

return when environmental conditions allowed corn to grow, living in alcoves such as Cave Springs. A drought such as that of the late 1980s would have led to the abandonment of Canyonlands.

The Plants and Animals

Beyond the alcoves, two ladders lead to a slickrock environment that contrasts dramatically with the tangle of vegetation near the springs. Few plants can survive the intense heat and dryness of bare slickrock. Shallow pockets of soil support growths of lumpy black "cryptobiotic crust" a community of cyanobacteria, lichens, moss, fungi and algae. Cryptobiotic crusts are an essential component of the desert ecosystem. They protect soils from wind and water erosion and enrich it with nitrogen and other nutrients. Crusts grow very slowly, however, and are easily crushed by careless footsteps. Tracks remain visible for decades.

Cracks and crevices in the sandstone provide shelter for snakes, lizards, rodents and bats. Packrats leave untidy evidence of their presence in nests, called "middens," composed of sticks, debris and dung. Urine from the rats congeals the middens into a hard brown substance and acts to preserve organic material. Plants and animals preserved in dwellings and middens of ancient packrats, or woodrats, provide evidence that the plants, animals and climate have changed over time. The greatest changes have occurred between the Ice Age to present time, but changes during the last 100 years may ultimately prove to be those with the greatest impact.

Climate is not the only factor that has changed the canyons. The tall, thick sagebrush and rabbitbrush near the end of the loop trail probably were not as abundant when the Anasazi inhabited the area. Overgrazing by cattle and upstream erosion, which creates deeper soil, have combined to make a habitat suitable for these plants to flourish. They have probably thrived since the days when Cave Spring was an active cowboy line camp.

The Canyon Scene

Plants, animals, people and rock have all played a part in the canyon scene as we know it today. In turn, the canyons have shaped the appearance, behavior and character of its inhabitants, as seen throughout this unique land.



Canyonlands National Park

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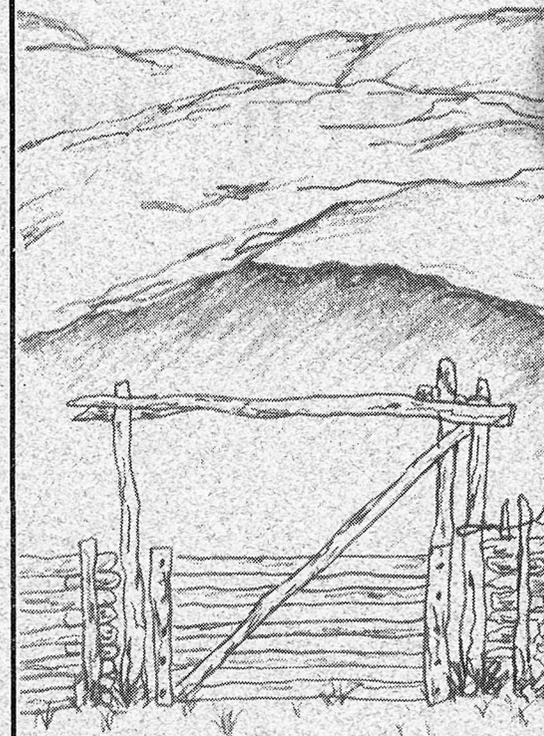
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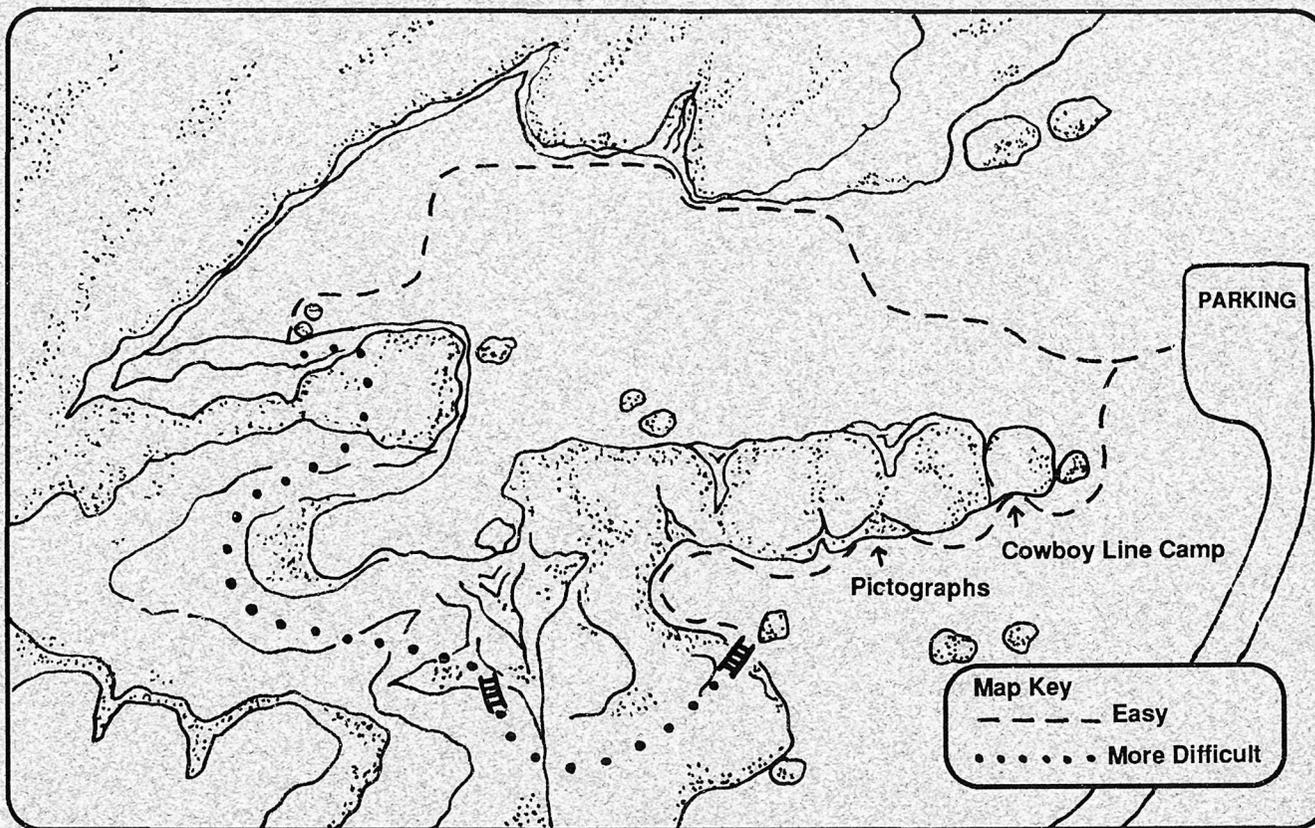
Cave Spring Trail

