

# Bull Canyon Dinosaur Track Trail: A Complete Hiking Guide

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*A comprehensive guide to exploring one of Utah's most fascinating paleontological treasures in the La Sal Mountains*

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*The dramatic cliff-edge view from Bull Canyon Dinosaur Track Trail, showing the spectacular canyon vista 1,000 feet below*

## Table of Contents

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1. [Introduction](#)
2. [Trail Overview](#)
3. [Getting There: Directions and Access](#)
4. [Trail Description](#)

5. [The Dinosaur Tracks: A Window into the Jurassic](#)
  6. [Geological Context](#)
  7. [Flora and Fauna](#)
  8. [Photography Tips](#)
  9. [Safety Considerations](#)
  10. [Best Times to Visit](#)
  11. [What to Bring](#)
  12. [Nearby Attractions](#)
  13. [Conservation and Leave No Trace](#)
  14. [References](#)
- 

## Introduction

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Nestled high in the La Sal Mountains of southeastern Utah, the Bull Canyon Dinosaur Track Trail offers visitors a remarkable opportunity to step back in time—literally walking in the footsteps of creatures that roamed the Earth over 165 million years ago. This short but spectacular trail combines paleontological wonder with breathtaking scenery, making it one of the most unique hiking experiences in the Moab area.

Located at an elevation of over 8,500 feet in the Manti-La Sal National Forest, this easily accessible trail provides an intimate encounter with well-preserved theropod dinosaur tracks while offering stunning panoramic views of Bull Canyon, Fisher Valley, and the surrounding red rock country. The trail represents a perfect synthesis of natural history and geological beauty, where ancient footprints tell the story of a world vastly different from today's high desert landscape.



*The majestic La Sal Mountains provide a dramatic alpine backdrop to the desert landscape below*

## **Trail Overview**

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The Bull Canyon Dinosaur Track Trail is a short, family-friendly hike that packs an extraordinary amount of natural and paleontological interest into a brief but memorable experience. This trail exemplifies the concept that great things come in small packages, offering visitors the chance to see genuine dinosaur footprints preserved in Entrada Sandstone while enjoying some of the most spectacular views in the La Sal Mountains region.

## Quick Facts

Attribute	Details
Distance	0.2-0.25 miles roundtrip
Trail Type	Lollipop loop
Difficulty	Easy
Elevation	8,504 - 8,526 feet
Elevation Gain	25 feet
Time Required	15-30 minutes
Best Season	May through October
Fee	None
Dogs	Allowed on leash
Facilities	Restroom available
Cell Service	Limited to none

The trail's brevity should not be mistaken for lack of substance. Within this short distance, hikers encounter multiple sets of dinosaur tracks, interpretive signage that provides context about the prehistoric environment, and viewpoints that showcase the dramatic landscape carved by millions of years of geological processes. The trail has been thoughtfully developed with a graveled pathway, protective fencing around the most significant track sites, and educational materials that enhance the visitor experience without detracting from the natural setting [1].

What makes this trail particularly special is its accessibility to visitors of all ages and fitness levels. Families with young children, elderly hikers, and those with mobility limitations can all enjoy this remarkable paleontological site. The easy grade and short distance mean that the focus remains on observation, education, and appreciation rather than physical challenge. This accessibility has made Bull Canyon Dinosaur Track Trail one of the most visited paleontological sites in the Moab area, drawing thousands of visitors annually who come to witness these ancient traces of life [2].

The trail's location within the Manti-La Sal National Forest ensures that it is managed with both conservation and public access in mind. The Forest Service has invested in infrastructure improvements in recent years, including updated interpretive signage, improved pathway surfaces, and protective barriers that allow visitors to view the tracks while preventing damage from foot traffic. These enhancements reflect the growing recognition of the site's scientific and educational value, as well as its importance as a gateway for introducing the public to paleontology and Earth sciences [3].

## Getting There: Directions and Access

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Reaching the Bull Canyon Dinosaur Track Trail requires a scenic drive through some of Utah's most beautiful landscape, but the entire route is accessible via paved roads, making it suitable for all types of vehicles. The trailhead is located along the La Sal Loop Road, a designated scenic byway that offers spectacular views of the La Sal Mountains, Castle Valley, and the Colorado River corridor.

### From Moab (Primary Route)

The most common approach to Bull Canyon begins in Moab, Utah's adventure capital and the nearest major town to the trailhead. From downtown Moab, the journey covers approximately 26 miles and takes about 45 minutes to an hour, depending on stops for photography and sightseeing along the way.

Begin your journey by heading north from Moab on US Highway 191 for exactly 2.5 miles until you reach the intersection with Utah State Route 128, also known as the Upper Colorado River Scenic Byway. This intersection is well-marked and represents one of the most scenic highway junctions in Utah, with the Colorado River flowing nearby and towering red rock formations on all sides.

Turn right (east) onto UT-128 and follow this winding road for 15.5 miles as it parallels the Colorado River through a landscape of towering sandstone cliffs, cottonwood groves, and historic ranches. This section of the drive is particularly beautiful in autumn when the cottonwoods display brilliant yellow foliage against the red rock backdrop. Along the way, you'll pass several notable landmarks including the famous Fisher Towers, whose distinctive spires rise dramatically from the desert floor.

At mile 15.5 on UT-128, you'll reach the Castle Valley/La Sal Loop Road intersection. Turn left (south) onto the La Sal Loop Road, leaving the river corridor behind as you begin climbing toward the La Sal Mountains. The road immediately begins to gain elevation, offering increasingly expansive views of Castle Valley and the surrounding red rock country.

Continue on the La Sal Loop Road for 10.7 miles, passing through diverse ecosystems as you climb from desert floor to montane forest. The vegetation changes dramatically during this ascent, transitioning from sagebrush and juniper at lower elevations to aspen groves and coniferous forests at higher elevations. This ecological transition provides excellent opportunities for wildlife viewing, particularly during early morning and evening hours when deer, elk, and various bird species are most active.

