

Dolores River Hike

by Dave Cooper



The Dolores River Canyon 1-small-2.jpg

We continue our exploration of the Paradox Valley this week with a hike along the Dolores River Canyon to its confluence with La Sal Creek. The primitive trail winds its way next to the Dolores River through a Wilderness Study Area administered by the Bureau of Land Management.

The hike takes you into a remote canyon bounded by sheer cliffs of Wingate sandstone, similar in appearance to those of Indian Creek, Utah. Not as well known as the Dominguez Canyons further east, the Dolores River Canyon is certainly as scenic, and likely sees less foot traffic. We encountered few human footprints on our hike, but plenty of the animal kind.

Due to its relatively low elevation (around 5000 feet), the hike should be accessible for much of the winter.

Getting to the Trailhead: The Paradox Valley is located along Highway 90, west of Norwood. A scenic drive is to take Highway 550 south from Montrose to Ridgeway, turning west in Ridgeway onto Highway 62. Take Highway 62 over the Dallas Divide and continue to the junction with Highway 145. From this junction drive west to the town of Norwood. Pass through Norwood and reach an intersection with Highway 90. Turn left on Highway 90 and drive to the town of Naturita. Continue west on Highway 90 and enter the Paradox Valley, reaching the small town of Bedrock, 21 miles west of Naturita.

Just after crossing the river bridge (west side) as you approach Bedrock, look for a sign to the boat ramp on your left. Turn onto this road and follow it through a residential area for 0.8 mile to the parking area near the boat ramp.

Hike Statistics: The trail gains less than 100 feet in 3.7 miles one way.

Difficulty: Easy hiking on sandy, primitive trails.

USGS Quad: Paradox, CO

Starting up the abandoned jeep road-small.jpg

Hike Description

From the parking area by the boat ramp, follow one of several jeep roads southwest, into the canyon. The roads soon end at a common point, but a foot trail continues along the west side of the river, becoming narrower as it goes.



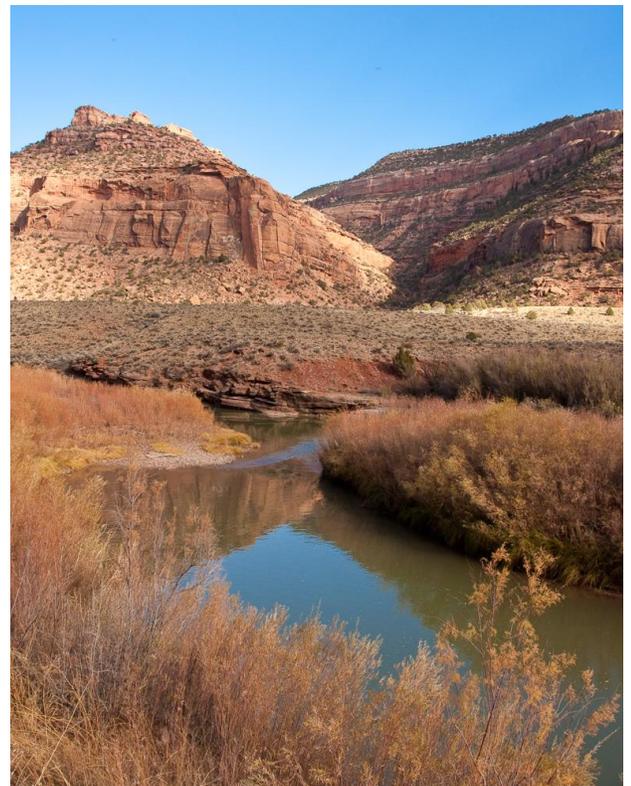
Impressive canyon walls of Wingate sandstone tower over the trail-small.jpg

Wander along the canyon and enjoy the views, arriving at the confluence with La Sal Creek after 3.3 miles. The trail follows a shelf at this point, along what is perhaps an old mining road. The remnants of the road can be followed as it curves north into La Sal Canyon, though the roadbed is so overgrown that forward progress is difficult. We thrashed our way for perhaps a half mile up La Sal Canyon to a viewpoint before turning around. The canyon appeared to be quite stunning, but would take a multi-day trip to thoroughly explore.



The Dolores River2-small-2.jpg

The confluence of the Dolores River and La Sal Creek-small.jpg





La Sal Creek-small.jpg

Side Trip

If you have time, an alternate driving route is very worthwhile, though slower, than the driving directions given above. I think this must rank as one of the most scenic drives that Colorado has to offer.

Consider driving north out of Paradox Valley on Y11 Road (a county road). This graded road, narrow in spots and with tight curves, can be icy during the winter months, so check on conditions if you're visiting after a recent storm.

The road follows the Dolores River Canyon to its confluence with the San Miguel River, then turns east to meet Highway 141 at the bridge by Uravan. As you drive through the San Miguel River Canyon, look for the remains of the old hanging flume, constructed between 1888 and 1891 to take water to a placer claim. This must have been an amazing engineering feat in its day.

The Hanging Flume along the San Miguel River-small (1 of 1).jpg



