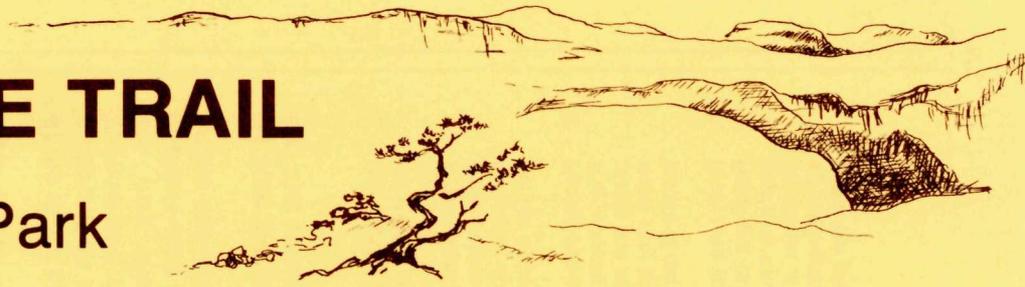
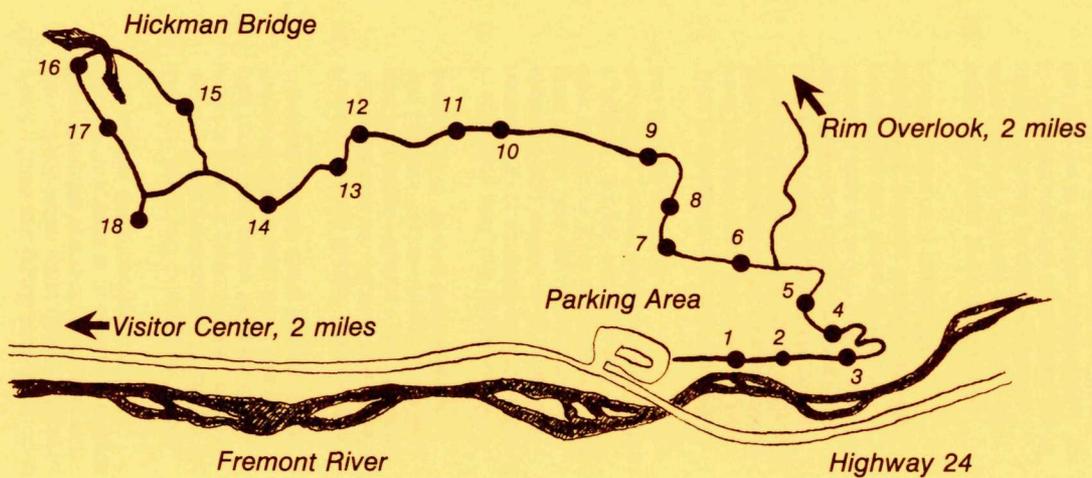


HICKMAN BRIDGE TRAIL

Capitol Reef National Park



CAPITOL REEF NATURAL HISTORY ASSOCIATION
Capitol Reef National Park, Torrey, Utah 84775
BY GEORGE DAVIDSON



This is the heart of Capitol Reef country.

Hickman Bridge lies about a mile from this trailhead, a graceful curve of stone that was named after a local educator—Joseph S. Hickman—who labored to preserve Capitol Reef as a park. This inexpensive guide is keyed to numbered posts on the trail.

The ascent to Hickman Bridge is fairly gentle; you will climb only about 400 feet from the trailhead elevation of 5,320 feet above sea level. IN THE SUMMER, TAKE WATER WITH YOU AND WEAR A HAT. AVOID DEHYDRATION!

If you wish more advice on recreational opportunities, stop at the visitor center two miles further west on the highway.

At the visitor center you may also purchase a copy of an award-winning guide booklet to serve as a memento of your hike. In fact, you may wish to purchase the guide booklet—also keyed to the numbered posts on the trail—before you begin your hike.

Be sure that you have locked your vehicle and that valuables are out of sight.

