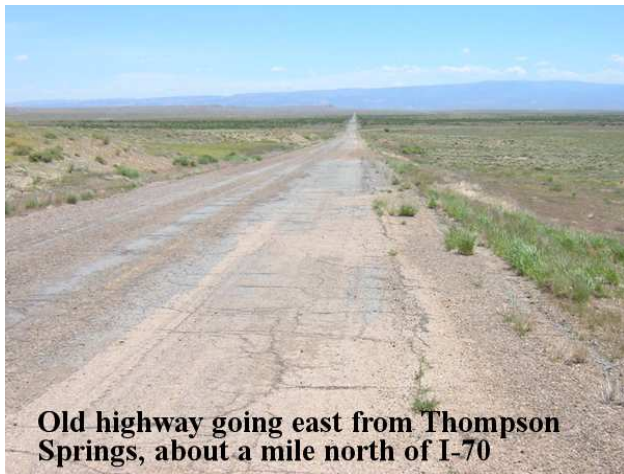


## Southern Utah – Colorado Loop June 2010

Randel Washburne [www.washburnemarine.com](http://www.washburnemarine.com)



**Old highway going east from Thompson Springs, about a mile north of I-70**

In the beginning of June, I trucked my XT-250 enduro down to Green River, UT. For a modest fee, the state park there allowed me to leave my car for a week in the lot next to the boat launch.

The beginning of the trip was a near disaster. My ramp is only six inches wide and six feet long. Normally it has worked ok for loading and unloading from the truck, as long as I could find some uneven ground where I could level out the ramp a bit. But the lot here was level. So I gave it a try. As I backed the bike down, the rear tire rolled toward one edge of the ramp, causing the ramp to dig into the sand and tilt up on edge. Half way down, I found myself stuck, with the rear tire unable to roll back because of the edge of the ramp, and unable to push it back up

the steep ramp. My only alternative would have been to just let go of it and accept the damage that would probably happen to the bike as it fell. Fortunately, some golfers from the adjacent course saw my plight and came to the rescue. After thanking them profusely, I resolved to get a longer and wider ramp (and I did).

From Green River, I rode east on the old highway running a mile or two north of I-70. The pavement was broken and rough, but the traffic was limited to two women in cowboy hats riding bicycles back toward Green River. I had to ride the interstate for a few miles before getting off again at Crescent Junction. Then I went on to Thompson Springs, now a ghost town. Not so many years ago it was listed as a stop for Amtrak, but now everything is closed up.

Continuing east the pavement deteriorated further and the only traffic was two dirt bikes coming the other way. Finally I rejoined the interstate again before exiting on the highway down toward the Colorado River to the south.

