

GOBLIN VALLEY AREA SLOTS (IN THE SAN RAFAEL SWELL): LITTLE WILD HORSE AND DING CANYONS

Ever since we had been to Buckskin Gulch in the Vermillion Cliffs and Peekaboo and Spooky Slots in the Grand Staircase, we had wanted to go to the San Rafael Swell to see the famous Goblin Valley Area Slots, especially Little Wild Horse Canyon. Little Wild Horse (LWH) did not disappoint, especially when we walked through the narrower sections of the canyon which were so tight that I could barely hike through without needing to walk sideways. In the early morning, the lighting was spectacular and made for great HDR photography. We only encountered water in the uppermost section of tight narrows, which was easily stemmed over. What I considered to be the most surprising part of the hike was seeing how the narrows changed when passing through different kinds of rock; sometimes the canyon reminded me of the Cottonwood Narrows and of Spooky Slot in the Grand Staircase, sometimes of Buckskin Gulch in the Vermilion Cliffs, and also sometimes of Keyhole Canyon in Zion and Grand Gulch in Capitol Reef. After exiting the main narrows of LWH, we had planned to continue on the loop to see Bell Canyon. We made it past the 15 foot impasse, located about a half mile from the Behind the Reef Road, before encountering a group that had hiked up Bell and informed us that there was knee-deep water in stretches of about 200 meters in Bell Canyon. As we were not prepared to cross that much (murky) water, we decided to head back down LWH and go up Bell to see how far we could get. We observed that LWH wasn't quite as amazing in the midday lighting as it had been in the morning, so we were glad we had gotten our photos then.

As we were heading up Bell Canyon, we encountered another group who were quite wet and muddy. Around a couple of corners, we encountered a fairly deep and very muddy pool beneath a fall, so we decided it would be best to check out Ding Canyon rather than try to continue up Bell Canyon. We had wanted to check out Dang Canyon too, but as we'd had to hike back so far down LWH we knew we wouldn't have time for it in addition to Ding. When we got to the parking area for Ding and Dang Canyons, we encountered a group who had just returned from doing the Ding and Dang Canyons loop. Ding had water which got increasingly difficult to stem over, but it wasn't too deep, whereas Dang had substantial water, up to one's waist. Thus we went up Ding Canyon to the beginning of the narrows; we were able to hike about halfway through the narrows, stemming over water when necessary, before being stopped by a big mucky pool of water which looked to be difficult to stem over due to the nature of the canyon walls at that point.

The distance to the Little Wild Horse and Bell Canyons junction is 0.6 miles, and the distance beyond that, through the narrows, to the 15 foot fall is approximately 2.7 miles. Had we been able to continue on the loop, we would have hiked 0.5 mile beyond the impasse to the Behind the Reef Road, 1.4 miles along the road, and then 1.6 miles down Bell back to the junction. The total length of the loop hike would have been 7.4 miles. The distance to the junction of Ding and Dang Canyons is 0.9 mile, and one can hike up Ding and back down Dang in 3.1 miles.

On the way to the parking area for Little Wild Horse and Bell Canyons, we were getting great views of the San Rafael Reef and the incredible slot canyons that cut through this formation:



Up ahead we can see Little Wild Horse and Ding Canyons coming down:



The canyon wash cuts through this short narrows section before splitting into Little Wild Horse and Bell (one might call Bell Canyon a side canyon of Little Wild Horse, or perhaps both canyons forks of the same canyon):



The canyon encounters this impasse, which can be easily bypassed by scrambling around the narrows section on the left side, along the slickrock, if one chooses not to climb it directly:



The narrows just above the impasse are of similar character to those below the impasse:



Panorama of the junction of Little Wild Horse and Bell Canyons (Bell to the left and Little Wild Horse to the right):



Guidebooks often note that the junction can be easily missed by hikers who are not used to navigating this sort of terrain; when we hiked these canyons, the BLM had placed a sign at this junction:



The beginning of Little Wild Horse is somewhat narrow, but definitely not yet a slot:



