

TRAVELOGUE

In the Footsteps of Giants

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Photographs by the author.

“Here where you are standing, the dinosaurs did a dance...”

Talking Heads, *City of Dreams*

In July 2007, I found myself in Boulder, Colorado for a business meeting. This was my first visit there, and the foothills and mountains of the Flatiron Range were spectacular. How cool would it be to live and work here, I thought, with a spectacular view and hiking trails to spend lunch hours exploring? I had built a couple vacation days into my visit, and while I could easily burn them up hiking in the mountains, I had something else in mind. After my meeting was over and all of my work responsibilities met, I turned my rental car east and left the Flatirons in my rear-view mirror.

Rain clouds rolled overhead as I left Boulder and then Denver behind, heading south and then east. My destination was the northern unit of the Comanche National Grasslands in Otero County. While I was looking forward to seeing some of the amphibians and reptiles found in the grasslands of southeastern Colorado, they were secondary. My primary goal was in one of the canyons that cut deep into this country: One of the largest dinosaur trackways in the world. Under a July sun, the long hike down into Picket Wire Canyon and out again requires good physical condition, warned the website. “SOLO HIKING CAN BE EXTREMELY RISKY,” it proclaimed. Perhaps, but it can also be a wonderful experience.

La Junta was the closest town, and after securing a hotel room and grabbing a quick bite to eat, I headed out to do some road cruising for reptiles as the sun set. As I drove out of town toward the grasslands, jumbo-sized grasshoppers scuttled across the asphalt

in huge numbers, making it difficult to swerve and miss them all. I was sure that flocks of birds worked to collect the bounty left in the wake of passing automobiles. Nothing edible remains on the roads for very long.

I swung onto one of the gravel roads transecting the grassland unit and tried to settle into a road-watching routine. The fading hours before sunset are good times for some snake species to be



The Comanche National Grasslands.



A Bullsnake (*Pituophis catenifer sayi*) with its body in the ‘kinked’ position often seen in snakes lying exposed in the open (left). When approached, the snake drew up into a defensive posture (right).

active. I found myself distracted by the low, rolling hills. The grasslands were beautiful in the late, low light — yellows, golds, browns, and muted greens all pleasing to the eye. Some of the more pronounced hills showed a line of rimrock, like the exposed spine of a long-buried beast. To the west, the line of dark clouds beneath which I had passed earlier in the day rolled towards me. I was not discouraged; a little rain on a July evening could bring thirsty reptiles out on the road for a drink.

After just a few miles, I spotted the familiar shape of a snake stretched out on the road. It was a fair-sized Bullsnake (*Pituophis catenifer sayi*) with its body in the 'kinked' position often seen in snakes lying exposed in the open. I'm of the opinion that this curvy posture is an attempt to break up the 'serpent pattern' for any raptor flying overhead. I took some close-up photos until the snake had enough of me and drew up into a defensive posture, pulling its flattened head back into a striking position while inflating its body. The tail beat a vicious tattoo on the road while the other end hissed at me — a rattlesnake imitation meant to intimidate. A couple more shots and I stepped back, letting the Bullsnake boil off the road and into the brush.

The black clouds rolled overhead, and a torrent of rain and high winds soon followed. Along the storm's edge, I came across a small adult Kansas Glossy Snake (*Arizona elegans elegans*) crossing the road. At the height of the storm, as the winds drove the heavy rain sideways, a Prairie Rattlesnake (*Crotalus viridis viridis*) appeared in my headlights as it crossed the center line. After the line



Kansas Glossy Snake (*Arizona elegans elegans*).

of wind and rain had passed, I headed back toward town to grab some sleep. Along the way, I saw a number of Plains Blackhead Snakes (*Tantilla nigriceps*) drinking from the thin wash of water on the asphalt. I could imagine a great host of animals out drinking rainwater on this dark night.

In the morning, the sky was crisp, clear, and blue. Driving on the gravel road leading to the canyon, I came across another basking Bullsnake, a handsome brute worth stopping to photograph.



Plains Blackhead Snake (*Tantilla nigriceps*).



Prairie Rattlesnake (*Crotalus viridis viridis*).

