

Hiking Happenings

Heading the Call of the Canyon Wren: Lower Courthouse Wash

by Kathy Grossman

Courthouse Wash is a roughly north-to-south water channel located mostly in Arches National Park. I chose to start my hike at the south end, off US 191, just minutes north of town. (The upper section begins inside the park.) I drove across the Colorado River Bridge, then across the Courthouse Wash Bridge, then went about a quarter mile, and pulled into the parking lot to the right (north). I walked back toward Moab (east) along the paved Moab Canyon Pathway, crossed the wash's bridge again, and watched for the trailhead down the hill to the left (north) just past the end of the chain-link fence. The path shortly zigzags into



The Trailhead

Arches National Park at a metal-and-pine post opening in a barbed wire fence.

This trail follows a *wash*: a channel that can be full of water, marshy, or even mostly dry. In New Mexico, we called this an *arroyo*. After heavy rains, this wash can flash flood as it surges down to the Colorado River. Quicksand (saturated loose sand) can also lurk along the creek banks, and dogs are especially at risk around quicksand. Washes are also wildlife corridors, and the national park does not allow canines: all good reasons to leave my border collie at home.



But, you might ask, how could a path so close to 191 feel even *close* to wild? Believe me, after a few turns of this trail, highway noises become fainter and fainter as you enter absolute quiet among the cottonwoods and stands of willows, beaver dams, and grasses slicked down by floods or flattened by mule deer bedding

down for the night. Burned tamarisk stumps also reveal recent restoration projects. Among the orchestra of birdsong is a sweet, cascading whistle, what Ed Abbey described as “the bright tinkling song,” of the canyon wren. This

pot-bellied bird uses its nutmeg-colored feathers, frothy white bib, stripey tail, and salt-speckled gray head to camouflage its tiny self among the talus and cliff cracks.



And then there is the warm caramel geological spice cake: cliff slabs, sandstone dreamscapes with holes and alcoves, and thin shelves

of mudstone. And the silty pools and stepping-stone waterfalls and pour-offs are a refreshing delight in our arid environment. And, for hiking breaks, overhangs and cliff walls can offer shade at various times of day. I've hiked this trail dry, hiked it swampy, and recently had to turn



Rock Panel Info

around after flailing through some flood debris. Watch your weather forecasts and use trekking poles for navigating tangled reeds and other tricky bits.

Kathy Grossman is a native Californian, nature journalist, birder, writer, and desert rat who's been in Moab since 2011.



Your adventure can be enhanced—before, after, or on its own—by the artistry at the end of the Courthouse Wash Rock Art Trail, accessed by 1) following the wash trail and then walking east at the sign, or 2) following the bike path farther east and ascending a signed boulder-strewn path to the information board. Look for the imposing, westward-facing 52-foot-long wall of rock, 20 feet tall, with petroglyphs (carved or pecked) and pictographs (painted). The figures were created up to 2,000 years ago by ancestral Puebloan or Fremont-era peoples. Paiute, Ute, or Diné (Navajo) groups may also have added images. The original pigments have been dimmed from vandalism and subsequent cleaning, so I share a brightened detail of some of the panel's images in my watercolor illustration.



Watercolor painting of the Courthouse Wash Panel by Kathy Grossman

In ancient times, these wash and river crossings were done on foot, the only crossings possible for hundreds of miles, making the area crucial for travel and trade. Your own visit can honor that deep history with observation, sketching, or photography. Removing rocks, touching the art, or making rubbings are prohibited. This site is just inside Arches National Park and in 1976 was added to the National Register of Historic Places.

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Hikes are free, start and end at CFI's office in Moab, and take place from 11am - 4pm. Each program consists of an easy to moderate hike where we spend time appreciating nature and exploring different mental health topics with expert educators. Registration is required. Please reach out if you have any questions.
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