Up ahead, the canyon enters a narrow bend:



Then, it opens up around the corner:



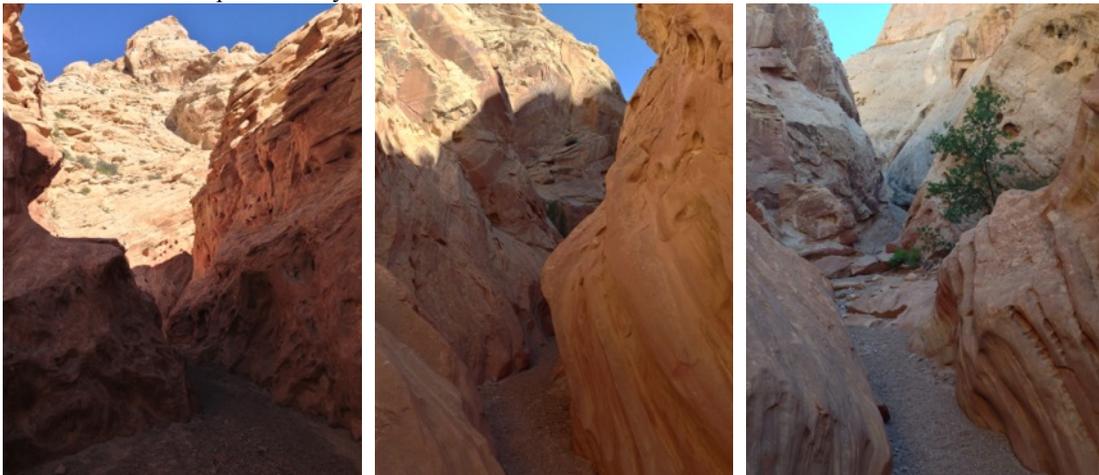
Before the slot narrows, the canyon has rock formations which are vaguely reminiscent of canyons such as Cottonwood Canyon in the Grand Staircase:



There are also a lot of holes in the rock throughout this slot canyon:



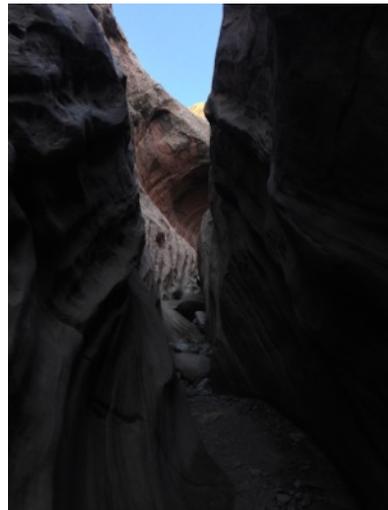
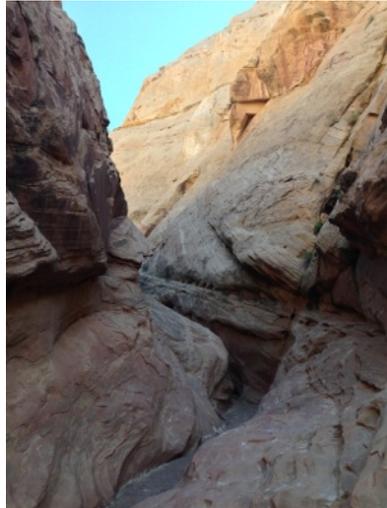
The canyon starts to narrow down spectacularly after a few more turns:



The rock formations in this canyon certainly are fascinating; here, this ridged rock wall is very interesting to walk past:

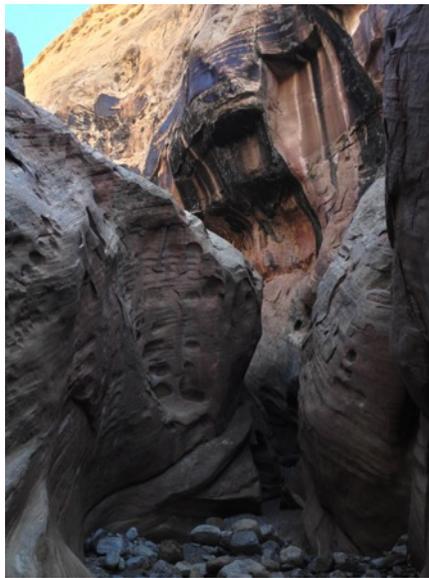


The next nine photos are of the first section of narrows in Little Wild Horse Canyon:





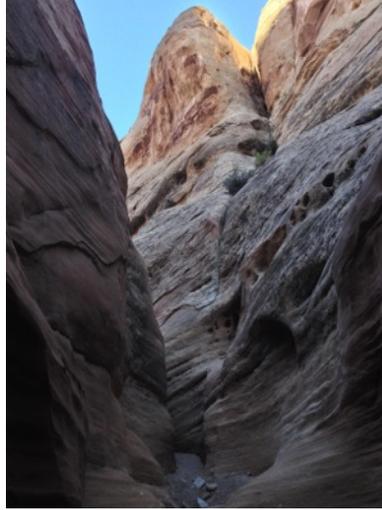
The rock wall up ahead was interestingly colored:



I tried taking some vertical panoramas in this canyon to see if it would give a better idea of how deep and narrow this canyon is:



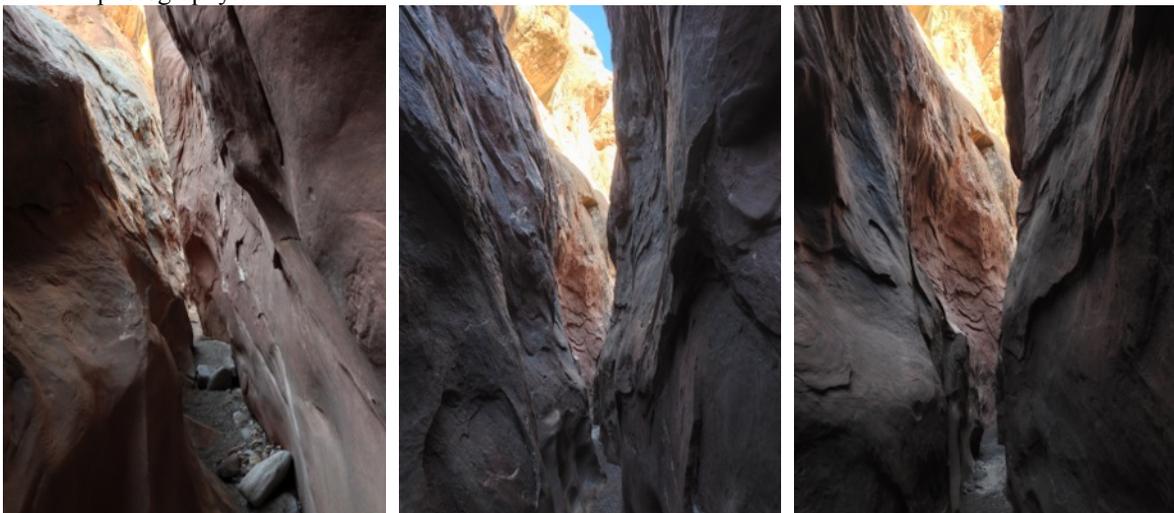
The kind of rock seems to be changing slightly through here:

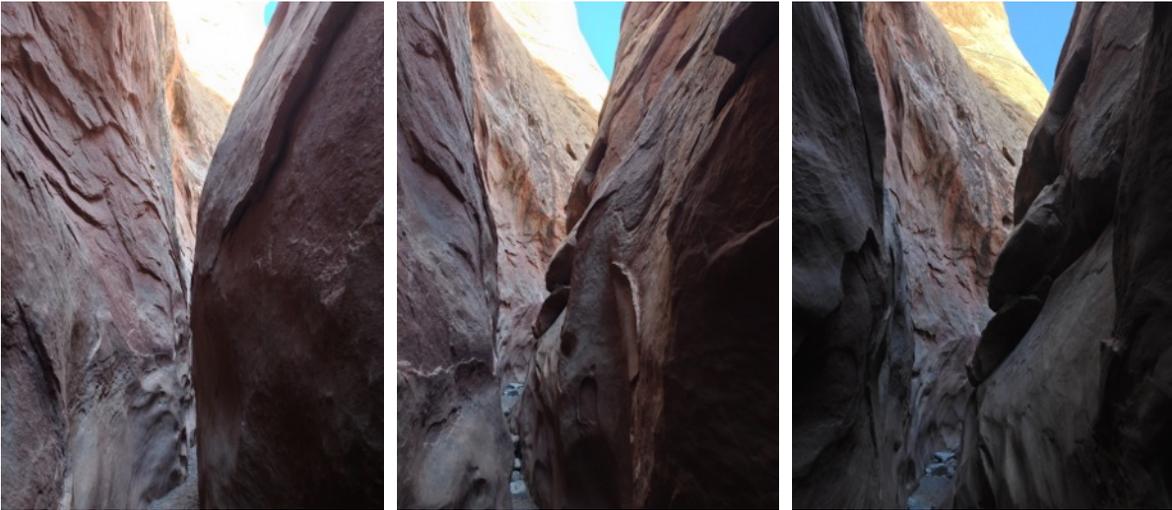


This was the narrowest section that we passed through; I had to take my backpack off and carry it through this slanted corridor:



These six photos are of the canyon just beyond this narrowest part of the canyon; the morning lighting in this area was amazing and made for great HDR photography:





Up ahead, the canyon opens up briefly before entering another narrow section:



Looking back down this narrow section; it would be difficult for two groups to pass in this part of the canyon (one might have to stem up and above the other):



The canyon actually does enter that narrow slot up ahead:



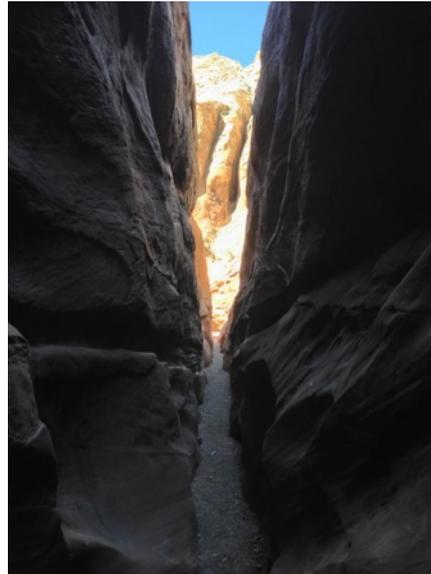
This looked to be where two short side canyons came in and joined the main Little Wild Horse Canyon; the side canyon to the left looked like it might be relatively wide and go some distance (and from Google Earth it appears to connect with a side canyon of Bell Canyon after crossing a ridge, though there certainly might be a large impasse in the way which would prevent a hiker from actually making the crossing), whereas the one on the right seemed to reach an impasse quickly. However, we didn't have time to check either one out, and both look like they would be worthwhile to explore on a cooler day:



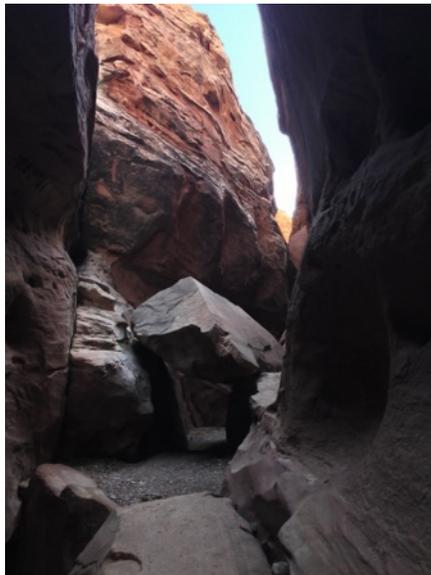
This narrow section wasn't quite as tight as the previous one; I think we are again entering a slightly different rock formation here:



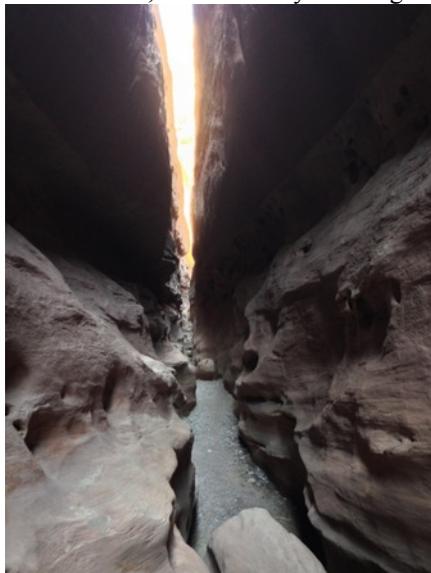
The narrows here were still tight, and they extended upwards higher than in the previous section of canyon:



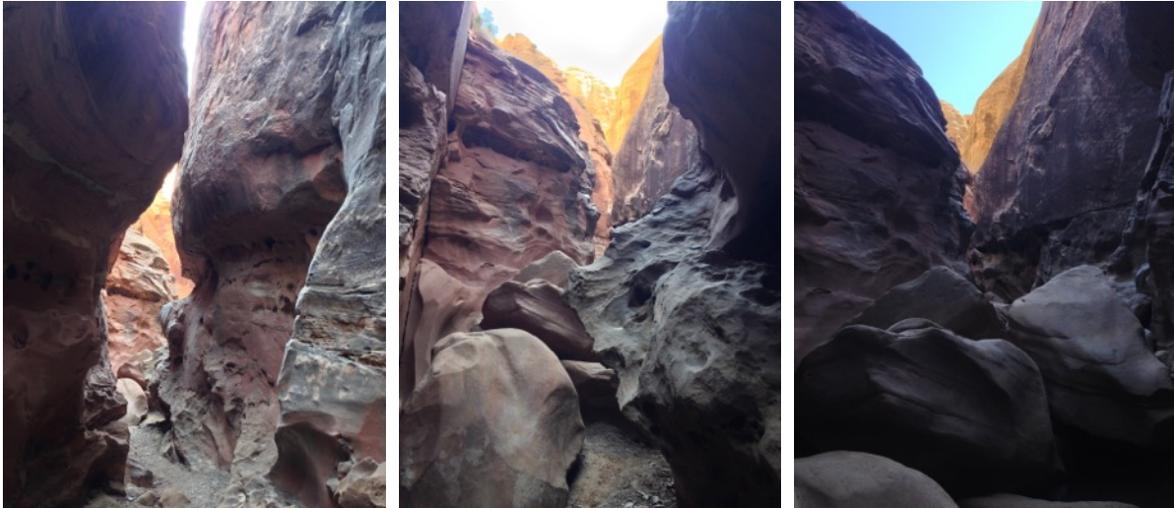
The route passes under a boulder here:



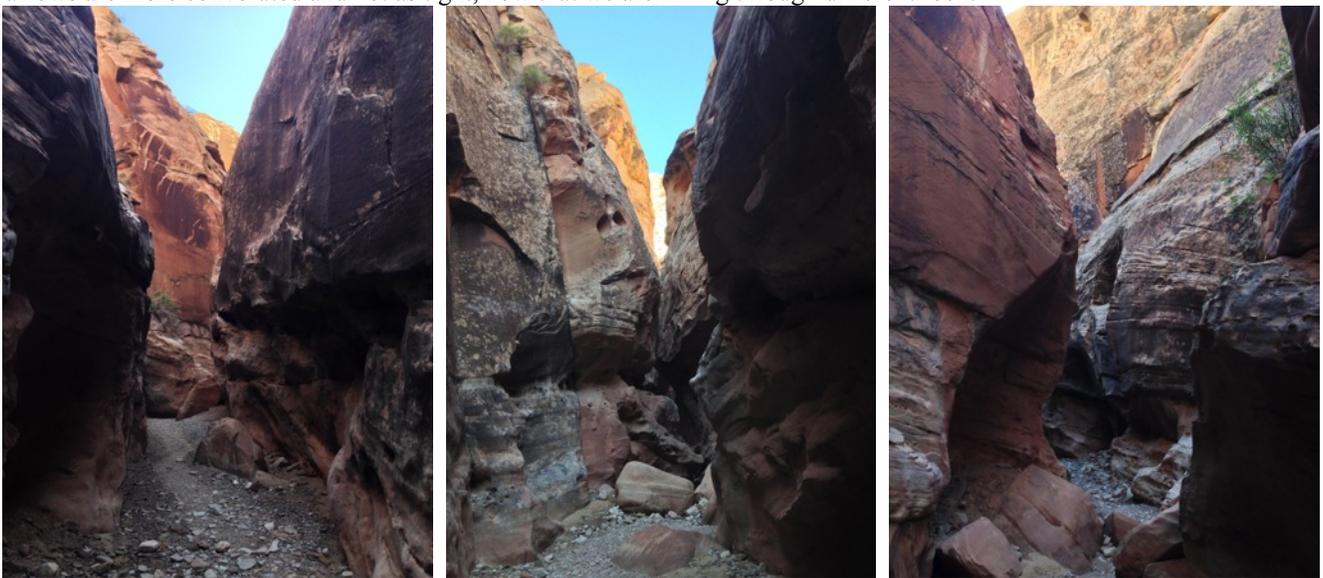
Looking back down at the narrow section we just came from, with the early morning sunlight shining in:



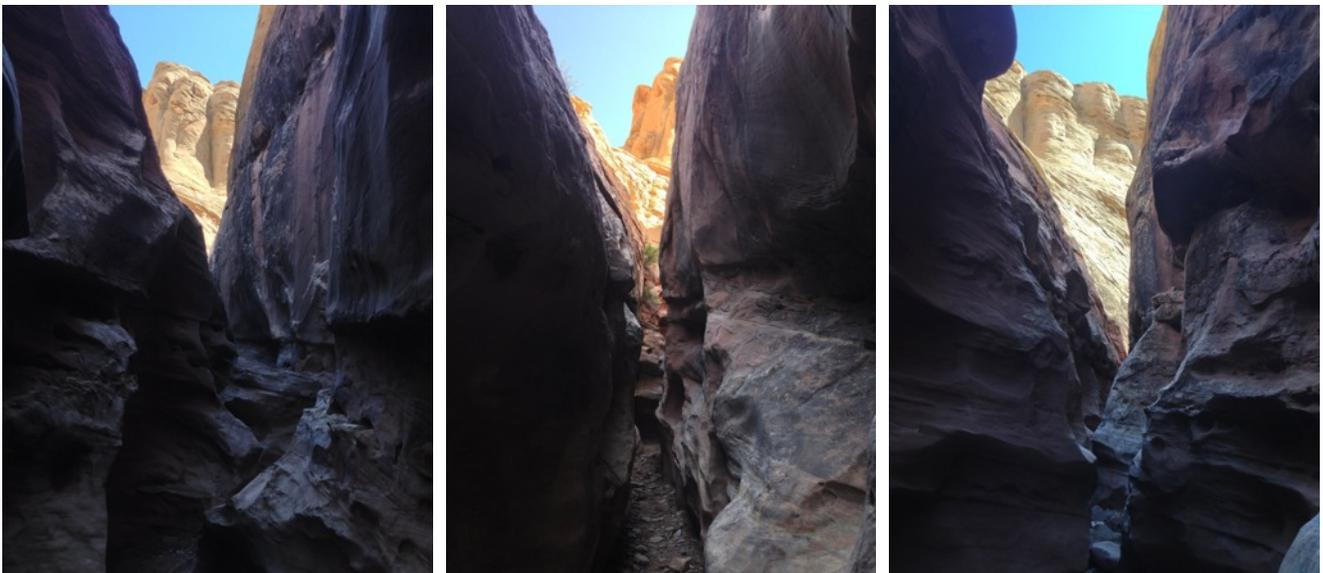
Up ahead, the kind of rock we are hiking through seems to change dramatically, and we have to scramble over and around a small boulder pile:



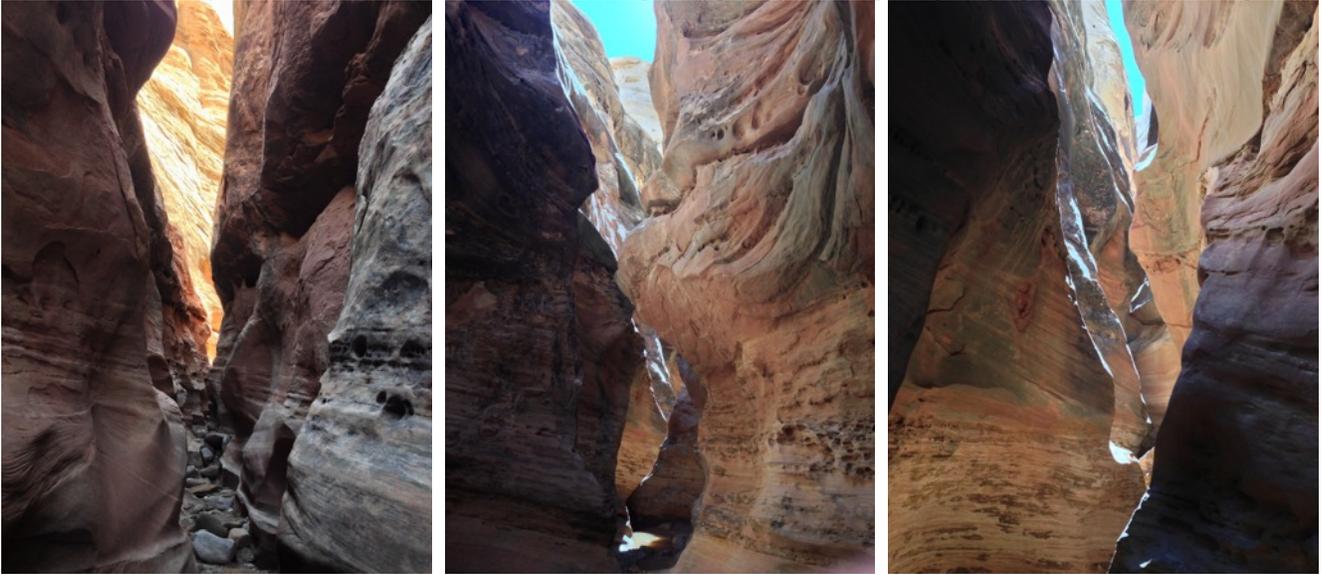
The narrows are more convoluted and not as tight, now that we are hiking through different rock:



This is certainly an amazing canyon; at this point we were surprised that the narrows had gone on this long—and there was still a lot more to come:



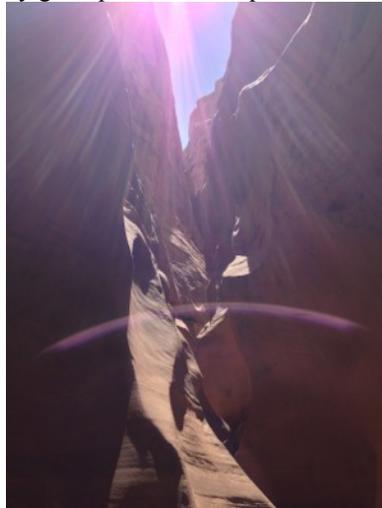
This seemed to me to be yet another kind of rock we were walking through here, as the passageways got less convoluted again:



