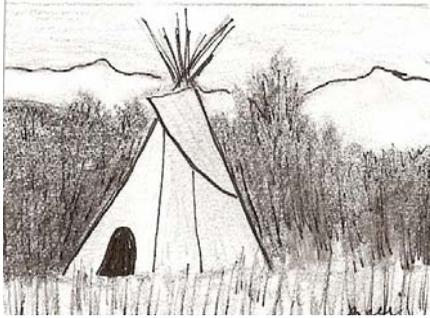


# FOREST DISCOVERY NATURE TRAIL



*WELCOME TO OUR SELF-GUIDED NATURE WALK ON THE FOREST DISCOVERY TRAIL!* This half-mile loop will teach you more about the plants life, animals, local history and geological features of the park.

THE TRAIL IS NOT WHEELCHAIR ACCESSIBLE; however we hope you will enjoy the hike!

*NOTE: PLEASE RETURN THE GUIDE AFTER YOUR HIKE SO THAT OTHERS MAY USE IT. IF YOU WOULD LIKE TO KEEP THE GUIDE, PLEASE DEPOSIT A QUARTER IN THE CHANGE BOX. THANK YOU!*



**Colorado State Parks**  
Ridgway State Park  
28555 Hwy 550, Ridgway, CO 81432  
Last modified: 01/06/08

**1** The Utes lived in this area in harmony with nature. They hunted wild game, gathered nuts and berries and lived simply off the land. The minerals found in the mountains here in the mid-1800's attracted miners and settlers to the area and the Indian way of life was changed forever. In addition to miners, other settlers moved into the area including farmers, doctors, shopkeepers, blacksmiths, missionaries and lawyers. When living in the outdoors many of them cooked over a fire with a tripod and kettle much like the one seen here.

**2** Before this juniper died, it served many purposes. It provided food, shade and homes for plants and animals. The juniper, just as all plants, provides oxygen through photosynthesis. The dead juniper still provides good homes for animals, where pack rats have built their nest. Notice a juniper seedling coming up next to the dead tree. This seedling will struggle for survival against animals grazing, insects, disease, snow damage, and trampling. The dead juniper will help protect the seedling in its fight for survival.

**3** Many plants were used by the Indians. For example, the grains from this Indian Ricegrass were used to make flour for bread. They are high in protein and make a good meal. Indian Ricegrass is the State grass of Utah.



**4** Junipers, also known as cedar, have scales instead of needles and a rubbery bark. Because its wood is resistant to decay juniper is used for poles, posts, and in areas of houses that come into contact with the ground. It was also used to make mats, sandals, and as insulation for walls and ceilings. The inner bark and berries are edible.

**5** Prickly pear cactus also grows well on the dry slopes here. Notice the jointed, prickly pads. The pulp of these pads and the fruits may be eaten raw or cooked. They manufacture food for the cactus and serve as water storage vessels during dry periods.



**6** Although you may think cactus only grows in the desert they grow in many other places too. For example, this Claret Cup Cactus has the type of sharp needles as the Prickly Pear Cactus. It is distinguished by its bright wine-red flower that blooms in the spring. Its big, showy flower assures good pollination.

**7** The bluff across the reservoir exposes horizontal layers of Dakota and Morrison formations, which contain sandstone, shale, coal and mudstone. This material was deposited millions of years ago when this entire area was covered by shallow seas. A few irregular hills on the top of the plateau are made of Mancos shale, which provide evidence of the shallow seas.

**8** Notice in front of you a plant called Western wheatgrass, sometimes called Blue Stem wheatgrass, because of its bluish leaves and stems. It grows best in low areas of loose alkaline soil where runoff accumulates. Western Wheatgrass is sod forming, which means that it reproduces from roots, stems and seeds. It produces seeds in the spring, goes dormant in midsummer, and can grow again in the fall when the soil is moist.

**9** Looking slightly southwest you can see the jagged pyramids of the Sneffels Range, which dominates the skyline in the western San Juan Mountains between Telluride and Ouray. The top of the tallest peak, Mount Sneffels, is an intrusion of igneous rock that pushed upward through the layered volcanic rocks that form the San Juan Mountains.

