Escalante Trailhead: Escalante Gorge and Boulder Mail Trail

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Overview

Two main hikes leave from here, with many ways to combine them and add to them. Being essentially within the City of Escalante, this trailhead is very easy to access (except when its wet) and the scenery is surprising. Walking the Escalante River, you follow it as it plunges unexpectedly straight through the sharp rise of the Escalante Monocline. The Boulder Mail Trail dodges up the same direction but then climbs the Escalante Monocline bringing you to wide desert views with pockets and folds of water tucked away. A common loop is to connect these hikes via Death Hollow. Death Hollow, while gaining more and more prominence, is still somewhat of a hidden treasure. Be aware that taking the Boulder Mail Trail requires wading through poison ivy in Death Hollow. Typically in summer, the Escalante River is dry until you get close to Death Hollow. At other times it can be difficult to keep your feet dry. Also this trailhead is an excellent place for sunset.

Driving directions

Accessed by a dirt road – check with the visitor center for road conditions
No high clearance or four-wheel drive necessary
To get to the trailhead, turn off Highway 12 to go to the Escalante Cemetery on the east side of Escalante. Turn right and pass the campground, then take the first left. This is a dead-end road but the last part couple hundred yards requires a high clearance vehicle.

Hiking routes

<u>The Escalante Gorge</u>
Easy hike with some basic route finding
0-13 miles, minimal elevation gain
“The Gorge” as its sometimes called is a loosely defined stretch of the Escalante River from Escalante through the Escalante Monocline or all the way to the Highway 12 bridge. This is an out and back day hike, a 13 mile through hike to the Escalante River Trailhead, or can be incorporated into any number of other hikes.
From the trailhead walk to the end of the road and follow a well-defined trail to the Escalante River, at this point a shallow stream that may be dry. There is an easy to find social trail down the canyon that gets more difficult to find as you go. Beware of the Boulder Mail Trail, a well-defined and cairned route that diverges and takes you up Pine Creek about 3/4 mile in.
1-1.5 miles in you can find a trail to the left that will take you to a nice, small petroglyph panel.
About 3 miles in there are some large, well-known pictographs in a big alcove on the north side of the river. 7 miles in you’ll come to a big side canyon that may have more water flowing out of it than the Escalante River here, this is Death Hollow.

Boulder Mail Trail
Difficult route for the elevation gain and the route finding
6 miles to the top of the monocline and back, 1200 feet elevation gain
15 miles as a through hike, 4000 feet elevation gain and 3000 feet descent
The Boulder Mail Trail was indeed the way that Boulder Town used to get its mail. The trail takes you across open desert and finds its way across Death Hollow and Sand Creek to another trailhead at the Boulder Airstrip. You may not be able to keep your feet dry crossing the drainages.
From the trailhead walk to the end of the road and follow a well-defined trail to the Escalante River, a shallow stream that may be dry at this point. There is an easy to find social trail down the canyon. 3/4 miles in you will go up Pine Creek at another well-defined trail with cairns. Once you're back on the outside of the Escalante Monocline again, the trail will climb up it. It's a well cairned route. Despite, this is easy country to get lost in so pay attention. After 8.5 miles the trail takes you into Death Hollow. There is good camping here. While in Death Hollow you will have to wade through a patch of poison ivy. Go up Death Hollow 3/4 mile to the exit on the other side. The Boulder Mail Trail intersects and temporarily conjoins with the Bowington Wagon Trail, another historic and cairned route, careful not to get diverged onto this. Between Death Hollow and Sand Creek is 2.8 miles. Sand Creek has good camping also. Go up canyon about 1/2 mile to find your exit and its another 2.5 miles to the other trailhead.
Death Hollow
Difficult route, wading and possible swimming, requires route finding
22 miles, 2500 feet elevation gain
This route takes you on the Boulder Mail Trail until you reach Death Hollow, down Death Hollow 6.5 miles to the confluence with the Escalate River and then back to the same trailhead via the Escalante Gorge. Due to its difficulty this is a long 2 day trip, recommended as a 3 day trip. Follow the directions above in the Boulder Mail Trail Section to get to Death Hollow. There is good camping in Death Hollow near where the trail comes in. While in Death Hollow you will have to wade through a patch of poison ivy. Walking down canyon you will spend a lot of time in the stream itself. Watch out for poison ivy, there is a lot of it. There are a couple nice swimming holes, one which is difficult to get around without getting you pack wet. This canyon gets little sun, recommended in summer. After 6.5 miles you will get to confluence with the Escalante River, which may be dry. There is good camping here. Walk upstream for 6.5 miles until you meet with the Boulder Main Trail and return to the trailhead.