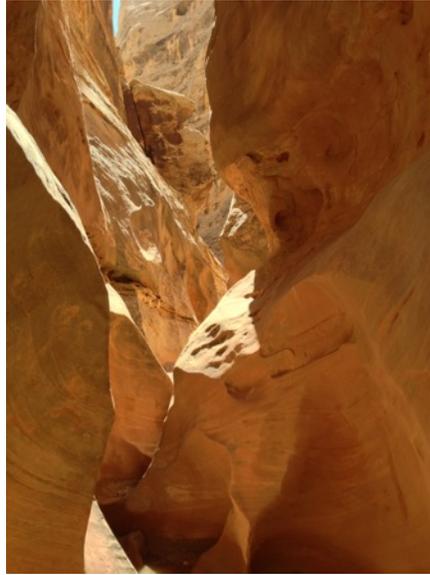
Then, we entered one last section which was very convoluted and reminded me of Keyhole Canyon in Zion National Park; this is a seemingly enclosed chamber, but the canyon does continue:



Unfortunately the sun angle wasn't good for photos when we were hiking through here in the morning, and on our way back we were constantly passing lots of hikers, so I didn't get very good photos of this part of the canyon:



However, it was one of the more amazing stretches of narrows that we hiked through, as each bend in the canyon was very regular, for lack of a better word:



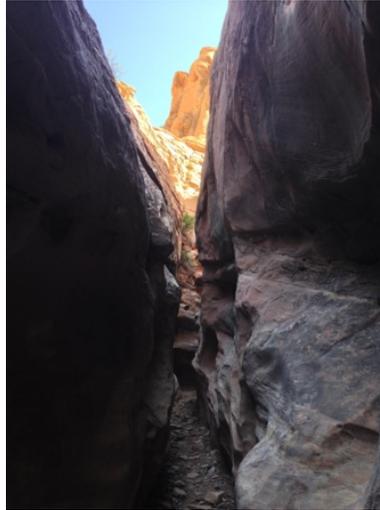
Looking back down this narrow section, which is where the only water we encountered in Little Wild Horse was located (it wasn't very deep and was easily stemmed over):



We spotted this photogenic lizard when exiting this part of the narrows:



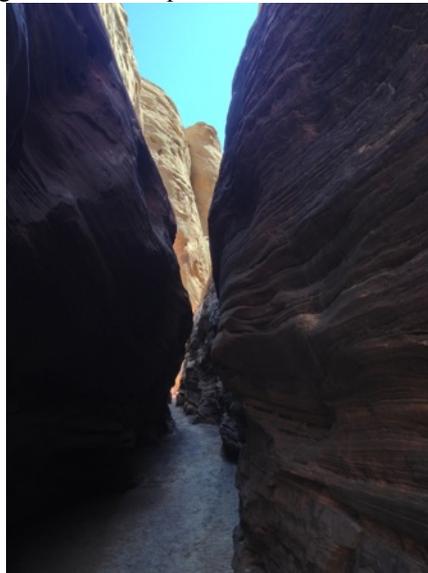
Looking back at the last part of this section of narrows; one can see that the kind of rock is starting to change again, and that's probably why this part of the narrows ended:



We entered a brief open area around a corner, and then the canyon narrowed down again. Here there is a narrow passage going off to the left of the main canyon, which quickly encounters a larger dryfall (but the canyon above looks interesting):



The canyon is a little wider from now on, though it is no less spectacular as the walls seem to actually be increasing in height:



Here we seem to be leaving one type of rock formation and entering another:



Up ahead the canyon is starting to look like a narrower and smaller version of Grand Gulch, in Capitol Reef National Park:



There were a few very narrow side-canyons dropping into the main canyon in this section of the narrows:



The canyon walls are now made of a substantially different rock than they had been previously, and there are also more holes in the rock as well as the nearly horizontal ridges we had seen near the start of the canyon:



This section of canyon had an amazing number of holes in the walls:



The walls become less tall through here, and we can tell that we are nearing the end of the narrow canyon:



The slickrock here might be possible to climb up and out of the canyon:



More amazing rock formations in this part of Little Wild Horse:



We now enter a section of small potholes and pinkish rock:



There are sections with lots of these small potholes, and there are sections where the terrain is flatter and easier walking:

