

NEEDLES DISTRICT OF CANYONLANDS NATIONAL PARK: CHESLER PARK LOOP AND THE JOINT TRAIL, AND ROADSIDE RUIN

We were fortunate enough to have had relatively cool weather for this hike, as much of the route is in direct sunlight. Originally we had only planned to hike to the Chesler Park viewpoint, located at 2.9 miles from the Elephant Hill Trailhead; however, due to the good weather, we decided to continue on and check out the Joint Trail, then complete the remainder of the loop around Chesler Park. This turned out to be a very good choice, as the Joint Trail passes through an amazing slot-like formation, and additionally the views of the Needles District and Chesler Park are substantially better from the loop hike than just from the viewpoint. After completing the Chesler Park loop hike (total mileage of 10.8 miles), we also walked the Elephant Hill Road to the top of Elephant Hill; this is certainly a serious 4WD road and should definitely not be attempted without sufficient experience, in addition to having the proper vehicle. Finally, we checked out the Roadside Ruin, a granary located a short distance from the park road, and the Newspaper Rock petroglyphs. Unfortunately, despite having left on the hike quite early in the day, as we had spent so much time in Chesler Park we did not have time to do some of the other short hikes in the Needles District.

We didn't have time to stop at the Wooden Shoe Arch overlook, but we got a glimpse of it from the main park road; I was quite surprised at how much the top part of the arch looked like a shoe:



There were lots of the toadstool-like hoodoo formations along the road out to Elephant Hill:



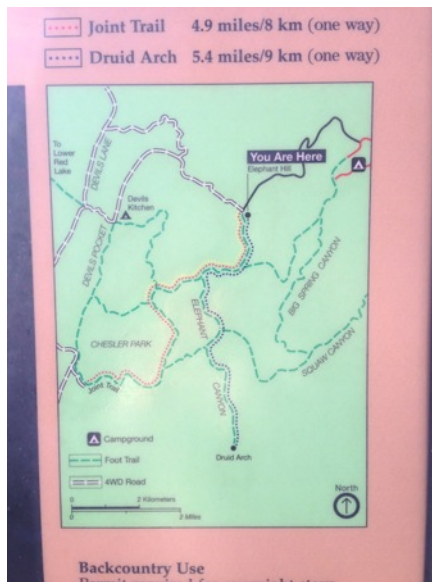
The 4WD road across Elephant Hill is one of the more difficult roads in Utah; I've read that one of the most important driver skills needed to drive this road is knowing the exact placement of everything under the vehicle:



The trailhead sign and map for this area, including Chesler Park, the Joint Trail, and Druid Arch:



Looking more closely at the map, we could see that the Elephant Hill Road would provide closer access to Chesler Park, though the time needed to drive this difficult road to the access point might end up (for some people) exceeding the time to simply hike out to the park from here:



The trail begins by following a nice set of steps up between two rocks:



There was some slickrock to be crossed on a cairned trail; then, we reached this nice overlook of the Elephant Hill area and the nearby hoodoos (with the La Sal Mountains seen silhouetted in the background):



Up ahead we could see a massive wall of needle-like rock formations (to the left in the distance):



There were lots of interesting rock formations to photograph here; I think my photos in this area turned out better in the afternoon with the storm clouds behind the rocks:



Panorama of the area we are now hiking through; there are lots of canyons throughout this area which prevent hikers from taking a direct route to their destination (that's why when looking at park maps there are multiple routes to Chesler Park):



Encountering this shade here was welcome; even though it wasn't all that hot here, we had been hiking in the sun since leaving the parking area and enjoyed taking a break in a cooler spot:



Looking across at more needle-like formations:



We rounded a corner and reached the fork with the trail over to the Squaw Flat Campground. Then, the trail passed between two big rocks; this panorama is of some of the spectacular formations we could see from there (I think Chesler Park is just on the other side of the massive wall of needles just to the left of center in the photo, but as the trail wound around many deep canyons I'm not totally sure):



We have now passed the halfway point to the first viewpoint of Chesler Park:



The trail crossed this flat area and we enjoyed the easier terrain; note the cryptobiotic soil seen in the lower portion of the photo—that's one of the many reasons why one shouldn't venture off-trail here (unless on slickrock), as the destruction caused by footprints can take many, many years to repair:



We soon come to an abrupt dropoff into a major wash; this is the wash which eventually leads to Druid Arch (going up-stream; the other direction ends up at the Elephant Hill Road):



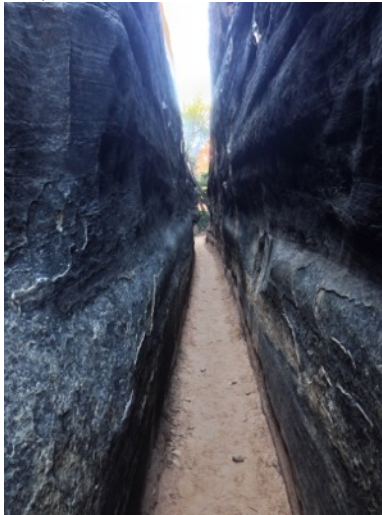
Another panorama from this spot, with the flatter area we just crossed off to the left, and the spires off to the right forming the boundary between where we are and Chesler Park. In the center of the photo is the crack which forms the "slot" that we will walk through next:



This "slot" is a crack between two big rocks:



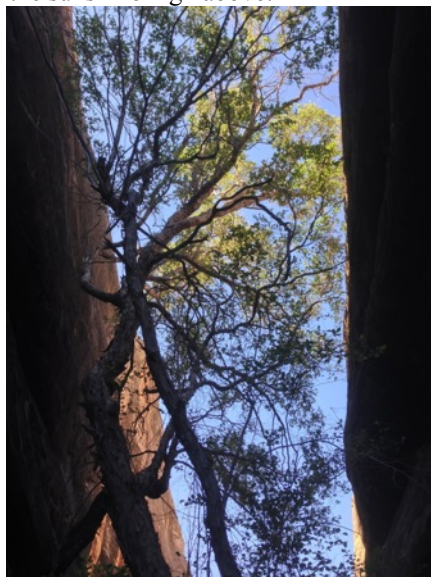
It's surprisingly narrow and deep, and is like a (much) smaller version of the "slot" on the Joint Trail:



The crack widens, then drops us into a "tributary" wash of the wash leading to Druid Arch:



This tree seems to be climbing its way towards the sunshine high above:



Up ahead we see that we will be descending towards a larger canyon:



Somehow I didn't manage to get any photos of the next part of the trail on the way out, where it drops into wash to Druid Arch, but I did get photos on the way back. This is where the trail crosses the wash, and it climbs up and out the other side (we do have to zig-zag up and out of the side-wash seen right of center in this photo):



This is the junction with the trail to Druid Arch, 3.3 miles away:



I got more photos of this route on the way back; at this point, it was getting quite warm on our walk out of the wash (as we hadn't encountered any substantial and accessible patches of shade). These formations were located off the trail and would most likely require a bit of bushwhacking to get on top of:



Panorama after scrambling over the slickrock on the route out of the canyon we'd just crossed; the saddle/pass into Chesler Park is just ahead:



We are finally approaching the big wall of needles previously seen from a mile back up the trail; the big crack to the left of center is where the trail cuts through this wall and enters Chesler Park:



Here is the turnoff to the Devils Kitchen camping area, on the Elephant Hill road:



The trail is in a very cool patch of shade at this time of day while it crosses the saddle into Chesler Park:



The view from this saddle looking back the way we have come is amazing; note all the toadstool formations in the center of the photo and extending off to the right:



Descending into Chesler Park; it turned out to be a lot different than we'd expected, and we were pleasantly surprised at how flat and green it is:



I think it's called a park because it is a naturally formed meadow-like area:



What tends to make most people consider this part of Canyonlands so scenic is the reddish rock spires rising out of the green "parklands." This certainly is a very nice view here. Note the small arch off to the left in this photo:



This is the intersection of the trail from Elephant Hill with the loop trail around Chesler Park; we went around the park in the clockwise direction:



Looking back at the "pass" into Chesler Park:



Panorama of Chesler Park from here; note the "island" of spires in the center of the photo; we'd circle way around this on the loop trail that goes around the perimeter of the park:



There were also many rock fins in addition to the needles surrounding Chesler Park, which reminded me somewhat of the rock formations at the Fiery Furnace in Arches:



Looking ahead at where the trail gets closer to some of these huge rock formations:



This was a crack/saddle between two sets of needles forming the boundary of Chesler Park, from which we could look back at the convoluted territory that we'd crossed to get here; there is a nice campsite near here, located between some rock fins:



The rock pillars silhouetted against the clear sky made for interesting HDR photography:



Another panorama of Chesler Park as we reach a flatter area and approach the "needle island":



There were multitudes of flowers in this section of Chesler Park; here's one of the orange-ish ones:



There were also many purple, yellow, and white flowers in addition to the orange ones:



Here's a closer photo of one of the purple flowers (which didn't come out as well focused as I'd have liked because the flower was moving in the breeze):



Another panorama as we approach a part of Chesler Park that has a higher concentration of the needles formations:



Panorama of the needle island noted previously; as can be seen from this photo, the terrain through here seemed to be covered with the orange flowers:



Looking back through these orange flowers at the rock formations we had just come from :



Panorama of the amazing scenery we are hiking through here:



This is where the Chesler Park Trail can be connected to the Druid Arch Trail (Druid Arch is located 2.6 miles from here):



We were incredibly lucky to have such relatively cool weather for this hike, as later in the year the hike might not be possible due to the heat:



There were campsites off to the left, in between some larger (shade-providing) rocks, after we rounded the other side of the "needle island":



There was one part of the trail where there were many of these yellow flowers (previously they had been scattered throughout the other flowers):



We are now getting closer to this section of tall needle formations near the edge of Chesler Park:



Looking back at the "needle island"; note how well-defined the trail we are following through here is (I think it may have once been an old road, though how the road accessed Chesler Park I'm not sure, as the terrain between here and the road beyond Elephant Hill will be seen to be difficult to cross):



Notice the balancing rock left of center in the photo:

