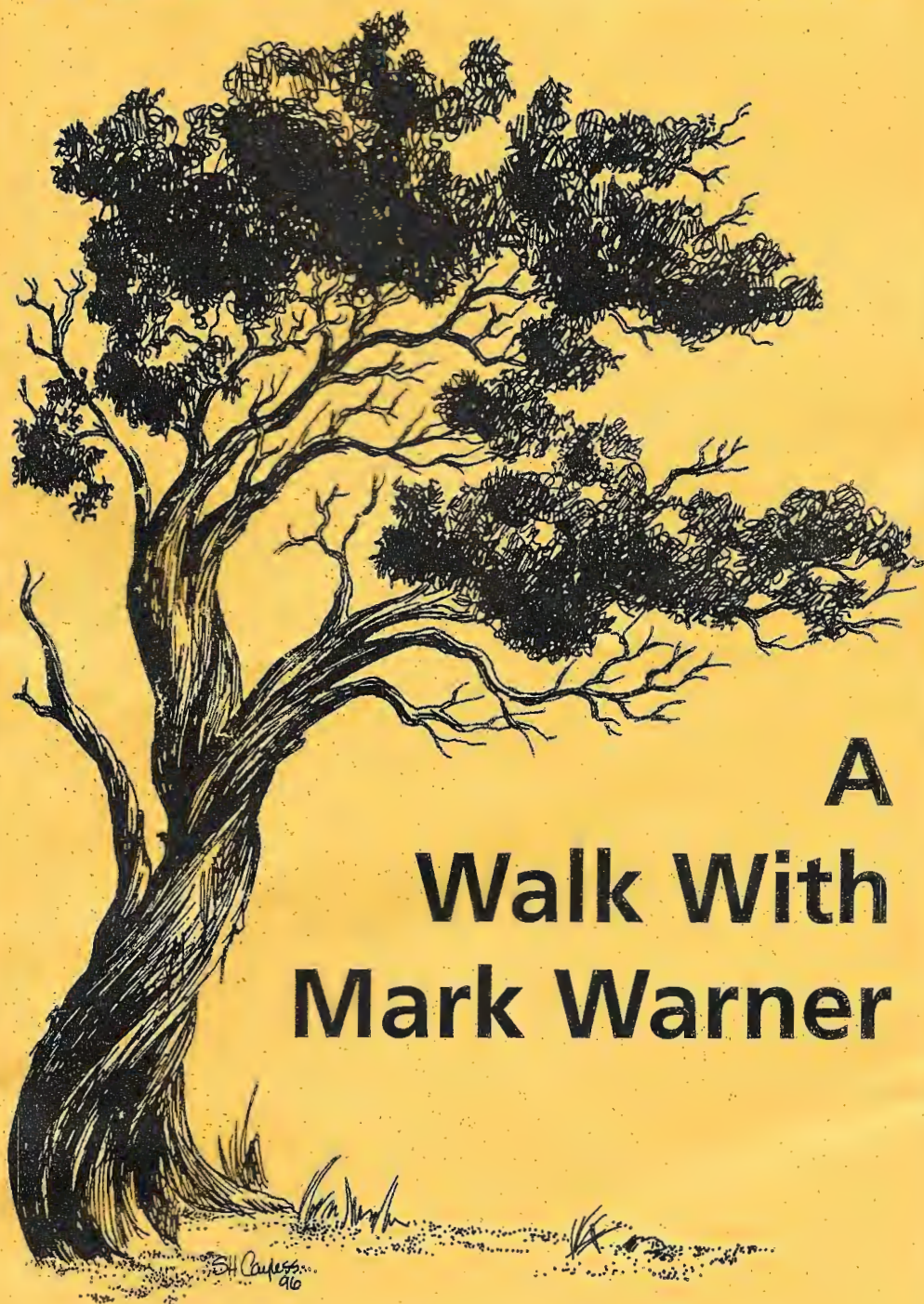


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A Walking Guide for the Warner Point Nature Trail



**A  
Walk With  
Mark Warner**

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The wide-open spaces of the western United States have always fired our imaginations. These lands have fueled our dreams and molded the character of America for more than two centuries. And we have a long history of preserving some of those places that still light that fire and compel us to take note of our connection to the natural world.