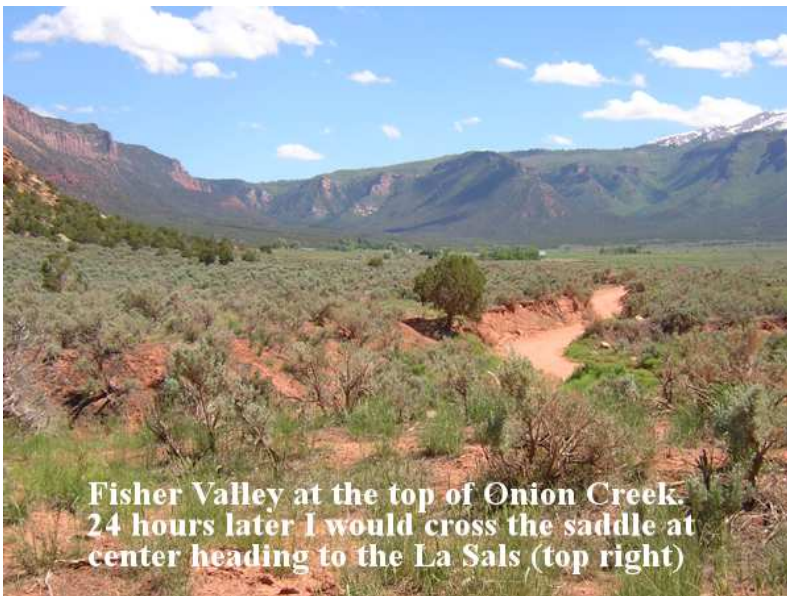


**Going up Onion Creek**

The highway crosses the river at the historic Dewey Bridge and continues downriver. It was now mid-afternoon and I considered staying at two BLM campgrounds along the river, but it was both too early and too hot, so I went on. My next destination was the Onion Creek Road, which heads south into the foothills of the La Sals to join the Kokapeli Trail, a network of trails and 4WD roads connecting Grand Junction, CO to Moab, UT.

The Onion Creek Road forded the creek at least a dozen times as it climbed into a narrow canyon. It was the weekend and nearly all of the designated dispersed campsites along the road were occupied. The BLM's rules for these sites also required that you bring a pack-it-out waste system. I couldn't imagine what would satisfy this on my little motorcycle except for a Ziploc, so I kept going.

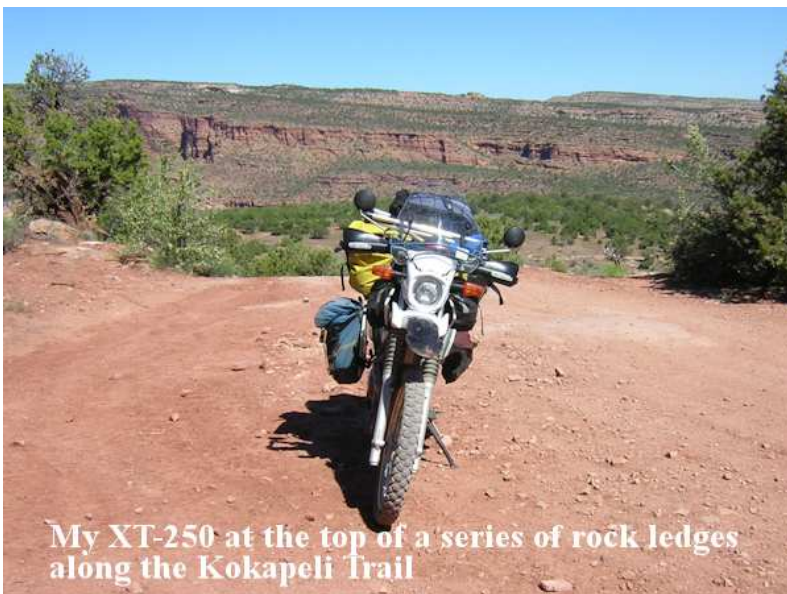
Finally the road exited into the beautiful Fisher Valley, with ranches accessible only by the road I had ascended. I took a left and went over a small pass. Coming up the other side were two women and several teens walking their bikes. They had run out of water, and I filled a few of their bottles with what I had to get them back down to the highway. My campsite was only a few miles beyond and had a stream that I could filter from.



**Fisher Valley at the top of Onion Creek. 24 hours later I would cross the saddle at center heading to the La Sals (top right)**