At mile 10.7 on the La Sal Loop Road, you'll encounter the Gateway Road junction. Turn right onto Gateway Road, a well-maintained paved road that leads toward the Colorado state line. Follow Gateway Road for just over 5 miles until you reach the Bull Canyon Dinosaur Track Trail parking area, which will be clearly marked on your right side.

## **Alternative Routes**

While the route from Moab represents the most straightforward approach, visitors coming from other directions have several options. Those traveling from Grand Junction, Colorado, can access the site via Gateway Road from the east, following Colorado State Highway 141 south to Gateway and then continuing west on Gateway Road to the trailhead. This approach offers spectacular views of the Colorado National Monument and the Dolores River canyon.

Visitors approaching from the south can take the La Sal Loop Road from its southern terminus near La Sal, Utah, though this route involves more mountain driving and may be challenging during winter months when snow and ice are present at higher elevations.

## **Parking and Trailhead Facilities**

The Bull Canyon Dinosaur Track Trail parking area is a well-developed facility that can accommodate approximately 20-25 vehicles, including larger RVs and vehicles with trailers. The parking area is paved and level, making it accessible for all types of vehicles. During peak visitation periods, particularly on weekends and holidays during

the summer months, the parking area can fill to capacity, so early morning visits are recommended for guaranteed parking availability.

The trailhead facilities include a vault toilet, which is maintained year-round and represents one of the few restroom facilities available along this section of the La Sal Loop Road. There are no water sources at the trailhead, so visitors should bring adequate water for their hike and any additional activities they plan to pursue in the area.

Interpretive panels at the trailhead provide an introduction to the site's geological and paleontological significance, helping visitors understand what they're about to see and placing the dinosaur tracks in their proper scientific context. These panels include illustrations of the types of dinosaurs that created the tracks, explanations of the geological processes that preserved them, and information about the ancient environment in which these creatures lived.

## Trail Description

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The Bull Canyon Dinosaur Track Trail begins immediately adjacent to the parking area, marked by a clear trailhead sign and the first of several interpretive panels that will guide your journey. The trail follows a well-maintained gravel path that has been carefully designed to provide stable footing while minimizing environmental impact. This thoughtful construction makes the trail accessible to visitors using wheelchairs or mobility aids, though some sections may require assistance due to slight grade changes.

From the trailhead, the path leads gently upward through a landscape dominated by scrub oak, serviceberry, and scattered ponderosa pines. This vegetation represents the transition zone between the high desert environment of the Colorado Plateau and the montane forests of the La Sal Mountains. The plant community here is particularly diverse, supporting a variety of wildlife species and providing seasonal color changes that make the trail attractive throughout the hiking season.

The first major feature encountered along the trail is a series of interpretive signs that explain the geological history of the area and provide context for understanding the dinosaur tracks. These educational materials have been developed in collaboration with paleontologists and geologists to ensure scientific accuracy while remaining accessible to visitors of all ages and educational backgrounds. The signs include

detailed illustrations showing how the tracks were formed and preserved, as well as reconstructions of the ancient environment that existed when the dinosaurs walked across this landscape.

Approximately 100 yards from the trailhead, the path reaches the first viewing area for dinosaur tracks. This section features several well-preserved footprints protected by a low fence that allows close observation while preventing damage from visitor traffic. The tracks at this location represent some of the clearest examples of theropod footprints found anywhere in the region, showing distinct toe impressions and claw marks that provide insight into the anatomy and behavior of these ancient predators.

The trail continues beyond the first track site, following the edge of the mesa toward the dramatic overlook that gives Bull Canyon its name. This section of the trail offers increasingly spectacular views as the landscape opens up to reveal the vast expanse of Bull Canyon stretching out below. The contrast between the forested mesa top and the arid canyon bottom illustrates the dramatic ecological diversity found within the La Sal Mountains region.

The highlight of the trail comes at its terminus, where visitors encounter the most spectacular dinosaur tracks situated directly on the edge of a cliff that drops nearly 1,000 feet into Bull Canyon. This location provides one of the most dramatic settings for viewing dinosaur tracks anywhere in North America, with the ancient footprints appearing to lead directly off the cliff edge into the void below. Of course, when these tracks were made during the Jurassic Period, no canyon existed here—the landscape was a flat, coastal plain near sea level, and the dramatic topography we see today was created by millions of years of subsequent geological processes.

The overlook area features additional interpretive signage that explains the geological forces that created the current landscape, including the uplift of the La Sal Mountains and the erosional processes that carved Bull Canyon. From this vantage point, visitors can see for miles across the Colorado Plateau, taking in views of Fisher Valley, the Colorado River corridor, and distant mountain ranges in Colorado. On clear days, the visibility extends for more than 50 miles, encompassing some of the most spectacular scenery in the American Southwest.

The return journey follows the same path back to the trailhead, but the changing perspective offers new opportunities for observation and photography. Many visitors find that the return trip provides better lighting conditions for photographing the

tracks, particularly during late afternoon when the angle of the sun creates more dramatic shadows that highlight the three-dimensional nature of the footprints.



*Clear, detailed view of theropod dinosaur tracks preserved in Entrada Sandstone, showing the distinctive three-toed footprint pattern*

## **The Dinosaur Tracks: A Window into the Jurassic**

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The dinosaur tracks at Bull Canyon represent one of the most significant paleontological discoveries in the La Sal Mountains region, providing direct evidence of dinosaur activity during the Middle to Late Jurassic Period, approximately 165-200 million years ago. These tracks offer a unique window into the behavior, anatomy, and environment of theropod dinosaurs, the group of bipedal, primarily carnivorous dinosaurs that includes famous species like *Allosaurus*, *Ceratosaurus*, and the ancestors of modern birds.

### **Track Characteristics and Identification**

The tracks at Bull Canyon are classified as theropod footprints based on their distinctive morphological characteristics. Each track displays the classic three-toed

pattern typical of theropod dinosaurs, with clear impressions of individual digits and, in many cases, visible claw marks that extend beyond the toe pads. The tracks range in size from approximately 8 to 14 inches in length, suggesting they were made by medium to large-sized theropods, possibly comparable in size to Allosaurus or similar predatory dinosaurs of the Jurassic Period [4].