Mark Warner felt that connection here. His dream was that others would also experience a sense of awe in this canyon, and his vision was that through a political process this place would be preserved in its natural state. Boundaries could be drawn and a park could be established.

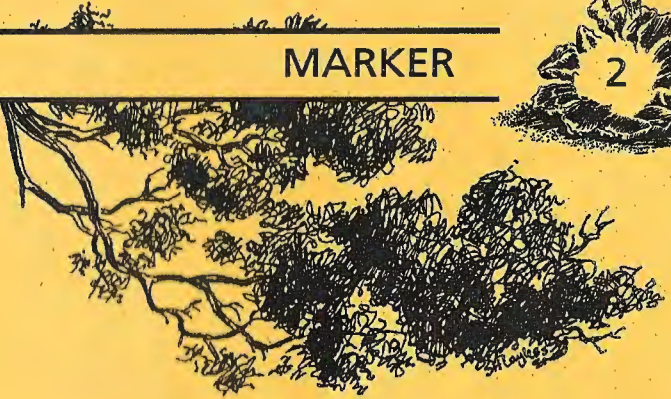
Warner was born and raised in Ohio, educated at Muskingum and Antioch Colleges, and came to western Colorado in 1917 to become pastor at the Montrose Presbyterian Church. Although many people contributed to the preservation of Black Canyon, it was Warner's vision and commitment that brought this about. Join him now for this walk to the overlook that bears his name.



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Pinyon pines (*Pinus edulis*) and juniper trees (*Juniperus osteosperma*) are slow growing high desert dwellers that dominate the land along this trail. The juniper distinguishes itself by the globular yellow-green foliage that differs from the sharp needles of the pine. It can grow in impossible conditions: Poor soil, intense heat, bitter cold, and prolonged drought, but time is an essential element. A seedling with a two-foot tap root could be several decades old. Yet the juniper is the most common tree from here to California, growing at elevations from 3,000 to 8,000 feet and higher. Age sets in, insects and parasites attack, the trees become contorted and gnarly. These trees are tough; really tough. They are steadfast reminders of a rugged life in the west.

*Looking down into the future I could visualize the desirability of making this remarkable canyon available from an educational and recreational standpoint to the citizens of the local community as well as others throughout the country who would enjoy seeing the canyon if at some time available to them.*

Letter to Ranger Robert Haugen recalling the establishment and early development of the Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Monument, 1972



*We may differ in color and in other physical characteristics - we may have and do have our racial, tribal and national peculiarities and customs, but under the surface - under the skin we are very much alike. We have our hindred feelings and emotions - our likes and dislikes; we enjoy love and experience hate; we have our longings, desires and aspirations; we came into the world in the same manner and we shall leave it after the same fashion - our eternal destination is the same.*

Remarks at the funeral service of John McCook an elder of the Ute Tribe, 1937.

We don't usually pay much attention to dead trees. They are just there until, after many unobserved years go by, they collapse. But dead trees or snags like this are important to the cycle of life in the natural world. Raptors find elevated perches on limbs to survey the slopes for small rodents, while those rodents find hollows in snags for shelter. Deer may use them to sharpen antlers; bobcats and black bears sharpen their claws. This dead tree holds the soil in place while new young shrubs and trees get a start on life. Above all its nutrients eventually return to the earth.

All of this from a snag that is usually unnoticed, by people at least.

Uncompahgre Peak

Storm King

Mount Sneffels



It's easy to take in the pastoral fields out there. But tucked down at the bottom of the hill, right in front of you, is an open grassy flat; a fire scar slowly on the mend.