Hazards
Flash floods – Check with the visitor center for the daily flash flood rating.
Death Hollow has stretches where you wouldn't be able to get to high ground during a flood. This is not recommended with any flash flood danger.
For hiking along the Escalante River, generally it would not be hard to find high ground if there was a flood, but you might not be able to cross the river for several hours or not until the next morning. This hike is not recommended with flash flood danger.
Boulder Mail Trail has much less risk, but you do cross a few drainages and its possible you won't be able to cross for a few hours to half a day during a flood.
Heat
Boulder Mail Trail is exposed to sun for most of the time. Death Hollow and Sand Creek offer Oases. Not recommended in summer unless you can hike overland in the morning. Death Hollow is best in summer as the canyon gets little sunlight and the water is always cold.

Along the Escalante River, cottonwoods and canyon walls provide shade for some but not all of your hike, and there may or may not be water.

Deer flies

Biting deer flies can be voracious in the late spring/early summer along the canyon floor. Wearing long sleeves and pants is the best protection.

Getting lost

Once in the canyons it may be difficult to find the trail but its difficult to become truly lost. You will always be able to tell which direction the water is flowing. If the Escalante River is dry this may take a little effort. Note that at the confluence of Death Hollow and the Escalante River, Death Hollow often provides more flow than the Escalante River. For the Boulder Mail Trail, there are cairns but it can still be easy to lose the trail. Bring a map and compass, as well as a GPS. If relying solely on GPS make sure you have a backup GPS or a battery bank and charge cord.

Poison ivy

Poison ivy us unvalidatable when accessing Death Hollow from the Boulder Mail Trail. Accessing Death Hollow from the Escalante River, you can go a long way without having to wade through poison ivy, but it is difficult to avoid.

Regulations and considerations

Human waste disposal

Along the Escalante River you will not be able to get 300 feet away from water, bring a wag bag. There is no bathroom at the trailhead. On the Boulder Mail Trail camping is frequently done in Death Hollow and Sand Creek. These areas experience concentrated use and even if you can find a place 300 feet from water, you may dig up something you don't want to see! In Death Hollow, there are very few places to dig a cat hole, bring a wag bag.

Dogs should be on leash. Pet waste disposal is the same as human waste.

Trail

No collecting of any object other than trash is allowed. Do not build or knock down cairns. It is suggested but not required to stay on the trail, just be considerate of the biological soil crust!

Water

The use of soap (even biodegradable soap) in or near the water is not allowed as this can reduce surface tension and dissolved oxygen in the water. Fishers must obtain a Utah fishing license. Death Hollow and Sand Creek do not run dry. The Escalante River between the trailhead and Death Hollow may be dry, but not below Death Hollow.

Camping and fires

Camping within 1/4 mile of the trailhead is prohibited. Permits for overnight camping are located at the trail register. Camping in previously disturbed areas such as the flood plain, open sandy areas and washes (if flooding is not a concern) is best. Fires are not allowed within the canyons. If intending to have fires on the bench lands, be aware of current fire restrictions.

Area restrictions

Within 300 feet of an archeological site one cannot sleep, eat, have fires or bury human waste.

Amenities

There are no bathrooms or trash service here. Escalante has a small grocery store (closed Sundays) and Boulder only has a nice convenience store. For medical issues Escalante has a clinic (Kazan Memorial Clinic, open M 9a-8p, Tu-F 9a-5p, closed Sat-Sun) and the nearest hospital is in Panquitch (Garfield Memorial Hospital, 200 N 400 E). For search and rescue and

non-emergency evacuations call the Garfield County Sheriff's Office: 435-676-2678. For emergencies call 911 or hit the SOS button on your inReach.

