TRAVELOGUE

Beyond the Valley of Fire

Tim Spuckler

8213 Wyatt Road, Broadview Heights, OH 44147 (tim@thirdeyeherp.com)

Photographs by the author.

A little-visited area rich in natural history, folklore, and rock formations reveals that taking the "road less traveled" is sometimes worth the trip.

About a half-hour outside Las Vegas is Valley of Fire State Park. The name refers to the spectacular red sandstone formations that are found in particular abundance there. Although I've done the "tourist" part of the park several times, driving the paved road and marveling at the landscape, today was going to be a different type of trip. We were set to visit Valley of Fire by going via the back roads. Our hope was to get a taste of Vegas from the days of old by seeing Native American petroglyphs and visiting remnants of places where prospectors once lived. We also hoped to see additional rock formations that cannot be viewed from the main road going through the park. These geological wonders include Buffington Pockets, Color Rock Quarry, and Opal Fields — all under the shadow of the Muddy Mountains.

The Bureau of Land Management's Bitter Springs Backcountry Byway gives visitors access to the Muddy Mountains Wilderness and the Buffington Pockets area. Before entering the byway, we stocked up on homemade beef jerky from a roadside stand outside the Moapa Indian Reservation store at the entrance of the park. About three miles later, the paved road bends left, but we followed the trail straight to the mountains. A BLM sign informed us that we had reached the Bitter Springs Backcountry Byway.

Although the dirt road starts out fairly smooth, eventually a high-clearance vehicle, preferably with four-wheel drive, is required. The road becomes bumpy and rock-filled. Some of the rocks are surprisingly sharp, so we were grateful we had new tires and a readily accessible spare. Being a passenger in a truck during the difficult drive is a bone-rattling experience, but the view is nice. We drove past yellow and red sandstone formations that are similar to the magnificent rocks seen in the Valley of Fire. The formations are known as the Buffington Pockets, natural basins that trap rainwater. These beautiful outcroppings, tinted by iron ore and other minerals, are a startling contrast to the limestone hills of the Muddy Mountains. Scrambling across and along the edges of the road were Desert Horned

The spectacular red sandstone formations for which the Valley of Fire is named.

Scrambling across and along the edges of the road were Desert Horned Lizards (*Phrynosoma platyrhinos*), their formidable, dinosaur-like appearance quite a contrast to their mild disposition.

Lizards (*Phrynosoma platyrhinos*), their formidable, dinosaur-like appearance quite a contrast to their mild disposition.

In the early 1920s, a cattle rancher named Warren Buffington wandered onto this location and noticed the burnt oranges and reds of the sandstone. A spring flowing from a narrow, twisting canyon completed the idea that the spot might be a "hidden paradise" in the harsh desert. We noticed the large cement wall that Buffington built at the head of the canyon to retain water for year-round use. The remnants of his cabin were just beyond the wall. The scene was worthy of further investigation.

A large cement wall built by a cattle rancher named Warren Buffington in the early 1920s at the head of the canyon to retain water for year-round use.

Petroglyphs are Native American rock engravings created by removing part of a rock surface by incising, pecking, carving, and abrading it. Some of the graphics resemble bighorn sheep, some resemble people, and one even looks very much like a rattlesnake.

As we approached the remains of the old house, we noticed puddles of water in the rock. Closer observation revealed that these small basins contain *Triops cancriformis*, a living fossil that has not changed in appearance since the Triassic Period. Although I had heard of these prehistoric-looking

creatures, these were the first I had seen. Often called "Tadpole Shrimp," a shield-like carapace and a fused pair of tiny eyes made me think of a miniature Horseshoe Crab. Not only are they fascinating in appearance, but the lifestyle of these crustaceans is equally interesting. Adults usually live only a few days — enough time to lay eggs before their pool of water evaporates. The eggs survive in the dry conditions under the hot sun for periods up to several years, until rains come and refill the basin where they rest. Then the whole process starts over again. We spent quite a bit of time observing the desert crustaceans and pondering the unlikelihood of a creature dependent on standing water making a living in the harsh, dry desert.

Small basins contain *Triops cancriformis*, a living fossil that has not changed in appearance since the Triassic Period. Although I had heard of these prehistoric-looking creatures, these were the first I had seen. Often called "Tadpole Shrimp," a shield-like carapace and a fused pair of tiny eyes made me think of a miniature Horseshoe Crab.

Western Coachwhip (*Masticophis flagellum testaceus*). Sometimes called a "Red Racer," this is the fastest snake in the land, although the individual we found seemed cool, content, and secure in its deep rock lair.

