FREMONT RIVER TRAIL

Capitol Reef National Park

The Fremont River Trail is a little more than a mile in length. Start at the trailhead in loop B of the campground. The first one-half mile of the trail is an easy, level walk along the river. This section is firmly packed and usable for wheelchairs. The last portion of the trail is a moderately strenuous climb to an overlook 800 feet above the valley floor.

There are no numbered signposts on the trail. Descriptions of the stops, which are keyed to recognizable features, are given in the folder.

If you are hiking in the summer, take water with you and wear a hat. While this is an enjoyable trail at any time of day, you may find it more comfortable to hike during the cooler early morning or evening hours.

Walk along the trail until you come to the park amphitheater, situated in a grove of fruit trees. The first orchards in Fruita were planted in the 1880s by Nels Johnson, the community's first permanent settler. Nurtured by a mild climate, fertile soil and abundant water of the nearby river, the fruit trees flourished. Horse-drawn wagonloads of fruit were hauled out of the valley to neighboring towns. There the harvest was exchanged for grain and supplies. Today, the National Park Service manages the orchards, which total more than 2500 trees. A network of ditches is used for irrigation; this same method was used by 19th century Mormon settlers and by their predecessors, the Fremont Indians, some 700 years earlier. Cherries, apricots, peaches, pears and apples are the main crops and are available to the public for picking in season.

Continue past the amphitheater, around a sweeping bend in the trail, and stop at the wood rail fence to your right overlooking the Fremont River. The river is named for explorer John Charles Fremont, who traveled near this area in the 1850s.

From its source in the mountains to the west, the Fremont River winds through broad meadows and sheer-walled canyons on its way to the Colorado. Water-thirsty willow, rose, cottonwood and tamarisk crowd the narrow channel margins, a ribbon of green slicing through a desert world of reds and browns. Without the river, neither these plants nor the orchards could survive.

A river has many moods. Midsummer brings thunderstorms to Capitol Reef and with them the threat of flash floods. Rainwater, flowing freely across a naked landscape, cascades down slickrock slopes into quiet, dry washes and streambeds. The tranquillity of the moment dissolves abruptly. A thunderous torrent of dark, silt-laden water rushes headlong downstream, undercutting and overflowing its banks, uprooting trees and flattening vegetation in its path. Then, just as quickly, the waters recede and life along the river resumes. From the beginning, the river has been the controlling force in this valley; it will continue to be so.

Follow the path across a wide, concrete irrigation ditch and enter the meadow beyond. Immediately ahead are three large trees. Stop under the shady canopy of the farthest one. These stately trees are Fremont cottonwoods and their windsong, like that of their cousins the aspens, is soothing and unmistakable. On crisp fall afternoons the slanting rays of the sun turn yellow cottonwood leaves golden. Silhouetted against a backdrop of brilliant blue sky and red cliffs, gently rustling cottonwoods are the essence of a Capitol Reef autumn.

Not dreamers as we humans, beavers view the cottonwood in a more practical light—as a source of food. Large cottonwoods such as these, while clearly revealing the scars of beaver activity, are rarely gnawed through completely. The leaves, twigs and inner bark of smaller trees are preferred. Surprisingly, beaver activity along the Fremont River does not include dam building—the water is flowing too fast. Beaver dens in this area are hollowed out of the river banks.

Yellowbelly Marmot

The lush meadow grasses that attract beaver also prove irresistible to mule deer and yellowbelly marmots. Resembling plump, greatly oversized squirrels, marmots are a common sight in the park's open fields. Easy targets for predators, they seldom stray far from their burrows in the brush or rock-sheltered meadow margins. Marmots live in loose colonies and are very vocal animals. Look for them as you walk along and listen for their high-pitched alarm whistles.

At the far end of the meadow, the trail passes through a narrow fence opening. Beyond, it winds through a corridor of pungent sagebrush, a zone of transition between river and desert. The path emerges at the base of the cliff. From here it will be a steady, one-half-mile climb to the overlook.

About 300 yards up the trail, the river and service road on its far side squeeze to their closest point. Stop opposite this spot and rest for a moment. It is much quieter here, away from the river. On warm summer days, swallows wheel and soar in the updrafts alongside the bluffs, aerial acrobats snatching insects out of the sky.

Beside you are the massive chocolate-brown cliffs of the Moenkopi Formation. Touch the rock. Notice how fine-grained and smooth it is. Can you imagine what the climate was like when the sediments that formed this rock were laid down more than 200 million years ago? At that time the land was a broad expanse of coastal mud flats, alternately covered and uncovered by the shallow tidal waters of an ancient sea. Gentle wave action created the ripple patterns seen on some Moenkopi rocks.

The trail continues its steep ascent in the shadow of the Moenkopi wall. Reaching the top of the cliff face, it levels off. Stop and walk to the rim for a panoramic view of the Fremont River canyon. *Be careful!* From here, the trail cuts sharply around the backside of the cliff; a short series of switchbacks climbs to a rock cairn marking trail's end.

Find a comfortable rock at the base of the cairn and sit down facing the orchards of Fruita. Drink some water and catch your breath. Now, look around you.

A kaleidoscope of color meets the eye. Against a field of cobalt-blue sky, white clouds pace their shadows across mesa tops and cliff faces. Far below, the silver thread of the Fremont River winds through a lush, green Eden, bound for a distant rendezvous with the Pacific. The now-familiar brown Moenkopi slopes rising from the valley floor are easy to pick out. Above them lies a more complex rock grouping, the Chinle Formation. Volcanic ash, petrified wood and uranium are found in the maroon and gray-green bands of this layer. Laid down on river flood plains and lake bottoms, Chinle sediments cap the top of nearby Johnson Mesa. Black lava boulders strewn across the mesa slopes were carried there by glacial rivers from the high plateau country to the west. Cliffs of red Wingate Sandstone rise abruptly from the Chinle slopes. Wind-blown sand dune deposits, their flat surfaces were a favorite canvas for artists of the ancient Fremont Culture. A thin layer of shrub-covered Kayenta rock separates Wingate Sandstone from the majestic white Navajo Sandstone domes. Former sand dunes, these domes now mark the crest of the Waterpocket Fold, a 100-mile wrinkle in the earth's surface born of collision between crustal plates.

Deposition, uplift and weathering—major chapters in the geologic story of Capitol Reef. Of these, it is the spectacular patterns of weathering that capture and hold our attention. Rocks: *what* they are and *where* they are determine how the land will decay. Minute quantities of iron in various compounds provide coloring of many hues. Water is the principal sculptor.

Now, close your eyes. Shut out the river, the sky, the rocks and the colors and "feel" this world. Wind. It's the first thing you notice. Carelessly coming from nowhere, going to nowhere. Rattling lonely clumps of piñon pine, juniper, Mormon tea, and bunchgrass. Lulls bring forth the steady drone of insects. Warm sunlight infuses the body like a narcotic. Earthtime. The lizard on the rock hears it. Listen closely. Can you hear it, too?

"I breathe in great draughts of space,
The east and west are mine,
and the north and south are mine."
—Walt Whitman

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