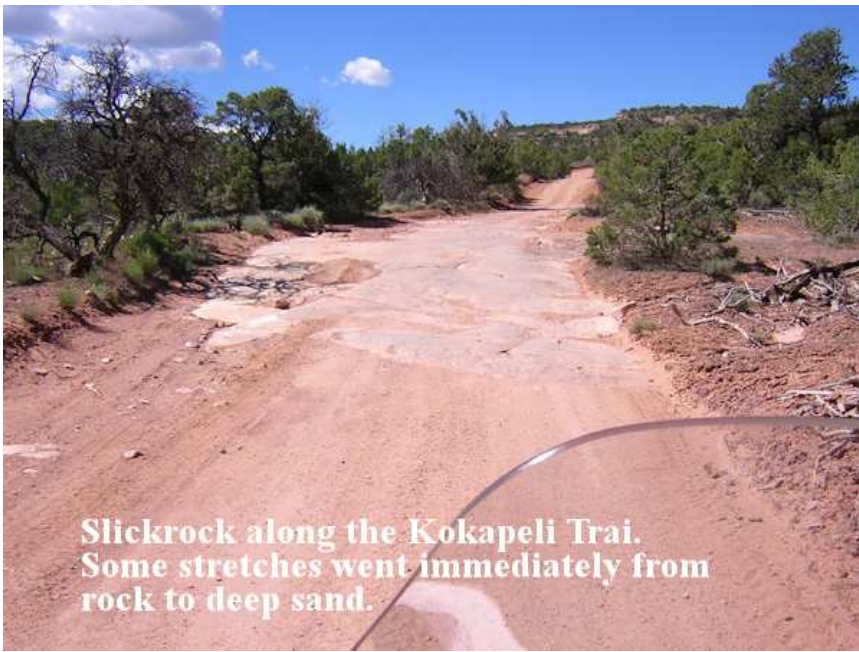
The next morning I started out by lubing my chain, after all the fording baths it had taken coming up Onion Creek. Then I headed out up the Kokapeli Trail and immediately crossed two fords again. It was apparent that scarce water was not going to be a problem on this trip.

The going got quite a bit rougher now, with the road sometimes climbing steeply over rock ledges sometimes six inches high. I took these stretches standing up which worked well but was very tiring. The road wound around the mountain, climbing steadily. Some areas were sections of bare slick rock, which was fairly easy going but anything but smooth.

