
If you have any questions about the park or surrounding area, ask the park superintendent or ranger. You also may address inquiries to:

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(801) 826-4466

Utah Division of Parks and Recreation
1636 West North Temple, Suite 116
Salt Lake City, UT 84116-3156
(801) 538-7221

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ESCALANTE STATE PARK

Nature Trail Guide



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The Utah Division of Parks and Recreation welcomes you to Escalante State Park. You are about to begin a moderately strenuous hike. If the weather is hot, please take your time. Carry water and rest often. Remember, you are 6,000 feet above sea level.

1. About the Trail

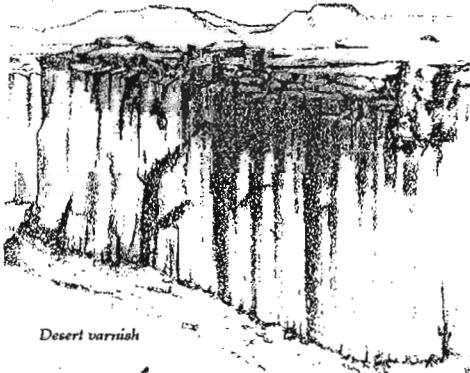
This trail is one mile or 1.6 kilometers in length. Approximately one-half mile or .8 km from here, you will begin to see petrified wood.

2. Balanced Rocks

Wind, frost, and rain have removed materials from around and under this hard rock, leaving it precariously balanced. There are hard and soft layers within rock strata. As water, frost, and wind grind away at soft layers, the harder more resilient layers resist erosion. Frost eventually cracks the hard layers, leaving large blocks resting on softer sediments.

3. Nature's Mysterious Painter

The black and brown streaks on the rocks are known as *desert varnish*. Just how the



varnish forms is a mystery. Most investigators believe that when it rains, a thin film of water streaks down the cliffs. The water contains iron and manganese picked up from soils on the canyon rim or from the rock itself. Other investigators feel that bacteria living on the rock have the power to concentrate the iron and manganese on the surface. Evidence of *desert varnish* is abundant throughout the Southwest.

4. Roundleaf Buffalo Berry

(*Shepherdia rotundifolia*)

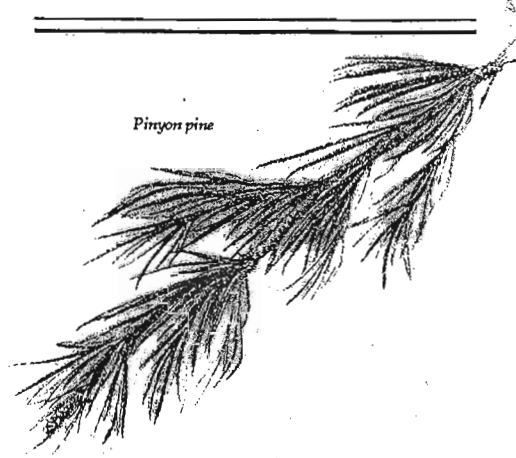
Tiny gray hairs on the leaves of this shrub protect it from the sun and reduce evaporation. Desert plants need to economize water loss. The buffalo berry is common in canyons with well-drained slopes. Its fruit contains a sweet, pale yellow juice. This plant's cousin, Silver buffalo berry (*Shepherdia argentea*) is found at lower elevations. Its fruit is used to make a delicious jam or jelly.

5. Lichen

The brilliantly colored plant on the rock face is actually two plants growing as one. This is an example of a symbiotic relationship between a fungus and an algae. One uses the other's by-products. The fungus protects the algae while the algae produces food for the fungus. They even reproduce together. These tiny lichen may have been the first living organisms to exist on dry land. There are at least 16,000 different species. Some of the individual plant colonies could be thousands of years old.

6. The Pygmy Forest

The slow growth of these dwarfed trees is the result of limited water. As you walk along the trail, you will notice small trees dotting the landscape. They make up what is



known as the pygmy forest. Utah juniper (*Juniperus osteosperma*) and pinyon pine (*Pinus edulis*) are both members of this pygmy forest community.