Archeology

The petroglyphs (images carved into stone), pictographs (paintings on stone) and structures you'll see at 100 Hands and along the Escalante River are associated with the Fremont People who left their traces in the Escalante Canyons from AD 100-1350. Ancestral Puebloans were also in this region in the latter half of this time period.

Geology

Because the Escalante River plunges straight into the Escalante Monocline instead of going around it like would seem to make sense, it is clear the river was here before the monocline. As you walk down the Escalante River, the walls will quickly rise around you. These walls are Navajo Sandstone. Most of the layers above the Navajo have been eroded away, as they are typically less durable, leaving behind a fairly cleaned curving surface marred by occasional canyons.

Escalante Monocline

From the trailhead you have an excellent perspective on the Escalante Monocline. As you look north you can see how the sandstone is angled sharply upward and then bends toward being level again. This was caused by the uneven uplift of the Colorado Plateau gently folding

Desert varnish coats some sections of canyon wall giving it a reddish brown to black color. The coating is mostly clay but the coloring comes from iron (reddish brown) and magnesium (black). It is not completely understood how the coating forms. It could be from rainwater creating a chemical bond, or from bacteria concentrating and cementing the oxides in place, or both!

The Navajo Sandstone (about 185 million years old) formed on top of the Kayenta when the sand dunes overtook the streams. Sand dunes piled on a shallow water table as the water table rose. Frequently the sand dunes would blow away down to the water table creating a break in the cross bedding. Imagine ridges of wandering dunes on a damp surface. Crossbedding here is a layering of sand at an angle that shows how the sand dunes were formed. Within the Navajo there are lenses of limestone formed by oases and ponds. Lenses are sections with limited width and thicker in the middle than the edges. The colors of the Navajo are formed primarily by iron in different forms.

Flora

Hiking up the Boulder Mail Trail you will see plenty of desert flora and fragile biological soil crust. Along the canyons you will see some desert plants as the trail cuts wide bends of the river and takes you through big sage fields. Mostly you'll be enjoying the wide cottonwood galleries and the rest of the lush riparian vegetation.

Biological soil crust

Biocrusts are complex communities composed of cyanobacteria, green algae, lichens, fungi and mosses that form a living cover. They can be identified as a dark, reddish or brown bumpy surface on otherwise barren ground. When first developing it can be nearly invisible. These crusts help stabilize soil, increase soil's water absorption and provide nutrients for other plants. They are extremely fragile and it can take decades, even centuries to recover from trampling. Stick to trails, washes, rock and other's footprints to avoid damaging this important part of the desert.

Salt desert scrub and pinyon-juniper woodland

Between the canyon walls and the riparian zone you'll find a high desert community of plants capable of withstanding the fierce baking sun of the summer as well as freezing temperatures in winter. This region gets about 11 inches of rain per year, and supports pinyon and juniper trees as well as big sage and sand sage, all woody plants. Prickly pear (a group of species that all look similar) and claret cup are the most common cacti found here. Narrow leaf yucca, another succulent, is related to agave. Common grasses include needle and thread grass, Indian rice grass, cheat grass and blue grama. In this high desert, flowers typically bloom from April to June, potentially with a second showing following monsoons. Some common flowers are globe mallow, penstemon, evening primrose and hoary aster.

Riparian area

Riparian areas are defined by a soil type and plant community that is strongly influence by the presence of water. Cottonwoods lord over this zone growing to several feet in diameter while only living on average for about 150 years. In spring they release seeds that float in the air, like cotton, for a magical effect. Other woody species your find here are river birch, Goodings willows, yellow willow and coyote willow. You'll also find phragmite (a grass that will grow taller than you), sedges, rushes and horsetail (a living fossil which has been around for more than 100 million years) as well as many more species.

