

TRIP 86-90

COMB RIDGE CANYONS

LOCATION	Butler Wash, between Blanding and Bluff
DISTANCE	1 to 5 mi (1.6 to 8 km) each
ELEVATION	gain 115 to 690 ft (35 to 210 m) each
KEY ELEVATIONS	trailheads from 4461 to 4874 ft (1360 to 1486 m) ridgcrest above Double Stack Ruin 5150 ft (1570 m)
HIKING TIME	30 minutes to 4 hours each
DIFFICULTY	easy to moderately challenging
MAPS	Trails Illustrated <i>Grand Gulch Plateau</i> USGS <i>Bluff Northwest, Bluff Southwest</i>

OPINION

Comb Ridge is a 90-mi (145-km) long, 650-ft (198-m) high, Navajo sandstone monocline running north-south. It has a split personality: a precipitous west face, and gentle eastern slopes.

Paralleling the Comb's east edge is Butler Wash—an ephemeral tributary of the San Juan River. The *teeth* of the Comb, if you will, are the canyons draining from the ridgcrest to the wash.

Lodged in the teeth like poppy seeds are numerous, ancient ruins and rock-art panels, because Ancestral Puebloans lived here until about 700 years ago.



Comb Ridge, from Procession Panel

They farmed Butler Wash. They dwelt within the Comb. And when they departed, they left behind archaeological treasures in what is now, essentially, an outdoor museum.

The ancient ones, skilled at water conservation, were dry-land farmers who grew corn, beans and squash in the deep, alluvial soil of Butler Wash. They were talented masons who built cliff houses sheltered by the Comb's alcoves. They were artists and shamans who painted and pecked visionary images in the Comb's walls.

Drought, overpopulation, diminishing resources, erosion, armed conflict—perhaps all these afflictions—eventually despoiled Comb Ridge and Butler Wash as a liveable enclave. Many inhabitants succumbed. The rest migrated elsewhere.

Today, hikers migrate here. Seeking the remnants of Ancestral Puebloan civilization, they find the Comb Ridge canyons a compelling destination. The actual hiking is inferior compared to almost anyplace else in southern Utah. But the cultural rewards compensate.

You'll be negotiating deep arroyos and pushing through riparian shrubbery. The distances are short, but that also means you'll never accelerate to cruising speed. The hiking improves on slickrock, for example en route to Procession Panel (Trip 89) and along the crest of Comb Ridge above Double Stack Ruin (Trip 90).

Five of the six hikes described here have separate trip numbers. The sixth hike, Wolfman Panel, is only a 30-minute round trip, but it deserves your attention. Include it in your Comb Ridge tour.

Total on-foot distance for all the Comb Ridge canyon hikes described here (including Wolfman Panel) is 17 mi (27 km). Total elevation gain: 2298 ft (700 m). Ideally, allow two days and camp in Butler Wash. If your soul is going to mingle with primordial ghosts, it'll happen at night, beneath the stars, when Comb Ridge is bathed in moonlight.



Near the mouth of Butler Wash

FACT

BEFORE YOUR TRIP

It's wise to restock your provisions, fill your vehicle's gas tank, and top-up all your water containers before driving through Butler Wash. You'll be off pavement, in the backcountry, for 20.5 mi (33 km) between Hwys 95 and 163. The nearest towns are Blanding and Bluff.

The Butler Wash roads should, when dry, be passable in a 2WD car. You'll cross numerous washes, however, so high clearance is preferable. And you'll encounter sand, so 4WD is ideal. The specific road conditions you encounter will depend on the vagaries of weather and maintenance.

En route to the trailheads are numerous possible campsites: primitive, random, no fee. Follow Leave No Trace principles.

BY VEHICLE**NORTH TO SOUTH**

From the turnoff to Natural Bridges National Monument, drive Hwy 95 east. Pass the junction with Hwy 261 (right / south). Continue east across Cedar Mesa. From Comb Wash, Hwy 95 ascends steeply south. Near the crest of Comb Ridge, at milepost 108, reset your trip odometer to 0. The highway descends left (north). At 2.6 mi (4.2 km) pass the signed turnoff (left / west) to Butler Wash Ruins. At 3.7 mi (5.9 km) turn right (south) onto unpaved Road 262. The elevation here is 5335 ft (1626 m).

