Lower Calf Creek Falls

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Overview

Due to its easy access from Highway 12, relatively easy hiking and spectacular waterfall, this is one of GSENM's most popular attractions. During times of high use be prepared to arrive early to secure parking. Parking is $5, but free for those with the America the Beautiful Pass. The hike is an out and back, 3 miles one way, along a wide well-defined trail. There are some big steps but this trail is suitable for most hikers. The trail features an interpretive trail guide with a wide breadth of information. Lower Calf Creek Falls is stunning itself and creates a microclimate that supports an incredible diversity of plants including an impressive hanging garden.

Driving directions

Accessible by paved roads

The Calf Creek Lower Falls Trailhead is located at the Calf Creek Campground, just off Highway 12 between Escalante and Boulder.

From Escalante drive 16 miles east on Highway 12, pass the Escalante River and turn left shortly after the highway starts to climb above the canyon floor.

From Boulder drive 12 miles west on Highway 12, pass the hogback and the trailhead will be on the right. Park in the parking lot by the restrooms.

Hiking route

Easy hike on an obvious trail

6 miles round trip, minimal elevation gain

The hike starts at a trailhead sign just a few hundred feet past the parking lot. Walk up the road past several campsites and the trail will start on your right just before the stream crossing. The trail is easy to find, with the main path being noticeably wider than any of the social trails. The trail continues 3 miles to the waterfall at the end. Return the same way.

Hazards

Flash floods – Check with the visitor center for the daily flash flood rating.

Most of the trail is safe from flash flooding. There are some wash crossings but they would be unlikely to strand hikers for long. Do not go near the falls if the water has debris falling with it.

Heat

This can be a relatively nice hike in the hot part of the season with a small stream near the trail and the waterfall creates a very cool microclimate in the final amphitheater. However much of the trail is away from water and exposed to the sun, so still be prepared!

Regulations and considerations

Human waste disposal

Catholes are not allowed along the trail as there are too few spots to get 300 feet from open water. Bring a wag bag or use the facilities at the trailhead.

Dogs must be on a leash, and make sure to pick up after them! This is a popular trail and the waterfall area can be crowded.

Trail

There are no trash facilities here so please pack it out of the campground. No collecting of any object other than trash is allowed. Do not build cairns. Bikes are not allowed off road in GSENM. It is suggested but not required to stay on the trail, just be considerate of the biological soil crust! Do not walk on or disturb the fragile hanging gardens.

Water

Calf Creek sometimes has high levels of e. coli, swimming is not recommended during peak season but allowed unless otherwise noted. 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.

Camping and fires are only allowed in designated sites within the campground. Be aware of current fire restrictions.

Area restrictions

No rappelling is allowed in Calf Creek Canyon.

Amenities

Bathrooms and drinking water are located at the trailhead. There is no 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.

Geology

For the duration of your hike you are walking along the Kayenta Formation, which tends to form ledges that step back as opposed to cliffs. The towering clean walls above you are of the Navajo Sandstone. As water flowed over the sandstone it eroded it away, eventually exposing the Kayenta. The Kayenta, having weaker sections within it, undercut the Navajo and caused a waterfall. Underneath the waterfall, as water seeps out of the sandstone it causes it to be weaker and erode faster than sandstone that is dry, creating an alcove or undercut.

Desert varnish

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 Kayenta Formation (about 190 million years old) was laid down when braided streams and temporary lakes intermixed with sand dunes, creating a mix of sandstone, siltstone, mudstone, limestone and conglomerate.
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

Calf Creek supports an incredible diversity of species of plants. The ribbon of lush greenery along the creek is a riparian community, populated by plants that require a reliable source of water. Much of trail will be in the more open desert, with its plant communities. In nooks of the canyon will be plants that cannot withstand open desert conditions but are still drought resistant. And as you approach the waterfall you will find relic communities and hanging gardens

Riparian zone

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.

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.

Hanging gardens

Underneath the waterfall you will notice a community of plants growing out of the shear sides of the canyon, clinging to the sandstone. This is referred to as a hanging garden! As Calf Creek flows over the Navajo Sandstone above the falls it infiltrates into the sandstone because sandstone has gaps between the sand grains that allow water to pass, and flows (very slowly) down and then laterally through the rock until it can find a way out. You can see that it has found a way out under the falls and the maiden hair fern, monkey flower, alcove columbine, and numerous mosses and liverworts have capitalized on this reliable source of water. The hanging garden environment is very fragile. It can be damaged easily and takes a long time to recover.

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.

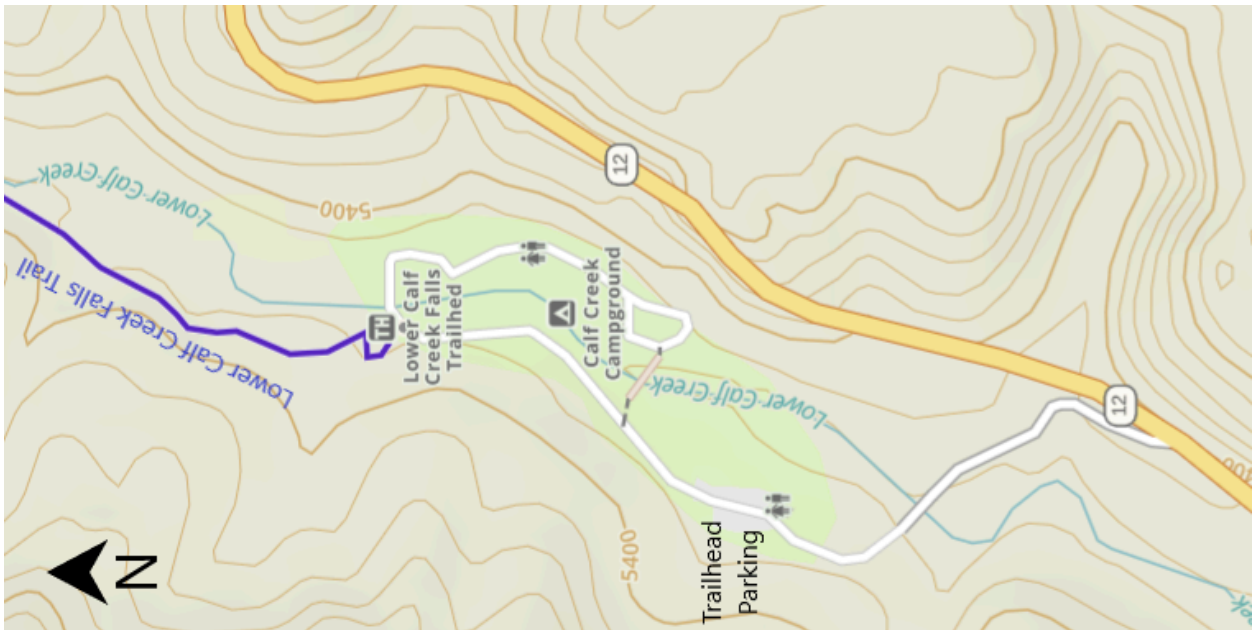
Velvet ants look like fast moving ants with a brightly colored patch of hair, however these are not ants. They are wasps and should be treated as such because they do have a powerful sting.

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
Highway 12 Hogback, a few miles east, is a great place to watch the sunset.
Escalante River Trailhead, a couple miles west, has numerous options for long and short hikes.

BLM Map: https://www.blm.gov/visit/lower-calf-creek-falls-trail




Lower Calf
Creek Falls
N
Dry
Hollow
12
12
wington
Bench
Calf
Creek
Campground
TH
Haymak
Bench