These Colorado specimens were much lighter in coloration than the Bullsnares back home in Illinois, but beautiful all the same. I left the snake stretched out in the road and continued on to the trailhead. I was somewhat concerned about the trailhead road's condition, since it was a three-mile drive along a very rough and rutted track to the gate, and I thought last night's heavy rains might have made parts of it impassable. My fears were all for nothing — the ground had soaked up every bit of the water, and it was difficult to tell that any rain had fallen. I was thankful that my upcoming eleven-mile walk would not be extended to seventeen miles.



Trailhead into Picketwire Canyon.

I parked the car and drank a liter of water, packing three more bottles and a big straw cowboy hat in anticipation of temperatures in the mid 90s. One last check of my gear and I walked through the gate and down the trail into Picket Wire Canyon. 'Picket Wire' apparently was an Anglicized version of 'Purgatoire,' the river flowing in the canyon's bottom.

The trail dropped steeply into the canyon, and I thought that it might be a tough climb back out at the end of the day. With each step down, I was walking backward through time, lower and lower, through the ages of the earth. At the bottom, the floor of the canyon rested on the limestone beds of the Jurassic. The Purgatoire River, working over long eons of time, cut these canyons to this great depth, exposing layers of rock laid down as sediment 150 million years ago. At times in the past, when the ice sheets melted, the Purgatoire was a wild torrent, scouring itself deeper into the earth. These days the river lazily curves its way across the canyon floor, a mere trickle now compared to earlier times.

I reached the canyon bottom and followed the rutted trail south and west into the main canyon. Grasses were the predominant vegetation on the canyon floor, with clumps of Cholla and wildflowers scattered here and there. It was high summer, and the air was filled with the buzz and hiss of grasshoppers and other insects. With nearly every step a grasshopper would take wing away from me, and I noted different kinds in various colors and sizes. At



A Variegated Fritillary (*Euptoieta claudia*), one of many small animals in the canyon.



A view from the trail while hiking back in time.

times, the insect drone sounded like human voices at a distance, and for a while I would look around for the people I was sure I heard. In truth, the nearest humans were many miles away, and I was quite alone in this large expanse of land. Being isolated to this degree is rare these days, and I tried to accept the solitude as a rare gift to be appreciated.



Old ranch house ruins, a reminder of the people who tried to scratch out a living in this landscape.



The Purgatoire River.

I passed the remnants of an old dwelling, with nothing left but a few crumbling walls and timbers and an old cook stove out in the yard. I supposed that a thousand years from now, humans would gaze at these ruins and wonder what life was like for the people trying to scratch out a living in this landscape. Before the cattle ranchers came here, before Mexican settlers and Spanish explorers, the original native peoples had occupied this place for a long time, and it was the river running through the canyon that made human habitation possible at all.

The trail followed the western edge of the canyon, and in some places climbed low hills. On one of these rises, I noticed markings on a pair of large upright rocks and climbed up to investigate. The smaller section had split off from the larger rock untold eons ago, and the space between the two rock surfaces was covered with petroglyphs. Many shapes marked the rocks, some of them obviously representing animals, but most were abstract symbols of some sort.

Intrigued, I stopped and spent some time examining these rock markings. Most of these symbols were made using a percussive technique — the rock was struck with perhaps a small, pointed stone, and the outer layer of rock flaked away under the impact. The rocks had a dark patina from a coat of oxidation, and the percussive flaking revealed a lighter layer of rock underneath. Some of the markings may have been far older than others, having reacquired a layer of patina. One of these caught my eye and sent my brain reeling — it was an elk or a deer, and I knew I was looking at something thousands of years old. Who had made this animal picture and why? I stood in the cleft between the two rocks, staring out at the broad river valley, wondering how things looked back then, wondering about the people who lived here. This spot seemed like a doorway into the land beyond, and these markings on the rock were full of meaning and purpose, although I was too far away in space and time to understand more than that.

