Overview

The Paria Canyon – Vermilion Cliffs Wilderness Area has offered adventure to generations of backpackers. It offers challenging hiking, pleasing campsites, and remarkable scenery from Highway 89 in Utah to Lee's Ferry in northern Arizona where the Paria flows into the Colorado River. The river is enclosed in towering sandstone walls for much of that distance providing breathtaking beauty. There are many terraces, which provide ideal campsites. Numerous springs provide potable water allowing trips from several days to a week. The best time of year to do the trip is spring or fall.

The Buckskin Gulch is an amazing tributary of the Paria River. Known as a "slot" canyon the Buckskin averages 15 feet wide and perhaps 400 feet deep for a distance of almost 15 miles. In some places you can spread your arms and touch both walls! The gulch offers extremely exotic scenery. There are many spectacular photographic opportunities if you are skilled enough to work in deep shadows! Sun penetrates only around mid-day.

This side canyon provides exciting challenges for the more advanced backpacker. There are many obstructions to overcome such as rock jams, rock falls, quicksand, and deep pools of icy cold water. In the event of a thunderstorm and subsequent flash flood there are few areas of escape. One can see tree trunks jammed between the canyon walls fifty or more feet above the canyon floor!

Trail Guide

The Paria Canyon – Vermilion Cliffs Wilderness Area encompasses one of the finest canyons in the American Southwest and what is possibly the most spectacular slot canyon in the world, the Buckskin Gulch. It also includes the scenic North Coyote Buttes (home of the Wave) and South Coyote Buttes. However this document covers only the Paria River and Buckskin Gulch. Additional information, including permits and reservations, can be obtained at the BLM's Paria Canyon website or call the Paria Canyon Permits Desk at (435) 688-3246.

Out locator map is on the next page. The map keys (by number) are on the subsequent pages. Our narrative for our backpacking adventure from Wire Pass to Lee’s Ferry is at the end of the document.

Special Note: In 2010, a series of powerful flash floods caused changes in Buckskin Gulch and Paria Canyon. There may new obstructions which are not yet fully documented. Some campsites have been washed away. The BLM is recommending you bring rope along for possibly bypassing obstructions. When you arrive locally, be sure to question a ranger closely on current conditions!
American West Travel.com
Paria Canyon and Buckskin Gulch – Map and Trail Guide

(Map keys start on next page)
Access and Trailheads

- **Driving Directions.** Please download our [Area Map (PDF)](http://www.americanwesttravel.com).

- **Buckskin Gulch.** Main entrance is 16.6 miles to the Paria River confluence and 44.8 miles to Lee’s Ferry. Access to both Buckskin Gulch trailheads is by House Rock Valley Road (BLM-1065) which connects US-89 and US-89a. This dirt road is passable to most vehicles during dry weather.

- **Wire Pass** entrance to Buckskin Gulch, 42 miles to Lee’s Ferry, 13.9 miles to the Paria River confluence, and 1.5 miles from trailhead to Buckskin Gulch. The preferred access point because the narrow canyon section, or “Dive”, starts about a mile upstream from Wire. So named because of the constricted cave-like lower end where the hiker must turn sideways or even remove his pack to get through.

- **White House** visitor center and entrance to the Paria River canyon. Information may be obtained here. Also, there is a small campground. It is 35 miles to Lee’s Ferry (from the actual trailhead which is three miles south of the visitor center), 6.8 miles to the Buckskin Gulch confluence. Off of US-89, all-weather access.

Buckskin Gulch

1. **Mile 3.0:** The start of the “Dive of the Buckskin”. The Buckskin Gulch is 3 to 15 feet wide for the next 12 miles and roughly 400 feet high. There are only two safe areas in the event of bad weather.
2. **Mile 4.2 – Confluence of Wire Pass and main Buckskin Gulch.** (Mile 1.5 from Wire Pass Trailhead)
3. **Mile 1.0 (here and below from confluence):** Open area, possible camping.
4. **Mile 6.6:** Long, dark canyon narrow with possible stagnant pools and mud.
5. **Mile 7.4:** Access to the top of the canyon. Recommended for first night’s camping.
6. **Mile 9.4:** Sand slide. Possible camping, canyon exit.
7. **Mile 10.9:** Major rock jam. Primary obstruction in Buckskin Gulch. Degree of difficulty varies with changes from flash floods. As of 2000, it is a 12 foot dropoff which you can scramble down. Rope is recommended to hand down packs.
8. **Mile 12.0:** Water seeping from rocks forms small stream.
9. **Mile 12.2:** Popular camping site on bench just before Paria River.
10. **Mile 12.4** Confluence of Buckskin Gulch and Paria River.
Start of Paria River from White House Trailhead

11. **Mile 3.9:** Last good campsite before Narrows.
12. **Mile 4.2:** The start of the Paria River Narrows which extend for about five miles downstream. Extremely hazardous when high water threatens. During some years there may be deep pools requiring swimming.
13. **Mile 6.2:** Site of Sliderock Arch. The much photographed landmark is actually a huge rockfall which formed a bridge over the river.

