

Naturalist Journeys – Utah, Arizona & the Navajo Nation

May 15 – 28, 2010 – Daily Journal

Greg Smith, Guide, with five participants

Saturday, May 15 - Arrival in Phoenix, AZ

After two stops, we headed north on our way north to the Grand Canyon. The weather was mild and the skies clear as we caught our first glimpse of this ten mile wide wonder. The sun was setting as we celebrated our welcome dinner and got ready for tomorrow's explorations.



Sunday, May 16 - Grand Canyon NP

After a hearty breakfast we drove to the canyon rim where we walked the rim trail. For two miles we watched as the canyon shared view

after view. Our trail gently dipped and rolled with the erratic topography of the rim as we watched the different layers changes hues as the sun rose higher in the sky.



A circle of cavorting Common Ravens croaked loudly, drawing our attention skyward. And there in their midst soared the largest and rarest bird in North America, an adult California Condor. With wings set, it glided directly overhead

and slowly disappeared to the northeast. A great start to or trip!

After lunch, we made our way to the new Visitor Center to get an overview of the park, the canyon and all of its resources. Our next stop was the shuttle up to Hermit's Rest to be at a great place to view the sunset. While waiting for the next shuttle a large black and white bird was seen soaring out over the middle of the canyon. Yes, our second condor of the day!

We rode the shuttle to the top and then back down to Hopi Point where we watched the late afternoon sun light up and then change the color of every layer of sandwiched rock in the canyon. The shadows were a deep purple, while the sunlit walls conformed to various shades of pastel. It is almost surreal to



experience that magic on a calm night in northern Arizona...

Monday, May 17 – Zion NP

After a delicious breakfast at the historic El Tovar Lodge we headed east to drive from one side of the canyon to the other. We stopped at the Desert View watchtower and wondered from level to level marveling at the design and decoration of the structure created by Mary Colter. We spent more time than planned, but the building and its interior did its best to capture our imagination.



We made it to the entrance gate at Zion under a cloudy sky that made for excellent photographic conditions of the sculpted sandstone. But it wasn't the sandstone that caught our attention as we entered the park.

Zion has a population of about 100 Desert Bighorn Sheep. We pulled around a curve and were fortunate enough to see three ewes and a lamb right next to the road. This was almost five percent of the entire population in the park, we were lucky! Then we

looked up. There were at least another thirty ewes and lambs leisurely feeding on the slope. Some crossed the road, some continued to feed while lambs tested their nimbleness.

As we drove off, we really had to focus on the scenery, but our minds were still with the sheep. After a few stops we started to realize how perfect the lighting was to photograph the spires and multi-colored bands of slick rock. Finally we made through the big tunnel and headed to our lodging for the next two nights – the Desert Pearl Inn. Nice lodging!!!

Tuesday, May 18 – Zion NP

We started the day with a shuttle ride up to the top of the canyon that was home to the Virgin River. After watching a tom Wild Turkey forage around the shuttle stop, we headed up Riverside Walk. Seeps filled with Utah Shooting Star, Golden Columbine and Swamp Monkey Flower left pools of water that flowed down to the swollen river.

There was so much water coming down the canyon that when we encountered an American Dipper, though not in its characteristic position mid-stream. It was always

feeding on the shore. The muddy, swollen river wouldn't let it race around sunken boulders looking for its favorite invertebrates.

While watching one of the American Dippers, a song floated down to us from up the canyon wall. We finally spotted a young male Lazuli Bunting, head up and belting out his song in defense of his patch of green. His song was followed by a pair of Plumbeous Vireos defending their turf. Another American Dipper was at the end of the trail, the end where you usually start to walk in the river – but not today.

After lunch we drove up Kolob Terrace Road where we got down on our hands and knees to take pictures of all the different wildflowers. Calochortus, Indian paintbrush, Opuntia cacti and more were our subjects for this sunny afternoon. Well sunny for a bit longer anyway.

After a couple of more stops the clouds decided to thicken and when that happens in the high country, they loosen their load of precipitation. And so they did, nice big, fat, wet drops pelted the van. But that wasn't loud enough, next came the hail. So off we retreated to our most comfortable digs, knowing we'd make another run up this road tomorrow on our way to Bryce Canyon NP.