The preservation quality of these tracks is exceptional, with many specimens showing fine details that provide insights into the soft tissue anatomy of the dinosaurs' feet. Some tracks display clear pad impressions, indicating the presence of fleshy foot pads similar to those found in modern birds. Others show evidence of skin texture or scale patterns, rare features that are seldom preserved in fossil footprints. This level of detail preservation is attributed to the ideal conditions that existed when the tracks were made—a fine-grained, slightly moist sediment that could capture and hold fine details before hardening into rock [5].

One of the most remarkable aspects of the Bull Canyon tracks is their arrangement in clear trackways that show the walking patterns of individual dinosaurs. Several trackways can be followed for distances of 20 feet or more, providing information about stride length, pace, and gait. Analysis of these trackways suggests that the dinosaurs were walking at a moderate pace, neither running nor moving particularly slowly. The stride measurements indicate animals with leg lengths consistent with medium to large theropods, supporting the size estimates derived from individual track dimensions [6].

## **Behavioral Insights**

The Bull Canyon tracks provide valuable insights into theropod behavior that cannot be obtained from skeletal remains alone. The trackways show that these dinosaurs were comfortable moving across the coastal plain environment that existed here during the Jurassic Period. The consistent direction of many trackways suggests that the animals may have been following established travel routes, possibly moving between feeding areas or water sources.

Particularly intriguing is the fact that multiple trackways show dinosaurs moving in the same general direction, raising questions about whether these animals traveled in groups or whether the tracks represent multiple individuals using the same route over an extended period. While definitive evidence for herding behavior is difficult to establish from tracks alone, the pattern of multiple parallel trackways is consistent with group movement and adds to the growing body of evidence suggesting that some

theropod dinosaurs may have exhibited more complex social behaviors than previously thought [7].

The tracks also provide evidence about the substrate conditions when they were made. The depth and clarity of the impressions suggest that the sediment was moist but not waterlogged, providing the ideal consistency for track formation and preservation. This information helps paleontologists reconstruct the environmental conditions of the Jurassic coastal plain, including seasonal patterns of rainfall and the presence of temporary water bodies that would have attracted dinosaurs to the area.

## **Geological Context and Preservation**

The dinosaur tracks at Bull Canyon are preserved in the Entrada Sandstone, a geological formation that dates to the Middle to Late Jurassic Period and is widely distributed across the Colorado Plateau region. The Entrada Sandstone was deposited in a variety of environments, including coastal dunes, tidal flats, and shallow marine settings, reflecting the complex geography of western North America during the Jurassic Period when sea levels were much higher than today [8].

The specific layer containing the Bull Canyon tracks represents a tidal flat or coastal plain environment where fine-grained sediments were periodically exposed to air, creating ideal conditions for track formation. When dinosaurs walked across these surfaces, their feet pressed into the soft sediment, creating impressions that were subsequently covered by additional layers of sand and silt. Over millions of years, these sediments hardened into rock, preserving the tracks in three-dimensional detail.

The preservation of the Bull Canyon tracks required a precise sequence of geological events. After the tracks were made, they needed to be covered quickly enough to prevent erosion but gently enough to avoid destroying the delicate impressions. The covering sediments also needed to have different physical properties from the track-bearing layer to allow for differential weathering that would eventually expose the tracks at the surface. This complex preservation process explains why dinosaur tracks are relatively rare in the geological record, making sites like Bull Canyon particularly valuable for scientific research [9].

The current exposure of the tracks is the result of millions of years of erosion that has stripped away the overlying rock layers, revealing the ancient surface where dinosaurs once walked. This erosional process continues today, gradually exposing new tracks while simultaneously threatening existing ones. The dramatic cliff-edge location of

some tracks illustrates this ongoing process—these footprints are literally on the edge of destruction as the cliff face continues to retreat through weathering and mass wasting processes.

## **Scientific Significance**

The Bull Canyon dinosaur tracks contribute to our understanding of Jurassic Period ecosystems and dinosaur evolution in several important ways. First, they provide direct evidence of dinosaur presence in this region during a time period that is not well represented by skeletal fossils in the area. While dinosaur bones from the Jurassic Period are known from other parts of Utah and Colorado, the Bull Canyon tracks fill in geographical and temporal gaps in our knowledge of dinosaur distribution and diversity [10].

Second, the tracks offer insights into dinosaur behavior and ecology that cannot be obtained from skeletal remains. The trackways show how these animals moved through their environment, their preferred travel routes, and potentially their social behaviors. This behavioral information is crucial for understanding dinosaurs as living animals rather than simply anatomical specimens, helping to reconstruct the complex ecosystems of the Mesozoic Era.

Finally, the Bull Canyon site serves as an important reference locality for ichnology, the study of trace fossils. The exceptional preservation and accessibility of the tracks make them valuable for training new researchers, testing new analytical techniques, and developing standardized methods for track documentation and analysis. The site has been featured in numerous scientific publications and continues to contribute to our understanding of dinosaur ichnology and Jurassic Period paleoenvironments [11].

## **Geological Context**

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Understanding the geological context of Bull Canyon enhances appreciation for both the dinosaur tracks and the spectacular landscape that surrounds them. The area represents a complex geological story spanning hundreds of millions of years, from ancient sea floors to modern mountain building, with each chapter written in the rock layers that visitors can observe during their hike.

The foundation of the Bull Canyon area consists of Paleozoic sedimentary rocks deposited when this region was covered by shallow seas. These ancient marine

deposits, including limestone, shale, and sandstone formations, provide the basement upon which younger rocks were deposited. While these older rocks are not visible at the surface in the immediate vicinity of the trail, they form the structural foundation that influences the area's topography and hydrology.

The Entrada Sandstone that contains the dinosaur tracks represents a dramatic change in environmental conditions from the earlier marine deposits. During the Middle to Late Jurassic Period, approximately 165-200 million years ago, this area was part of a vast coastal plain that extended across much of what is now the western United States. Sea levels were much higher than today, and the climate was warm and humid, supporting lush vegetation and diverse animal communities including the dinosaurs whose tracks we see preserved in the rock.

