



Hiking Routes in Capitol Reef's Waterpocket District



Surprise Canyon

Backcountry hiking opportunities abound in Capitol Reef's remote, southern Waterpocket District, ranging from one-hour walks to multi-day backpacking routes. Short-distance hikes in Red, Surprise, and Headquarters Canyons cut through multiple sedimentary rock layers, while slot canyons in Burro Wash, Cottonwood Wash, and Sheets Gulch are arduous but rewarding. Upper and Lower Muley Twist Canyons and Halls Creek Narrows are popular overnight destinations. Use caution in narrow canyons, particularly during the flash flood season (typically July–September). Free backcountry permits are required for all overnight trips and can be obtained at the visitor center.

These routes are not official, maintained trails. Route conditions, including obstacles in canyons, change frequently due to weather, flash floods, rockfall, and other hazards. Routefinding, navigation, and map-reading skills are critical. Do not rely solely on unofficial route markers (rock cairns, etc.); they are not maintained by the National Park Service (NPS), may not indicate the route in this description, or may be absent.

Red Canyon Trail and Route

5.6 mi. (9.0 km) round trip
3-4 hrs.
Easy to moderate

Starting at Cedar Mesa Campground, the Red Canyon Trail bears southwest across a sagebrush flat before climbing a low ridge that affords views of the Henry Mountains to the east. Here the trail follows an old dugway northwest into Red Canyon. After 1.3 miles (2.0 km), the trail drops into a sandy wash

flanked by cottonwood trees. Here the route simply follows the wash bottom for more than a mile into an amphitheater of high, Wingate sandstone walls. The hike ends at a fork in the gray-green and lavender clay of the Chinle formation, beyond which progress is obstructed by a collection of large boulders.

Surprise Canyon Route

2.0 mi. (3.2 km) round trip
1-2 hrs.
Easy

The short Surprise Canyon route crosses a broad, grassy drainage before entering a deep canyon in the Waterpocket Fold. After crossing the dry wash bed of Halls Creek, bear slightly left to crest a small, grassy hill. From here the cairned trail meanders west among colorful outcrops before dropping steeply into a rocky ravine. From here, follow the wash bottom into

the deep, relatively narrow canyon. The route ends at the base of a spiraling pouroff 1.0 mile (1.6 km) from the Burr Trail Road. A bypass on the left offers access to the canyon's upper reaches. However, progress is challenging due to large boulder jams and steep, crumbling slopes.

Headquarters Canyon Route

3.2 mi. (5.2 km) round trip
2-3 hrs.
Easy

Headquarters Canyon features sheer, vertical walls and slopes of Navajo sandstone streaked with color. Departing from the Burr Trail Road, a signed, sandy track cuts west across a sagebrush flat and crosses the dry drainage of Halls Creek. Within 0.5 mile (0.4 km), the route crosses a couple of dry washes, edges around orange Entrada sandstone outcrops, and descends to a wide, stony gulch. Follow this drainage west into the Waterpocket Fold.

Less than one mile (1.6 km) from the start, the deep gorge constricts to a narrow slot usually free of significant obstacles. Beyond the slot, the canyon is flush with vegetation. The hike ends at a sandstone ramp in the ledge-forming Kayenta formation. A 6-foot dryfall atop the slide is passable to agile climbers, but progress beyond is quickly halted by a much higher dryfall.

Strike Valley Overlook

0.9 mi. (1.4 km) round trip
30 min.-1 hr.
Moderate

From the end of the 2.9-mile (4.7 km) Upper Muley Twist Road, it is a 0.4-mile (0.6 km) hike to Strike Valley Overlook. From the overlook high above the valley, nearly a dozen sedimentary rock layers representing nearly 150 million of geologic history are on full display. The overlook, marked by a large rock cairn, sits

atop a low saddle reached by way of a sandy trail, followed by two moderate-grade slickrock climbs. Driving the sandy and rock-strewn Upper Muley Twist Road requires a high-clearance vehicle. Overnight camping is not permitted on the Strike Valley Overlook route.

Additional Backcountry Routes

Detailed information on these longer, strenuous routes is available separately.

Burro Wash / Cottonwood Wash / Sheets Gulch

Dayhikes into deep sandstone gorges and arduous slot canyons. Accessed from signed roadside parking areas along the Notom-Bullfrog Road.

Upper Muley Twist Canyon

Sandstone narrows, arches, and panoramic views from high slickrock ridges. Accessed from Upper Muley Twist Road via Burr Trail Road. Either a long dayhike or overnight trip.

Lower Muley Twist Canyon

Long, sinuous canyon with narrows and large alcoves; scenic vistas and remote desert wilderness. Accessed either from Burr Trail Road or the Post Corral trailhead. Either a long dayhike or overnight trip, depending on the variation of the route chosen.

Halls Creek Narrows

Long, multi-day hike through dry desert landscapes, leading to deep, narrow canyon at the park's remote southern tip. Involves wading or possibly swimming through sections of narrows. Accessed from Halls Creek Overlook via Burr Trail Road.

