

## **Beware of the Slot Canyon**

**by Susan Lamberson**

A slot canyon is a narrow channel with sheer high walls which commonly contains unique ecological communities distinct from their adjacent surroundings. They are a characteristic on the Colorado Plateau, including the San Rafael Swell. Slot canyons are subject to flash flooding.  
-- Wikipedia

Stu, a professional skier, Karen, a veteran forager of huckleberry patches, Bill and I (Rivers to Ridges aficionados) were finally discovering Utah's public lands. We were seasoned outdoor people. Seasoned in the sense of weathered, perhaps, but not yet past our prime in agility.

On one fine April day a few years back, we set off to hike the Ding and Dang trail, a five-mile loop through slot canyons in the San Rafael Swell near the Green River in Utah. We had checked the weather by looking up from our campsite. We found the sky was a deep desert blue and cloudless in all directions.

I felt prepared for the day. I often take five-mile hikes in our local foothills. I carried water and stored my Nano puff vest in Bill's daypack. I wore wool footsies inside my pretty good trail runners. Bill brought provisions – phone, lighter, an airplane-sized bag of peanuts, water, and his Nano puff vest.

Early on, the slots were wide and welcomed us. "Come forth, you hikers, but be wary of hubris." As the slots narrowed, clouds gathered. It took us a while to recognize that clouds had arrived. We were deep in the canyons and could only see straight up. At times the slot was so narrow, we used the wall for hands and feet – one side, then the other. Our walk soon turned

into a scramble just when the clouds parted and released a full-on downpour onto the ledges of desert above us and the path upon which we were clawing forward.

Prior to the rain, ledges for cover were abundant; now they were non-existent. We found a scanty spot for four, lit a fire, and evaluated and strategized while our clothing (some of it cotton) got wet and threatened hypothermia. With resolve to survive rather than complete the loop, we turned back and trudged down the way we had come with eight hands and eight feet pitter-pattering one at a time on the walls all the way down. Where we had been able to walk on the trail, pools formed so deep that Stu's hiking pole could not reach the bottom.

Focus...focus. A slip insured injury or worse. The traveling out was steady and quiet. At last, we were able to put our feet on the ground without a twisted ankle or fall.

Back at the trailhead, the sky remained clear. The gravel path was dry; the water had not reached this far. Would-be hikers were starting up the trail. We warned them of our travail, but there was no evidence, which is the way of the desert. I don't think they were concerned.

I do not know whether we spent our day on the Ding leg or the Dang leg, but I do appreciate the clever geographer who named this place.