

Ruby - Horsethief Trip Report: October 11 - 14, 2022

Trip Coordinator Kathryn and Miry, Kit, Henry, Mike and Craig

Six RMCC members spent three nights/four days canoeing and hiking in the Ruby and Horsethief Canyons of the Colorado River from October 11 to 14, 2022. After meeting at 8:00 am and running the shuttle to Westwater, we launched from Loma boat ramp about 11:00 in two tandem and two solo canoes,. Launch day, we paddled about 3 miles to Rattlesnake Canyon camp where we disembarked on a combination of muddy shoreline and steep bank. Our hope was to find our way to the Rattlesnake arches trail which is also accessible from two trails in McInnis Canyons National Conservation Area and Colorado National Monument. Our entire group started up the main canyon about noon, hoisting ourselves through the narrows and turning left up the first major side canyon. Guided by a trail description and waypoints gathered by Henry, four of us continued up this canyon to a rubble slope with scattered trees where we followed cairns to clamber to a bench that would eventually take Kit, Henry and I around a sheer sandstone cliff and up a steep drainage to a plateau overlooking the Grand Valley and then up another steep slope to the sandstone outcrop that yielded several dramatic arches during an additional ~2 mile RT hike. At about 3:30, we started hoofing it back down the trail to Rattlesnake camp where the rest of the group waited (arriving about 5:30) and paddled the last half mile to Beavertail 2 camp. Beavertail 2 was a nice camp under large cottonwoods with a slippery mud landing. Double parking and unloading one canoe at a time over the slip-n-slide, we finished camp set-up and prepared dinners in the dark. A wonderful day!

Day 2 we paddled 10.5 miles to Mee Canyon — less than 3 hours including stops. After negotiating the rock and sandbar guarded entry to the campsite landing, we enjoyed relaxing in camp and ogling a herd of 6 bighorn until late afternoon. As the day cooled slightly, we hiked up the canyon with part of the group getting as far as the gateway of Wingate Formation spires. In the evening we shared potluck appetizers and dessert, dinner on our own, and a small fire.

Day 3 we paddled a little more than 3 miles to Black Rocks 5, with a decent landing – best camp in the area, in our opinion, and that of other boaters in

the area. After settling in and relaxing, I climbed up to the pourover ridge above camp for an amazing view of the area – an hour up and shorter down with mixed sun/shade in the mid-afternoon. Then Kit and I hiked a couple miles up Moore Canyon, returning before the sun set. Others hiked a bit and relaxed in camp before dinner, a fire, and more stargazing.

Day 4 we took two hikes on our 8 mile paddle to the Westwater takeout. Our first was a short hike up McDonald Canyon — about 1.5 miles downstream from Black Rocks 5 — to see two pictographs in a large sandstone amphitheater. These pictographs do not match those shown in the Belknap guide, so we might have to hike further next trip. We tied up canoes below the canyon mouth and scrambled up and over the railroad tracks, but a landing at the McDonald Creek outlet would have allowed for a muddy entry to the canyon under the railroad tracks.

Our last hike of the trip was Knowles Canyon, starting out from the Knowles camp. The river left landing was excellent after an energetic ferry across and upriver from the outlet from McDonald Canyon, which is behind an island on river right. Kit, Miry, Mike and I hiked up canyon while Henry and Craig enjoyed the cottonwoods of Knowles Canyon camp. We enjoyed this last canyon, walking mostly in the flood washed creek bottom, but did not find the rockart that a boater at Loma indicated at about mile 1.

The remainder of our take-out day – about 7 miles – was mostly calm and beautiful with a couple of heart fluttering riffles and a few moments of wind. After shuttling back to Loma, we enjoyed a delicious group dinner at the Karma Kitchen in Fruita and then all stayed on the western slope to drive home on a beautiful fall Saturday – against the traffic.

Mid-October is a perfect time for Ruby-Horsethief – Fall colors were gorgeous in the Vail area driving west and on Grand Mesa driving east. Night-before launch camping was available at Colorado National Monument (4 of us) and for vans/trailers (2 of us) at the Fruita Welcome Center. Water levels at the State Line gauge spiked to over 6000 cfs in the days before we launched, but our flows, ranging from 3420 - 3090 cfs, were a very comfortable level for canoeing. Miry/I and Craig/Mike each got stuck once on sand/rock bars, but

Kit's and Henry's clean runs demonstrated that operator error may have caused the groundings. Boating days were warm to hot in the afternoons and the trees in the canyons were just starting to turn (might have been peak colors or snowing 10 days later). We saw the bighorns at Mee Canyon, a few bats and Great blue herons and a couple of bald eagles, but few other birds and we were disappointed with no eagles in the final stretch to the Westwater take-out. Nights were crisp and the stars, and even satellites, were beautiful. Our small fires were most welcome in the long evenings with sunsets about 6:30.

A few photos follow from Kit, Mike, Miri and me. More photos will be available on the website gallery.



Henry, Kit, Mike, Craig, Miry, Kathryn



Loma - preparing to launch



Rattlesnake Canyon, first hike



Rattlesnake Canyon - two of eight named arches



Kit and Henry at Centennial Arch



View across river from Beavertail 2 camp



Mee Canyon bighorn sheep



Mee Canyon hike spires



Black Rocks camps from pour-over ridge



McDonald Canyon pictographs



Knowles Canyon entrance



Westwater reflections



Evening primrose