

Capitol Reef

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



National Park
Utah



This view of the Waterpocket Fold is oriented like the illustration below, with east to the left, west to the right.

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A giant buckle in Earth's crust stretches across south-central Utah. This vast warping of rock, created 65 million years ago by the same great forces later uplifting the Colorado Plateau, is called the Waterpocket Fold. Capitol Reef National Park preserves the Fold and its eroded jumble of colorful cliffs, massive domes, soaring spires, stark monoliths, twisting canyons, and graceful arches. But the Waterpocket Fold country is more than this. It is also the free-flowing Fremont River and the big desert sky. It is cactus, jay, lizard, jackrabbit, juniper, columbine, and deer. It is a place humans used for thousands of years, from early indigenous peoples to Mormon pioneers. It inspires poets, artists, photographers, and seekers of solitude. The world of the Waterpocket Fold stretches 100 miles—and beyond.

Creation of the Waterpocket Fold



Many layers of originally horizontal sedimentary rock make up Waterpocket Fold. The layers formed from sediments deposited over hundreds of millions of years in seas, tidal

flats, deserts, and other ancient environments. Regional mountain-building bent, or flexed, rock layers into a huge fold. Many upper layers of the ancient fold (restored in the illustration)

have eroded away, leaving only a hint of the earlier Waterpocket Fold's enormous size. Wind and water still slowly erode the fold and create new features from the rock.

Exploring Highways and Byways



The Castle: a prominent landmark

You can explore the Waterpocket Fold country via several roads in and around the park. The major east-west highway through the park, Utah 24, follows the serpentine Fremont River through the Fold. With soaring white Navajo sandstone domes and nearly impassable ridges sometimes called reefs, this scenic area gives the park its name.



Grand Wash

The 16-mile round-trip Scenic Drive starts from the visitor center. This narrow, paved road goes along Capitol Reef's brilliantly colored towering cliffs. Two unpaved spur roads—not included in the 16-mile round-trip figure—are also suitable for passenger vehicles. They lead into Grand Wash and Capitol Gorge, deep and twisting, water-carved, sheer-walled canyons.



The life-sustaining Fremont River

Trails to overlooks, remote canyons, natural arches and bridges, and slickrock wilderness can be found along Utah 24 and the Scenic Drive. Catch spectacular views of the Waterpocket Fold country from roads outside the park, too. From Utah 12 west of the park you can see a sweeping vista from over 9,600 feet of elevation.

THREE PHOTOS ABOVE © STEPHEN TRIMBLE; ALL IMAGES NOT CREDITED ARE NPS



Fremont petroglyphs



Fruita orchard



Fruita schoolhouse



Mule deer



Indian paintbrush



Yellow-bellied marmot



Mountain bluebird

Life Along the River

Life is most abundant along the waterways here. American Indians, early pioneers, moisture-loving plants, and animals have found refuge near them. Fremont Culture people lived here by the year 700 until sometime after 1250, growing corn, beans, and squash, and also hunting and gathering food. They left few traces, but the images they painted on (petroglyphs) or pecked into (petrographs) canyon walls can still be seen. Explorers, Mormon pioneers, and others began coming to the Fremont River valley in the late 1800s.

Travel beyond the valley meant going over rough Waterpocket Fold terrain. Capitol Gorge, a rocky route, cut through the Fold. Names of the canyon's travelers after 1871 fill a rock wall called the Pioneer Register. No more than 10 families at a time called the valley home, but by the early 1900s, the Mormon community of Fruita was known for its productive orchards. Capitol Reef National Monument, established in 1937, became a national park in 1971. Farm families eventually moved on: Fruita's last private resident left in 1968.

Today, cottonwoods, willows, and ash populate the Fremont River corridor as a green ribbon dotted with wildflowers in spring. Water attracts birds, from mountain bluebirds to migratory ducks, and mammals, from marmots to mule deer. Away from water, a harsher desert environment dominates. At Capitol Reef you can explore the park's diverse landscapes and microhabitats.

PHOTOS OF ORCHARD, DEER, FLOWER, AND MARMOT © STEPHEN TRIMBLE; SCHOOLHOUSE © LAURENCE PARENT.

In the Backcountry



Cathedral Valley: one corner of the backcountry



Golden eagle



Desert bighorn



Spadefoot toad

Unpaved roads penetrate remote backcountry once known to the hardy few. They offer properly outfitted travelers access to wild beauty. In expanses like Cathedral Valley, golden eagles soar and solitary sandstone monoliths tower over sandy desert plains. In the secluded canyons like Halls Creek Narrows, hanging gardens of monkey flower and maidenhair afford panoramic vistas. On Burr Trail Road the views grow ever more breathtaking as you ascend the Waterpocket Fold. On backcountry roads or trails Capitol Reef National Park is yours to enjoy.

This desert environment gets less than eight inches of rain per year, but danger awaits the unprepared. Flash floods can occur any time but are most common when late summer thunderstorms send raging torrents down otherwise dry, sandy washes. Twisted, stunted juniper and piñon trees and other hardy plants dot the landscape. Many plants and animals, like the kangaroo rat, lizards, and cactuses, are adapted to survive despite scarce water. Some collect and store water; others conserve it; some do both. Many animals move about only at night to escape the heat of the day, leaving the casual observer to

underestimate the richness of animal life in the seemingly inhospitable desert.

