Lower Calf Creek Falls Trail

Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument

Photo by Melissa Dixon and the Share the Experience Photo Contest 2016.

Trail Map

This map is geo-referenced

Roads: Trails: Visitor Information: Area of Detail:

Trail Head, Trail, Campground, Campsites, Restrooms, Trash, Picnic Area

NORTH

Lower Calf Creek Falls Trail

1.5 miles round trip

Lower Calf Creek Falls Trail

Calf Creek Campground

Visitor Information Centers

Escalante Interagency Visitor Center
755 W. Main St. Escalante, UT
435-826-5499

Annasai State Park Museum
Main and Center Streets, Dove Creek
435 N. Highway 13 Boulder, UT
435-335-7382

Interpretive Information

Lower Calf Creek Falls is one of the most well known and unique features in Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument. The trail follows Calf Creek to the 126 foot high lower falls. The hike is 6 miles round trip and takes average hikers 3-4 hours. Elevation change on the trail is minimal, but the trail is sandy and walking can be strenuous, especially in hot weather. In contrast, the falls provide a delightfully cool, shady haven which makes the hike well worth the effort.

When hiking, please remember...

- There are no facilities along the trail. Please use the outhouses at the parking area or in the campground.
- Pack out all trash, including toilet paper.
- Keep dogs leashed and please pick up after your pet.
- Bring water with you. Do not drink creek water. Potable water is available in the campground (April-October).
- Archaeological and historic sites are fragile and irreplaceable. Do not touch rock art or climb in ruins.
- Leave everything as you find it. Collecting is prohibited.
- Wear waterproof sunscreen when swimming to minimize water contamination and to protect the fragile aquatic ecosystem of Calf Creek.

Interpretive Stops:

1 Welcome to Calf Creek! The year-round flow of the creek begins several miles up canyon with large seeps and springs. Water is the key to survival here. Canyon and rim plant communities support an abundance of plant and animal life. People have also depended on the life-giving waters of Calf Creek for thousands of years.

2 Water forms canyons. Over millions of years, the creek has carved its way deeper and deeper into its channel. Meanwhile, rain water flowing over cliffs and down slopes carries the sides of the canyon erodes sand grains, pebbles, rocks, and boulders, gradually widening the canyon. Major erosion and sediment transport occur when flash floods from summer thunderstorms roar down the canyon. Water laden with sediment also forms arches, alcoves, intricate honeycombing, and water pockets. Look around you and observe the wonders of water and wind at work.

3 Sometimes there are ponds and marshy areas along the creek formed by beaver dams. Beavers are industrious, sometimes building large and extensive dams. Beaver dams help control flooding, reduce siltation downstream, and provide habitat for mature fish.
Insects, frogs, and birds are attracted to these wetland areas, and a variety of ducks can be observed here.

4 Gambel oak is an upland species. In high desert areas it is often found in cool, shady locations. The twigs, leaves, and acorns provide important food for wildlife, especially deer and turkeys.

5 You wouldn't know it looking at Calf Creek today, but in the early 1900's a local farmer grew watermelons here along the banks of the creek. They were said to be "the best melons in Escalante." Floods and native vegetation, however, have removed all signs of this agricultural venture.

6 High on the cliff across the creek is a storage structure (granary) built more than 800 years ago by prehistoric people who lived in the canyons. We call this culture the Fremont. Assorted food items and seeds were stored in these structures. What would it have been like to be a Fremont Indian living in this canyon?

7 Millions of years ago a huge Sahara-like desert covered this area. Sand dunes hundreds of feet high drifted back and forth. The wind-blown sand of this former desert is now Navajo Sandstone. It is the predominant geologic layer found in Calf Creek canyon and is a cliff-forming layer usually white in color. The dark streaks on the canyon walls are called desert varnish. It forms when windblown dust or rain leave behind trace amounts of iron and manganese. Rainwater combines with these minerals to create oxides, leaving behind the reddish-brown to black patina on the cliff walls. Bacteria growing on the cliff faces also contribute by concentrating these minerals and cementing the oxides to the rock surface. Over time, as desert varnish ages, it becomes thicker and darker.

8 The old fence line is a reminder of the historic use of Calf Creek Canyon by early pioneers. Weaned calves were kept in the natural pasture behind the box canyon above the fence, hence the name "Calf Creek."

9 Across the canyon, near the bottom of the smooth cliff wall, are three large figures painted with red pigment - further evidence that people have used Calf Creek for hundreds of years. (Pictographs are painted images while petroglyphs are carved or pecked into the rock surface.) With their horizontal shape, depictions of arms and legs, and elaborate head dresses, these images are typical of Fremont style rock art. Their meaning is unknown. Archaeologists speculate that it may represent significant events, religious ceremonies, deities, lineages, information, maps, or even warnings. Rock art, like all archaeological sites, are a limited resource. Once they are damaged or destroyed they are gone forever. Please help protect and preserve this link to our past. Look but never touch or damage rock art or prehistoric structures. These activities result in the loss of valuable scientific information and cultural connections.

10 Straight ahead on the right-hand wall of this side canyon is another storage granary. The Fremont people grew corn, beans, and squash along creeks and river bottoms, but more often they relied on gathering native plants, pinyon nuts, berries, and seeds. They also fished and hunted deer, bighorn sheep, and other small mammals.

11 Horsetail is a golden plant found only in wet areas. Pioneers called it scouring rush and used it to scrub pots and pans. Boxelder, a member of the maple family, is the predominant tree in the canyon. Reaching a height of 50 feet, it grows rapidly in wet places. It provides bank stabilization for the creek and ample shade for both people and wildlife.

12 Stop for a few minutes. Relax and listen. How many different bird calls do you hear? Many bird species find the lush vegetation and abundant water ideal habitat. Look for hummingbirds, ravens, spotted towhees, peregrine falcons, and American robins. During spring and fall, many birds stop here on their migration routes. Is something rustling in the leaves? Lizards, mule deer, ground squirrels, coyote, porcupine, and mountain lion are just a few of the many animals that live in the canyon. Do you see the wind? Even during the short time you have been listening, sand grains have been blown off the cliffs and slopes and the process of erosion slowly continues. Is there only silence? Listen and enjoy.

13 The creek is the life force within the canyon. It provides life-sustaining water for the plants and animals here. Aquatic plants, insects, and fish make their home within the creek itself. Brook, brown, and rainbow trout can often be seen resting on the creek bottom or darting in and out of hiding spots under vegetation along the creek bank.

14 Wetlands are one of the most productive and important ecosystems, displaying a greater abundance of plant and animal life than adjoining upland areas. A healthy riparian zone filters and purifies the water passing through it, reduces sediment loads, enhances soil stability, and contributes to ground water recharge and flow. Cattail, common reed, river birch, cottonwood, false Solomon's seal, and willow are all water-loving plants you may see in the canyon.

15 Mist from the falls and shade from the canyon walls keep the temperature cooler here. Look for scarlet monkey flower, Easter flower, and maiden hair fern growing near seeps in the cliff walls. Close your eyes and listen to the sounds of water and wind. Feel the mist on your face. Imagine how different this canyon and your hike would be without the creek. Water is precious in the desert. Water is life.

Artwork by Matt How

Leave No Trace
Center for Outdoor Ethics | LNT.org

Leave No Trace Outdoor Ethics

- Plan ahead and prepare
- Travel and camp on durable surfaces
- Dispose of waste properly
- Leave what you find
- Minimize campfire impacts
- Respect wildlife
- Be considerate of other visitors