A tree down there, struck by lightning, smoldered for a few hot days in July 1996. Strong afternoon winds then fanned the embers into a blaze, and whorls of fire swirled around the trees, completely engulfing them as the front of the flames charged up the draw to your left. Before 24 hours had gone by the fire was advancing on the entrance booth where you entered the park.

But fire is a part of nature in western North America. The oak brush, in fact, has adapted to it fairly well. But pinyons and junipers have not. It may be decades before you see new trees growing out there again.

*In the immediate foreground one may gaze upon the beautiful Bostwick Park farming country, the city of Montrose and the Uncompahgre Valley... As one from this vantage point looks to the south some forty miles, (your) eyes rest upon the beautiful panorama of the San Juan Mountains with the city of Ouray in the center and lofty sentinals of the Rockies extending for miles in either direction.*

From manuscript of article published by The Colorado Magazine, 1934.

Mount Wilson

Horsefly Peak

Lone Cone



By Cayless 1996



*We do not all stand on the same platform religiously, politically, or socially, but there is one place where we have everything in common, where we are willing to share everything we have with the other fellow, and that is anywhere in the great outdoors. When we meet there somehow we are able to lay aside our differences and the things that normally divide us into social groups for there is a power - an attraction... a fascination (that) once it gets ahold of a man he can never get away from it.*

Address to the Montrose Game and Fish Protective Association, 1926.

Although wildflowers scatter bursts of color along this slope in the spring, the wild grasses will sprout and take over in early summer. The variety of grasses is important to this land.

Even as the roots of all the grasses are woven together to hold the soil in place, so too, they hold a web of life together for nature. In fact, one third of the earth is covered in grasses, and they are a foundation for life.

Foxtail barley, needle-and-thread, wheat and Indian rice grass; these and others serve a specific purpose in the rhythm of life along the rim. It's hard and impractical to measure the health of the natural world in a specific place. But the growth and diversity of the grasses are a good indication that, here at least, there is a harmony in nature.

The West Elk Mountains across the canyon were once active volcanoes, belching gasses and ash high into the atmosphere. Along with the ash came lava flows, and together the debris settled in layers over the land. Like the San Juan Mountains, the West Elks exploded for millions of years and piled thousands of feet of ash upon the region.



With a liberal amount of time, the Gunnison River eroded away the ash and other underlying layers of rock. Two million years ago, the river began carving into the crystalline rock that makes up the walls of Black Canyon. Swollen by melting snow in springtime, and dwindling to a trickle in winter, the river carved age after age, into some of the oldest rock in North America.

*Long ridges of jagged granite project out into the heart of the main canyon, with deep narrow gorges on either side, through which one may occasionally get a glimpse of the rushing, roaring waters of the mighty Gunnison. Towers, pinnacles, spires and other fantastic rock formations greet the eye with an ever new challenge, as sunshine and shadow play their part in the creation of this ever changing pageant of rugged grandeur and majestic beauty.*

