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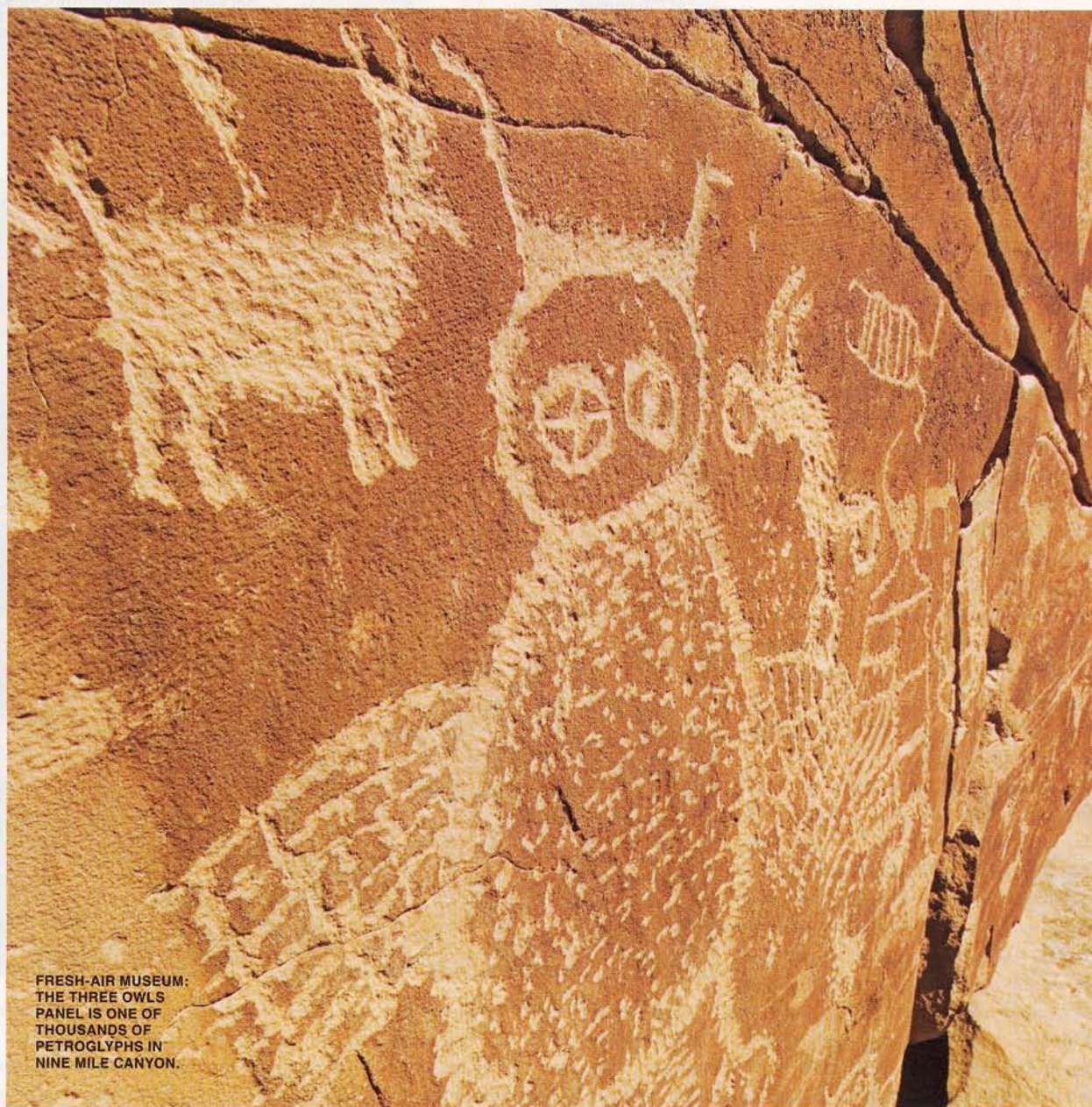


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FRESH-AIR MUSEUM: THE THREE OWLS PANEL IS ONE OF THOUSANDS OF PETROGLYPHS IN NINE MILE CANYON.