10. **Mile 6.8 (from White House Trailhead):** Confluence of Paria River and Buckskin Gulch. A shorter trip can start at Buckskin Gulch or Wire Pass and proceed upstream to the Paria Canyon trailhead. The Buckskin is never hiked going upstream.

Confluence of Paria River and Buckskin Gulch to Lee’s Ferry

14. **Mile 1.9 (here and below from confluence):** Spring on south side of river. It is important to be aware of where springs may be found as the river water is extremely muddy and not drinkable. Most of the springs in the area are found on the south side of, and adjacent to, the river.
15. **Mile 2.2:** First good campsite after Paria Narrows. Spring nearby. Good campsites and springs the next few miles.
16. **Mile 4.2:** Free-flowing spring on south side.
17. **Mile 4.4:** Side canyon on south side has lush riparian vegetation and fresh water.
18. **Mile 6.5:** Excellent campsite on a wooded bench.
19. **Mile 8.8-9.6:** Following a short rough stretch, there are remnants of a water station used by early settlers. Downstream there are numerous springs and good campsites for the next several miles.
20. **Mile 11.7:** Wrather Canyon is a scenic side canyon with a clear stream. The 200-foot Wrather Arch is 1/2 mile up the canyon. Very scenic. No camping allowed in Wrather Canyon.
21. **Mile 13.1:** Good spring on north side of river. This is the last really obvious spring along the river before Lee’s Ferry. The canyon becomes narrower and very boulder-strewn for the next three miles, and progress is slow.
22. **Mile 16.2:** Small side canyon to south. Spring upstream.
23. **Mile 17.3:** Lush side canyon with last spring before Lee’s Ferry. Paria Canyon starts to widen, and there is a trail of use on the south side for several miles, bypassing the boulder filled river.
24. **Mile 20-28.2:** The canyon broadens widely into open desert terrain. No shade or drinking water. Very warm. Least interesting part of the trip although the canyon walls become very steep and scenic as you approach the Colorado River.
25. **Mile 27.2:** Historic Lee’s Ferry Ranch and cemetery.
Questions You Should Always Ask the Ranger

Conditions are constantly changing in Paria Canyon and Buckskin Gulch. You should not assume that this guide or any guide fully reflects current conditions. Always check in with the ranger at the BLM office in Kanab and determine current conditions before you start on your trip.

- What is the current Weather Forecast? **Always get a weather forecast before going in the Buckskin Gulch or Paria Narrows! If you get caught in a flash flood there, it can potentially be fatal.**
- Are floatation devices needed to negotiate any deep pools?
- Are ropes needed at any rock jams or other obstacles?
- Is drinking water available from the known springs? Which are reliable?

Narrative

The Buckskin Gulch and the Paria Narrows present many kinds of experiences to their visitors. During some years and during some times of the year backpackers may have an easy jaunt and hardly get their feet wet. During other times the canyons may provide an excruciating journey. And it can all change in an instant. A powerful flash flood can wash away old obstacles and create new ones in an hour.

Whatever the conditions, the Paria Canyon Vermilion Cliffs Wilderness Area offers spectacular canyon country scenery and an outstanding outdoor experience. The Buckskin Gulch offers the mystery and astounding beauty of the slot canyon. The Gulch ranges from 3 to 15 feet wide over twelve miles and averages 400 feet deep. Eons of flash flooding have carved the sandstone into fantastic formations over its entire length. But usually it's not easy going.

Our experience offered the most extreme level of difficulty. We chose the first week of April following a wet winter to do the hike; much too early in the season. The weather deteriorated en route, and when we stopped at the Kanab, Utah, ranger station for permits it was snowing. The ranger was not encouraging, saying that all the pools were full and the water temperature was measured at 42°F (5.56°C) a few days ago. But that didn't stop us!

We camped in the scenic campground at Lee's Ferry where we would meet our shuttle driver in the morning. The weather did not look too promising. Nor was the weight of our backpacks. With the cold weather we were obliged to carry extra clothes. We also carried two inner tubes for the pools, rope for the obstacles, and two days’ supply of water. (The water in the Buckskin is not potable.)
Our shuttle host, a "colorful" local, drove us from Lee's Ferry, where we left our vehicle, to the Wire Pass Trailhead for the Buckskin Gulch. She regaled us with her pearls of wisdom the entire way. (Years later, she and her wisdom were featured in Arizona Highways magazine!) The trailhead, at over 5,000 feet elevation was lightly covered with snow and frost. So we would be hiking in heavy clothes.

The "Wire Pass" is appropriately named. A short walk brings us to an entrance which is 18 inches wide! You remove your packs and half-walk half-crawl. It opens up a bit rather quickly and soon reaches the Buckskin. The Buckskin Gulch is sometimes referred to as the "Dive of the Buckskin". This is a description of the canyon's sharp downward gradient. We encounter our first large pool no more than five minutes downstream. No more than two feet deep, but we'll be walking in wet clothes from here on.

