

Pikes Peak River Runners

Desolation/Gray Canyons: Wilderness Lost & Found April/May 2024



By Christina King

*Photo credits: Christina King, Jim Smith, Drake Dennert, Antonio Flori
Green River (Desolation & Gray Canyons) in Utah, April 29-May 4, 2024
6 Days, 2 layovers, 84 miles, Sand Wash to Swasey's*

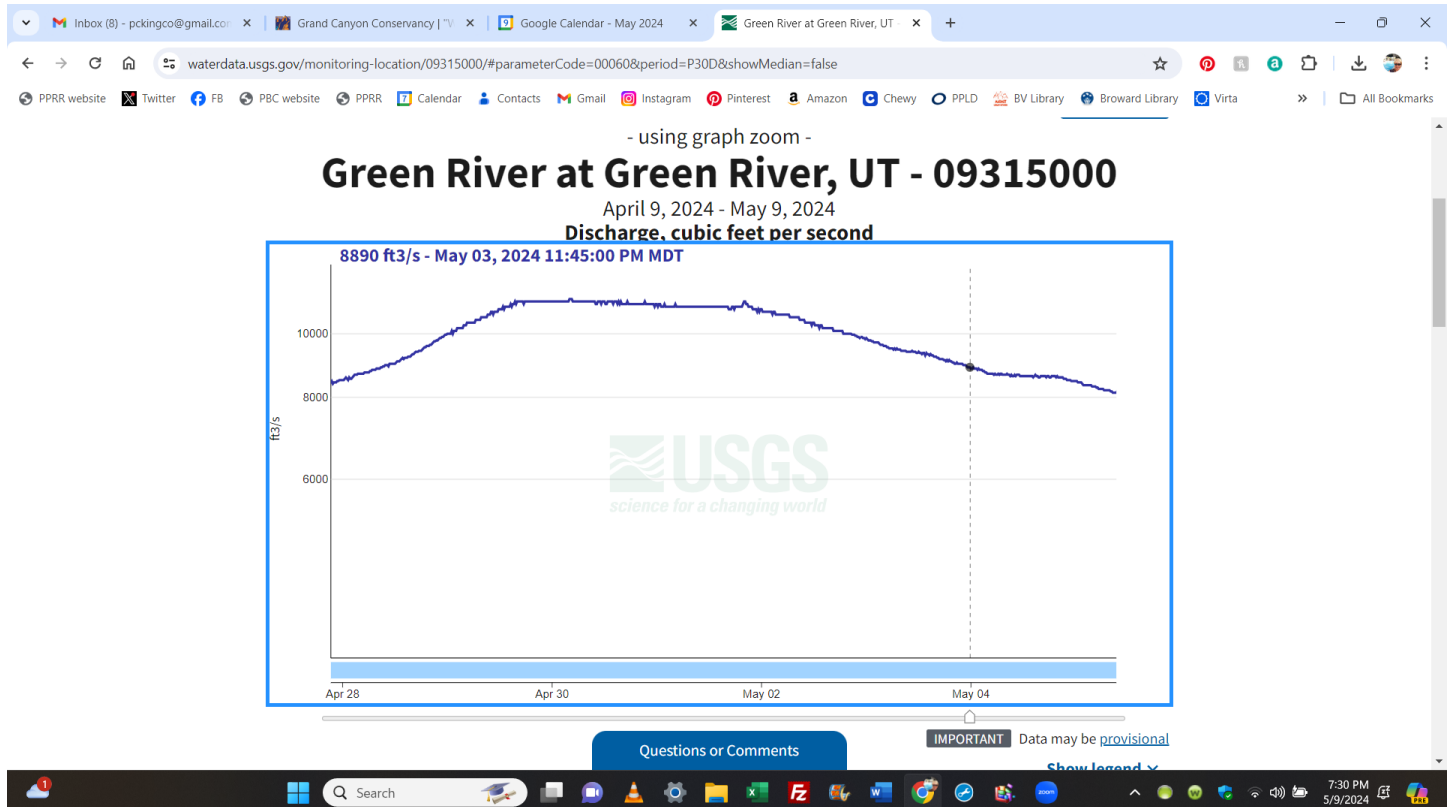
[Youtube video of our trip](#)

Participants: 8

- Melissa Broch (permit holder & supreme organizer & people wrangler)
- Leo Gallagher
- Jim Smith
- Don Judge
- Pat Wise
- Drake Dennert
- Antonio Flori
- Christina King
- 2 rafts, 2 cats, one dory, one motor, one ducky & plenty of firewood we did not burn!

Flows: Flows ranged from 8,400 to 11,200 cfs, see graph below. Our trip temperatures were quite cold in the evenings/early mornings but relatively warm daytime temps, up to ~80°F on our last day. The only significant on-river wind was on Day 1 when we used our motor! Thankful for our gas-powered motor. Note my contradiction mentioned on page two about the oil rigs.