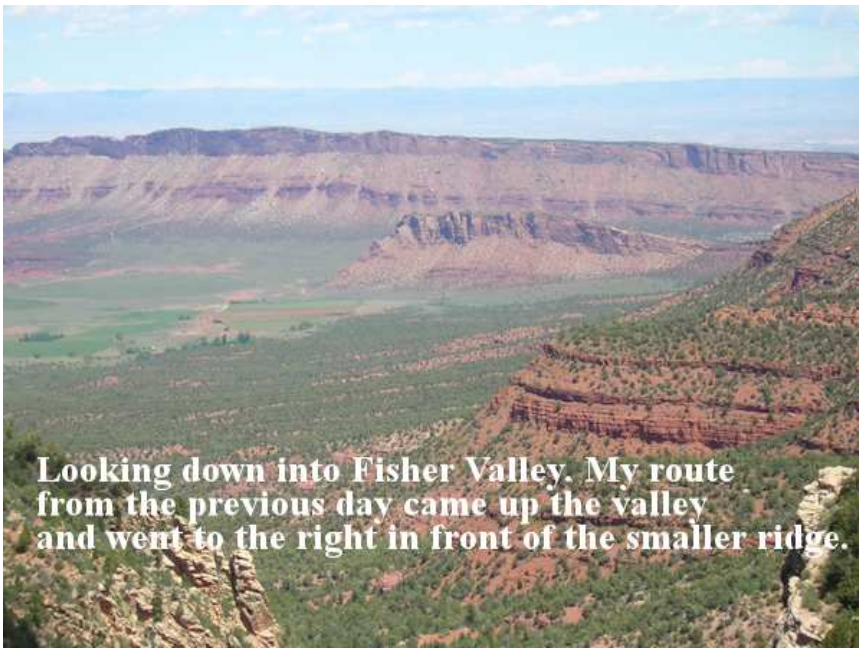


**My XT-250 at the top of a series of rock ledges along the Kokapeli Trail**

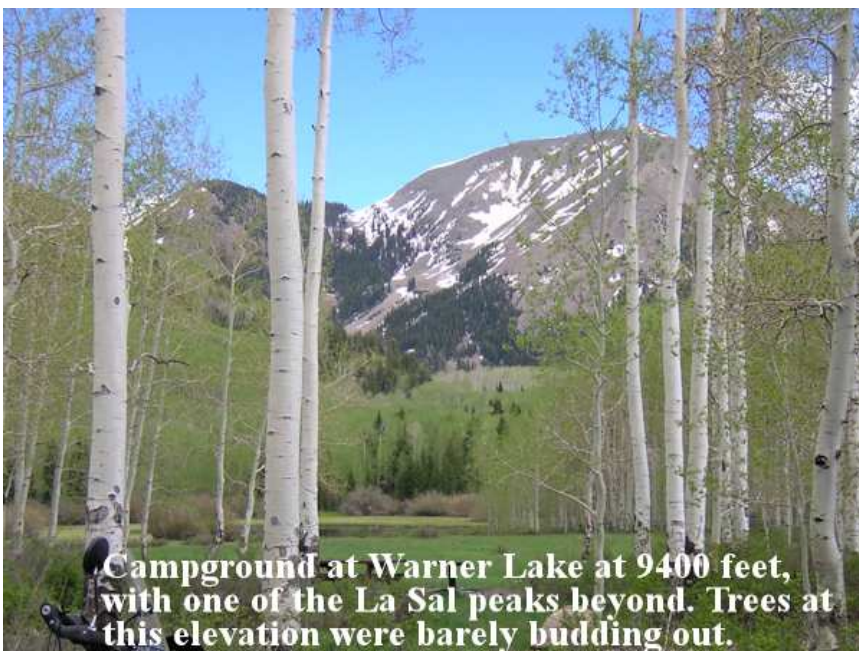
After I got on top of the mountain plateau, I started encountering patches of sand. The tires sank in about four inches, and standing up I was able to keep it going ok. But standing is very tiring for me, and that and the adrenaline from feeling the bike wandering under me wore heavily. I came to one patch of sand that just went on and on. I needed to stop and rest so I sat down as I slowed, the bike swerved, I put a foot down to counter it, and down we went. Fortunately there were no rocks there (which there frequently were in these sandy



**Slickrock along the Kokapeli Trail. Some stretches went immediately from rock to deep sand.**



**Looking down into Fisher Valley. My route from the previous day came up the valley and went to the right in front of the smaller ridge.**



**Campground at Warner Lake at 9400 feet, with one of the La Sal peaks beyond. Trees at this elevation were barely budding out.**

patches) and I managed to avoid getting my leg trapped under the pannier as had happened before.

I stopped the engine and got the bike standing back up. But I was definitely shaken. I had really lost my nerve and my confidence. I felt fragility of my age – that I couldn't afford many more such crashes without debilitating either myself or the bike, in a place where I hadn't seen a single person all day. Not good, and an attitude I hoped to overcome but I didn't know how. The pavement couldn't come soon enough.