1. The rushing Fremont River has fathered the mighty canyon walls nearby. On its banks grow tamarisk, willow and cottonwood—plants that cannot survive without an abundance of water. The river is named for John C. Fremont, famous frontier explorer.
2. Having moved away from the river only a little, you are now in the desert. The plants and animals that live here use water very sparingly. Only about seven inches of rain fall on Capitol Reef a year.
3. From here you can see how “Capitol Reef” got its name. The high cliffs form a barrier to travel, like an ocean “reef.” And the domes of Navajo Sandstone look like a Washington, D. C., landmark. “Capitol” Dome lies just ahead.

4. Now, walk to your right about 30 paces. The ring of black boulders you see was once the foundation for a “pit house.” People of the Fremont Culture—who lived, farmed and hunted here for about 400 years—left little to remind us of their stay.
5. Long after the erosion of Capitol Reef had begun, the eruption of volcanoes laid down a blanket of lava just west of here. The black rocks are the worn, water-tumbled remains of that lava flow, torn loose by glaciers.
6. The desert is a fragile environment. The dark crust on the soil just past the marker is living organisms, lichens, that protect against erosion. A careless explorer can leave tracks that last for generations.
7. Two trees exist here: the pinon pine and the Utah juniper. They stand apart to share precious soil moisture. The pinon has tough straight needles and cones. The juniper is clothed in scaly, lace-like leaves and has bluish berries and cedar-like odor.
8. Plants combat evaporation to survive. Mormon tea leaves are tiny scales; chlorophyll is concentrated in the stems. Prickly pear cactus has thick, water-holding pads. Roundleaf buffaloberry has reflective silver leaves to reduce heat.
9. The “everlasting hills” do not last forever. About 180 million years ago, the white domes around you were a Sahara-like desert and then became rock. Now the sandstone is becoming sand **grains** again. Look for the ancient dune lines, memories of long ago desert winds.
10. The Fremont people knew how to make use of desert plants. The yucca at your feet provided mats, baskets, rope, nets, food and shampoo. What did sharp tips supply?
11. This is a “wash.” Water flows here occasionally. Wash sands hold enough water to give “shade tree” size to normally dwarfed juniper and pinon. It’s a good place to spot animal tracks: chipmunk, ringtail, perhaps even cougar.
12. Look up at the cliff. The structure you see is a granary used by the Fremont people to store beans and corn grown on the Fremont River flood plain below. Pioneers called them “Moqui” huts and thought they were dwellings of tiny ancients.
13. Water scours and grinds after every cloudburst. Sand-laden water carves potholes. Over immense spans of time, water eats through rock walls to form natural bridges. Rest awhile at the nearby alcove.
14. Can you see it yet? Scan slowly for the arching stone masterpiece. All around you water is at work, removing the “cement” that holds sand grains together. Where the cement is weaker, water has worn countless pockets along the cliff faces.
15. Hickman Natural Bridge: 133 feet wide, 125 feet above the gnawing floods! Early park advocates—Utahns “Joe” Hickman and Ephraim Pectol—thought it the very essence of a “Wayne Wonderland.”
16. In ages long past, this bridge was a narrow “fin” of sandstone. First an alcove appeared and, millenium by millenium, grew larger. One day, enough rock fell from the alcove to let floodwaters through. A natural “bridge” was born and successive floods deepened both the hole and the canyon below.
17. Time to sit and rest, time to think about what you have seen. Consider the patterns and textures of the rock, the colors. Hear the faint sounds of life on a tapestry of silence and the gentle rustle of the wind. Feel—you cannot perceive—the immense span of time it took to create this bridge. You may find a different perspective, another frame of reference for the concerns of human life.
18. Walk a few steps to the rim. Just upstream lie the orchards of Fruita, a 19th century Mormon pioneer settlement. Further west soar the high plateau lands that give life to the river. Downstream, to the east, the river becomes the “Dirty Devil” and flows into the Colorado and to the Pacific. Century after century, age after age, the canyons, domes and cliffs ebb slowly away. Even Capitol Reef is not forever.