Trail Guide

.6 mile



Needles District
Canyonlands National Park



Head left from the trailhead to hike the .6 mile Cave Spring Loop Trail. The trail takes you across level ground for about .1 mile, then climbs onto slickrock for approximately .2 mile. Two ladders must be ascended in order to reach the slickrock section of the trail. The text of this guide addresses trail features in the general order that they are encountered in the route illustrated above.

The Setting

The geology and climate of Canyonlands have created an unusual landscape characterized by maze-like canyons, sheer cliff faces, strangely shaped rock formations, deep crevices and alcoves. Some areas are hospitable to lifeforms; others are harsh and not easily inhabited. This trail leads through both types of environments, where life has found a foothold almost everywhere. The demands of the environment have shaped the appearance and behavior of the inhabitants who, in turn, have affected the land.

The Cowboys

In the late 1800s, the canyon country was settled by pioneering cattlemen. One of the best known was John Albert Scorup, who through hard work, determination, and adaptation to the demands of the canyon country, was able to establish a successful cattle operation. In 1918, Scorup and his partners formed the Scorup-Sommerville Cattle Company, which eventually grew to be the largest ranch in Utah. Their herd varied from 7,000 to 10,000 head of cattle, and ranged over 1,800,000 acres, from the area now encompassed by Natural Bridges National Monument to the Needles District of Canyonlands National Park.

Such a widely spread ranching operation required the cowboys to stay with their cattle. They lived in isolated line camps such as the one near Cave Spring, which was used from the late 1800s until Canyonlands National Park was established in 1964. Many of the items left by the cowboys are still here. Touch and examine these objects, but please leave them for others to enjoy.

Cowboys usually worked for six weeks at a time. Each cowboy packed his belongings, clothes, and bedding on a pack mule. Other mules carried food, drinking water and grain for the horses. The cowboys cooked over an open fire using simple cookware such as dutch ovens. Food consisted of the usual cowboy delights: bacon and potatoes, canned vegetables and fruits, dutch oven biscuits, and the ever-present coffee. From daylight until dark, the main tasks of the men were to watch the cattle and move them to feed and water. The latter was a difficult chore in the canyons since it took 200 acres to feed one cow and water sources were many rugged miles apart.

A line camp was established near Cave Spring because it provided a reliable water source. A seep like Cave Spring is formed by rainwater that slowly percolates down through layers of porous sandstone. When the water reaches an impermeable rock layer, it flows along that layer until it reaches a place to flow out, such as a cliff face. Moisture hastens erosion of the rock faces and carves alcoves.

The Anasazi

Springs are rare in the desert. Beyond the cowboy camp, soot blackened ceilings, handprints, painted figures and grinding depressions on boulders indicate that others were also attracted to this precious resource. The Anasazi Indians occupied these canyons six centuries before the cattlemen arrived, from approximately A.D. 750 to A.D. 1250. The Anasazi did not live in Canyonlands continuously; they would leave the canyons during periods of drought and