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Introduction

The nation's second newest national monument, Grand Staircase-Escalante, is a large area of broad plateaus, narrow sandstone canyons, and unique rock formations in southern Utah. With an area of 1.7 million acres, or 3% of the area of Utah, the monument is the second largest in the lower 48 states [\[map\]](#). Established through presidential proclamation in September 1996, the monument extends eastward from Bryce Canyon National Park to Capitol Reef National Park and southward to [Glen Canyon](#) National Recreation Area.



The massive White Cliffs are the second of four "steps" in the "Grand Staircase"--a series of east-west-trending cliffs and terraces best viewed looking north from the summit of the Kaibab Plateau. Photo © 1991 Ray Wheeler.

Elevation within the monument ranges from 4500-8300 feet, allowing for a diversity of vegetation types, including scrub, [grassland](#), sage-[pinyon-juniper](#) woodland, [ponderosa pine](#), and even hanging gardens. Thousand-year-old pinyon and juniper trees can be found within the monument. A fragile [cryptobiotic soil](#) [\[photo\]](#) crust covers large portions of the arid landscape, helping to prevent erosion and moisture loss to plants. Several threatened or [endangered species](#) inhabit the area, including the bald eagle, peregrine falcon, Southwestern willow flycatcher, California condor, Mexican spotted owl, Kanab ambersnail, and several plants. Eleven plant species are [endemic](#) to the monument.



Source: [Grand Staircase-Escalante Visitor Information](#)

Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument (GSENM) can be divided into three distinct sections: the Grand Staircase, the Kaiparowits Plateau, and the Canyons of the Escalante River. The Grand Staircase is a colorful series of rising cliffs, terraces and mesas which expose 200 million years of geology. Each major "step" represents a geologic formation; the

Vermilion, White, Gray, and Pink Cliffs chronicle the passage of Triassic

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dinosaurs, Jurassic sand dunes, and an ancient shallow ocean.

The 1,600 square mile Kaiparowits Plateau is the highest section of the monument, and among the most remote landscapes in the continental United States. The rocks of the Kaiparowits contain one of the best preserved and continuous records of Late Cretaceous fossils in the world. However, the soils are rich in salts and acids, making the Plateau inhospitable to most plants, except a few salt-tolerant species.

The northeast portion of the monument is characterized by Navajo sandstone which has been deeply carved by the Escalante River and its tributaries. Within these canyons are lush riparian communities and hanging gardens. The monument encompasses approximately 900,000 acres of wilderness study areas (WSAs). An act of Congress will be required to designate an additional several hundred thousand acres of lands being reviewed by the BLM as potential WSAs within the monument.



*The Gulch, Grand-Staircase/Escalante NM.
Photo © 1991 Ray Wheeler.*

The ruggedness of this region has precluded large-scale land development. In fact, the monument region was the last area in the continental U.S. to be explored, mapped and influenced by European Americans. Even today, only two major paved roads provide access to the monument, and other existing roads are generally very primitive. The exclusion of [grazing](#) and road construction on much of the monument's lands has allowed [grasslands](#), [pinyon-juniper woodlands](#) and other habitats to remain unusually pristine and has kept numbers of invasive and [exotic species](#) very low. These relatively undisturbed biotic communities provide excellent opportunities for studying speciation and other ecosystem dynamics.

A rich array of preserved [packrat middens](#) and [prehistoric plant materials](#) allow the reconstruction of past climates and vegetation communities. For example, Late Pleistocene/Early Holocene plant macrofossils found in sandstone alcoves of the Escalante River Basin were analyzed by Kim Withers and Jim Mead in order to construct a chronology of climate change based on the corresponding vegetation change. The plant deposits, dated to 12,700 to 7,500 years B.P., provide evidence that the Colorado Plateau was cooler and wetter during the Late Pleistocene, gradually becoming warmer and drier as the climate shifted in the Early Holocene, and groundwater and stream base levels decreased (see [Changing Climates on the Colorado Plateau](#)).

Grand Staircase-Escalante is unique among the nation's parks and monuments in that it is the only one managed by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM).

Foremost in the management ethic of the monument is the retention of the area's remote and undeveloped character. However, the area's designation as a monument (as opposed to a national park), as well as the conditions of President Clinton's proclamation, allow for the continuation of traditional mixed uses of the land, such as grazing, hunting and fishing. (See [The Creation of GSENM: A Case Study in the Politics of Land Use](#))

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