>>>THE TRIP

Messages From Beyond

Dive into the mysteries of Utah's Nine Mile Canyon. *By Keith Kloor/ Photography by Steve Howe*

WE'VE BEEN HIKING the open valley for only 10 minutes when the sky turns from lazy blue to purple to black, like a 1970s mood ring. We shouldn't be surprised: Much of south-central Utah gets strafed with fierce, monsoonal rains on late-summer afternoons, and Nine Mile Canyon is certainly no exception. Even locals can be startled by their intensity—which is

why, out on an expedition to find rock art, we're caught a little flatfooted when the storm hits. Fortunately, there are alcoves under the nearby cliffs, so we scuttle up to shelter, slipping under cover just as fat bolts of electricity ionize the air.

We hunker down and watch the lightning pierce curtains of rain marching eastward. A

ON GUARD: JENNIFER HOWE HIKES THROUGH A FREMONT DEFENSIVE SITE OVERLOOKING DEVILS CANYON.

sagey aroma drifts through. Then the hail starts: half-inch ice balls, clattering off the rocks and gouging dirt loose. Just when it seems the show can't get any better, somebody looks away from the gale and gazes up. And there they are on the rock ceiling: weird-looking grids of dotted lines, and the yellow outline of a doglike animal. It's exactly what we've come here looking for. These are just a couple of the thousands of ancient drawings that Fremont Indians left behind in Nine Mile Canyon a millennia ago.

When the storm moves on, we step back into the sunshine, blinking and recalibrating. Not every turn in this priceless time capsule tucked beneath Utah's Book Cliffs leads to something magical, but if Jerry Spangler's animated monologue is to be believed, it can definitely seem that way. Since falling in love with the place as a graduate student 15 years ago, he has visited the canyon some 75 times, written a book about it, and become one of its leading archaeologists.

Spangler says that what we just saw is a mere hors d'oeuvre compared to the feast ahead. Because of its 10,000 petroglyph and pictograph images, the canyon network, a bewildering labyrinth two hours north of Moab, is nicknamed "the world's longest art gallery." It contains exquisitely carved or painted renderings of bighorn sheep, hunters with spears, and haunting figures with triangular bodies, splayed hands, and bucket-type heads, not to mention other abstract designs. Archaeologists describe it as the most spectacular concentration of such sites in the country. And the Wilderness Society calls the surrounding Book Cliffs region one of the largest unprotected, natural, and mostly roadless areas in the West.

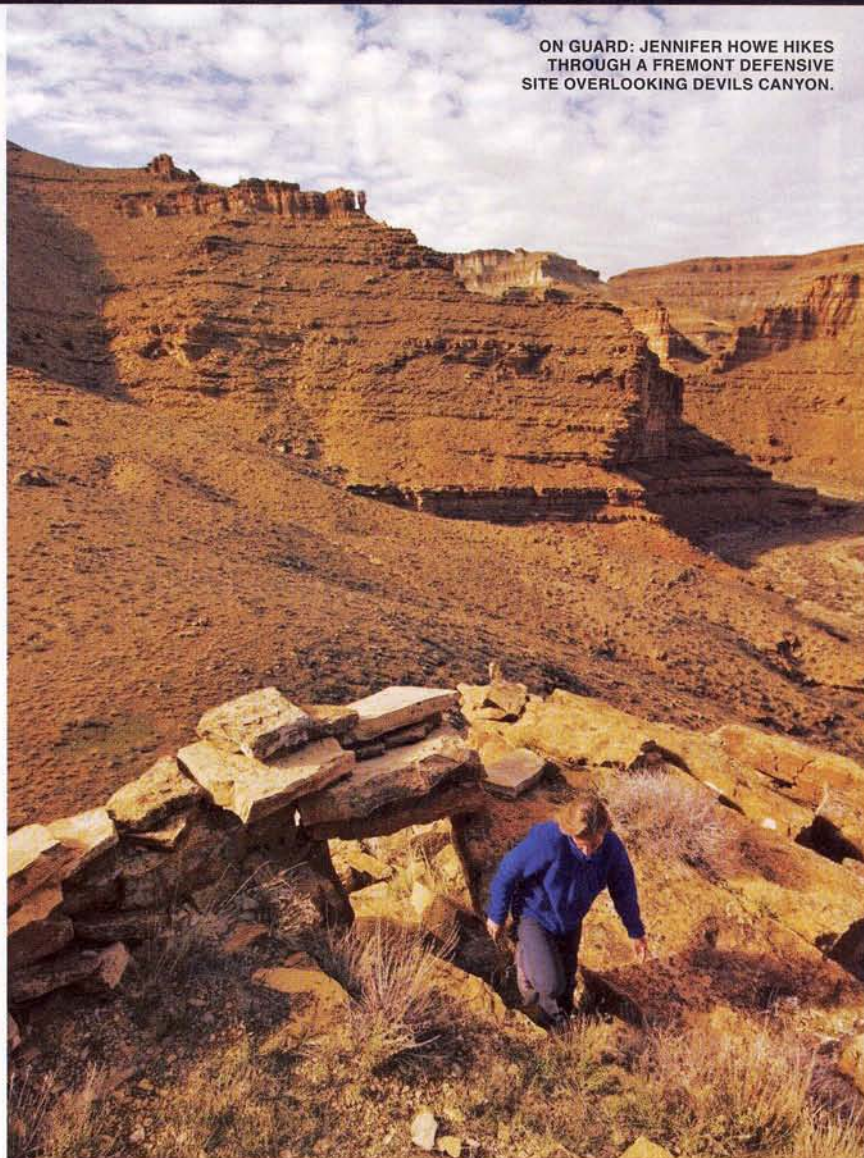
The operative word here is "unprotected." In 2003, the Bureau of Land Management, which oversees large chunks of Nine Mile, gave energy companies the go-ahead to drill for natural-gas deposits buried deep in the rock. Since then, crews have plugged