Wednesday, May 19 – Bryce Canyon NP

We took another run up Kolob Terrace Road hoping to intersect with Utah 14. Wonderful scenery as we climbed higher toward Kolob Reservoir, only thing is that we were starting to see more snow. Before we made it to the reservoir we were passing meadows with three feet of late-season snow. This didn't bode well, and when we made it to the reservoir, the snow and muddy roads made us turn back. There was no way we were going to be able to make it up and over.



After having lunch in Cedar City we started up Utah 14 where the first sign we encountered was one saying that Cedar Break NM was closed. Would we even make it over this highway? We did, but not before passing frozen meadows with lots of snow, really lots of snow.

We did make it to Bryce with a stop in Red Rock Canyon which was being lit up by the late afternoon sun. Exquisite corals and reds were glowing. The snow melt was flooding fields and geese were grazing

right alongside cattle. The two pronghorn near our night's lodging were a fitting finish to a longer than expected day.

Thursday, May 20 – Bryce NP

The morning was bright and clear, so we headed to the rim of the amphitheater, but first we had to stop at the local town, the local Utah prairie dog town. This endangered species' distribution is limited to the SW corner of Utah. From a population of 90,000, trapping and poisoning has dwindled their population to less than 3300. The park is a safe haven for this once common animal.

We parked at one end of the rim and moved south to the other end of the rim. Looking at multi-hued spires of red and white, we watched the sun take advantage of their varying heights and layout. Dancing shadows highlighted the views as we hiked and gained different perspectives. The site is just so wild, and most of us shot well over a couple of hundred photos trying to capture Bryce's essence.



We took a lunch up to Rainbow View and settled into the 9000 foot elevation prior to our hike. We were off to see the Bristlecone Pine about a mile away. Didn't plan on it, but we ran into snow, and lots of it. We hiked around it, through it and over it and finally made it to the pines. They were pretty cool, but it was their dead brothers and sisters that stole the show. Their skeletons positioned against the blue sky made for striking photographs. Another highlight, but an exceptional one!

We finished the day with dinner at the Bryce Canyon Lodge before watching the sunset take another colorful swipe at the amphitheater.



Friday, May 21 – Antelope Canyon

We left Bryce Canyon early today so we could be in Page, Arizona, before our noon tour of Antelope Canyon. We climbed into the truck and headed out to the Navajo Nation reservation and the south end of Antelope Canyon.

This section of the canyon has a big sandstone barrier that impedes the passage of water down canyon. But water always finds a way, and here it has created a slot canyon. A narrow slot no more than six feet wide and 50 – 60 feet in height is the only escape route for the water charging downstream. This was our hike and we were happy to have an expert local guide!

The inside of the canyon has been smoothed by the high pressure water being forced through the narrow channel. Smooth sandstone revealing layered colors of iron-stained rock. We followed the tortuous route further and further back into the slot. Here and there a shaft of sunlight lit the floor, a sharp contrast to walls of the slot. Sand rolled in from the top after a breeze cooled the sweat on our faces. We made it to the end of the canyon before turning around and retracing our steps to the entrance of Antelope Canyon, one of the most famous spots for photography in all of the American Southwest.

Saturday, May 22 – Rainbow Bridge



After an early breakfast, we boarded the *Ethel B* for the fifty mile boat ride on Lake Powell to Rainbow Bridge. It took us two hours as the early morning sun lit up the buttes and plateaus that surrounded the lake. Rocks took the shape of camels, cobras and more. We turned to starboard and entered a narrow channel with walls towering over 400' in height. We slowly motored further

back into the channel until the floating dock we tied up to prevented us from going any further.

The hike back to Rainbow Bridge is only half a mile, but the scenery never stopped being impressive. And then the bridge appeared. This is the largest natural bridge in North America and spans a canyon over 200 feet in width. The softer Navajo sandstone was eroded away leaving the harder arch rock standing.

Arches are a common sight in this sandstone country. Slabs of rock peel off the vertical walls in rounded pockets. You won't see angled breaks in sandstone, as there isn't any structural support in this weak rock to support that kind of fracture. So arches, with their inherent structural strength, are all that we see.

It took us longer to return to the marina as we had a stiff headwind that really slowed our progress. We did get back in plenty of time to get ready for our farewell dinner that we celebrated that evening at the resort!