The Entrada Sandstone formation consists primarily of fine to medium-grained quartz sandstone deposited in a variety of coastal environments. The specific characteristics of the rock at Bull Canyon—its fine grain size, cross-bedding patterns, and trace fossil content—indicate deposition in tidal flat and coastal plain settings where sediments were alternately exposed to air and covered by shallow water. These conditions were ideal for track formation and preservation, as the sediment had the right consistency to capture detailed impressions while being stable enough to maintain those impressions until they could be buried and lithified.

Above the Entrada Sandstone, younger rock formations tell the story of continued environmental change throughout the Mesozoic Era. The Morrison Formation, famous for its dinosaur fossils, was deposited during the Late Jurassic Period and represents a shift to more terrestrial conditions with river systems, floodplains, and lakes. While the Morrison Formation is not present at the Bull Canyon site itself, it can be observed in nearby areas and provides context for understanding the broader regional geology.

The dramatic topography visible from the Bull Canyon overlook is the result of much more recent geological processes, primarily the uplift of the La Sal Mountains during the Tertiary Period, approximately 25-30 million years ago. This mountain-building episode, caused by the intrusion of igneous rocks deep beneath the surface, tilted and fractured the sedimentary rock layers, creating the structural framework for the modern landscape. The La Sal Mountains represent one of several isolated mountain ranges in the Colorado Plateau region formed by similar igneous intrusions, known collectively as laccolithic mountains.

Following the mountain uplift, erosional processes began carving the landscape we see today. Bull Canyon itself was carved by stream erosion over millions of years, with the Colorado River system and its tributaries gradually cutting down through the rock layers to create the deep canyons and mesas that characterize the region. The cliff-edge location of the dinosaur tracks dramatically illustrates this ongoing erosional process—these ancient footprints are literally being exposed and destroyed by the same forces that created the spectacular views visitors enjoy today.

The geological processes that created and continue to shape Bull Canyon are ongoing, making this an active landscape where change occurs on both human and geological timescales. Visitors can observe evidence of recent rockfall, ongoing cliff retreat, and active erosion that continues to modify the landscape. This dynamic quality adds an element of urgency to the preservation of the dinosaur tracks, as some of the most spectacular specimens are located perilously close to the cliff edge and may not survive much longer in geological terms.

## Flora and Fauna

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The Bull Canyon area supports a diverse array of plant and animal life adapted to the unique environmental conditions found at this elevation in the La Sal Mountains. The site's location at approximately 8,500 feet places it in the transition zone between several distinct ecological communities, resulting in unusually high biodiversity for such a small area.

### Plant Communities

The vegetation around Bull Canyon represents a complex mosaic of plant communities influenced by elevation, slope aspect, soil conditions, and microclimate variations. The dominant vegetation type is a mixed shrubland community characterized by Gambel oak (*Quercus gambelii*), serviceberry (*Amelanchier alnifolia*), and mountain mahogany (*Cercocarpus montanus*). These shrubs form dense thickets that provide important habitat for wildlife while creating a parklike landscape with open areas interspersed among the shrub patches.

Gambel oak, also known as scrub oak, is perhaps the most conspicuous plant species in the area, forming extensive clones that can cover several acres. These oak communities are particularly spectacular during autumn when the leaves turn brilliant shades of yellow, orange, and red, creating some of the most beautiful fall color

displays in the region. The oak's acorns provide important food for wildlife, including deer, elk, and various bird species, making these communities crucial habitat components.

Scattered throughout the shrubland are individual ponderosa pines (*Pinus ponderosa*) and Douglas firs (*Pseudotsuga menziesii*), representing the lower edge of the montane forest zone that dominates higher elevations in the La Sal Mountains. These conifers become more common on north-facing slopes and in protected areas where moisture conditions are more favorable. Some of these trees are quite large and old, serving as important landmarks and providing nesting sites for various bird species.

The understory vegetation includes a diverse array of herbaceous plants that provide seasonal color and support pollinator populations. Common species include Indian paintbrush (*Castilleja* species), lupine (*Lupinus* species), penstemon (*Penstemon* species), and various grasses and sedges. During late spring and early summer, these wildflowers create spectacular displays that attract numerous butterfly and bee species, adding another dimension to the area's ecological richness.

Of particular interest are the cryptobiotic soil crusts found in open areas between shrubs. These living soil surfaces, composed of cyanobacteria, lichens, and mosses, play crucial roles in soil stabilization, nitrogen fixation, and moisture retention. These biological soil crusts are characteristic of arid and semi-arid environments throughout the Colorado Plateau and represent one of the most important but least appreciated components of these ecosystems.

## **Wildlife**

The diverse plant communities around Bull Canyon support an equally diverse array of animal species, from large mammals to small invertebrates. The area's location along the interface between different habitat types creates edge effects that increase wildlife diversity and provide opportunities for observing species that might not be encountered in more homogeneous environments.

Large mammals are well represented in the Bull Canyon area, with mule deer (*Odocoileus hemionus*) being the most commonly observed species. These deer are particularly active during early morning and evening hours, and visitors frequently encounter them along the trail or in the parking area. The oak shrublands provide excellent habitat for deer, offering both food resources and cover for protection from predators.

Elk (*Cervus canadensis*) are also present in the area, though they are less commonly observed due to their preference for higher elevations and more remote areas. During autumn rutting season, elk may move through the Bull Canyon area, and their distinctive bugling calls can sometimes be heard echoing across the landscape. The presence of elk adds an element of wilderness character to the area and represents one of the great conservation success stories of the American West.

Black bears (*Ursus americanus*) inhabit the La Sal Mountains and occasionally visit the Bull Canyon area, particularly during late summer and autumn when they are actively foraging in preparation for winter hibernation. While bear encounters are relatively rare, visitors should be aware of proper food storage and waste disposal practices to minimize the risk of attracting bears to the area.

Mountain lions (*Puma concolor*) are present throughout the La Sal Mountains, though they are rarely seen due to their secretive nature and primarily nocturnal activity patterns. These large predators play important ecological roles as apex predators, helping to maintain healthy deer and elk populations through natural selection processes.