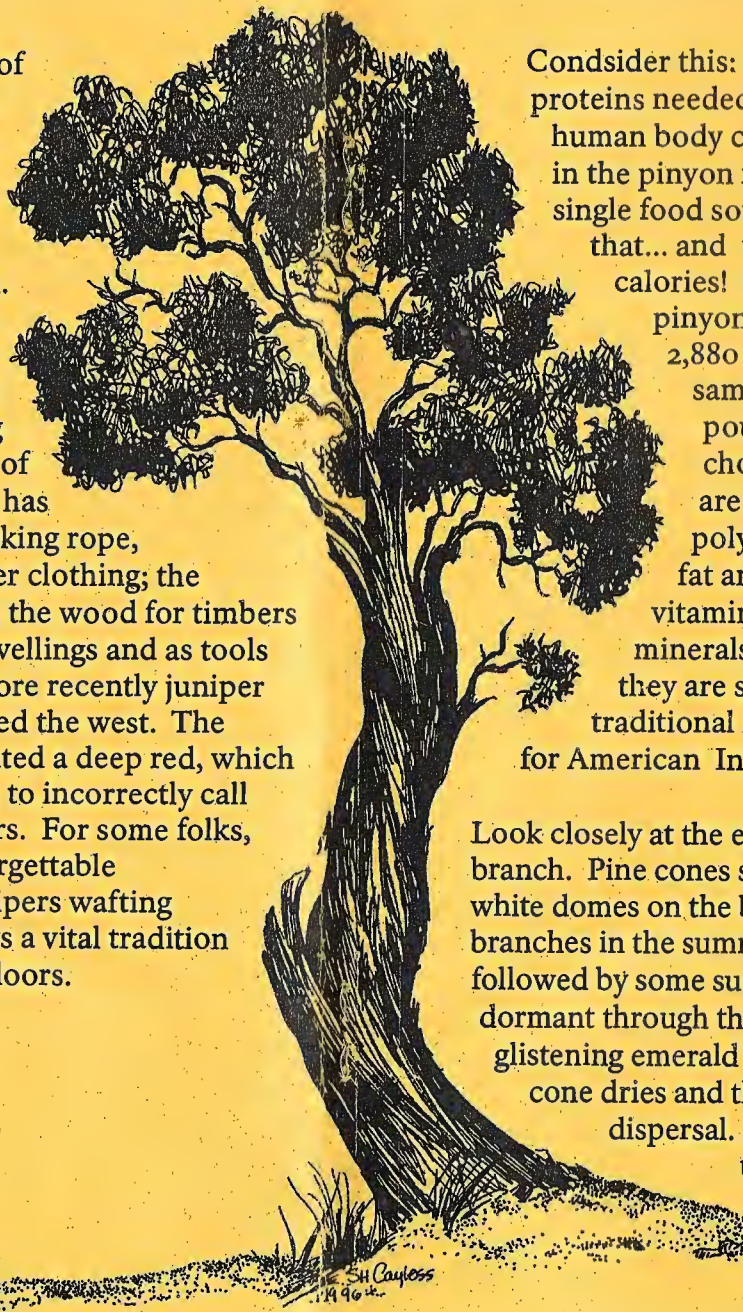
From manuscript of article published by The Colorado Magazine, 1934.



*We wish to take this opportunity to express the very deep and sincere appreciation of our people for the splendid interest you have taken in this project from the beginning, and your persistent efforts which were continued until the proclamation was signed by Mr. Hoover creating this national monument. It is our firm conviction that in years to come this national monument which is vastly different from others, will take high rank among our national scenic, and scientific attractions.*

Letter to Congressman Edward Taylor following his efforts to gain a presidential proclamation establishing Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Monument, 1933.

Touch the bark of this old juniper. Feel its twisted, shaggy surface whipped by the wind and dried by the sun. The juniper has played a role in many traditions of people dating back thousands of years. The bark has been used in making rope, sandals and other clothing; the berries for food; the wood for timbers in prehistoric dwellings and as tools and utensils. More recently juniper fence posts dotted the west. The heartwood is tinted a deep red, which led early settlers to incorrectly call these trees cedars. For some folks, though the unforgettable fragrance of junipers wafting from campfires is a vital tradition of the great outdoors.



Consider this: All of the proteins needed by the human body can be found in the pinyon nut. Very few single food sources can do that... and talk about calories! One pound of pinyon nuts has 2,880 calories, the same as in one pound of chocolate. They are high in polyunsaturated fat and rich in vitamins and minerals. No wonder they are still a traditional food source for American Indians.

Look closely at the end of a branch. Pine cones start as tiny white domes on the buds of new branches in the summer. Pollination follows the next spring, followed by some summer growth, then the conelet lies dormant through that winter. Late the next summer, the glistening emerald cone, full of sap, stops growing. The cone dries and the scales open, exposing the nuts for dispersal. Count the months and you'll find that the pinyon pine needs almost 26 months to produce the next generation of seeds. Slow growing, indeed.