The going is consistently strenuous. Sections of packed, dry ground are infrequent. Mostly we find mud, pools, quicksand, and stretches of ankle-killing cobbles. Occasional open areas break up long stretches of extremely narrow, tunnel like sections. These sections are extremely dark because the carved walls often form a canopy overhead. Most disconcerting, these dark, narrow sections are often completely flooded, often for hundreds of feet at a time.

So far, the pools we’ve had to wade have not been more than thigh deep. However we've discovered that quicksand occurs even beneath pools of water. It's quite shocking to step in quicksand while wading through a pool and suddenly sink a foot or more. Most of the quicksand holes appear shallow. However there was one pool of quicksand deeper than my walking stick which was six feet long.

As we progressed downstream there were sections of canyon amazingly deep. These tall walls combined with the narrow channel were a fantastic and surreal spectacle. Occasional open areas with a little sunlight and vegetation did occur but they were usually choked with rubble and boulders making the going very difficult. Packs had to be removed several times to scramble down minor rock falls. At midday, when a little sunlight penetrated the canyon, we were frequently treated to very exotic lighting effects. Unfortunately, due to the circumstances, it wasn't often possible to stop for a picture.

We camped the first night on a safe sand slide area about ten miles from the starting point. It was well above the channel but with very little room to move about. Gerry awoke in the morning to a mouse pancake. The mouse had tried for our food but Gerry rolled over in his sleep. End of story.

Our luck finally ran out the next morning when we encountered an enormous pool in a narrow section. It was too deep to wade and filled the channel as far as we could see, perhaps 100 yards or more. This was truly frightening. It was dark, cold, and the water was freezing. Our plan had been to rope the inner tubes. I would go first, pulling my gear on the second tube. Gerry would hold a rope to pull the tubes back and repeat the process after
I crossed. We could only hope the ropes were longer than the swimming section. Then there was the hypothermia threat. The process would be slow, and we'd be exposed to the icy water.

We spent well over an hour inflating the tubes, making sure all plastic bags were sealed, tying everything together. After all that, the swimming section was only about ten yards, the remainder about hip deep. Despite the tubes we were immersed in the water. (In these conditions, you need a wet suit!!) The pool went on for well over 100 yards. We reached an open area with some brush about a half hour later. At this point I was well into hypothermia, shaking uncontrollably and stumbling around drunkenly.

Fortunately we got a fire going with some brush. I had most of my clothes off so I could expose myself to the heat. I tried to get my clothes near the fire to dry off. In my shaking state, my wool socks go up in flames and the top of my pants are singed.

By late afternoon we had progressed about two miles for the day. We arrived at the Dive's major obstacle at mile 15, a huge rock jam. The drop off at that time was well over twenty feet. However the ranger said there was a way down so we did not bring any climbing gear. In our exhausted state we simply could not find the way. We have to camp here for the night and sleep in a tiny rock alcove (two feet high) with all the mice.

Refreshed by a night's sleep, we find the solution almost immediately. A chimney (a narrow rock chute) hidden by some brush offers quick and easy access to the bottom. Beyond the rock fall the going becomes really easy and we reach the Paria River in less than an hour. Heading downstream, we travel the last couple miles of the Paria Narrows. With soaring cliffs and a narrow channel (though much wider than the Buckskin!) it rather resembles the Zion Narrows.

There is quite a bit of water but only one last mishap. Crossing a waist-deep pool I step in some quicksand and am suddenly shoulder deep, a very scary moment. However the Narrows soon give out, and the river is mostly ankle deep the rest of the way. The channel widens and terraces (benches) start appearing on both sides of the river. Springs start appearing. We fill our canteens in a beautiful side canyon with fresh water pools and lush vegetation. There are many excellent campsites now offering. We select a beautiful wooded terrace to make camp.
For the next seven or eight miles the walking is fairly easy, the scenery is beautiful, and there are interesting side canyons. It is all decompression after the Buckskin experience. Around mile 20, the river starts cutting into the soft Kayenta formation which results in many more boulders and obstacles in the river. The channel narrows sharply, and the going becomes difficult for several miles. The effort becomes fairly strenuous again.

The canyon starts to widen after this difficult stretch, and there are generally informal trails on the embankments the rest of the way. This is easier than negotiating the river channel but also less interesting. A few miles later the canyon widens broadly into an open desert terrain. The last ten miles are shadeless and springless, the river is ankle deep sludge, and after an exceedingly cold start, the weather is exceedingly warm! All the winter gear is now packed away, and we are walking in tee shirts and shorts trying to keep cool. Soon the spectacular cliffs above the Colorado River come into view, heralding our approach to Lee's Ferry and the end of the trail and our memorable adventure.

Disclaimer

This write-up is accurate to the best of my knowledge and is for informational purposes only. We assume no liability for any errors or the errors of others. We assume no liability for your safety or for any mishaps you may have on your trip. There is no way we can know about your physical condition or ability to handle yourself outdoors or on the road. We recommend discussing all outdoor activities with the park ranger or other officials.