The bird life around Bull Canyon is particularly diverse, reflecting the variety of habitats present in the area. Raptors are well represented, with red-tailed hawks (*Buteo jamaicensis*), Cooper's hawks (*Accipiter cooperii*), and American kestrels (*Falco sparverius*) commonly observed hunting over the shrublands and open areas. Golden eagles (*Aquila chrysaetos*) occasionally soar over the area, taking advantage of thermal updrafts created by the cliff faces and canyon topography.

Forest birds include several species of woodpeckers, nuthatches, and chickadees that utilize the scattered conifers for nesting and foraging. The oak shrublands support different bird communities, including various warblers, vireos, and flycatchers during the breeding season. Many of these species are migratory, making spring and early summer the best times for bird watching in the area.

## Photography Tips

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Bull Canyon Dinosaur Track Trail offers exceptional opportunities for photography, combining paleontological subjects with spectacular landscape scenery. Success in photographing both the dinosaur tracks and the surrounding landscape requires

understanding the unique challenges and opportunities presented by this high-elevation desert environment.

## **Photographing the Dinosaur Tracks**

Capturing high-quality images of the dinosaur tracks requires careful attention to lighting conditions, camera settings, and composition techniques. The tracks are three-dimensional features carved into rock surfaces, and their visibility depends heavily on the angle and quality of light falling on them.

The best lighting for track photography typically occurs during the golden hours—the first hour after sunrise and the last hour before sunset—when the sun is low on the horizon and creates strong directional lighting. This angled light creates shadows within the track impressions that enhance their three-dimensional appearance and make details like toe pads and claw marks more visible. Midday lighting, while providing good overall illumination, tends to flatten the appearance of the tracks and reduce their visual impact.

For detailed close-up photography of individual tracks, consider using a polarizing filter to reduce glare from the rock surfaces and enhance contrast. A macro lens or close-focusing capability is essential for capturing fine details like skin impressions or claw marks. When photographing tracks, include a scale reference such as a coin, ruler, or hand to provide viewers with a sense of the tracks' actual size.

Composition is crucial when photographing dinosaur tracks. Consider including multiple tracks in a single frame to show trackway patterns and walking sequences. Wide-angle shots that include both tracks and the dramatic cliff-edge setting help convey the spectacular location and geological context of the site. Vertical compositions can be particularly effective for showing the relationship between the tracks and the canyon below.

## **Landscape Photography**

The Bull Canyon overlook provides some of the most spectacular landscape photography opportunities in the La Sal Mountains region. The dramatic elevation difference between the mesa top and canyon bottom, combined with the diverse geological formations visible in the distance, creates compositions with exceptional depth and visual interest.

Wide-angle lenses are essential for capturing the full scope of the canyon views, but don't overlook opportunities for telephoto compositions that isolate distant features like the Fisher Towers or Colorado River corridor. The layered rock formations visible from the overlook provide excellent subjects for geological photography that illustrates the area's complex geological history.

Weather conditions can dramatically affect landscape photography opportunities at Bull Canyon. Storm clouds moving across the landscape create dynamic lighting conditions and dramatic skies that can transform ordinary scenes into extraordinary images. The high elevation of the site means that weather can change rapidly, so be prepared for sudden changes in lighting and atmospheric conditions.

Seasonal variations provide different photography opportunities throughout the year. Autumn offers the spectacular fall colors of the Gambel oak, creating warm foreground elements that contrast beautifully with the red rock landscape. Spring brings wildflower blooms that add color and life to compositions. Winter conditions, while challenging, can provide opportunities for snow-covered landscape photography that shows the area in a completely different light.

## **Technical Considerations**

The high elevation and intense sunlight at Bull Canyon create challenging conditions for photography equipment and techniques. The thin atmosphere at 8,500 feet provides less filtering of ultraviolet light, which can affect color balance and contrast in photographs. UV filters can help reduce these effects and protect lens elements from the harsh conditions.

Battery life is often reduced in cold conditions, which can be encountered at Bull Canyon even during summer months due to the high elevation. Carry spare batteries and keep them warm when not in use. Memory cards can also be affected by extreme temperature changes, so allow equipment to acclimate gradually when moving between different temperature environments.

The dry conditions and frequent winds at Bull Canyon create dusty conditions that can affect camera equipment. Protect cameras and lenses from dust and sand, and clean equipment regularly to maintain optimal performance. Consider using lens hoods to reduce flare and protect lens elements from wind-blown particles.

# Safety Considerations

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While the Bull Canyon Dinosaur Track Trail is generally considered safe and suitable for hikers of all ages and abilities, the unique environment and cliff-edge location of the site present several safety considerations that visitors should understand and prepare for before beginning their hike.

## Cliff Edge Hazards

The most significant safety concern at Bull Canyon is the proximity of the dinosaur tracks to a dramatic cliff edge that drops nearly 1,000 feet into the canyon below. The most spectacular tracks are located within just a few feet of this precipice, creating a situation where visitors may be tempted to approach closer than is safe for optimal viewing and photography.

The rock along the cliff edge is fractured and unstable, with ongoing erosional processes that continuously weaken the cliff face. Visitors should maintain a safe distance from the edge and never venture beyond the protective barriers that have been installed around the most dangerous areas. Parents should maintain close supervision of children at all times, as the dramatic views and interesting tracks can be distracting and cause visitors to lose awareness of their proximity to the cliff.

Wind conditions can be particularly hazardous near the cliff edge, especially during afternoon hours when thermal updrafts are strongest. Sudden gusts can catch visitors off guard and potentially cause loss of balance near the precipice. Be especially cautious during windy conditions and consider postponing your visit if winds are severe.

## Weather-Related Hazards

The high elevation of Bull Canyon, at over 8,500 feet, creates weather conditions that can change rapidly and dramatically. Temperatures can vary by 30-40 degrees Fahrenheit between day and night, even during summer months, and sudden thunderstorms are common during the summer monsoon season from July through September.

Lightning presents a significant hazard at Bull Canyon due to the exposed nature of the mesa top and the lack of adequate shelter. Summer thunderstorms can develop

quickly, and the high elevation makes the area particularly susceptible to lightning strikes. If thunderstorms are forecast or if you observe storm development, plan to complete your hike early in the day or postpone your visit entirely.