in dozens of wells. The result has been a gradual deterioration of some canyon treasures, most of it due to large-truck traffic. The vehicles' persistent vibration has caused granary walls to crumble, and dust from the trucks has blanketed popular rock-art sites. The issues aren't just aesthetic: Dust contains chemicals that can cause erosion, experts say.

Spangler, who is executive director of the Ogden-based Colorado Plateau Archaeological Alliance, has invited me along on a three-day survey in Nine Mile's backcountry, where many rock art sites have yet to be documented. Catalog the art, and it's easier to argue that the canyon should be listed in the National Register of Historic Places.

That's Spangler's goal. Such a designation would be largely symbolic, but it would pressure the BLM to give greater consideration to the impact of energy development. I jumped at the chance, having seen the place—and been enthralled by it—a few years earlier.

The plan is to cover about 25 miles, delving into remote side canyons that hikers rarely visit; we'll look for unknown sites while redocumenting others that Spangler first found as a student. When the storm passes that first day, we explore the remains of a thousand-year-old pithouse along a muddy ridge. But the monsoonal rains slow us considerably; the cliffside has turned to clay that sinks under our



boots. After a few hours of this, we return to our basecamp—actually a sliver of land in the canyon's midsection owned by one of our team members. We don't know it yet, but bigger, better finds lie ahead.

NINE MILE CANYON'S backcountry is hard to access, but easy to disappear into. The canyon bottom is roadless and wild, so the only practical way to explore the craggy innards of its lower side canyons is to drop down from the Tavaputs Plateau and hike in. That's what Spangler and our group do on the second day of the survey. Our launch point is three-quarters of the way up the 11,000-foot plateau. We drive up Wrinkle Road, passing through a stumpy moonscape before turning off on an easy-to-miss dirt spur.

When I first visited Nine Mile in 2004, I was stunned to find that many of its rock-art panels can be viewed from the dirt road that cuts through

much of the upper canyon's towering walls. It's strange: You can motor up to a thousand-year-old painting as if you were ordering a drive-thru Egg McMuffin. This is how the vast majority of the 10,000 annual visitors see the place. Of course, that easy access cuts both ways. In the last 100 years, vandals have shot at and spray-painted and engraved their initials over some of the art, and pothunters have made off with artifacts.

Today, we'll visit the harder-to-reach and thus more pristine backcountry. (The BLM is weighing proposals to open up this roadless area to development, too—meaning that even if vandals haven't made it in here, hundreds of additional wells just might.) Off one side of the Tavaputs Plateau is a sweeping view of the Green River. On the other side is the bank of cliffs above Nine Mile down which Spangler intends to lead us. There is no identifiable trailhead; instead, we're relying

on Spangler's vague recollection of a bushwhack he'd taken 15 years earlier. After a bit of pacing back and forth and shaking his head, he decides on a route down a sharply eroded talus slope. One hour and 700 vertical feet of sketchy descent later, we're following a desert wash through a sandstone maze in one of the nameless, forget-me-not side canyons, many of which aren't detailed on the topo map. That's when Spangler nonchalantly blurts out, "I don't remember this being the route."