*I received recently a letter requesting information relative to these Black Canyon Conifers, with the thought in mind that possibly this area of over-age drought conifers might be of sufficient interest and scientific value to add to the series of Botanical Reserves that have been established over the state of Colorado, with the thought of calling special attention to such specimens because of their unusual scientific interest.*

Letter from Warner to Dr. Edmund Schulman, Laboratory of Tree-Ring Research, University of Arizona, 1948.





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Ooooh, something has been chewing on those trees, to your left. Porcupines eat the inner bark of trees in the winter when their summer food supply of leaves, seeds and forbs disappears. The inner bark, called cambium, is rich in energy.

How rich? Known for being loaded with carbohydrates, it is a high-energy food source. Western tribes, including the Utes, followed the porcupine's lead and stripped bark from various trees to get the inner lining for food. The Utes were careful to take only a little from any single tree. Stripping the bark in a ring around the tree will kill it because the inner bark brings water and nutrients from the roots up to the branches. Moving from tree to tree allowed them a continued source of the cambium.

Porcupines, of course, may feed on a single tree, sometimes killing it. Not many predators will take them on, though, especially since they sport more than 30,000 quills on their bodies. Parasites can keep the porcupine in check, and cougars will take them on when really hungry. Otherwise, it's hard to think of an animal that has made itself as unappetizing... except maybe the skunk.

*At present the Utes are a self-supporting people and I find it hard to fit the description of the early historians with the present day Utes. You can scarcely forget the important part (they) have played in the history of Colorado for they have left their imprint in the names we use for our counties, cities, mountains and streams.*

From sermon notes, date unknown.



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The 800-acre fire scar is pretty evident from here. Fire can be terrifying! Handled in an appropriate way, fire can be of great benefit, but when out of control it can scare us out of our wits. At this fire, the winds that day were whipping the blaze into a blast furnace, and the billowing smoke that towered hundreds of feet above the mesa struck fear into the hearts of folks that were stuck on the south rim. In the end, a cold front bringing light showers doused the fire, and after a week the park was reopened.

Firefighters can't always count on a rain shower to help them out. So local, state or federal agencies will set ground fires, when conditions are right, to burn the underbrush. Such fires, called controlled burns, can imitate prehistoric fires and prevent catastrophic infernos.

*It is the old story repeated over and over again of wanton destruction without any thought of conservation. So much for the past. What about the present and the future? Will we follow the example of the past? Will we rob our children of their rightful heritage of wild things of nature as we have been robbed of ours? No. We must keep the faith with coming generations. You may drink from the fountains of nature and come back again and again to satisfy your thirst. But if you destroy the fountain, you destroy the stream that the fountain feeds. Nature gives abundantly, but does not give inexhaustibly. You cannot exterminate and still possess. All life about us testifies to this fact.*

Address to the Montrose Game and Fish Protection Association, 1928.



*In the autumn after the frosts have come the Black Canyon presents a scene of gorgeous beauty with the dark evergreens, the brilliant yellow aspens, and hundreds of acres of scrub oak and other shrubs in their many colors, blending into a harmonious setting of the colored granite walls of the canyon.*

From manuscript of article published by The Colorado Magazine, 1934

These tall conifers are Douglas fir trees, which are common throughout the west and flourish in moist locations where they grow much larger. You may have noticed that they do not grow on the south side of this ridge. The climate on the north facing, or canyon side, is a little cooler and holds moisture longer. These conditions allow the Douglas fir to populate the south rim slopes.

These same conditions favor the Gambel oak, too. Although it may be hard to imagine, this tree is a close relative of the mighty eastern white oak. The Gambel oak is stunted and spindly in part because the root system is similar to that of a potato (called a tuber). Many stems can shoot up from the root system, which causes the tree to grow as a thicket. That, in turn, causes the shrubby appearance and leads to the more typical name, scrub oak.