Sunday, May 23 – Monument Valley



Today was the start of our extension (all of the group staying on) and it was time to pick up another guest in Flagstaff. The weather service predicted a strong wind for the day and they were correct. Before the halfway point to Flagstaff you could see dust clouds. After starting off to Monument Valley you couldn't see the mountains off to the side

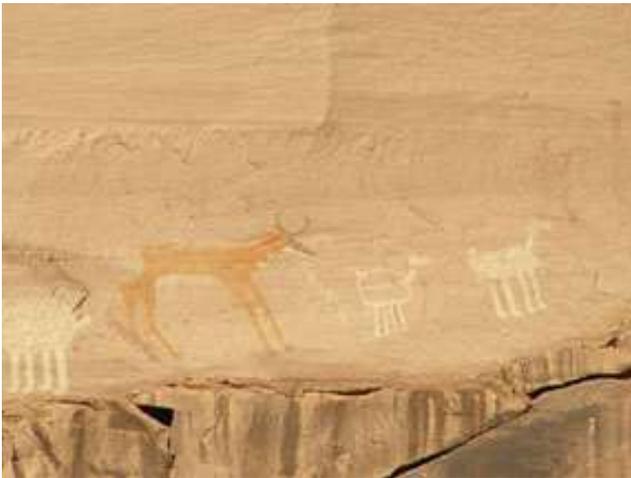
of the road. When we reached Kayenta to the south of the valley, it was impossible to see the monuments – this was a full-on dust storm! So we checked into our lodging, dusted off and went to dinner. We needed to get ready for our all day tour of the area with local guide, Larry the next day.

Monday, May 24 – Monument Valley

The wind from yesterday was completely gone as the front it was ahead of came into the valley. Definitely on the very cold side and few snow flurries reminded us it was only late May. We hopped in the truck and off we went to explore the valley.

Thick, puffy cumulus clouds littered the sky trying to provide balance for the electric blue sky. Everywhere we looked buttes and plateaus were spotted with shadows from the clouds and the crispness of the air made them almost leap into your field of view. It was a stunning landscape!

The sandstone outcroppings and walls were surrounded by the red sand of the area and everything was a lush green. Miniature desert lilies and different sages were in bloom as we visited our first Anasazi ruin – Square House. Pottery shards littered the ground with examples that must have spanned a thousand years with earliest being corrugated ware. Remnants of their cliff dwelling, protected under the cliff's overhang, we still in good shape, even after hundreds of years.



We drove further back into the valley and saw more ruins and wonderful examples of petroglyphs of wildlife and symbols. Examples of miniature sandstone bridges, ceiling holes in caves that let the abundant sun shine through and gnarled junipers that were hundreds of years old. This stunning landscape was our view as we barbequed our lunch and took it all in.

After lunch we explored Monument Valley, with all those buttes made so famous by the great director John Ford. The mittens, totem pole and the sitting hen, all made familiar by his films that John Wayne and others starred. We drove on roads the public could not, getting photographs of views that were almost story book in their composition. Over eight hours later we made it back to the lodge and took a break before we headed into dinner.

After yesterday's wind storm, it was almost too good to believe the views, clean air and blue sky.

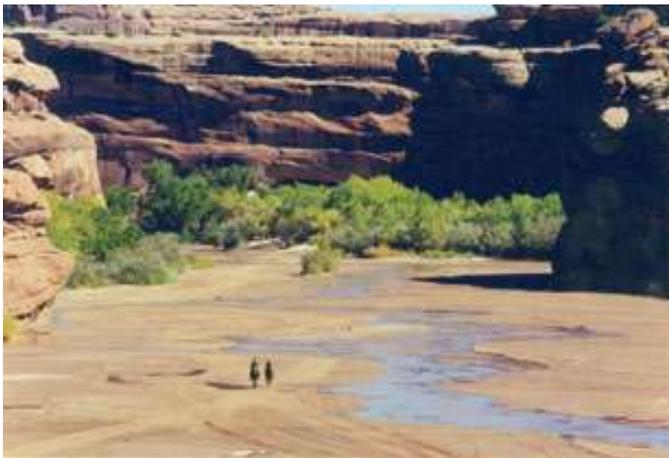
Tuesday, May 25 – Mexican Hat, Goosenecks, Moki Dugway

We left Monument Valley with clear, blue skies and headed north to explore some of the San Juan River watershed. Our first stop was just north of Mexican Hat to photograph the hat and the San Juan River. Lupine, vetch and delphinium were in full bloom on the desert floor as the snow melt laden river milked its way through the canyon. With the “Mexican Hat” rock as the backdrop, photos of the landscape and wildflowers dominated our time.