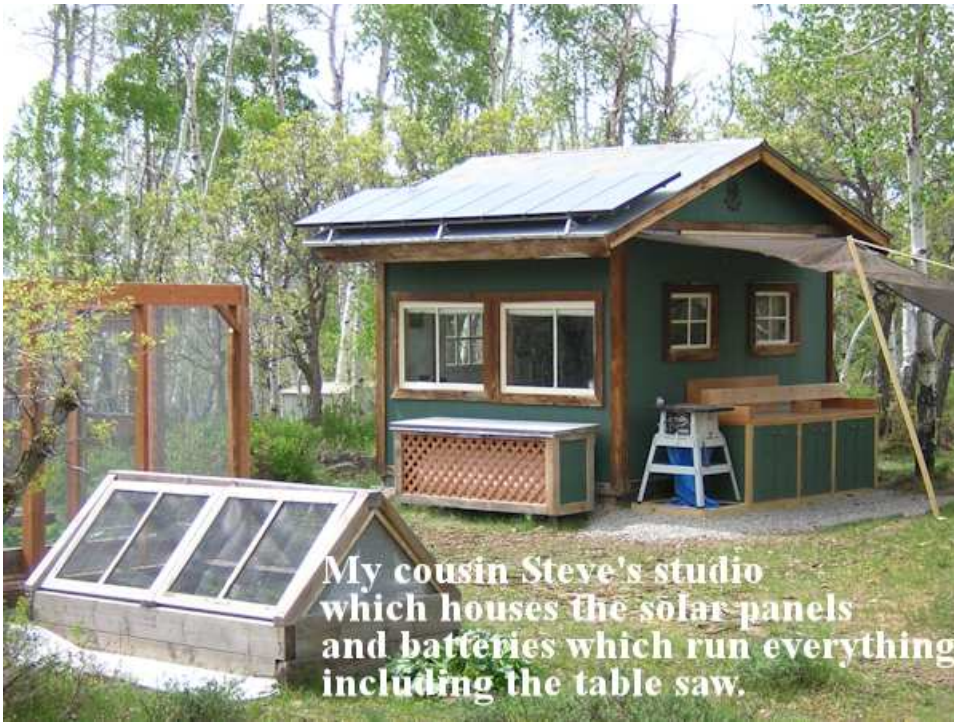
I continued on, standing up more that necessary, aware that tension was contributing to how tiring that was. I went slowly and cautiously, and eventually passed over the saddle above Fisher Valley where I could look down on where I had been a day before. At last, and with great relief, I arrived on the paved road which winds around the La Sals.

This is a delightful paved Forest Service road, which comes up from the Colorado through Castle Valley and continues on to descend to south of Moab, maintaining an elevation of 600-7000 feet most of the way. There wasn't much traffic even though it is a favorite sightseeing loop for tourists and an escape from the heat for Moab locals.

There are two campgrounds along the loop. I stopped at the first, a small one, and found only one site available, which had little shade. It was still early, so I headed on a few more miles and turned off on the gravel road that climbs about a thousand feet to Warner Campground, at the foot of the La Sal peaks at 9,400 feet. In contrast, there were only a few sites occupied in this much larger campground, which I thought was far more attractive too. Aspens all around were just starting to bud out. I picked a site under a big conifer that gave plenty of shade for my tent from the afternoon sun. A short stroll away was Warner Lake where I collected water. A trailhead here led to trails into the La Sal peaks. Concerns about security of my gear and the effect of the elevation on my lungs

mitigated against following them, but I wish I had.

In the morning I descended all the way to the valley floor and back north toward Moab to fill up on gas. My next leg was east into Colorado to my cousin's place north of Telluride. I went back south again to La Sal Junction and then east over the southern shoulder of the La Sals and down into the Paradox Valley. This drive was a nostalgic one for me. On a bicycle trip about twenty years ago I had started near Telluride and ridden all night by the light of a full moon back to Moab – over a hundred miles, not a single car, a race with two coyotes, and one of my fondest memories.



**My cousin Steve's studio which houses the solar panels and batteries which run everything including the table saw.**

Steve lives on Horsefly Mesa at just under nine thousand feet elevation. About ten miles of dirt road lead from the highway to the place where he and Aly live, and the last three are not plowed in the winter, so they ski or snowmobile out to their car. Power and phone lines don't come here, so they use solar panels, batteries, and an inverter to run lights and smaller appliances, and a cell phone to communicate. To supplement his income Steve leases a portion of his acreage to sheep grazing, as do many of the (mostly absentee) neighbors. The sheep are supervised by Peruvian shepherds who come up for the summer.

About a mile from Steve's place I came to a gate closed across the road. Behind it was what appeared to be a Peruvian shepherd. I told him in English that I was going to my cousin's. His reply was "solamente Espanol." No English. So I dragged out my rusty Spanish. But I couldn't remember the word for cousin, and instead blurted "abuelo", which means grandfather. Skeptically, gauging my age, "your grandfather lives here?!" Realizing my mistake I had to clarify by tracing my family tree using relationships I could sure of before he understood. Yes, he said, they both lived just

ahead, and I could certainly pass through the gate, but just be sure to close it to keep the sheep in.