Fauna

Mammals, fish, reptiles, birds and even amphibians all make their home in the desert and the streams that course through it. There are many species of birds in GSENM, some of the more notable ones include turkey vultures, ravens, pinyon jays and spotted towhees. You may also hear owls at night including the great horned owl and the western screech owl as well as a variety of frogs croaking on for hours. Several species of bats also come out at night. As of now white nose syndrome, a fungus which is very deadly to bats, has not made it to Utah. Other mammals that roam these parts include coyotes, foxes, bob cats, mountain lions, badgers, ringtails, mule deer, bighorn sheep, beavers and many smaller rodents. The Escalante River is home to 6 native fish species. In some of the colder streams there are trout such as the Colorado River cutthroat trout and the invasive brook trout, and there are fish that prefer warm water such as the flannelmouth sucker and roundtail chub. Some insects you may encounter are the creepy Jerusalem crickets, biting deer flies, and sand trap building antlions. Likely you will see collared lizards, with a black band around their neck and you may see whiptail lizards with tails up to 2.5 times as long as its body. Some poisonous animals to watch out for are rattlesnakes, scorpions, black widows, and velvet ants.

Rattlesnakes are not common and not aggressive but they will stand their ground. If they are rattling they're agitated and if they're also coiled up they're ready to strike. They can strike a distance 2/3 the length of their body. If someone is bit, request a medical helicopter evacuation immediately.

Scorpions hide under rocks during the day and come out mostly at night. Their sting is painful similar to a bee sting. No medical attention is necessary, but if it's the first time someone has been stung, watch out for anaphylaxis. Just like with bee stings some people have severe allergic reactions. If their throat starts to swell administer Benadryl and, if possible, find an EpiPen in case its necessary. Get to a clinic unless the situation resolves itself.

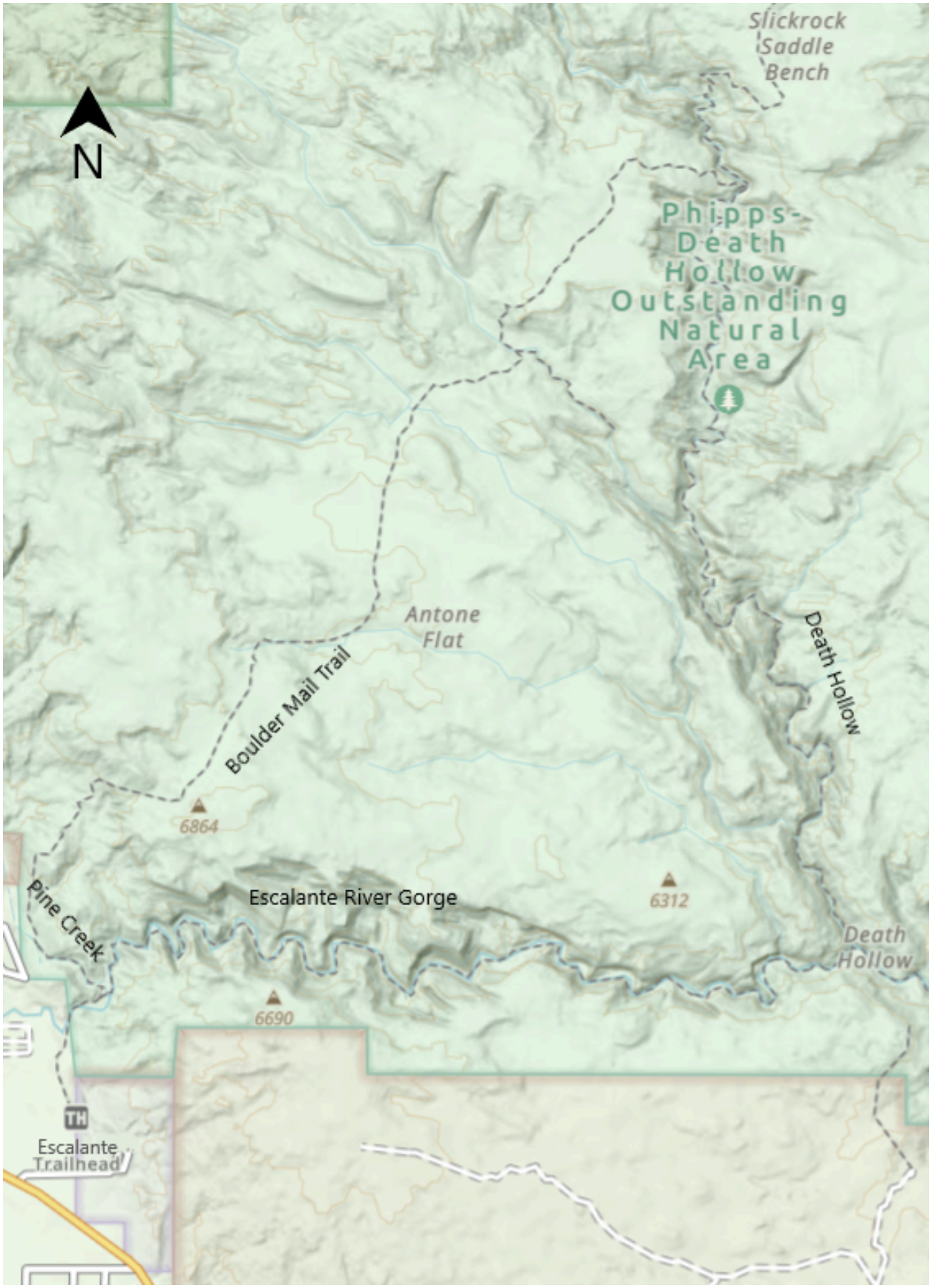
Female black widow spiders have a distinct red hourglass shape on the back of their black body. They are not aggressive and build very sticky webs in nook of canyon walls. Their bite may require medical attention, drive to the nearest medical facility.