From the junction of Hwys 191 and 95, just south of Blanding, reset your trip odometer to 0 and drive Hwy 95 west. At 9.5 mi (15.3 km) turn left (south) onto unpaved Road 262. The elevation here is 5335 ft (1626 m).

0 mi (0 km)

Departing Hwy 95, initially heading southeast on unpaved Road 262. Pass a BLM kiosk at 0.2 mi (0.3 km), cross the first of many washes, and proceed south above the east side of Butler Wash.

3.6 mi (5.8 km)

Look right (west) to see Hwy 95 slicing through Comb Ridge.

7.5 mi (12 km)

Cross a second, larger wash. Fish Mouth Cave is visible ahead.

8.2 mi (13.2 km)

Pass through a fence. Immediately south of it are two forks (left and right). Just beyond, are two right (west) forks that join and lead a short distance to **Fish Mouth Cave trailhead**, at 4874 ft (1486 m).

10.8 mi (17.4 km)

Reach a junction. Road 230 forks left (southeast). Proceed right (west) on Road 262 and continue south.

12.4 mi (20.1 km)

Bear right where Road 230 rejoins from the left. Proceed through a fence.

13.2 mi (21.3 km)

The right (west) fork leads a short distance to **Cold Springs Cave trailhead**, at 4736 ft (1444 m). Directly east is a brown-orange, white-topped promontory.

13.5 mi (21.8 km)

The right (west) fork leads 110 yd/100 m to **Monarch Cave trailhead**, beside cottonwoods, at 4725 ft (1440 m).

14.1 mi (22.7 km)

The right (west) fork leads 30 yd/m to **Procession Panel trailhead**, at 4560 ft (1390 m).

16.6 mi (26.8 km)

Right (west) are three forks. Of those, the two forks to the right (northwest) loop through the **Double Stack Ruin trailhead**, 30 yd/m distant, at 4461 ft (1360 m).

18.5 mi (29.8 km)

Bear right on the main road.

19.5 mi (31.4 km)

Pass a BLM sign and cross a cattleguard. Immediately past the fence is a right fork leading northwest to **Wolfman Panel trailhead**. In 137 yd (125 m) reach the first parking area at 4477 ft (1365 m). The spur, rougher now, continues 75 yd/m farther, descending to a broad, slickrock bench.

20.5 mi (33 km)

Intersect **Hwy 163**. The elevation here is 4507 ft (1374 m). (Close and latch the gate behind you.) Right (west) leads to the junction with Hwy 261 and the town of Mexican Hat. Left (east) passes the junction with Hwy 191 in 0.8 mi (1.3 km) and, shortly beyond, enters Bluff.

SOUTH TO NORTH

From Bluff, drive Hwy 191 west. Reset your trip odometer to 0 at the junction with Hwy 163. Hwy 191 turns left (south) here. Proceed straight (west) on Hwy 163. At 0.8 mi (1.3 km), turn right (north) onto unpaved Road 262. The elevation here is 4507 ft (1374 m).

0 mi (0 km)