Rainwater sometimes pools in eroded, bowl-like rock depressions—the landscape's namesake waterpockets. Bighorn sheep, bobcats, and other animals quench their thirst at these water holes. Spadefoot toads live and reproduce in waterpockets. After eggs laid in the water hatch within days after a rainstorm. Tadpoles that reach adulthood before the pool dries up will repeat the cycle when the pool fills again. And life in the Waterpocket Fold country goes on.

PHOTOS OF EAGLE AND TOAD © STEPHEN TRIMBLE; BIGHORN © TOM BEAN

Exploring Capitol Reef

A strange, beautiful landscape of multi-hued rock layers, Capitol Reef National Park lies in the heart of Utah's canyon country. Here you see geologic formations of the Waterpocket Fold and Cathedral Valley, archeological evidence of the ancient Fremont Culture, vestiges of a historic Mormon settlement, and a range of habitats for diverse plants and animals.

Facilities, Fees, and Services

The park is open year-round. Stop first at the visitor center for information and orientation. It is open daily 8 am to 4:30 pm, longer in summer, but closed on some federal holidays. The visitor center features exhibits on geology and natural and cultural features, the orientation video, and a bookstore run by the Capitol Reef Natural History Association. Service animals are welcome.

A nearby picnic area has picnic tables, grills, restrooms, drinking water, and shade trees. An entrance fee is charged on the Scenic Drive beyond Fruita campground. Fees are charged in Fruita campground also.

Stores, food service, lodging, gas stations, and medical facilities are available in nearby towns.

Campground The 71-site Fruita campground has picnic tables, fire grates, restrooms, water, and an RV dump station. A fee is charged. Sites are first-come, first-served and limited to eight people per site. The Cathedral Valley and Cedar Mesa primitive campgrounds (no fee) offer picnic tables, fire grates, and pit toilets but no water. Camping in the backcountry outside a designated campground requires a free permit available at the visitor center.

Pets

Pets must be under physical control at all times and are permitted only in developed park areas, along roadways, and in the picnic area and campground on a leash no longer than six feet. Pets may not be left unattended. Pet owners/controllers are required to immediately pick up solid waste left by their animals and dispose of it in garbage cans, dumpsters, or vault toilets. Placing plastic bags in a vault toilet is prohibited.

Climate

Summer temperatures can reach into the 90's F during the day and cool down to the 50's and 60's at night. Humidity is low. Thunderstorms are common in the late afternoon in summer. Spring and fall, with milder temperatures, are ideal for longer hikes. Winter brings cold weather and little snowfall. Flash floods can occur at any time of the year, but are most common in late summer and early fall. Stay informed about weather conditions.

Things To Do

Park Programs May through September the park offers guided walks, talks, children's activities, and evening programs at the amphitheater near the Fruita campground. Program schedules are available at the visitor center and posted on park bulletin boards.

Ripple Rock Nature Center The nature center, 0.5 mile from the visitor center, has interactive displays and exhibits—fun for all ages! Check at the visitor center for scheduled hours and activities.

Fruita Historic District Fruita was a Mormon settlement dating from the late 1800s. Fruita Schoolhouse is a restored and refurbished one-room school on Utah 24, 0.8 mile east of the visitor center. The blacksmith shop, 0.5 mile south on the Scenic Drive, provides a window into the working life of Fruita's settlers. Historic Gifford Farmhouse, part museum with cultural exhibits and part country store featuring pioneer-era sales items, is one mile south on the Scenic Drive.

Orchards Apple, peach, cherry, pear, and apricot trees grow in the Fruita orchards. Historic and heirloom varieties of some fruits are still found here. You may pick and eat fruit free of charge while in the orchards. A nominal fee is charged for fruit you take with you. Blossom and harvest times vary from year to year. Ask at the visitor center or call the fruit hotline at 435-425-3791 and follow the voice prompts.

Scenic Drive You can see the Waterpocket Fold landscape up close along the paved Scenic Drive and unpaved spur roads. Several guides

to the Scenic Drive are sold at the visitor center. Allow about two hours for the round-trip. An entrance fee is charged on the Scenic Drive beyond the Fruita campground.

Hiking Ask at the visitor center for trail and route conditions. Trailheads for day hikes are located along Utah 24 and the Scenic Drive. Longer, more rugged routes can be found throughout the park. A free backcountry permit, available at the visitor center, is required for overnight hikes. Carry at least one gallon of drinking water per person per day during hotter months. Water from any backcountry source should be purified before drinking.

Bicycles Bicycles are considered vehicles and are restricted to maintained roads open to vehicle traffic.

For a Safe Visit

All natural and cultural resources and historic and archeological objects are protected by federal law. • Do not feed or disturb wildlife. • When hiking carry plenty of water, wear appropriate clothing and footwear, avoid hiking alone, and tell someone of your hiking plan. • Be careful near cliff edges. • Watch for flash floods when storms threaten. Avoid canyons and washes. Avoid exposed areas prone to lightning strikes. • Ground fires are not permitted anywhere in the park. Use the fire grates provided or campstoves. • Do not litter. Pack out all trash. • Off-highway vehicle use is not permitted in the park. • Hunting is prohibited in the park. For firearms regulations ask a ranger or visit www.nps.gov/care.

More Information

Capitol Reef National Park is one of over 390 parks in the National Park System. To learn more about national parks and National Park Service programs in America's communities, visit www.nps.gov.

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