This sort of thing is routine enough. This area often flummoxes visitors, and except for the drilling and a few ranches here and there, the terrain remains as untamed and unforgiving as it was when the Wild Bunch and other notorious outlaws sought refuge in its canyons. It's a place where history and fiction blend seamlessly. Even the name is misleading: Nine Mile Canyon is actually 80 miles long. It got its name around 1871, when John Wesley Powell

What's the purpose
of a pygmy Chihuahua?



I'm an accessory.
Like a chic handbag,
a vintage necklace,
or...

A pair of socks?



No, not a
pair of socks.
I would think
you'd understand,
being so stylized
yourself.

led his second expedition down the Green. Supposedly he or one of his men came up with the moniker after conducting a 9-mile survey triangulation at the canyon's mouth.

At least I'm in good hands. If you have to get lost with one person in a Utah wilderness once populated by Indians, Spangler is your man. A lapsed Mormon and connoisseur of cheap Don Diego cigars, he's hiked the Southwest backcountry for 25 years—long enough to be thoroughly unfazed by the desert's mercurial doings. In southeast Utah's Arch Canyon last fall, a hundred-year storm triggered raging flash floods that pinned Spangler on high ground for two days. When the water finally receded, he went back to his survey work rather than retreating to town. He spent several full summers in here in the late 1980s and early '90s to research his dissertation. He and his wife, Donna, turned their experiences into a book, *Horned*

Snakes and Axle Grease, about the canyon's cultural history.

We bushwhack for a half-hour along Nile Mile Creek, dodging spiny sagebrush. Then we hook up with an old cattle trail that none of us is sorry to see. Spangler scans the cliffs for Mischief House and Shroom Room, two fortress-like structures he'd found and named as a grad student. After consulting the topo and taking a GPS reading, he concludes we've ventured too far. We backtrack across the valley for a broiling quarter-mile. There, Spangler says we need to cross a creek, head up to a ridgeline, and follow a ledge around the backside, into another canyon. One of the few changes in this timeless landscape is the presence of tamarisk, an invasive plant that has littered streambeds across the Southwest with dense, head-high tangles of brush. Rather than swim the swollen stream, we decide to fight our way through a jungle that has choked off some of the water, effectively bridging the river.

We emerge 10 minutes later, scratched up and cursing. But from a bench we scramble down to, Spangler announces that we're now on track. Peering through binoculars, he points out Mischief House on a pinnacle more than 300 feet high. Without climbing gear, which none of us thought to bring, there's no way up. A bit farther downcanyon, we find Shroom Room, built on a mushroom-shaped spire that also looks unreachable. Spangler speculates that these were defensive structures—most likely lookouts. None of us comments on the ironic fact that with all our modern backpacking gear, we'd still struggle mightily to reach those ancient redoubts without ropes.

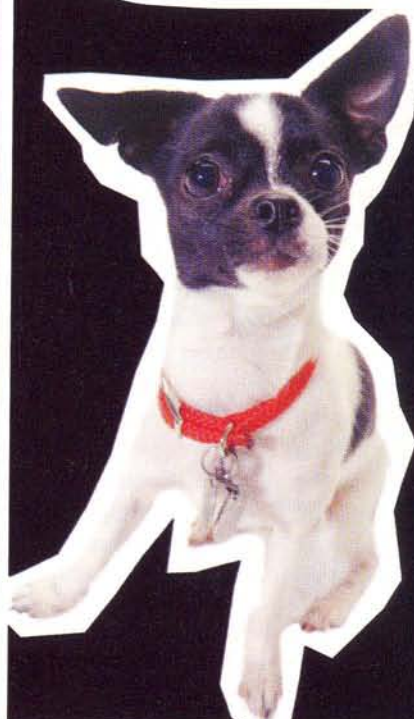
We mark the sites on a map and continue to survey the canyon's nearby nooks, taking coordinates on undocumented rock-art sites Spangler has never seen. It's a veritable outdoor museum that's as dazzling as it is indecipherable. Experts have identified the Fremont, a

Hold up there, Napoleon.
I'm more than stylish.
I'm also crazy versatile.



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I'm versatile, too. I can
wear a funny hat or a little
leather jacket.



Element
SC

nomadic culture of farmer-foragers that lived mostly in Utah from AD 700 to 1300, as Nine Mile's most prolific artists. But sometime around 700 years ago, much like their better-known neighbors in the Four Corners region, the Anasazi, they mysteriously disappeared.