Perhaps one of the more delightful features of hiking this trail is to spot some of the birds that live here. I hope you have had that chance. Smaller birds, like the Pinyon Jay and Clark's Nutcracker, commonly inhabit these woodlands. They will eat almost anything, but they particularly relish the pine nuts, especially through the winter.

In the fall they will peck the cones apart, filling and stretching their throat with up to twenty nuts at a time. The seeds are then stored on the ground near the nest. The birds separate the good seeds from the bad by color, weight (as the nut rests in their bill), and by the sound each nut makes when "clicked" by quickly opening and closing the beak. The birds depend so much on pine nuts that if there is a bad crop, they will alter their breeding behavior to match the food supply.



Does the pinyon tree get anything out of this? As it turns out, the pine nut is the largest seed generated by any tree in the American southwest. Once produced, they don't spread very far. The jays normally leave a few nuts behind in the soil, and those not eaten by rodents may sprout. The birds disperse the pinyon seeds and spread its range.

*Among the smaller birds may be found several members of the sparrow family, the robin, house finch, junco, and the friendly little chickadee. Soaring among and above the pinnacles and crags of the rugged canyon, the visitor to the national monument is occasionally thrilled with the sight of the king of our North American birds - the lordly eagle.*

From manuscript for an article in The Colorado Magazine, 1934.



*During the past few years I have spent much time in searching for drought-sensitive trees, and have found several whose age exceeds that of the oldest I noted at Black Canyon... The impression remains, however, that the concentration of extremely old pinyons at Black Canyon was quite unusual. At the time of my visit I was told by the ranger in charge that on the north side of the canyon there were even larger pinyons...*

From letter to Warner by Dr. Edmund Schulman, Laboratory of Tree-Ring Research, 1948.

Now THAT is an old pinyon tree. And it's just the type of grandparent tree that fascinated Mark Warner. In fact, the groves of pinyon pine along this ridge are some of the oldest of their species. The Laboratory of Tree-Ring Research at the University of Arizona discovered this when testing some trees in the 1940s and 60s.

Information from the tree rings revealed that the groves at Warner and High Points, and some on the north rim, are in the range of 750 to 850 years old. These trees were seedlings when the Ancestral Puebloans built the dwellings at Mesa Verde, or when the Magna Carta was signed in England (1215).

Yet growing old with grace is difficult for any living thing. Young pinyons thrive in the shade of older ones, waiting until the aged trees pass on before fully realizing their potential. We all have our youth, middle age and older years on this earth, but all generations need to fit together for a healthy society. The trees, with this same rhythm of life, are perhaps among the marvels that seized Warner's imagination.

Mark Warner's efforts at preserving the Black Canyon were realized in the creation of a National Monument by the signature of President Herbert Hoover in 1933. President William Clinton signed legislation 66 years later expanding the boundary and renaming the Black Canyon as a National Park.

If tradition is the enemy of progress, then could it be that the tradition of National Parks is in conflict with the greater part of our society? The things that we save define us as a nation, and it is through our traditions that we find strength in our values as a people. Some have said that our national parks portray us at our best in a national process of sharing and commemorating those values. In fact, nations around the world have followed this custom and have also established national parks.

The view ahead is one of those places where we come face to face with this tradition. We protect these places to remind us of those values that distinguish our country, and we cherish them for the future so that those values will live on.

*Having always enjoyed a deep appreciation of the majesty and beauty of the things of the natural world and being an ardent "out-doors man", I felt that my efforts in working on this as a civic project would not be inconsistent with my work as a minister... And so I accepted the opportunity of working on the Black Canyon project and I have greatly enjoyed and appreciated friends in the community who worked with me and... whom I came to know and be associated with down through the years. It was always a delightful and very rewarding experience.*

Letter to Ranger Robert Haugen recalling the establishment and early development of the Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Monument, 1972.