**Elk calf calling to its mother, across the road behind me.**

I went on and spent two very nice days with Steve and Aly, sleeping comfortably in their guesthouse, a VW camper van. The shepherd lived in a small trailer nearby and spent hours inside learning to play a saxophone.

Then it was time to head west again. Shortly after leaving Steve's I passed several elk cows behind a fence on the right side of the road, and several small calves behind the fence on the

left side. Obviously the cows had sailed over the fences without realizing that their children could not. I stopped between them to take pictures of the cute calves while the mothers gazed over the fence behind me. The calves were quite curious and came close to the fence to look at me, but soon became bored and called to their mothers for assistance in getting together again. The best way for me to help that was to move on, so I did. I went out a different way, a long gravel road that took me back to the highway on which I'd come east.

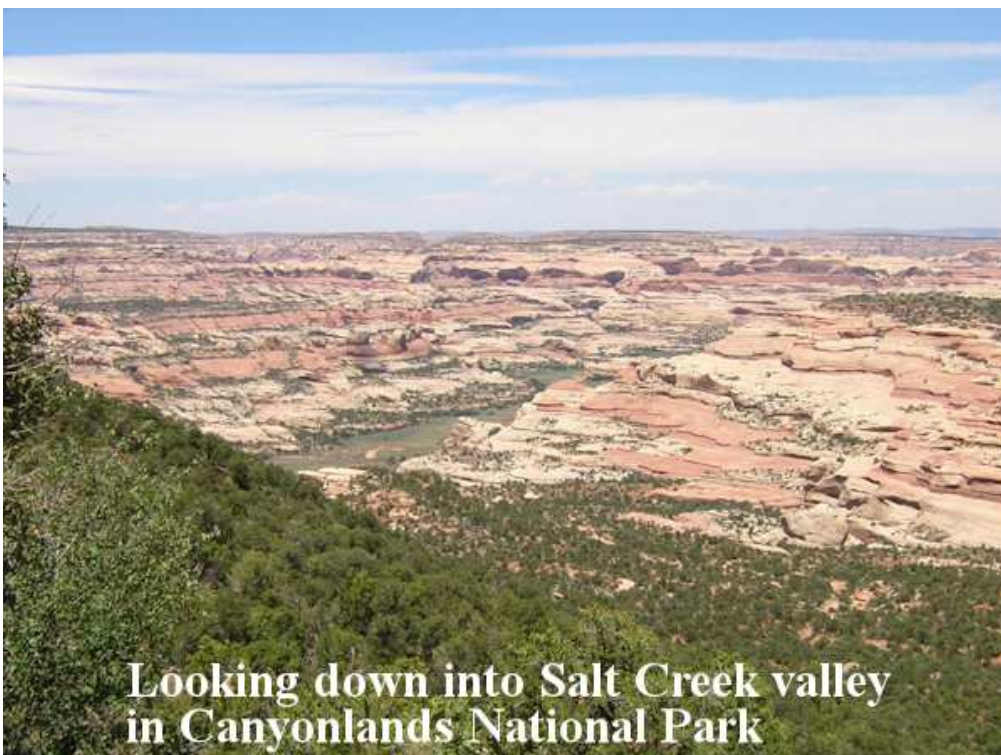
This time I followed it partway toward the Utah border, but turned off south at Naturita, a long but pleasant ride which took me to Montecello, Utah. After restocking with gas in both the tank and auxiliary can and a few groceries, I took a paved Forest Service road west into the Abajo mountains, where once again I was back in cool



aspen groves. There were two campgrounds here. I took a circuit through the first one, which was largely full. One couple camped there had a truck about the size of a U-Haul filled with every kind of outdoor recreation toy, including two KTM dirt bikes. I continued to the second campground, which was mostly empty and found a nice shady site for the night.