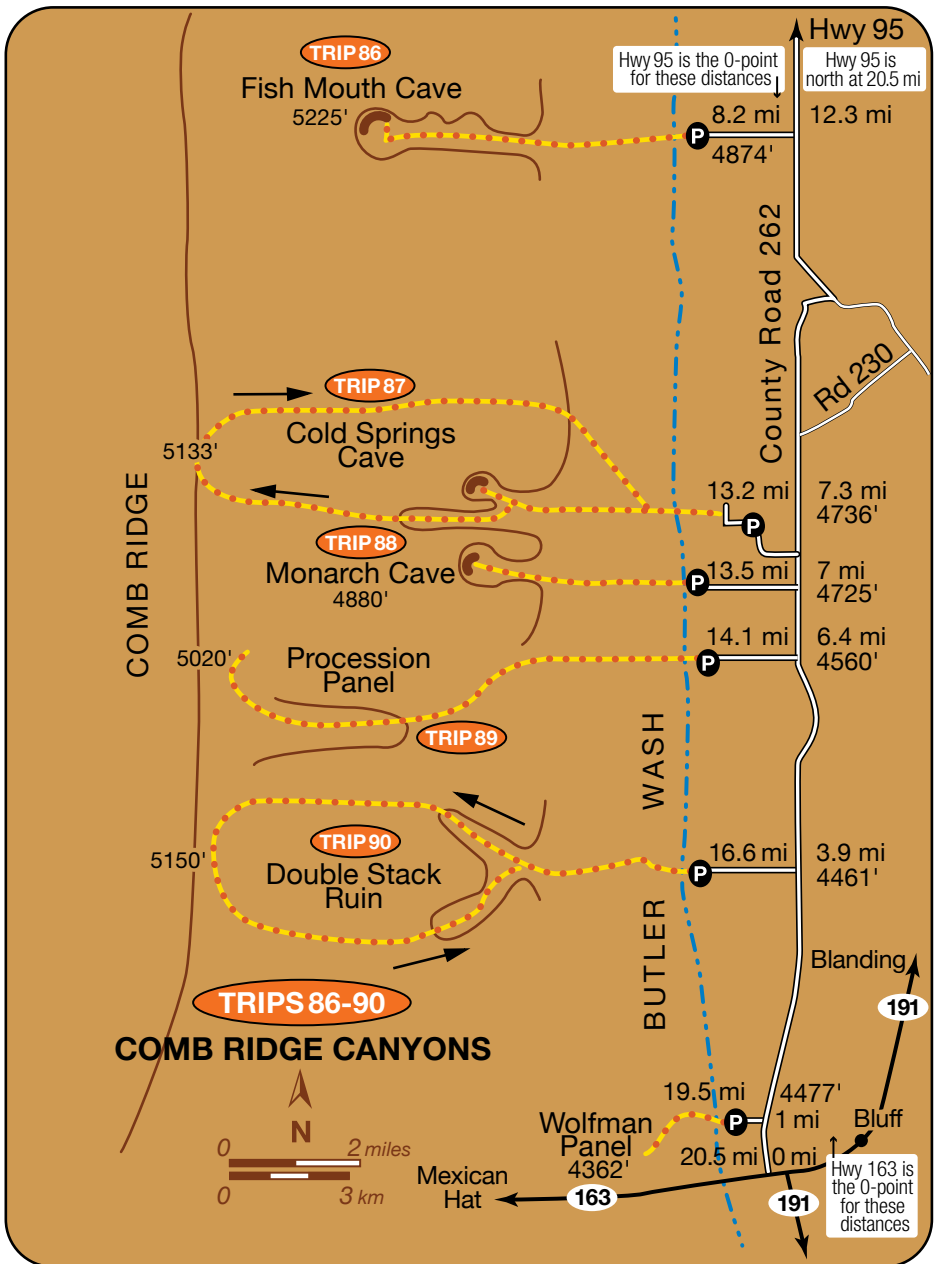
Departing Hwy 163, heading north on unpaved Road 262. (Close and latch the gate behind you.)

1 mi (1.6 km)

Immediately before a fence and cattleguard is a left fork leading northwest to **Wolfman Panel trailhead**. In 137 yd (125 m) reach the first parking area at 4477 ft (1365 m). The spur, rougher now, continues 75 yd/m farther, descending to a broad, slickrock bench.



Road 262 along Butler Wash



3.9 mi (6.3 km)

Left (west) are three forks. Of those, the two forks to the right (northwest) loop through the **Double Stack Ruin trailhead**, 30 yd/m distant, at 4461 ft (1360 m).

6.4 mi (10.3 km)

The left (west) fork leads 30 yd/m to **Procession Panel trailhead**, at 4560 ft (1390 m).