Late in the day, we happen upon a 6-foot-high panel of a humanlike figure with a trapezoidal body, pecked-in eyes, splayed fingers, and a tail. Spangler is excited: This piece is bigger and more colorfully detailed than most Fremont rock art, he explains. We gape at the eerie image, transfixed. It feels like we've found the undiscovered work of an Old Master. A minute ago, I was bone-tired, dreaming of cold beer. Now I can't pull myself away.

Researchers have only begun to theorize about what these ancient artists intended to say with such images. But that doesn't diminish the thrill of pondering what it all means. Maybe these bewildering pictures in Nine Mile somehow offer clues to the Fremonts' fate.

STILL, THERE IS THE IMAGINATION, and there is science. It's possible archaeologists could break the Fremont code if they had countless years to try. Unfortunately, that may not be the case.

One researcher, Pam Miller, who had accompanied me on my first visit, was despondent over the BLM's decision to allow energy extraction in Nine Mile, part of a larger push by drillers into the surrounding Book Cliffs region, a 250-mile-long, 1,000-foot-high escarpment. Miller has spent many years chronicling the area's archaeological riches. By the time I arrived, a Denver-based energy company had started drilling the first of 38 test wells. Noisy compressor stations

and trucks kicking up plumes of dirt seemed to appear around every corner. There are several ranches, rustic inns, and other private properties sprinkled throughout Nine Mile Canyon, and some landowners have already sold out to the energy companies. Since the drilling started, the National Trust for Historic Preservation has listed Nine Mile as one of America's most endangered landscapes.

That second day, after we've documented our finds, we turn to figuring a way out. No one wants to bash through the tamarisk again, so we opt to follow a dry streambed, hoping it leads in the same direction as the wash we'd followed in earlier. We have a GPS and map, so orientation is no problem; it's more a question of whether

the landscape will foil our northward push. There's no way to know for sure, because the twisting, weirdly sculptured landscape is such a hall of mirrors.

Our improvised route snakes up and around the cliffs toward a huge bowl—the bowl that Spangler believes will serve as an escape route. Predictably, we round a corner to find a steep wall confronting us. But we're committed now. By the time we grunt up the sharp incline and crawl over the rim, we're bloodied, bruised, physically spent—and exhilarated. We probably only covered 5 to 7 miles today, but in this country, raw distance doesn't tell you much. Spangler calculates that we documented 10 sites—a good haul.

Things get even better. The final day, we plumb Cottonwood Canyon, a side network that drains into Nine Mile from a high plateau to the south, where there's easier access to art. In the end, we bag coordinates and photos for

nearly 30 sites, all of which Spangler later includes in Nine Mile's nomination for the Historic Register. A final decision is expected by summer's end. Meantime, there was other good news: The Interior Department's Board of Land Appeals recently suspended energy development over 14,000 acres scattered throughout the Book Cliffs, ruling that the BLM didn't adequately identify sensitive archaeological sites when leasing parcels four years ago.

It's not as if Spangler can light a victory Don Diego yet. But a number of concerned parties—from wilderness advocates to scientists—have united to keep the heat on the BLM. And he hopes to keep raising the canyon's profile, especially among backpackers and other preservation-minded folks. "Once we let the world know there are other values to Nine Mile Canyon besides oil and gas extraction," he says, "more people will step up to protect it."

And if they fail? Spangler can't even bring himself to answer the question. Better just get there while you can. 🍌



Hiking Finding a trail in this country can involve trial and error, and crumbly stone makes hiking difficult. Bring a gallon of water per person per day, and don't touch any art or ruins. Nine Mile Ranch (ninemilecanyon.com) offers guided hikes. **Getting there** From Moab, take US 191 N to I-70 W; after 25 miles, take the turnoff on US 6 north to Price. After about 45 minutes, look for the turnoff to Nine Mile: 2200 East (Soldier Creek Road).

Homework Spangler's book (available on Amazon) is the only one on Nine Mile Canyon. For logistical help with your hike, ask the staff at the Prehistoric Museum in Price (435-613-5060). You can also find useful info at ninemilecanyoncoalition.org and blm.gov/utah/price/9mile.htm.

LEND A HAND The Colorado Plateau Archeological Alliance continues to relocate and redocument rock-art sites noted decades ago, before GPS and modern topos. Spangler is seeking volunteers and donations; write to jerry_cpaa@att.net. Twice a year, the Nine Mile Canyon Coalition hosts volunteer cleanup days. For info, write to pam.miller@ceu.edu.