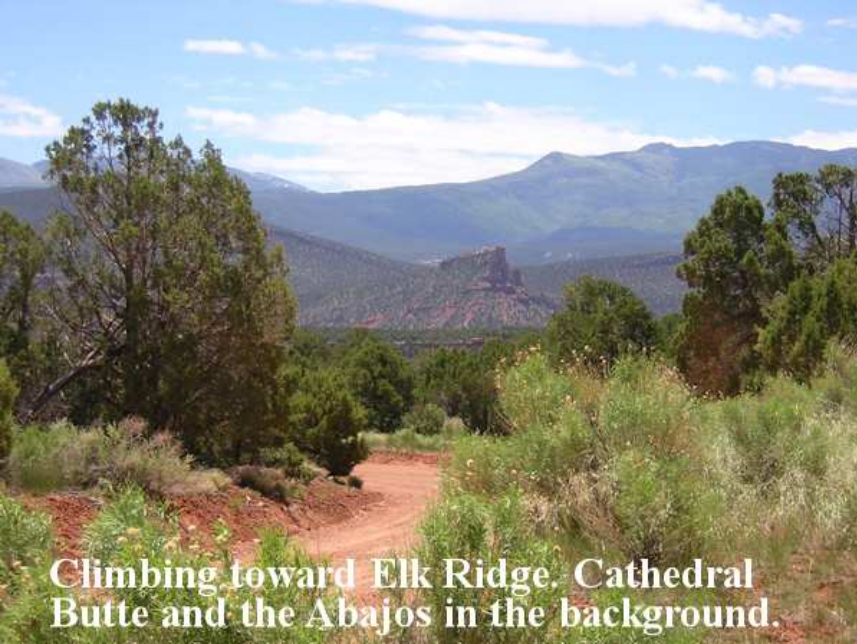
The next morning I descended the road, still paved, to join the highway that leads to the Needles District of Canyonlands National Park. My next destination was Elk Ridge just outside the park, and left the pavement again at Dugout Ranch. This was a long climb, and again a nostalgic one, since I had

made this same climb on the same bicycle trip twenty years ago. I recalled how hot it was and was amazed that I was able to do that dragging up all the same camping gear, water, etc., since I certainly couldn't do that now under my own power.



Eventually it leveled out past Cathedral Butte at the top of the Salt Creek valley, which led north into the park. Here I had hidden my bicycle with half of my water and some of the gear, stuffed what I could into my day pack and carried two panniers down into Salt Creek for an overnight. It was very worthwhile, with several granaries that I spotted up in the cliffs and was able to climb up to. The next morning I re-ascended to my bicycle and continued on to Elk Ridge. Again I was amazed at my younger self's energy.

Looking down into Salt Creek valley in Canyonlands National Park



Climbing toward Elk Ridge. Cathedral Butte and the Abajos in the background.

buildings. There was no water, so I rode over to shallow Duck Lake to scoop out what I needed. The evening view across the meadows to the shimmering aspen groves from my porch campsite was truly gorgeous, and several elk came trotting across not far away.

But now I cruised on effortlessly on freshly graded road back into the green meadows, aspens and Ponderosas of Elk Ridge. Once on the largely level ridge which is about twenty miles long, it was very easy going on to Gooseberry Guard Station.