I needed to be on my way again; the morning was beginning to heat up and I still had miles to go. The river made a turn away from me, wandering to the other side of the canyon, while the trail continued to skirt the foothills to the west. I passed the ruins of a small chapel, where headstones in the adjoining cemetery marked the resting places of Mexican immigrants who had lived here over a century ago. *Eugenio Padilla*, I read on one grave marker. *Abeyta Murio*. *Maria de la Cruz*. Their headstones were made of cement



Petroglyphs: Who made these pictures — and why?





Headstones near the ruins of a small chapel marked the resting places of Mexican immigrants who had lived here over a century ago.

and were decorated with incised patterns around the names and dates. I wondered who would be reading them a thousand years from now.

This place clearly had more to offer, and I could spend the entire day wandering about in search of petroglyphs and ruins and never reach my destination. I needed to get my head out of the historic, if I was ever going to get to the prehistoric. I put my feet back on the trail and moved along at a steady pace. I was thankful for the straw hat on my head, and several times I ducked beneath small cedar trees to enjoy a few minutes out of the sun and drink a little tepid water.

Ahead in the distance, I spotted a sign of civilization, a building, the small size and protruding vent pipe clearly marking it as a toilet. I apparently had arrived, and the outhouse had shown the way! A Red-Lipped Prairie Lizard (*Sceloporus undulatus erythrocheilus*) cocked an eye at me from a shaded overhang as I passed by the structure. Heading toward the river, I spotted some interpretive signs, well made and quite detailed. I was surprised at both the signs and restroom facilities, given the remoteness of the place. How many people came to see this? More than I thought, apparently, but today I had the place to myself. The displays thoughtfully provided an overhead map of the trackways and shapes for each type of dino-



A Red-Lipped Prairie Lizard (*Sceloporus undulatus erythrocheilus*) cocked an eye from a shaded overhang.

saur print. Therapods were represented by prints of the fearsome *Allosaurus*, and *Apatosaurus* was the largest sauropod to have left its tracks. Armed with these search images, I headed down toward the river. The Purgatoire had exposed these trackways, washing away the layers of sedimentary rock that had accumulated since the Jurassic.

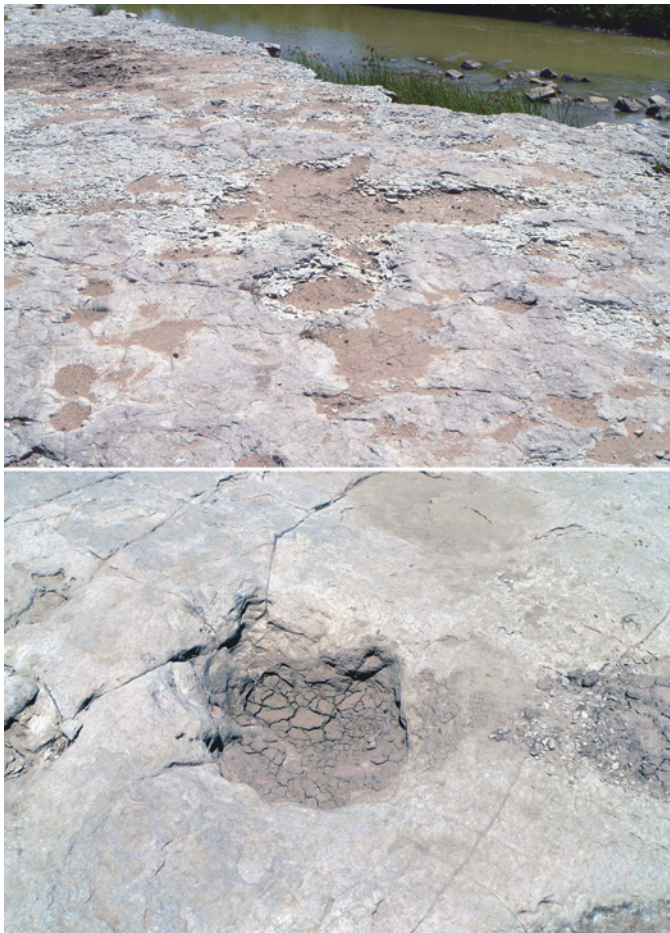
I scanned the ground as I walked, looking for the first footprint. Hmm... Was that one? Three projections, the middle one longest ... big ... must be an *Allosaurus*! I don't know why I thought these tracks would be as clean and sharp as a coon's paws in mud. The markings were indistinct and rough around the edges, mud turned to rock so long ago it was hard to wrap my mind around the concept of how much time had passed. Many of the prints were filled with mud from the last overflow of the river, giving them a surreal, made-yesterday look.

