot agree as to whether this is an impact crater

or a salt dome that resulted from plastic salt layers rising to the surface. Tamsin wondered if it might be both. Red Spotted Toads in shallow pools were found here.

Views from the Green River and Gooseberry Canyon Overlooks were really special today. Storms in the area brought dramatic lighting to the plateaus and canyons below, as well as to mountaintops 100 miles distant. Looking over the edge we saw a nearly continuous sandstone bench, dubbed the White Rim, 1200 feet below us.



A walk out to Grand View Point, the southern-most spot in Island in the Sky, has almost unlimited views of a complex network of canyons carved by the converging Colorado and Green Rivers.

Next came lunch and the beginning of some rain. Driving away from the rain we headed for Mesa Arch and the Washer Woman. Once again, outstanding lighting made this short hike well worth the effort. The parthenogenetic Plateau Whiptail Lizard was a curiosity here. There are NO males. Nope, not even one.



Returning to Moab, Bob H., and the rest of us, were pleased to stop at several rock art sites along the way. Once back in Moab, we had a quiet dinner at Eddie McStiff's.

**Wednesday,
September 26 --
The Needles
District of
Canyonlands
National Park --
Moab**

Today was our last day with Tamsin and to transition to our next CFI guide, Nate came along. Now we had TWO great guides, plus Carol, of course. It was a long ride from Moab to the Needles section but well worth it. Our first stop was at

Newspaper Rock, a Utah State Historical Monument which contains an outstanding selection of native American rock art spanning 2000 years. The very dark desert varnish makes this area ideal for viewing striking petroglyphs.



Next we had a REAL hike. Beginning at the Elephant Hill Trailhead, we were blessed with a second day of stormy skies and cooler weather. Walking the Chesler Park Trail we worked hard to climb boulders and squeeze through narrow passageways. Along the way, and then at a high lunch spot, we were rewarded with the the colorful spires of Cedar Mesa Sandstone that dominate the area. After

lunch, during which we were accompanied by a large Common Raven, we continued on for 3/4 mile to a splendid viewpoint and then turned around to retrace our steps, walking a total of seven miles. More rock art was discovered on the way back -- a nice series of hands.

After a two hour ride, we returned late to Moab, with dinner on our own.

Thursday, September 27 -- The La Sal Mountains -- Moab

The Canyonlands Field Institute continued to treat us well. Today we not only had Nate with us, but also the Executive

Director, Karla. She was glad to get out of the office, and we were delighted to have such a talented naturalist with us. Driving along the La Sal Mountain Loop Road, we stopped at Clark Lake Trailhead to prepare for a five mile, mostly downhill hike, with a picnic lunch, of course. Temperatures were crisp at almost 10,000 feet and we all wore more clothing than we had all week. Skies were still spectacular, with clouds all around. But most stunning of all were the yellow aspen leaves, at the height of their fall color. We walked efficiently through the forest of spruce and fir trees, enjoying the quiet of the deep forest. Clark's Nutcrackers and Mountain Chickadees flew overhead while we watched Beaver and Muskrat swim in Clark's Lake, where we stopped for a snack. A little lower, the leaves of the scrubby Gambel Oaks were a brilliant red.



Lunch was on a hilltop, or as Karla said, "A room with a view." We did not even mind the slight wind as we gazed into the distance, realizing that we could see the Island in the Sky District of Canyonlands. This was a day different than all the others, but equal in every way.

Back in Moab, dinner was our own, but almost all of us chose to eat together at Miguel's Baja Grill.

Friday, September 28 -- Arches National Park -- Moab

Nate picked us up on schedule, of course, and we made the short drive to the Devil's Garden Trailhead. The walk to Landscape Arch is fairly easy but then the trail becomes more challenging. Hikers must climb over sandstone slabs and walk along fins that are wide enough, but have steep drop offs. Everyone met their challenges -- one way or another -- and made it all the way past the Double O Arch to the Dark Angel, where we had lunch. The Dark Angel is a 150-foot sandstone tower sitting at the end of the trail.



On the return trip we opted to hike to several arches that we had missed on the way out.

These included Partition, Navajo, Tunnel and Pine Tree Arches. This time we were experienced fin walkers and the return trip went smoothly. We were even rewarded with a striking young Gopher Snake along the trail.

Saturday, September 29 -- Moab -- Stern's Wash -- CFI Benefit Dinner -- Red Cliffs Lodge

The morning was on our own in Moab and seven of us drove out to the Scott M. Matheson Wetlands Preserve, just a short distance from downtown Moab. Owned by the Nature Conservancy, songbirds and shorebirds forage among the Russian Olives. A drier than usual period made the boardwalks unnecessary, but we all enjoyed the quiet walk through the preserve. A fire destroyed part of the cottonwood canopy a year ago, but other parts of the small preserve are intact.

After lunch on our own we were happy to be met by Nate at the Moab Visitor Center. Driving all the vans out of Moab along Route 128, we stopped near mile marker 18 at Stern's Wash. Here a three mile round trip took us to a rock art site. When asked by Nate to tell about our week's highlights, most of us realized that every day had been so special that it was hard to pick out just one.



But our afternoon highlight for THIS day was clear. It was the brilliantly colored Eastern Collared Lizards in the area. Against the subdued desert environment, these animals are striking: Males have bright turquoise bodies with yellow heads and socks! We couldn't get enough pictures. Other lizards included the Western or Tiger Whiptail Lizard, which HAS males.



Late in the afternoon we checked in at the Red Cliffs Lodge, cleaned up and headed out for a benefit dinner at the Canyonlands Field Institute Camp. Here middle schoolers sleep in teepees and learn about the environment. We were all happy to end our trip in this way and hope that the money we paid for our dinners helps children to enjoy and cherish the environment as much as we do.

Sunday, September 30 -- Red Cliff Lodge to Airport

By 8:30 a.m. we were on our way back to the Grand Junction Airport as several of us had flights at 12:15 p.m. It was easy to agree that this was a wonderful trip, with each day being absolutely special. And what a nice group too. Thanks to Margaret, Joan, Pat, Linda, Fred, Bob H. and Bob S. You were all *great* hiking companions.

All photos by Carol Simon





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