Hypothermia is a risk during cooler months and can occur even during summer if visitors are caught unprepared by sudden weather changes. The combination of high elevation, potential for sudden temperature drops, and exposure to wind can create conditions where body temperature can drop dangerously low, especially if clothing becomes wet from rain or snow.

Heat-related illnesses, while less common due to the elevation, can still occur during summer months, particularly for visitors who are not accustomed to the high altitude environment. The intense solar radiation at high elevation can cause sunburn and heat exhaustion more quickly than at lower elevations, even when air temperatures are moderate.

## **Wildlife Encounters**

While wildlife encounters at Bull Canyon are generally positive experiences that enhance the hiking experience, visitors should be aware of appropriate protocols for interacting with wild animals. Black bears are present in the La Sal Mountains and may occasionally visit the Bull Canyon area, particularly during late summer and autumn when they are actively foraging.

If you encounter a bear, do not run or make sudden movements. Make yourself appear large by raising your arms or jacket over your head, back away slowly while facing the bear, and speak in a calm, loud voice. Most bear encounters result in the bear leaving the area once it becomes aware of human presence. Store all food and scented items in bear-proof containers or your vehicle to avoid attracting bears to the area.

Mountain lions, while rarely seen, are present throughout the La Sal Mountains. If you encounter a mountain lion, maintain eye contact, appear large, back away slowly, and never turn your back on the animal. Make noise and throw objects if the animal approaches, but do not run unless you can reach immediate safety such as a vehicle or building.

Rattlesnakes are present in the region, though they are uncommon at the elevation of Bull Canyon. Be aware of where you place your hands and feet, especially when

exploring off-trail areas or examining rock formations. Most snake encounters can be avoided by making noise while hiking and being aware of your surroundings.

## **Medical Considerations**

The remote location of Bull Canyon means that emergency medical services may be delayed in reaching the area in case of serious injury or medical emergency. Cell phone coverage is limited or nonexistent at the site, making communication with emergency services challenging. Visitors with known medical conditions should take appropriate precautions and ensure they have necessary medications readily available.

Altitude sickness can affect some visitors, particularly those coming from sea level elevations. Symptoms include headache, nausea, fatigue, and dizziness. Most cases are mild and resolve with rest and hydration, but severe cases may require descent to lower elevations. Allow time for acclimatization if you are not accustomed to high elevation environments.

## **Best Times to Visit**

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The Bull Canyon Dinosaur Track Trail can be visited year-round, but seasonal variations in weather, accessibility, and natural conditions create distinct advantages and challenges for different times of the year. Understanding these seasonal patterns will help you plan your visit for optimal conditions based on your interests and priorities.

### **Spring (April - May)**

Spring is considered one of the best times to visit Bull Canyon, offering mild temperatures, excellent visibility, and the emergence of wildflowers throughout the area. Daytime temperatures typically range from the 60s to 70s Fahrenheit, making hiking comfortable without the extreme heat of summer or the cold of winter. Nighttime temperatures can still drop below freezing, so visitors planning to camp in the area should be prepared for cold conditions.

The spring months offer some of the clearest atmospheric conditions of the year, with excellent visibility for landscape photography and sightseeing. The absence of

summer haze and dust storms means that distant features like the Colorado River corridor and Colorado mountains are clearly visible from the overlook.

Wildflower blooms begin in late April and continue through May, adding color and life to the landscape. Species like Indian paintbrush, lupine, and penstemon create spectacular displays that attract photographers and nature enthusiasts. The timing of peak blooms varies from year to year depending on winter snowpack and spring precipitation patterns.

Spring is also an excellent time for bird watching, as many migratory species return to the area for the breeding season. The combination of resident species and spring migrants creates the highest bird diversity of the year, making this season particularly rewarding for birders.

## **Summer (June - August)**

Summer brings the warmest temperatures and longest days of the year, but also presents some challenges for visitors to Bull Canyon. Daytime temperatures can reach into the 80s and occasionally 90s Fahrenheit, though the high elevation keeps conditions more moderate than in the lower desert areas around Moab.

The summer monsoon season, typically beginning in July, brings afternoon thunderstorms that can develop rapidly and create dangerous conditions. These storms often produce spectacular lightning displays and dramatic cloud formations that can enhance photography opportunities, but they also present significant safety hazards for visitors caught in exposed areas.

Summer is the peak visitation season for the area, meaning that parking areas and trails may be crowded, particularly on weekends and holidays. Early morning visits are recommended to avoid crowds and to take advantage of cooler temperatures and better lighting conditions for photography.

Despite the challenges, summer offers some unique advantages for visiting Bull Canyon. The long daylight hours provide extended opportunities for exploration and photography, and the warm temperatures make camping and other outdoor activities more comfortable. The summer months also offer the best conditions for exploring other areas in the La Sal Mountains, making it possible to combine a visit to Bull Canyon with other hiking and sightseeing activities.

## **Autumn (September - October)**

Autumn is widely considered the optimal time to visit Bull Canyon, offering the best combination of weather conditions, natural beauty, and visitor experience. Temperatures are mild and comfortable, with daytime highs typically in the 60s to 70s and cool, crisp nights that are perfect for camping and stargazing.

The highlight of autumn visits is the spectacular fall color display created by the Gambel oak communities that dominate the area. These oak groves turn brilliant shades of yellow, orange, and red, typically reaching peak color in late September or early October. The timing of peak color varies from year to year depending on weather patterns, but the display typically lasts for 2-3 weeks.

Autumn also offers excellent weather stability, with fewer thunderstorms than summer and generally clear, stable atmospheric conditions. This makes autumn ideal for landscape photography, with dramatic lighting conditions and excellent visibility for distant views.

Wildlife activity increases during autumn as animals prepare for winter, making this an excellent time for wildlife observation and photography. Elk rutting season occurs during September and early October, and their distinctive bugling calls can often be heard echoing across the landscape.