Two



April 27/28, 2024 (Arrive at Sand Wash put-in- Prelaunch):

Departed from our various western home states (Montana & 3 of us from Colorado) with snowy roads in Colorado. Sand Wash road was in good shape but we drove conservatively to avoid any threat of flat tires due to sharp limestone rocks on the road base. We saw MANY oil drilling rigs. This is my first time running Desolation/Gray canyons after many decades of running Western rivers. I had a vision of Utah wilderness but instead the drive in to the put-in was a scene of lost wilderness and endless oil pumping rigs, commercial vehicles, snaking pipes, rusty tanks, spider webs of gravel access roads, etc.... A veritable corrupted oil field landscape as far as the eye could see. I was surprised and disappointed. Thankfully, the last portion of the road dropping into Sand Wash is very scenic. Unfortunate that you have to travel through the oil field area first. Thank goodness, our wilderness has been found again at the river!!!!



We had one mishap after arriving at the put-in. The Montana crew forgot to fill up gas can for our motor in Vernal. Fortunately, Pete was able to head out and contact our last arrivals from Colorado and ask them to buy a gas can and fill up for us before they drove into the put-in. But not before Don Judge got a mouthful of gas from his gas tank siphon experiment. Yuck! Drake arrived and we have enough gas for our motor! Melissa had been informed by the ranger office prior to leaving that no ranger would be present to check us out and we enjoyed an empty rigging ramp. No bugs seen or heard, water was on the rise. Saw some wild horses across the river from us while rigging. Camp was at the put-in with a tasty dinner of Nachos and Ginger cream cookies pre-prepped by Melissa. Leo brought out his new river kitchen for us to admire and inaugurate on our river trip. The only suspect item was the bleach container. Antonio mistakenly created a Bleach-arita that he quickly spit out when he realized the tequila taste was not “off” but actually a shot of bleach. Both Don and Antonio experienced a bit of “heartburn” that night.

Another small permit group pulled in after dark and launched with us the next day but we never saw them again. They were on a quicker 4-5 day trip. Our trip was 6 days with two of the days layover days. BTW: The [Vernal Brewing Company](#) was a memorable food spot in Vernal.

April 29-30, 2024 (Launch Day 1-2) Camp Jack Creek #1- first layover

day: (Mile 95.8 to 69.7) 26 mile day. Woke up to a brisk cold morning after an overnight with wind and spitting rain. Shoved our rigged boats off the ramp, immediately hooked them up in a barge formation with Don Judge running the motor. His subtle hand signals guided us down river for the next 26 miles. The motor and wind precluded any on river conversation and frankly it was nice to bundle up and just watch the canyon go by. Leo and Melissa oar-ruddered us to keep our boats on track in the deeper “current”. River left is off limits (Ute/Uintah reservation land). When river runners describe the flow as negligible in this section they are not kidding. It felt like a lake. No riffles and barely any discernable current. We did not stop at Rock House Canyon petroglyphs. The Powell’s Lighthouse Rock is one of so many unique rock formations. The canyon walls are spectacular and very scenic with many spires, hoodoos and cliff walls of dramatic color. We motored from ~10:15 am to 3:15 pm, about ~5 mph. Rowing would have been very tough. See the campsite notes section at the end of this journal. I would have to say the first 26 miles on this section had minimal acceptable camps due to thick and heavy shrubs along the riverbank. The river changes quite a bit at Jack Creek rapid with regular riffles, minor rapids and much improved current. Turns out today is the one and only time we used a motor for our trip. But it was nice to know if the wind picked up on the last day we had an option to use our motor.



I am usually not a fan of layover days mainly because it can be a bit selfish to take an additional camp away from another group to enjoy and it can mess up schedule planning for groups behind us. BUT the river corridor seemed empty and the layovers Melissa planned were fabulous. We enjoyed relaxed meals, meandering up the side canyon, looked for fossils but did not find any, seeing coyotes and a bull snake, some flowering cactus, canyon overhangs, blue skies and sun. Lots of animal scat, bighorn sheep, deer, coyote and bones. We bushwacked down to the Mushroom Rock petroglyphs. Do not recommend hiking down from our camp. Float down instead and stay on trail. Our meals were fabulous, chili, eggs, sausage, pancakes, Ethiopian ground nut stew, charcutier boards, LOTS of food! Despite our two days of relaxation, the cool nights encouraged folks to sneak off for bed before 8 pm. We brought firewood but never stayed up late enough to bother using it. Bleach-gate made another appearance but no takers this time.

I have two new river items on this trip. A solar multicolored lantern and a easy popup tent which turn out to be perfect for this trip. The solar color changing lantern is fun to use at night and the tent literally takes one minute to set up and five minutes take down and stuff in the storage pack. Cozy and nice addition to my river gadgets this year.