Velvet ants look like fast moving ants with a brightly colored patch of hair, however these are not ants. They are wasps and should be treated as such because they do have a powerful sting.
Ravens look very similar to crows but ravens are significantly larger. Their distributions overlap but crows are very rare in GSENM. Ravens often hang out in pairs and they are scavengers so don't leave your snacks unattended!
Turkey vultures have a wingspan of up to 6 feet and do not flap their wings very much. They are expert at finding rising warm air currents and gliding in circles all day as they look for carrion.
Pinyon jays, related to blue jays, like to hang in large flocks in pinyon/juniper forests. This species of jay is endemic to the Colorado Plateau, it doesn't exist anywhere else!
Flickers are related to woodpeckers
Spotted towhees are a type of large sparrow that like brush in riparian areas. They scratch the ground looking for food. The scratching can sound like a fox or other animal moving through the brush.
Mountain lions, like all large predators, were hunted and poisoned almost to extinction. Today, the best place to see one is in the desert southwest; however, you will be very lucky if you do. Mountain lions range far to find prey, mostly mule deer, and kill efficiently with a bite to the back of the neck. If you do encounter a mountain lion, make sure you don't have it cornered. Make loud noises and raise your arms, fight back if necessary, and do not run away!
Beavers build dams in streams, or sometimes they don't! Sometimes beavers dig out lodges in the sides of banks and have decided not to build dams that continually get washed away in floods. In Calf Creek, which is relatively safe from flash floods, you will see classic beaver dams and lodges if you pay attention on the hike. Beavers do indeed eat wood, and they will cut down a whole cottonwood tree just by gnawing away at its stump.
Bighorn sheep make their home in rugged rocky areas it would seem were impossible to navigate. They are excellent climbers and use this to their advantage to avoid predators. The males have very large horns which grow longer every year. They use these to establish dominance over other males during mating season. They charge each other at over 20 mph, the loud crack can be heard for miles. One nearly wiped out, bighorn are making a comeback.

Nearby Attractions
Petrified Forest State Park has hiking trails with excellent views and lots of petrified wood in some areas. Free hiking access is at Bailey's Wash.
Wide Hollow Reservoir is a popular swimming spot for the locals. Free access is via a dirt road under the dam.
Bighorn is a nearby canyon that gives a slot canyon-like feel without the difficult maneuvering.

BLM Map: https://www.blm.gov/visit/escalante-river-gorge


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Boulder Mail Tra
27
Escalante Monocline
Private Property
5800
6302
Pine Creek Road
Private Property
6263
5800
Pine Creek
Escalante River Gorge
Escalante River
Private Property
90 North Street
TH
Escalante
Trailhead
Cemetary
Old
Dump
12
Shooting
Range
Escalante
Heritage
Center


N
Slickrock
Saddle
Bench
Phipps-
Death
Hollow
Outstanding
Natural
Area
Antone
Flat
Boulder Mail Trail
Death Hollow
6864
Pine Creek
Escalante River Gorge
6312
Death
Hollow
6690
TH
Escalante
Trailhead