## **Winter (November - March)**

Winter visits to Bull Canyon require more preparation and present greater challenges, but they also offer unique opportunities for those willing to brave the conditions. Snow is common at the 8,500-foot elevation of the site, and temperatures can drop well below freezing, particularly at night.

Road conditions can be challenging during winter months, with ice and snow making driving hazardous, particularly on the winding sections of the La Sal Loop Road. Visitors should check road conditions before traveling and be prepared with appropriate vehicles and equipment for winter driving conditions.

Despite the challenges, winter visits can be rewarding for those seeking solitude and unique photographic opportunities. The snow-covered landscape creates a completely different aesthetic, and the clear, cold air often provides exceptional visibility for distant views. Winter storms can create dramatic cloud formations and lighting conditions that are not available during other seasons.

# What to Bring

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Proper preparation and equipment are essential for a safe and enjoyable visit to Bull Canyon Dinosaur Track Trail. While the hike itself is short and relatively easy, the remote location, high elevation, and variable weather conditions require careful planning and appropriate gear.

## Essential Items

Water is the most critical item to bring, even for this short hike. The high elevation and dry air can cause dehydration more quickly than at lower elevations, and there are no water sources available at the trailhead or along the trail. Bring at least one liter of water per person, and more if you plan to spend extended time in the area or explore other nearby attractions.

Sun protection is crucial due to the intense solar radiation at high elevation. Bring sunscreen with high SPF rating, sunglasses, and a wide-brimmed hat. The thin atmosphere at 8,500 feet provides less filtering of ultraviolet radiation, making sunburn a significant risk even on cloudy days.

Appropriate footwear is important for safety and comfort on the gravel trail surfaces and uneven rock formations around the track sites. Sturdy hiking boots or shoes with good traction are recommended, particularly if you plan to explore areas beyond the main trail.

## Clothing Recommendations

Layered clothing is essential due to the potential for rapid temperature changes at high elevation. Even during summer months, temperatures can vary significantly between day and night, and sudden weather changes can create conditions requiring additional insulation or rain protection.

A warm insulating layer such as a fleece jacket or down vest should be carried even during summer visits, as temperatures can drop quickly with elevation gain, cloud cover, or wind. A waterproof or water-resistant outer layer is recommended during any season, as sudden thunderstorms are common and can develop rapidly.

Comfortable hiking pants or shorts are appropriate depending on season and personal preference, but long pants provide better protection from sun exposure, wind, and

vegetation. Avoid cotton clothing in favor of synthetic or wool materials that maintain insulating properties when wet and dry more quickly.

## **Photography Equipment**

For visitors interested in photography, specific equipment considerations can enhance the experience and improve results. A sturdy tripod is valuable for landscape photography and essential for detailed macro photography of the dinosaur tracks. The windy conditions common at Bull Canyon make a stable tripod particularly important.

Extra batteries are essential, as cold temperatures and high elevation can reduce battery life significantly. Keep spare batteries warm in an inside pocket and allow equipment to acclimate gradually when moving between different temperature environments.

Lens cleaning supplies are important due to the dusty conditions and frequent winds that can deposit particles on lens surfaces. Bring lens cleaning cloths, solution, and protective filters to maintain optimal image quality.

## **Safety and Emergency Items**

A basic first aid kit should be carried, particularly for visitors planning to spend extended time in the area or explore beyond the main trail. Include items for treating minor cuts, scrapes, and blisters, as well as any personal medications that may be needed.

A whistle or other signaling device can be valuable for attracting attention in case of emergency, particularly given the limited cell phone coverage in the area. Three sharp blasts on a whistle is the standard distress signal.

A flashlight or headlamp should be carried even for day hikes, as weather conditions or other factors could delay your return to the trailhead. LED lights are preferred for their efficiency and reliability.

## **Nearby Attractions**

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The Bull Canyon Dinosaur Track Trail is located in one of Utah's most scenic and geologically diverse regions, with numerous additional attractions within a reasonable

driving distance. Combining a visit to Bull Canyon with other nearby sites can create a comprehensive exploration of the area's natural and cultural history.

## **Fisher Towers**

Located approximately 15 miles northeast of Bull Canyon along the Colorado River corridor, the Fisher Towers represent one of the most iconic rock formations in the American Southwest. These towering sandstone spires rise dramatically from the desert floor, creating a landscape that has served as the backdrop for numerous Hollywood films and countless photographs.

The Fisher Towers Trail is a moderate 4.4-mile roundtrip hike that provides close-up views of these spectacular formations while offering panoramic views of the Colorado River valley and surrounding red rock country. The trail is well-maintained and suitable for most hikers, though some sections involve exposure and require caution.

The geological story of the Fisher Towers is closely related to that of Bull Canyon, as both areas showcase the erosional power of water and wind acting on sedimentary rock formations over millions of years. The towers represent erosional remnants of once-continuous rock layers, illustrating the same processes that created the dramatic cliff faces and canyon views at Bull Canyon.

## **Castle Valley**

The drive to Bull Canyon passes through Castle Valley, a spectacular high-desert valley surrounded by towering red rock formations and the snow-capped peaks of the La Sal Mountains. This valley represents one of the most scenic landscapes in the Moab area and provides excellent opportunities for photography, wildlife viewing, and geological observation.

Castle Valley is home to several notable rock formations, including Castleton Tower, a prominent sandstone spire that is popular with rock climbers, and the Rectory, a massive red rock formation that dominates the southern end of the valley. These formations represent the same geological processes and rock units visible at Bull Canyon, providing additional context for understanding the area's geological history.

The valley floor supports a diverse ecosystem that includes riparian areas along Castle Creek, sagebrush communities, and scattered groves of cottonwood trees that provide

spectacular fall color displays. Wildlife viewing opportunities are excellent, particularly for deer, elk, and various bird species.

## **La Sal Mountain Loop Road**

The complete La Sal Mountain Loop Road represents one of Utah's most scenic drives, covering approximately 60 miles through diverse ecosystems ranging from high desert to alpine environments. The loop can be driven in either direction, with each route offering different perspectives and photographic opportunities.

The southern portion of the loop climbs high into the La Sal Mountains, reaching elevations above 10,000 feet and providing access to alpine hiking trails, aspen groves, and panoramic viewpoints. During autumn, this section of the loop offers some of the most spectacular fall color displays in Utah, with extensive aspen forests turning brilliant gold against the backdrop of snow-capped peaks.

The northern section of the loop descends through Castle Valley and along the Colorado River corridor, providing views of red rock formations, river ecosystems, and the transition zones between different ecological communities. This diversity makes the complete loop an excellent introduction to the geological and ecological complexity of the Colorado Plateau region.

## **Arches and Canyonlands National Parks**

While not immediately adjacent to Bull Canyon, both Arches and Canyonlands National Parks are within an hour's drive and represent world-class destinations that complement a visit to the dinosaur track site. These parks showcase the same geological formations and processes visible at Bull Canyon on a much larger scale, providing broader context for understanding the region's natural history.

Arches National Park, located just north of Moab, contains the world's largest concentration of natural stone arches, with over 2,000 catalogued formations. The park's landscape represents the same Entrada Sandstone formation that contains the Bull Canyon dinosaur tracks, illustrating the diverse ways that erosional processes can sculpt sedimentary rock formations.

Canyonlands National Park encompasses a vast area of canyons, mesas, and buttes carved by the Colorado River and its tributaries. The park's Island in the Sky district

provides spectacular overlooks of the Colorado River corridor and demonstrates the erosional processes that created features like Bull Canyon on a much larger scale.

## **Conservation and Leave No Trace**

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The Bull Canyon Dinosaur Track Trail represents a irreplaceable paleontological and geological resource that requires careful stewardship to ensure its preservation for future generations. The tracks themselves are fragile features that can be easily damaged by inappropriate visitor behavior, while the surrounding ecosystem supports diverse plant and animal communities that are sensitive to human disturbance.

### **Protecting the Dinosaur Tracks**

The dinosaur tracks at Bull Canyon are irreplaceable scientific and educational resources that have survived for over 165 million years but can be destroyed in moments by careless human actions. Visitors play a crucial role in protecting these ancient treasures through responsible behavior and adherence to established guidelines.

Never walk directly on the dinosaur tracks or touch them with hands or objects. The oils from human skin, combined with the mechanical stress of contact, can accelerate weathering processes and cause permanent damage to track surfaces. The protective barriers around the most significant tracks are designed to allow optimal viewing while preventing damage from visitor traffic.

Do not attempt to make casts, rubbings, or other reproductions of the tracks. These activities require direct contact with the track surfaces and can cause irreversible damage. Photography is the appropriate way to document and share these remarkable features with others.

Report any observed damage to the tracks or protective infrastructure to the Manti-La Sal National Forest office. Vandalism, whether intentional or accidental, threatens the integrity of this irreplaceable resource and may be subject to federal prosecution under laws protecting paleontological resources on public lands.

## Leave No Trace Principles

The Leave No Trace principles provide a framework for minimizing human impact on natural areas and should be followed by all visitors to Bull Canyon. These principles are particularly important in fragile desert environments where recovery from disturbance can take decades or centuries.

Plan ahead and prepare by researching conditions, regulations, and appropriate equipment before your visit. Proper preparation reduces the likelihood of emergency situations that can result in resource damage and ensures that you have the knowledge and equipment necessary for responsible recreation.

Travel and camp on durable surfaces such as established trails and designated camping areas. The cryptobiotic soil crusts and fragile plant communities around Bull Canyon are easily damaged by foot traffic and can take many years to recover. Stay on designated trails and avoid creating new paths or shortcuts.

Dispose of waste properly by packing out all trash, food scraps, and human waste. The high elevation and arid conditions at Bull Canyon mean that organic materials decompose very slowly, and improperly disposed waste can persist in the environment for years while creating health hazards for wildlife and other visitors.

Leave what you find by not collecting rocks, plants, artifacts, or other natural or cultural features. The geological specimens and plant communities at Bull Canyon are part of a complex ecosystem, and their removal disrupts natural processes while depriving other visitors of the opportunity to enjoy these features in their natural setting.

Minimize campfire impacts by using established fire rings where available and following all fire restrictions and regulations. The dry conditions and high winds common in the area create extreme fire danger during much of the year, and campfires may be prohibited entirely during high-risk periods.

Respect wildlife by observing animals from a distance and never feeding or approaching them. Human food is harmful to wildlife and can create dangerous situations where animals lose their natural fear of humans and become aggressive in seeking food from visitors.

Be considerate of other visitors by keeping noise levels low, yielding trail right-of-way appropriately, and camping away from trails and other visitors. The remote and

peaceful character of Bull Canyon is one of its most valuable attributes, and maintaining this quality requires cooperation from all visitors.

## Supporting Conservation Efforts

Visitors can support ongoing conservation efforts at Bull Canyon and throughout the La Sal Mountains region through various means. Consider making donations to organizations that support paleontological research, public education, and habitat conservation in the Colorado Plateau region.

Volunteer opportunities are available through the Forest Service and various nonprofit organizations for activities such as trail maintenance, invasive species removal, and educational programs. These volunteer activities provide valuable services while offering opportunities to learn more about the area's natural and cultural resources.

Educational outreach is another important way to support conservation efforts. Share your knowledge and enthusiasm for Bull Canyon with others, but emphasize the importance of responsible visitation and resource protection. Social media posts and trip reports should include information about Leave No Trace principles and appropriate visitor behavior.

Support scientific research by reporting unusual observations or discoveries to appropriate authorities. While visitors should never collect specimens or disturb research sites, observations of new track exposures, unusual wildlife behavior, or other phenomena can provide valuable information for ongoing research and management efforts.

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*This guide was compiled using the most current available information as of 2025. Trail conditions, regulations, and access information may change. Always check with the Manti-La Sal National Forest for the most up-to-date information before visiting.*

**Contact Information:** - Manti-La Sal National Forest, Moab Ranger District - 62 E 100 N, Moab, UT 84532 - Phone: (435) 259-7155

**Emergency Contact:** - Grand County Sheriff: (435) 259-8115 - Emergency Services: 911

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