There was no one at the station and a new vault toilet by the entrance, so I decided to stay there for the night, camping on the front porch of one of the



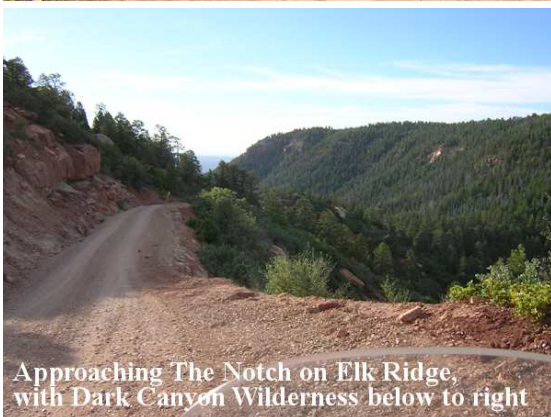
Gooseberry Guard Station

The next morning I woke up before dawn, made coffee and snacks for breakfast as the light came up, and made an early start on down the ridge.



On Elk Ridge

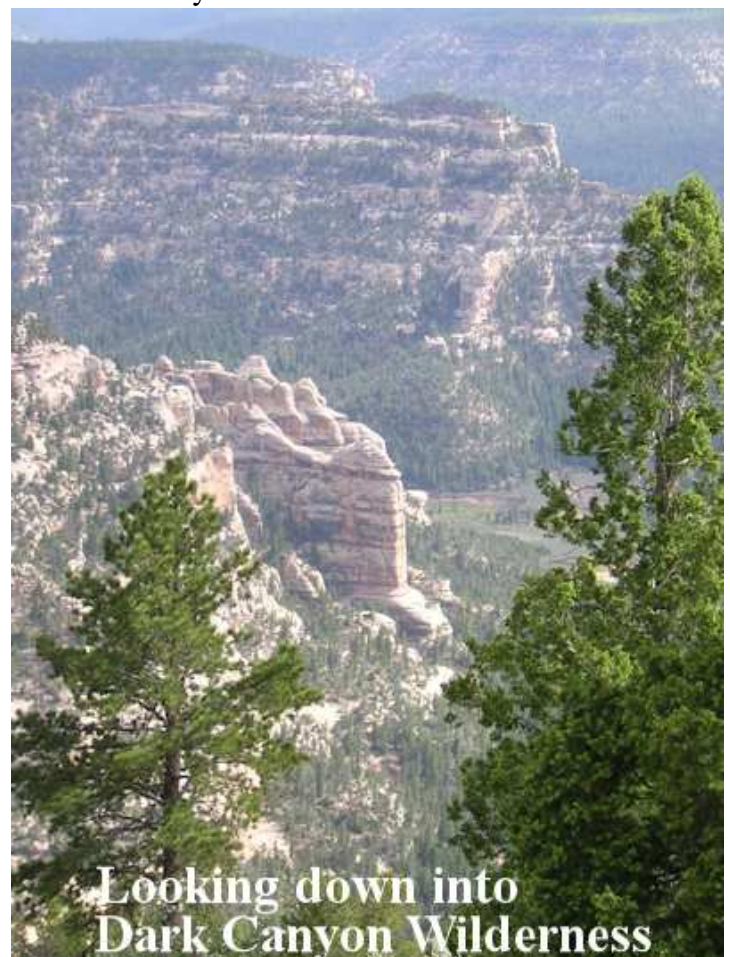
To the right was Dark Canyon Wilderness -- a huge network of canyons descending from the ridge's 8000 feet all the way to the Colorado River at least four



Approaching The Notch on Elk Ridge, with Dark Canyon Wilderness below to right

thousand feet below. There were several trailheads leading into it from the ridge, with stern warning not to count on finding

water down there. Truly wild and rarely visited country.



Looking down into Dark Canyon Wilderness

By late morning I passed the Bears Ears and started the long descent toward Natural Bridges National Monument. On the way down I passed the couple on their KTM bikes coming up, and later their camp with their big truck. Reaching the pavement I stopped at the visitor center to air up my tires for the highway, and continued west, stopping for gas at Hite Marina, and then on to Hanksville and north back to Green River, arriving by early afternoon.

I moved the truck to the sandy slope next to the launching ramp where I could set the ramp to be almost level, and was able to load my bike with no problem, but still vowing this would be the last time I would depend on this ramp.