(continued)

Rules and Regulations

- Free permits are required for backcountry camping, and are available in-person at:
 - ◆ Capitol Reef Visitor Center
 - ◆ Bullfrog Visitor Center (Glen Canyon NRA)
 - ◆ Anasazi State Park (Boulder, UT)
 - ◆ Escalante Interagency Visitor Center
- Dispersed/at-large camping is prohibited within the park, including at or near trailheads. Dispersed/at-large camping is allowed on federal lands (USFS, BLM) adjacent to the park.
- Pets are not permitted on trails or in off-trail or backcountry areas. Pets are permitted on roads and in designated campgrounds.
- Fires are prohibited.
- Collecting or damaging any park resource (plants, animals, wood, rocks, bones, antlers, artifacts, etc.) is prohibited.
- *Violation of these regulations may result in a citation.*

Additional Information

Best season:
Spring and fall

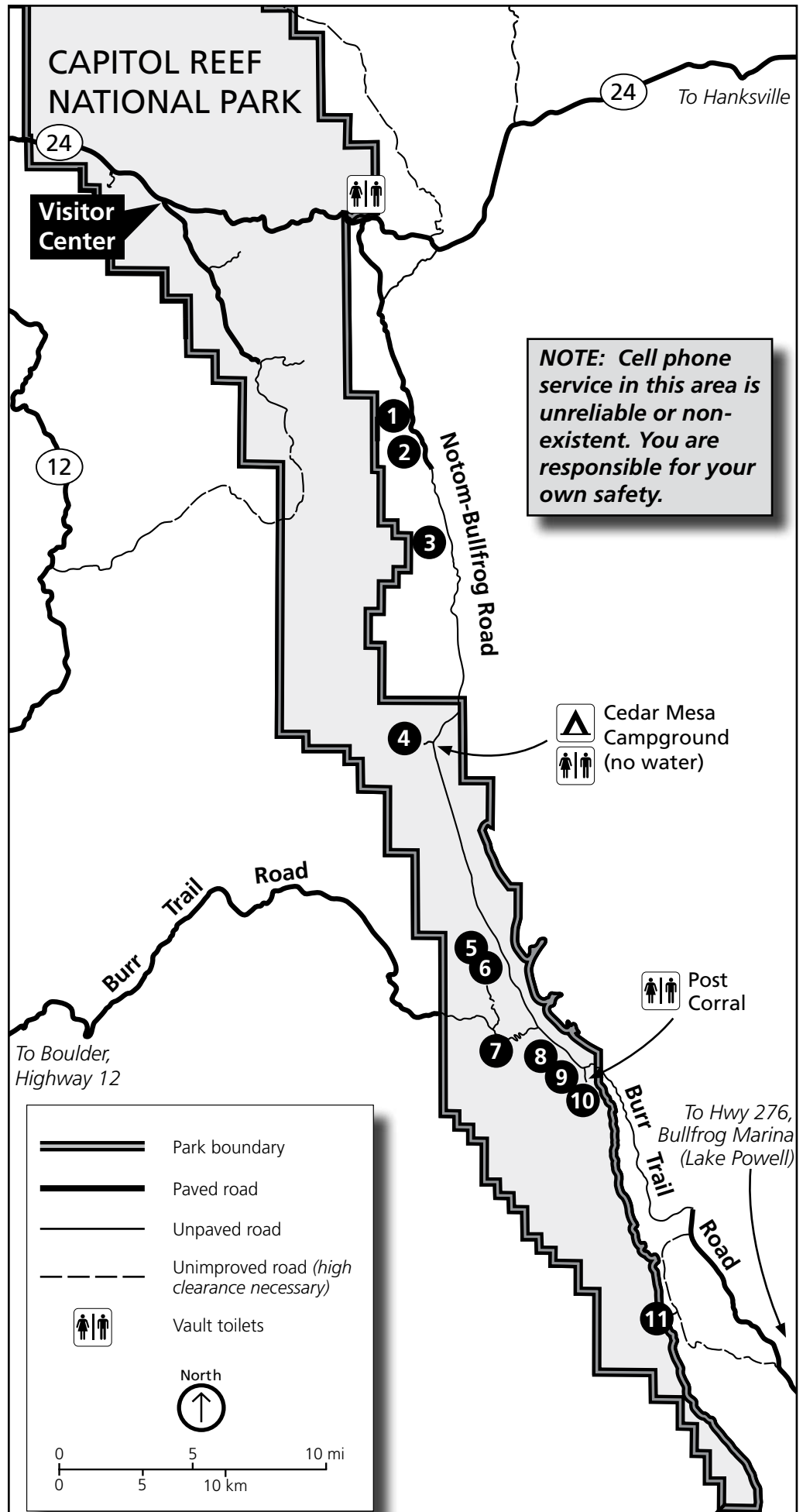
For more information:
Contact the Capitol Reef Visitor Center at 435-425-4111.

Maps:

USGS 7.5-minute series: Golden Throne, Notom, Bear Canyon, Sandy Creek Benches, Bitter Creek Divide, Wagon Box Mesa, The Post, Deer Point, Stevens Canyon North, and Hall Mesa. Maps available at the visitor center.

Trailhead Location Map

- 1 Burro Wash
- 2 Cottonwood Wash
- 3 Sheets Gulch
- 4 Red Canyon
- 5 Upper Muley Twist Canyon
- 6 Strike Valley Overlook
- 7 Lower Muley Twist Canyon (Burr Trail Road trailhead)
- 8 Surprise Canyon
- 9 Headquarters Canyon
- 10 Lower Muley Twist Canyon (Post Corral trailhead)
- 11 Halls Creek Narrows



Driving distances from the Capitol Reef Visitor Center to:

	Miles	Km
Notom-Bullfrog Road junction	9.0	14.4
Cedar Mesa Campground	30.1	48.4
Burr Trail Road junction	41.4	66.6
Upper Muley Twist junction	44.5	71.6
Post Corral trailhead	44.2	71.1
Halls Creek Overlook	56.2	90.4