Our next stop was Goosenecks State Park, where the San Juan had incised through millions of years of layered rock to form four very tight goosenecks. A stunning view, one that left us wondering how the river could create those goosenecks without forcing itself through the remaining narrowed canyon walls. Hmmmm...

Moki Dugway is a narrow, gravel road that climbs 1100’ to Cedar Mesa in just three miles using numerous switchbacks. It is a 10% grade and is not suitable for any vehicle over 28 feet. We stopped at one of the three pullouts and explored the surrounding rock slopes. Indian paintbrush and other wildflowers dotted pockets of soil as the slick rock sloped to the edge of the drop-off to the valley below. The views were so outstanding as we crested the top, that we decided to descend for a different perspective.

After driving the 1100’ feet to the base, we made a quick left and drove through the Valley of the Gods on our way to Bluff and the Twin Rocks Café for lunch. After getting excellent looks at orange-headed Sceloporus and a male collared lizard, the road became sinuous as it maneuvered through the monuments. We were driving at the base of the monuments which was a completely different perspective from our Monument Valley experience.



We spent the afternoon driving to Canyon de Chelly where we settled into our rooms at the Thunderbird Lodge and got ready for our morning tour.

Wednesday, May 26 – Canyon de Chelly

We had a private tour set up for nine in the morning, so after breakfast we got together with our Navajo guide, DJ. We loaded up into the open air

truck and made our way into the canyon. Steep-sided and red in color, the sandstone walls were tarnished with desert varnish and other stains. Lush cottonwood forests provided views into summer camps for local families.

Numerous Anasazi ruins dotted canyon caves ranging in size from single family to multi-family dwellings. Petroglyphs of figures and symbols were found alongside stunning pictographs of pronghorn antelope. The canyon walls were lined with signs of human habitation spanning back 1300 years. Narrow switchback trails dating back over a

thousand years were still being used by Navajo families today to access the canyon from above. The sense of time and human use in this canyon made city streets seem so inconsequential.

After lunch we drove to various overlooks on both the north and south side of the canyon to a different perspective. The farmed fields, the cottonwood gallery forest and sheer height of the encompassing walls left a more mentally- manageable memory than that of the immensity of the Grand Canyon!

Thursday, May 27 –Hubbell trading Post National Historic Monument, Hopi Nation

This morning we were heading back into Arizona's non-daylight savings time zone which gave us an extra hour. We took that hour, plus a couple of more and spent some time at the Hubbell Trading Post.

The post was the first of many trading posts set up in the Utah, NM and AZ area to provide goods for Native Americans and others during the late 1800's. The artifact collection and the main house had an amazing collection of Indian artifacts and painting collected over the last 140 years. It put into perspective some of the challenges associated with living in this area decades ago as well as what it meant to be Native American in a time that didn't favorably view Indians as part of the landscape.

We finished our drive to the Hopi Nation where we had lunch before meeting up with guide Gary Tso (his mother was Hopi and his father Navajo – hence the last name being Navajo). Gary took us to different villages on the Second Mesa where potters and silversmiths shared their work and methods of creating them. We walked over pottery shards, ancient bone and pieces of arrowheads that littered the streets that looks drove and walked over daily. He shared cultural views and timeless vistas for a culture that had called this land home for hundreds of years.

We finished our afternoon with a visit to the huge Tutuveni petroglyph site that was more than 400m in length. Complete with solstice markers and and 'glyphs from numerous cultures, this site was amazing. We had seen some, if not a lot of the figures at previous sites, but none of them were as extensive or abundant as at this site.

We had our goodbye dinner this evening before heading back to the rooms to pack.

Friday, May 28 – Return to Phoenix

After an early breakfast, we took one last drive through the Hopi and Navajo Nations as we headed down the hill from Flagstaff to Phoenix, passing from pines to Saguaros. It was time to head home, until the next adventure!

Photos: Greg Smith: Rainbow Bridge, Antelope Canyon, Bryce Spires. Narca Moore-Craig: California Condor, Angela Burnett: Zion Canyon