May 1, 2024 (Day 3) Camp Three Canyon: (Mile 69.7 to 49.9) 20 mile day. We all really begin our rowing/paddling river trip today. All boats “unbarged” and rigged for rapids. Or should I say riffles. I find that the river map rates rapids a bit higher than I would guess. This is an “easy river” and the River Maps book describes the rapids in quite a bit of detail. I actually do not “see all that detail” when we run rapids as they are all straight forward. All rapids/riffles are read and run but I dress warmly because my ducky is constantly splashy. The water is super cold, skies a bit overcast with breezy winds on/off today. The brilliant bright green of the newly leafed out Fremont Cottonwood trees make for gorgeous lighting. We pass many good camps but do not stop at Flat Canyon petroglyph panel. We stopped for lunch at the private historical uninhabited [Rock Creek Ranch](#). I LOVE this stop, so many historical artifacts to explore and speculate upon. Those Swedish homesteaders were tough. We have at least 4 different guidebooks for this area and they all have different names/dates and versions of history for this ranch. It makes us ask so many questions and come up with many theories on who lived here and when and why they left.



May 2-3, 2024 (Day 4-5) Camp Range Creek #1, second layover: (Mile 49.9 to 31.2) 19 mile day. More rapids/riffle today. The only rapid of consequence is Joe Hutch Canyon Rapid which has a big hole to avoid on river left. Don ran behind me and avoided running me down but ended up unintentionally running the hole. All was well but I missed seeing his run since he was right behind me. Lunch stop at [McPherson Ranch](#) which has an entire history described in our guidebook. Some old artifacts but mainly an abandoned native American attempt at a tourist resort. Really sad looking. We reach camp and settle in for another couple of layover days. Herons and egrets visit us often. Beef stroganoff, Asian fusion, eggs, biscuits and gravy, brownies and chocolate round out our meal buffets. Every night our group has come up with some extravagant cocktails. Drake, Pat and I hike up to the “Three Golden Stairs” overlook behind camp. Pat and I stop when Drake starts “spider monkeying” up the cliffs. The views are spectacular! Desolation Canyon ended and Gray Canyon started quite dramatically at Mile 37.7 today. Literally the high cliffs turned into more rounded features, extremely noticeable.



May 4, 2024 (Day 6) Takeout at Swasey’s: (Mile 31.2 to 11.9) 19 mile day. No wind and good current/riffles so we decide to forego our motor and row/paddle our way out. Perfect day! I begin to smell sulfur at Coal Creek Rapid and it continues off and on for miles. Wilderness ends and people begin at the public access road ~Mile 25. The lower we row the more campers we see. Nefertiti has many vehicles, campers, rv’s, etc... with so many people recreating along the river. This is the first river access point for day trippers. Our takeout is Swasey’s which is Mile 11.9. Indian reservation ended at Mile 26.3 Coal Creek. The Price river slips into the Green at Mile 18.2 but is so choked with shrubs/tamarisk it is hardly noticed. Swasey’s takeout is empty except for us, high temp in the low 80’s °F. We unload and derig our boats/gear and begin to head for home. Great

trip, wonderful weather and fabulous friends. The weather takes a severe turn for the worse with a major winter front with high winds and snow the night we drive home. So glad we got off the river just in time.



Camps Notes: All camps river right unless noted otherwise.

- Mile 87.8: Small hard to pull out
- Mile 82.1: ok but small, landing cliff disappears at higher water
- Mile 80.1 (Rock House): ok good camp
- Mile 78.1 (Opposite Stampede Flat camp): small
- Mile 76.7: ok
- Mile 76.4: hard to see, small?
- **Mile 69.7 (Jack Creek #1): First great camp, #1 is best but #2 is almost as good. Great for a layover, hike up creek but “trail” hike to Mushroom Rock petroglyphs a short way downriver is a tamarisk/shrub choked mess. Save the petroglyphs for the next day and float down. Quick hike and much easier on your skin.**
- Mile 68.8 (Mushroom): good camp
- Mile 65.6 (Firewater): river left on reservation, but good camp
- Mile 65.5-65.3 (Cedar Ridge camps #2): great with lots of room, 3 camps here, all good, #2 is the best!
- Mile 62.8 (Flat Canyon): good, lots of room
- Mile 61.7 (Dripping Springs): good, lots of room
- Mile 59.3: ok
- Mile 56.4 (Steer Ridge): great camp
- Mile 52.6 (Calf Canyon): great camp
- Mile 51.3 (Snap Canyon): ok camp
- **Mile 49.9 (Three Canyon): great camp, two canyons come in on right, third canyon comes in river left.**
- Mile 49.7 (Lower Three Canyon): good camp also
- Mile 48 (Lion Hollow): ok
- Mile 47.2 (Chandler Falls): great camp
- Mile 46 (Trail Canyon): good camp
- Mile 44.7 (Above Bill Canyon): good camp, sandy
- Mile 43.5 and 43.4: small with slope with beach
- Mile 42.8 (Moonwater): good camp

- Mile 42.3 and 42.2 (Below Red Point): small to medium ok
- **Mile 31.2 (Range Creek #1): Great camp, #2 also good**
- Mile 20.3 (Nefertiti boat ramp): If you camp below mile 20.3 you will have entered the day trip run with many campers!
- I did not note the camps below Range Creek – there were so many numerous great camps described in great detail in the River Maps link below.
- [The River Maps](#) are a great resource. My 2022 waterproof edition had a wealth of educational information.