7 mi (11.3 km)

The left (west) fork leads 110 yd/100 m to **Monarch Cave** trailhead, beside cottonwoods, at 4725 ft (1440 m).

7.3 mi (11.8 km)

The left (west) fork leads a short distance to **Cold Springs Cave trailhead**, at 4736 ft (1444 m). Directly east is a brown-orange, white-topped promontory.

8.1 mi (13 km)

Proceed through a fence. Bear left on Road 262 where Road 230 forks right.

9.7 mi (15.6 km)

Reach a junction. Road 230 rejoins from the right. Proceed left on Road 262 and continue north.

12.3 mi (19.8 km)

Shortly before a fence are two left (west) forks that join and lead a short distance to **Fish Mouth Cave trailhead**, at 4874 ft (1486 m). Between the Fish Mouth forks and the fence, ignore the next pair of forks (left and right).

20.5 mi (33 km)

Intersect **Hwy 95**. The elevation here is 5335 ft (1626 m). Left ascends over Comb Ridge and continues west across Cedar Mesa. Right (east) intersects Hwy 191, just south of Blanding, in 9.5 mi (15.3 km).



Monarch Cave



Fish Mouth Cave

ON FOOT

trip 86 Fish Mouth Cave
round trip 2 mi (3.2 km)

hiking time 1½ hours
elevation gain 351 ft (107 m)

From the parking area, Fish Mouth Cave is visible left (west). Follow the sandy road in that direction, beside the fence. Go left, past the “no vehicles” sign, but 10 yd/m farther abandon the road by turning right (west-northwest) onto a trail into the wash.

Soon opt for the trail on the right bank, along the broken rock. Pass a crumbling, **minor ruin** (right). Two minutes farther, cross bedrock. Follow the trail left (west) back into the wash and among cottonwoods.

Stay on the most prominent, boot-beaten trail—sometimes in the wash, other times along one of the banks. Keep hiking generally west.

One minute after the trail ascends between **slickrock arms** (about 20 minutes from the trailhead), ascend right (north) to a **minor ruin** under a deep overhang.

After resuming in the wash for a couple minutes, pass another minor ruin beneath an overhang. Two minutes farther, ascend a **slickrock crescent**. The small cave above (right) contains a minor ruin.

Your destination is visible at the head of the canyon. The final ascent is steep—first on slickrock, then on a sandy trail among boulders and talus. Favor the right (north) side of the draw.

Enter **Fish Mouth Cave** at 1 mi (1.6 km), 5225 ft (1593 m). The impressive grotto harbors little evidence of the ancient ones. Look for handprints (deep in, far right), tiny ruins, metates, corn cobs. What’s spectacular here is the stupidity and irreverence of recent visitors who’ve desecrated the cave with graffiti.

*Procession Panel*

trip 87 Cold Springs Cave
circuit 3 mi (4.8 km)

hiking time 2 hours
elevation gain 397 ft (121 m)

Your immediate destination is the low, prominent cave visible west. After probing the basin harboring the cave, you'll complete a clockwise circuit: hiking up the canyon immediately left (south) of the basin, surmounting the crest of Comb Ridge, then descending the canyon immediately right (north) of the basin.

The trailhead-access here is rough, perhaps requiring you to park shy of where the **spur road** now ends at a washout. After crossing the washout on foot, proceed west on what used to be the remainder of the spur. In another minute, the spur curves right (north). Just before the spur ends, go left onto trail.

The trail drops into a **double-channeled arroyo**, tunnels through tight vegetation, then surmounts the far bank. Continue directly west toward the dirt trail visible above the nearest slickrock outcrop. Beyond, the path continues in a wash.

About 15 minutes from the trailhead, reach a **small confluence** at 4790 ft (1460 m). Right (northwest) quickly enters Cold Springs basin. Left (west) is a narrow, sandstone defile through which you'll begin a clockwise circuit after returning from the cave.

For now, go right (northwest). Immediately ahead is a **minor pouroff**. Bypass it via the left (west) wall. Enter a slickrock basin and see **Cold Springs Cave** ahead. A spring drips in the recesses of the cave. Look for artistic and architectural evidence of the ancient ones along the upper, right wall of the basin.