Despite their small size, many of the junipers and pinyons in the park are hundreds of years old. Trees with a diameter of six to ten inches are often 150 years old. Mature trees with greater diameters are from 250 to 350 years old. Small size and slow growth processes are adaptations made by some plants to live with severely limited water.

7. Painted Desert

The brightly colored deposit on the hill in front of you is characteristic of the Morrison formation. It is commonly referred to as a painted desert. Indians used to call it "the land of sleeping rainbows." The minerals in these color bands are the same minerals that give petrified wood its brilliant color. This highly-mineralized strata was once a shallow lake bed, stream bed, or floodplain. The harder cap rock directly above it is ash deposited from ancient

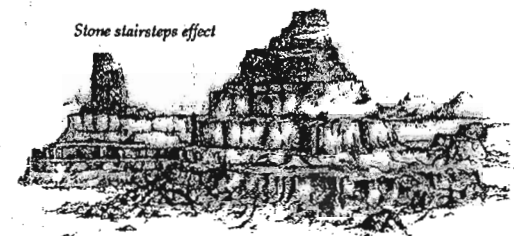
volcanic eruptions. Because these floodplains were rich in nutrients, plant life was abundant. Consequently, this was a gathering place for dinosaurs.

8. Remain to your right.

9. Escalante

Here you have a commanding view of the town of Escalante, population 800. This historic Mormon town was settled in 1876. It was named in honor of Father Escalante, the first European to explore the Great Basin region. Father Escalante was a Spanish missionary in search of an overland route from New Mexico to California. Some rock and adobe-mortar pioneer houses remain scattered throughout the valley.

The root word of Escalante means "to escalate upward as stairsteps." Interestingly, the entire plateau system here "steps up." Look beyond the town and you will see the Colorado Plateau and the mighty Colorado River gorge. To your right is the Kaiparowits Plateau at an average elevation of 8,500 feet. Now look behind you at the great Aquarius Plateau. It is the granddaddy of them all with an elevation of 11,000 feet. Escalante is indeed a land of stairsteps.



10. Petrified Wood

Large chunks of petrified wood have been washed out of the ridge's deteriorating strata. Escalante State Park is comprised of 1,400 acres. About 5 1/2 million tons of fossilized wood is exposed in the park. Much of the wood is found like this, but there are areas with larger single deposits. Anasazi and Fremont Indians gathered petrified wood here to use for tools.

11. Trail of Sleeping Rainbows

This is an optional trail. It is .75 mile and quite steep. A vast amount of our petrified wood is found along this trail.

12. Land of Imagination

This is the largest single deposit of petrified wood on the trail. Imagine yourself in a large low floodplain similar to the Mississippi Delta area but with less foliage. To the north-west you could see towering volcanoes such as Mount St. Helens. To the east would be a large mountain range similar to the Sierra Nevada. It is the ancestral Rockies. You would be surrounded by large conifer trees, some more than 200 feet high. Nearby would be cycads, the ancestors of palm trees and some ferns. One hundred fifty million years ago this region was near the equator, but our continent has since drifted north.

13. Black Boulders

These boulders are remnants of the cone volcano to the north. Less than 50 million years ago, Boulder Mountain erupted and covered much of the Escalante region with lava flows and boulders.

Ten million years ago, the Colorado Plateau was 5,000 feet lower than it is today. The region began to rise when the Continental plate collided with the Pacific plate. The Colorado River and its tributaries continued to maintain their courses, slowly carving the beautiful canyons you see today.

14. Petrified Wood

This is one of the most remarkable petrified wood specimens in the park. Look at the subtle color changes from the outside rings to the center. Only a few petrified wood specimens in this formation are sufficiently preserved to be recognized. Scientists have identified several conifers or cone-bearing trees, however.

Low-Impact Use

We hope this trail guide has given you a deeper appreciation for the Escalante area and especially the petrified wood. Please help us protect this fragile environment for all to enjoy in its natural state. Remember that it is unlawful to collect or deface petrified wood. Leave small pieces of petrified wood and rocks as you find them, and help us prevent erosion by not cutting switchbacks. All pets should be confined on a six-foot leash. No firearms are allowed.