**10** The Pinyon pine is another common evergreen in this area. Its nuts are a popular food item for birds, animals and people. The tasty nuts are enclosed in a small cone that exudes a lot of sap called pitch when opened. The pitch is also in the bark of the tree and protects it from insects and disease. It is also used as glue and chewing gum.



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From this vantage point, you can see the Ridgway Reservoir below and the large valley that the reservoir filled. Construction on the Ridgway dam that formed the reservoir began in 1978 and was completed in 1987 by the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation. The Uncompahgre River and Dallas Creek flow into the Ridgway Reservoir. The main purpose of the dam is for irrigation. While the dam is primarily managed for flood protection, it also provides recreation and habitat for fish and wildlife. Obtain more information about the dam at the Visitors Center.

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The large, red rock directly in front of you is called an "erratic boulder" because it is not common in the place where it is found. One possible explanation as to how it got here is that it was moved here tens of thousands of years ago by a glacier. More evidence of this type of boulder is found south of the park. There are many glacial dumps called moraines. The pockets in the boulder provide shelter for small animals.

13

The rock below contains an enormous amount of lichen. Lichen plants are made up of algae and a fungus growing in symbiotic (mutually beneficial) association on a solid surface.

Lichen can be seen elsewhere on this trail and in other areas of Ridgway State Park.



14

To the right you can see a group of Yucca plants, which are evergreen plants composed of a dense cluster of narrow, needle-pointed leaves. These leaves range 1-2 1/2 feet in length and support a flower stalk 2-3 feet high

rising from the center of the leaf cluster. The flowers are creamy to greenish white bells with large apple-green pistils. The fruits are dry pods containing small black seeds. Leaf fibers were used by native people for sandals, cordage and mats.



15

Cryptobiotic crusts like these are found in dry places all over the world and have existed for billions of years. In fact, they helped increase the amount of oxygen in the Earth's atmosphere so that it was more hospitable for life. If you look more closely at these ashen gray clumps you can see that the soil is actually alive. It is made up of many tiny living organisms called cyanobacteria, which are a type of bacteria. They provide a home for other bacteria, mosses, algae, and microfungi. Cryptobiotic crusts are held together by root-like threads. When water is available, these threads expand and these crusts swell and move. This makes the ground appear jagged. Cryptobiotic soil crusts are important for nature because they create and stabilize soil, stop wind and water erosion, and help maintain soil moisture.

16

The Colorado Bluebird Project began in XXXX to help boost bluebird populations, which have decreased in recent decades because of habitat loss and competition from other species such as European starlings. One aspect of the recovery effort is the placement of nesting boxes like these across the state. The park has breeding pairs of both Mountain and Western bluebirds. People enjoy their beautiful plumage and sweet songs.



17

To the southeast you can see the mountains of the Cimarron Range. Ice Age glaciers scoured the peaks to form numerous rings and circles and scooped out little lakebeds in the U-shaped valleys. Post-glacial erosion has formed a lot of talus, the rocky debris found on many of the upper slopes. Fast flowing mountain streams then eroded them more.

18

At this point a sagebrush meadow follows both sides of the trail. The sagebrush covers many areas on dry hillsides, basins, and open range in the Rocky Mountains. This plant is a member of the sunflower family and grows from 1-4 feet high. It is well-known for its aromatic gray-green leaves sprouting from rigid branches. The flowers of sagebrush are in tiny greenish heads, which become bright yellow with an abundance of pollen in late summer.

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The Rabbitbrush, also in the sunflower family, is a spreading shrub with gray woody stems, gray-green branches and leaves. Its leaves are slender, sharp pointed, and the flower heads are massed in large rounded golden yellow clusters. During late summer it is colorful along roadsides, streams and on dry slopes.



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This meadow is browsed by Mule deer year-round. During the late spring and early summer, many wildflowers can be found here. Look for the following flowers: Sego lily, asters, primrose, Globe mallow, Indian paintbrush, Scarlet gilia, lupine, penstemon and various species of Daisy. A checklist of the park plants and a plant photo album are available at the Visitor Center.

The Forest Discovery Trail was made in 1989 when this part of the park first opened. This guide was made in 2006 by Blake Zimmerman, a local Boy Scout from Troop # XXX. The artist is B.J. Chorak. A Reference/Resource List is available at the Park Visitor Center. Other trails in the park are listed in the Ridgway State Park Trail Map, available at the Park Visitor Center.