Over there ... a few round potholes — *Apatosaurus*! These tracks were perhaps the diameter of a telephone pole, and a bit deeper than the allosaur print. Sitting in one of them was a Texas Horned Lizard (*Phrynosoma cornutum*), turning her head to watch me approach. The irony of that moment was delicious — modern lizards in the Age of Mammals are a far cry from what walked here in bygone days. She skittered away, but I scooped her up for a closer look and a picture or two. I then gave the little lizard her freedom and she scurried under a bush to examine me from a safe position.

The majority of the tracks were on the other side of the river, so I carefully made my way across. The water wasn't very deep, but the rocks were slippery with moss and algae. This would be a very bad place to break a leg; people knew where I was, but help could still be a long time coming. On this side of the river, more rock strata remained, telling a story of the role of frost and flood in exposing the footprints. On top was a hard layer of rock, perhaps a foot thick, and underneath it was a thin, softer layer, no thicker than a few inches. It was this thin layer that had filled in and covered up the footprints shortly after they were made. Whether this layer was mud or volcanic ash, I could not tell. As the river washed away at the thin layer, the hard, thick layer on top would fracture along regular planes and fall away as rectangular blocks. During times of heavy flooding, the force of the water would wash these blocks away, along with the softer layer underneath. Now the layer



Interpretive displays thoughtfully provided an overhead map of the trackways and shapes for each type of dinosaur print.



An *Allosaurus* footprint (top) and those of an *Apatosaurus* (bottom).

composing the prints and trackways was exposed, and taking its turn under entropy's grindstone.

A hundred and fifty million years ago, dinosaurs walked along the shore of an ancient lake, their feet leaving depressions in the soft mud, which then dried in the sun. Not very long after, some event occurred that resulted in the depressions getting filled with another layer of soft material, fortunate happenstance for hominids happening on the scene much, much later. Timing is everything — had I visited a million years earlier, the prints might still be under layers of rock. If I were to make the long hike into the canyon a million years from now, the layer of prints would probably be washed away. I was in the right place, at the right time.

Heading upstream, I was able to find several *Apatosaurus* trackways that ran more or less parallel to the river. Who could visit here and not try to picture the scene in their mind's eye as the giant sauropods made these footprints? I sat on a big rock, drank some warm water, and tried to picture the muddy shoreline of an ancient shallow lake. The steep hills and canyon walls around me were not here back then — all that material was laid down later, and only the action of the river washed it away in this one spot.

My mind flashed back to one of the petroglyphs I had seen earlier in the day, a series of staggered circles. Could they represent these *Apatosaurus* tracks? What did those early peoples think of this place? Did they wonder what kind of creatures could leave tracks in solid rock? This had to be a place of great mystery to them. Perhaps the theropod impressions made them think of giant birds; maybe the brontosaur tracks brought mammoths to mind. Along with thunder beings and various monsters, the big hairy elephants were



The Purgatoire River, with trackway at the far right.



A Collared Lizard (*Crotaphytus collaris*) on a block from the layer covering the footprints.

a part of Native American folklore long after they had disappeared from the landscape.

I spent several more hours scrambling about the place, taking pictures and chasing the occasional lizard while I pondered and puzzled over what I was seeing. I had drunk half of my water, and the afternoon was getting on — time for me to think about head-

ing back. I was not looking forward to the hot five-mile walk in front of me, but I had plenty to think about as I put one foot in front of the other and headed back toward the present. Someday in the far future, the works of a certain bipedal mammal also may be buried and then uncovered in the same manner. What a rich and puzzling treasure we will leave for future bone hunters.



A Texas Horned Lizard (*Phrynosoma cornutum*) near the trackways.



An *Apatosaurus* trackway along what had once been a muddy shoreline.



A male Pale Milksnake (*Lampropeltis triangulum multistrata*) from Pennington County, South Dakota.