



Burro Wash, Cottonwood Wash, and Sheets Gulch



These are classic examples of slot canyons which so typify the canyon country of southern Utah: deep, narrow, secret places within the Waterpocket Fold. The routes are largely unmarked. A few rock cairns may mark key points; carrying a topographic map is recommended. It is extremely hot in summer and water sources are unreliable; carry adequate water. Use caution in narrow canyons during flash flood season (typically July–September).

All three canyons are difficult hikes and only experienced canyon country hikers should attempt these routes. All contain obstacles in the form of dry falls and chock stones (large boulders wedged in narrow slots) which must be climbed over. The canyons are extremely narrow in places; most people will have to work their way through sideways. Often there are pools of water that may require deep wading or short swims.

Beginning at the Notom-Bullfrog Road, Burro Wash (eight-mile [12.88 km] round-trip) and Cottonwood Wash (six-mile [9.66 km] round-trip) can be done as long day hikes. Sheets Gulch can be done as a long day hike or an overnight, depending on where you turn around. One-way mileage to Tantalus Flat is nine miles (14.49 km). Backcountry permits are required for all overnight trips and can be obtained at the visitor center.

Location of Trailheads

All three canyons are located within a few miles (km) of each other and can be accessed from the Notom-Bullfrog Road, which is paved south of Hwy 24 until just past Cottonwood Wash. The unpaved portion is usually passable to passenger cars. Each route begins where the wash crosses the road; all crossings are marked with signs. There are no developed trailhead parking areas except for Burro Wash. For Cottonwood Wash and Sheets Gulch, park along the edge of the road,

away from the bottom of the wash. Do not drive up any washbed. The first few miles (km) cross Bureau of Land Management (BLM) lands along sandy wash bottoms surrounded by low hills.

The upper end of Sheets Gulch can be accessed via the South Draw Road at Tantalus Flat. The South Draw Road begins off of the Pleasant Creek Road at the end of the park's Scenic Drive and requires a high clearance four-wheel drive vehicle.

Mileages

- Burro Wash, round-trip from the Notom-Bullfrog Road and back.....8 miles (12.88 km)
- Cottonwood Wash, round-trip from the Notom-Bullfrog Road and back.....6 miles (9.66 km)
- Sheets Gulch to Tantalus Flat, one-way.....9 miles (14.49 km)

Burro Wash Hiking Description

Burro Wash is located 7.8 miles (12.55 km) south of Hwy 24 on the Notom-Bullfrog Road. As you proceed up the wash (west), always take the left branch at wash junctions. Approximately two miles (3.22 km) in from the Notom-Bullfrog Road the canyon begins to narrow as it cuts into the Navajo Sandstone. Soon you will encounter a narrow, sandy wash on the right. Proceed up this wash to a large chock stone, which may be preceded by a

pool of water. You can bypass this obstacle by backtracking 20 yards (18.28 m) to a slickrock slide on the south side of the canyon. A route leads from the right side of the slide around the ridge over the chock stone and down into the wash on the other side. As you proceed up canyon you will encounter several more chock stones that require some climbing to negotiate and two sets of narrows that are just wide enough to squeeze through. About three

miles (4.83 m) in from the trailhead is a large chamber with an impassable pour off. You can bypass this obstacle by backtracking a couple hundred yards (18.28 m) through the last section of narrows and then friction climbing up the steeply sloping canyon wall on the right (north). A few rock cairns may mark the route. At the top, descend back down into the wash above the pour off. The route continues another mile (1.61 km), traversing several short sections of narrows and eventually ends at a sculptured, fluted pour off which will

be impassable to most. To return to the trailhead, simply retrace the route back down the canyon. Note: Continuing up canyon requires technical rock climbing equipment and expertise and route finding skills. For those with such capabilities, the canyon continues several more miles (km) and will eventually come out on the South Draw Road. (See note above under Location of Trailheads.)

Cottonwood Wash Hiking Description

Cottonwood Wash is located 9.1 miles (14.65 km) south of Hwy 24 on the Notom-Bullfrog Road. About one mile (1.61 km) up the wash (west) from the trailhead, a side canyon enters from the right (north) and could be mistaken for the main drainage; stay left. A few hundred yards (m) further, the main canyon narrows and a ¼ mile (0.40 km) long stretch begins that is choked with large boulders and requires scrambling to negotiate. After another ½ mile (0.53 km), another side drainage enters from the left (south); stay right. Shortly beyond this point the canyon

abruptly narrows to a thin slot. A deep pool of water is often found here, and deep wading or swimming may be required to continue up canyon. The canyon alternates between tight narrows and more open areas with a number of chock stones that must be negotiated and possibly more pools of water for the next mile (1.61 km). An impassable 35-foot (10.67 m) pour off blocks the canyon at the end of this stretch of narrows (about three miles [4.83 km] in from the road) and marks the end of the route. To return to the trailhead, simply retrace the route back down the canyon.

Sheets Gulch Hiking Description

Sheets Gulch is located 12.7 miles (20.44 km) south of Hwy 24 on the Notom-Bullfrog Road. One mile (1.61 km) up the wash (west) you will encounter a major side drainage on the right (north); stay left. A short distance further up canyon another drainage enters; stay right at this junction. One mile (1.61 km) further the wash bottom narrows and you may find a few pools of water associated with several small dry falls. The most difficult obstacle along the route, another dry fall and pool, is encountered 3.5 miles (5.63 km) from the road. A good climber will be able to negotiate this alone, but most people will need assistance from another person. The last obstacle is 4.5 miles (7.24 km) from the trailhead. Here you will encounter a high pour off in a cave-like chamber; bypass this by backtracking about 100 yards (91.4 m) and climbing out of the wash on the south side of the canyon. Beyond this point, numerous stands of

Douglas fir begin to appear on cool, shaded, north slopes, and the canyon walls begin to change from the white Navajo to the red Wingate. There is an intermittent seep with cottonwood trees six miles (9.66 km) in from the trailhead. Soon the canyon opens up and becomes much wider. This is a good place to turn around if you are on a day hike. To return to the trailhead, simply retrace the route back down the canyon.

If you left a second vehicle at Tantalus Flat, or if you are on an overnight trip (backcountry permit required), it is possible to continue up canyon for several more miles (km). Eventually, an old jeep trail will lead you out of Sheets Gulch to Tantalus Flat. If you left a vehicle at Tantalus Flat, your hike will end here. If your vehicle is on the Notom-Bullfrog Road, return to the trailhead by retracing the same route back down the canyon.

Additional Information

Maps:
USGS 7.5 Minute Series:
Notom, Golden Throne, Bear Canyon, and
Sandy Creek Benches
Available at the visitor center

Best Seasons:
Spring and fall

For more information and backcountry
permits, contact

Capitol Reef National Park Visitor Center at
435-425-4111