Back at the **small confluence**, turn right (west). Hike through the **defile**. About six minutes along, a cairn guides you right, onto level slickrock. Where it peters in about four minutes, follow a faint path just left of the drainage, then resume on slickrock.

Right (northeast) are sheer, rose-and-buff walls. Aim for the gap visible north-northwest. About 20 minutes from the small confluence, top out near 5133 ft (1565 m) on the **crest of Comb Ridge**.

Descend right (east-southeast) into the **next canyon**. Bypass boulders via the left side of the drainage. A trail is soon evident. About one hour after leaving the small confluence, approach the **canyon mouth**. Just east of (beyond) a stand of cottonwoods, follow the trail right (southeast).

Hike east-southeast about 220 yd (200 m) to drop into the **double-channeled arroyo**. You're now on familiar ground. Upon emerging from the arroyo, go right on the spur road. The brown-orange, white-topped promontory directly east of the trailhead is a helpful landmark.

trip 88 Monarch Cave
round trip 2 mi (3.2 km)

hiking time 1 hour
elevation gain 157 ft (48 m)

From the south edge of the parking lot, the trail descends southwest into an **arroyo**. Hike west, beneath cottonwoods, across the broad wash. In a couple minutes, the trail surmounts the far bank and rises onto slickrock.

The trail is on the left (west) side of the **slickrock**, then drops left (south) into a wash. Proceed up-canyon: right (northwest).

At 20 minutes, 4829 ft (1472 m), ascend onto a slickrock bench. **Monarch Cave**, and the ruin it shelters, are visible west-southwest, about 165 yd (150 m) ahead. The structure is perched on a ledge at 4882 ft (1488 m). Below is a pool shrouded by vegetation. Above is a grand pouroff.

trip 89 Procession Panel
round trip 4 mi (6.4 km)

hiking time 3 hours
elevation gain 590 ft (180 m)

From the parking loop, the trail departs southwest. It quickly descends into a tamarisk-filled **arroyo**. Ascend the far bank, follow the briefly-level trail left (south-southwest), then drop into a **second arroyo**. At the bottom, go right for 30 seconds before angling left: up and out.

Follow the trail northwest across **sage flats** for about a minute, then drop into a **third arroyo**. This one has a small, exposed, slickrock reef in it. Go directly across this arroyo, ascend out, then ascend the sandy trail southwest.

Reach **slickrock** about 10 minutes from the trailhead. The trail remains evident—either boot-beaten into sand among scrub, or cairned across slickrock. It continues a gentle, westward ascent.

After hiking about 30 minutes, three distinct drainages are visible ahead. Proceed directly west, toward the middle one. Cairns should lead in that direction.

Ascend a **long, slickrock ramp**. To your right (north) the slope falls sharply to an impressive, sandstone bowl. At the top of the bowl is a great pouroff.

Continue the ramping ascent until, about 50 minutes from the trailhead, a steep-but-safe descending friction-walk is possible right (northwest). Bottom-out well above the lip of the great pouroff. You're now in the **middle drainage** you observed earlier.

Proceed generally west, following scraps of boot-beaten route through the **sandy wash**. Soon access an ascending, **slickrock ramp** on the right (north) side of the canyon. It leads north-northwest, past the pink and black, desert-varnished wall, to the farthest, west-facing prow.

That's where you'll find **Procession Panel**: on the right, at 2 mi (3.2 km), 5020 ft (1530 m), slightly more than an hour from the trailhead. It comprises 179 petroglyph figures. The site also affords a grand view. And if you ascend slightly higher, you'll attain a climactic panorama from the crest of **Comb Ridge**.



Wolfman Panel, Butler Wash

When you leave, initially vary your descent by staying left, high, along the base of the cliff. Close observation of the walls will reveal many more petroglyphs. Soon drop right and return the way you came.

trip 90 Double Stack Ruin
circuit 5 mi (8 km)

hiking time 4 hours
elevation gain 690 ft (210 m)

The trail immediately drops northwest into an **arroyo**, then ascends the far bank. Proceed northwest through sage about one minute, then cross another deep **arroyo**. About a minute farther, cross a **shallow wash**, then ascend a sandy path. Reach **slickrock** about five minutes from the trailhead.

Cairns lead north-northwest. Pass a series of small, descending depressions (tinajas). One minute farther, at the edge of slickrock, follow a sandy path into the **wash**. Go left (west-northwest) up the vegetated drainage, sometimes on a bench among sage.

Pass a crude, teepee-shaped structure. One minute beyond it, about 12 minutes from the trailhead, ignore a right (north) drainage. (The path in that direction quickly ends at a pouroff.) Bear left (west). Proceed up the **main wash**. The easiest path is on the right (north) bank.

About 18 minutes from the trailhead, arrive at a **confluence**. The canyon forks here, at 4485 ft (1367 m). Following the directions below, **begin a counterclockwise loop** that returns to this point.

Go right, into the north fork. A big alcove is visible ahead. Pass the remains of a second, crude, teepee-shaped structure. From the wash, a well-preserved ruin is now visible on a high ledge, on the canyon's right wall. This is the upper portion of **Double Stack Ruin**.

About 15 yd/m farther are the remains of the accessible, lower portion of Double Stack. Note the kiva (a huge log still spans it), a spiral pictograph,

numerous handprints (white, red), and a metate (stone with a concave surface) used to grind corn into flour).

Continue west, beyond Double Stack, up the north fork. Pass a shallow alcove (left). Walk into a **long, deep alcove** (right). It contains no obvious rock art or ruins. Near the far end of the alcove is a **pouroff**. So, about two-thirds of the way through the alcove, go left, out of the alcove, then proceed up-canyon on the left side of the wash to skirt the pouroff.

Above the pouroff, the wash is briefly rougher, bouldery, choked with vegetation. Work through it, probably by ascending the right slope then dropping back in. Where grey bedrock spans the floor, pick up a dirt path on the left (south). Your immediate goal—the ridgecrest—is visible ahead.

Having overcome the obstacles—about a 15-minute task—arrive at a **slickrock ramp** rising northwest. Though steep, it grants a fun, 15 minute, final ascent. Reach the **crest of Comb Ridge** at 5150 ft (1570 m). Total hiking time: one hour and 40 minutes. Looking east-southeast, over the canyon you just ascended, you'll see cottonwoods in Butler Wash. A panoramic view extends to the western horizon. Monument Valley is visible southwest.

Turn left and hike south along the crest. In a couple minutes, angle left (southeast). Descend through broken rock, then on slickrock, then among trees and boulders in the drainage. You're aiming for the canyon parallel to (immediately south of) the one you ascended to the crest.

Bypass a **small pouroff** by traversing slickrock about 10 ft (3 m) above its right side. About 30 minutes below the crest, bypass a **big pouroff** by descending the trail on its right side.

Reach yet another **big pouroff**. Just above its lip, cross to the left side of the drainage. Then descend ledges along the canyon wall. Soon reach the wash bottom. Proceed down-canyon.

Nearly an hour below the crest, reach the **confluence near Double Stack Ruin**. You're now on familiar ground. Bear right and retrace your steps to reach the trailhead in about 18 minutes.

Wolfman Panel hiking time 30 minutes
round trip 1 mi (0.6 km)
elevation gain 115 ft (35 m)

From the slickrock bench, follow the tiny drainage west. Soon reach the **canyon rim** at 4435 ft (1352 m). Butler Wash is visible below. Cairns indicate the descent route. Go left (south-southwest) on the ledge. Immediately past the small alcove, look left (east), above you. The **Wolfman Panel** is on the west-facing wall, at 4362 ft (1330 m), 15 minutes from the upper parking area. On the return, after ascending to the slickrock bench, go left (northeast) a couple minutes along the canyon rim. Look left (north) to see a couple ruins on the far canyon wall.



Alcove near Double Stack Ruin