

Fish, Owl & McCloyd Canyons, Cedar Mesa Country, Utah

Location & Access These 3 canyons are located south of the Abajo (Blue) Mountains & Highway 95 east of Grand Gulch & Highway 261, and north of Road Canyon on the eastern side of Cedar Mesa. To get to **Fish & Owl** from the junction of Highways 95 & 261, drive south about 7 kms (4 miles) to the **Kane Gulch Ranger Station (near mile posts 29)**. If you're there between 8am & 12 noon in spring or fall seasons, ask someone about the latest road or trail conditions. From the ranger station, continue south on Highway 261 to between **mile posts 27 & 28** to a turnoff to the east which is **Road #253**. From the highway, drive southeast 8.5 kms (5.3 miles) to an old **drill hole** which is the trailhead for Fish & Owl Creek Canyons. This is a good road for any vehicle, but it can be slick & muddy in wet weather. You can camp at the trailhead, which has a toilet, but no water.

To reach the upper parts of **Owl's South Fork**, turn east & southeast from Highway 261 about 500m south of **mp 27** and drive a pretty good road for about 3.6 kms (2.2 miles). There the better road ends for cars--park there (with a HC/4WD you can go all the way to **Snow Flat Road #237**).

To get to **McCloyd Canyon**, continue south on Highway 261 to between **mp 22 & 23** and turn east onto the **Snow Flat Road #237**. Drive east for 13.3 kms (8.2 miles). There you should see a flat parking area on the right (south) which is labeled **drill hole** on USGS maps. To the left or north is a sign, hiker's register & information board, and a homemade road heading north. Drive this to its end, which is 1.6 kms (1.2 miles) from Road #237. This last part is a bit rough, but most cars can make it in the best of conditions. This is the trailhead to **McCloyd Canyon** and the **Moonhouse Ruins**.

Trails/Routes Fish & Owl Walk down one canyon and up the other; best way to do this loop-hike is to go in a clock-wise direction. The reason is, it might be easier going down into Fish Creek, than to find, then climb up the route out of the canyon. To begin, walk north from the trailhead sign & register board on a good well-used trail until you reach the canyon rim. Take a short rope or cord to lower big packs over the first ledge. Below that, the trail zig zags down the steep slope. Once at the bottom it's generally easy walking down the creek bed or along hiker-made trails. Take binoculars to view ruins. There's flowing water in places, but you can avoid wading. In 1986, there were lots of small fish or minnows in this creek, but in 2005 & 2010, the author didn't see a thing (?). Once through Fish Creek, walk up Owl Creek until you reach the first waterfall just below the confluence of the 2 upper forks; pass it on the right or north side. About a km above that will be the 2nd waterfall; walk up a trail in a side-canyon to the north to bypass this. After that follow the trail back to the trailhead. As you near the rim and the trailhead, you'll have a chance to visit an interesting cliff dwelling & kiva on the left under an overhang.

From the suggested car-park near **Owl's South Fork**, walk along the canyon rim just to the east. You'll see 2 sets of ruins. Or drive or walk the 4WD road southeast to a divide between altitude markers **6429 & 6344**, then make your way northeast to the canyon rim. From the rim, you can see at least 4 sets of ruins in that section. You can enter the drainage just upcanyon from the **Big Ruins**. Take and use binoculars while rim-walking these parts.

From the **McCloyd Canyon** trailhead, walk northeast on a wide trail; after 250m you'll reach the rim. Zig zag north down a cairned trail ending at the bottom of a rockslide. As you walk down, be looking north to the other side of the canyon. You should see Anasazi ruins in at least 3 places. The biggest site is called **Moonhouse Ruins**. It has 49 rooms (this is counting ruins just to the east), and was built in 3 stages between 1226 & 1268 AD--according to dendrochronology studies. One unusual thing about these dwellings is, there is an outer wall in front, then a kind of hallway, and behind that several more rooms. This appears to be a most unusual kiva (?) because of the painted walls.

Going **upcanyon** you'll find at least 6 other ruins and 2 waterfalls (or dryfalls); the 1st is easy to climb, the 2nd more difficult--help each other over that--or return the same way. A short rope might help. You can exit in several places above the 2nd water/dryfall and view more ruins from the rim.

Going **downcanyon** is more interesting. There are 3 water/dryfalls and at least half a dozen Anasazi sites. About 2 kms below Moonhouse, be sure to follow tracks & a hiker's trail up to the right or south to bypass 3 falls. At one ledge, you'll find a **rickety homemade ladder** about 5m in height. Hopefully the BLM will make a better one and install it. In the meantime, if you have an extra rope of about 15m or so long, leave it tied to a small juniper for added safety. From the ladder, walk down to the creek bed, then after another 500m or so, veer right and bench-walk above another water/dryfall and around the corner to the south. That bench turns into a **skinny ledge** and you crawl part way! At that point, head west into the little **South Fork of McCloyd**. Follow tracks, and a topo map. In this little fork are 3 sets of ruins and 2 debris slopes on the south side where you can exit/enter the canyon on developing trails. Once out, walk cross-country WNW back to your car. Nice hike. Take binoculars.

Elevations Fish & Owl TH, 1895m; confluence of Fish & Owl, 1460m; McCloyd Canyon TH, 1760m.

Time Needed To do the **Fish & Owl Creek Loop** should take 8-12 hours. But many people do the hike in 2 days or more while camping. If you have only half a day, go down Owl Creek, visit some ruins, the 2 water/dryfalls, and return. **McCloyd Canyon**; you can see Moonhouse Ruins and return in 1, 2, or 3 hours, but to see the lower part of the canyon and return via the little South Fork, may take 4-7 hours. In 4-6 hours, you can see the **South Fork of Owl Creek**.

Water On day-trips take your own. There may be running water in all canyons, but more in **Fish Creek**. Cattle are apparently no longer allowed to graze these canyons, so the water should be unpolluted--except by careless campers! The running water shown on the map is how it was in 1986, after several wet years. **McCloyd** may have a little running water in spring, or maybe just pools (?).

Maps USGS or BLM map Bluff (1:100,000) for driving & orientation; Snow Flat, Spring Cave & Bluff NW (1:24,000--7 1/2" quads) for hiking; or the plastic Trails Illustrated/National Geographic map, Grand Gulch Plateau (1:62,500) for hiking & driving.

Main Attractions This is one of the better places in Utah and the Colorado Plateau to visit Anasazi ruins in a wilderness setting--especially in McCloyd Canyon. Plus water/dryfalls & nice scenery.

Best Time to Hike Spring or fall, or perhaps winter dry spells. Summer isn't bad either.

Boots/Shoes Any dry weather boots or shoes, but trail running shoes are best.

Author's Experience In 1986, he camped at the **Fish & Owl** trailhead and did the loop-hike in 8 1/2 hours. In 4/2005, he did the same hike, but went up the South Fork of Owl about 1 km; round-trip 8 1/2 hours. Next day, he visited Moonhouse in **McCloyd**, then went upcanyon, exited and rim-walked back while viewing ruins with binoculars; 3 3/4 hours. That afternoon, he rim-walked east, found the entry/exit in the little **South Fork** and walked upcanyon to Moonhouse and exited via the normal route; 5 1/3 hours. He visited the upper part of **Owl's South Fork** in 4 1/4 hours. In 4/2010, he walked down McCloyd and out the little South Fork in just over 5 hours.

Map 60, Fish, Owl & McCloyd Canyons, Cedar Mesa C., Utah