Side-blotched Lizard (*Uta stansburiana*).

Our thoughts were interrupted by a decent-sized reptile sprinting past on its hindlimbs. "Did you see that?" "What the heck was it?" We headed to where we had seen the lizard disappear. After some concentrated searching, we found a Mojave Collared Lizard (*Crotaphytus bicinctores*) among the rocks. Big-headed and with strong back legs, we drew comparisons to a tiny "T-rex." Our heads now filled with these prehistoric images, we glanced up from where the Collared Lizard had led us to see the rock walls covered with petroglyphs — rock engravings created by removing part of a rock surface by incising, pecking, carving, and abrading it. Some of the graphics resemble bighorn sheep, some resemble people, and one even looks very much like a rattlesnake. It was a bit spooky and more than a little fascinating to view these ancient etchings.

Although not as common here as in other parts of the desert, Side-blotched Lizards (*Uta stansburiana*) are seen from time to time, either basking or scrambling over rocks near the petroglyphs. These lizards are often approachable, and therefore easily photographed. They don't seem to mind going about their business if humans are nearby, so we seized the opportunity to see them hunt, do "push ups," and chase each other around. Albeit small (about 10 cm in total length), males can be quite colorful. While peering into a deep rock crevice, one of us spotted the first snake of the day, a Western Coachwhip (*Masticophis flagellum testaceus*). Sometimes called a "Red Racer," this is the fastest snake in the land, although the individual we found seemed cool, content, and secure in its deep rock lair. We took photos and, as we finished, a sound from above us grabbed our attention. Taking a

Mojave Collared Lizard (*Crotaphytus bicinctores*).

few steps back from the rocky area, we could see what was lurking on top of the rocks — a Chuckwalla (*Sauromalus ater*). The large, bulky herbivorous lizard seemed just as curious about us as we were about it.

Eventually we made our way back to the wall and the spring that runs near it. Although not much water was flowing on that day in early June, the ground around the spring is damp enough to support vegetation, like Desert Sage (*Salvia dorrii*) and Squawbush (*Rhus aromatica*). Perhaps these grew naturally or maybe Mr. Buffington planted their ancestors for their medicinal qualities and as a food source, respectively. Searching the shoreline turned up one of the most commonly seen desert amphibians, the Red-spotted Toad (*Anaxyrus punctatus*). This small toad has round parotid glands, a characteristic that distinguishes it from other species of toads in the region. Its scattered red bumps are another distinguishing marking, although the coloration of this amphibian is rather variable. The example we found certainly lived up to its name, adorned as it was with many bright red dots. The damp conditions also provide a favorable microhabitat for one of the largest arachnids in the United States, the Desert Hairy Scorpion (*Hadrurus arizonensis*). These impressive invertebrates often can be found in substantial numbers in desert areas that retain humidity.

Red-spotted Toad (*Anaxyrus punctatus*).

While investigating an *Agave* pit, we encountered another common saurian. When disturbed, the Western Whiptail (*Aspidoscelis tigris*) characteristically runs several yards before stopping to look back at the source of its disturbance. Sometimes these lizards appear oblivious to humans keeping a distance of 5–6 m, and on these occasions their foraging, territorial, and courtship behaviors can be observed. We commented on the lizards and then turned our attention back to the pit. *Agave* is a type of yucca plant that was used as food for thousands of years by Native Americans. *Agave* was harvested and the sweet-tasting hearts were roasted in large pits during communal gatherings. Plants were placed in a bed of hot coals mixed with limestone cobbles and covered with vegetable material and sometimes earth. An *Agave* pit was a place to gather and feast, prepare for the winter, and meet for dancing and religious ceremonies.

At about three-quarters of the way through the nearly 30 km (~18 mi) of back roads, we decided to check out some rocky and scenic habitat. It would be our last stop before ending our unconventional three-hour adventure. The temperature was becoming quite warm and we were encountering more and more desert speedsters — Zebratail Lizards (*Callisaurus*

Western Whiptail (*Aspidoscelis tigris*).

Zebratail Lizards (*Callisaurus draconoides*).

draconoides). They have a habit of curling their tails over their backs, thus revealing the striped underside. Hiking around a boulder-strewn, sparsely vegetated open area, I spotted a loosely coiled snake, apparently resting after consuming a sizeable meal. Although I had found the area's two other commonly encountered rattlesnakes, the Sidewinder (*Crotalus cerastes cerastes*) and the Mojave Rattlesnake (*Crotalus scutulatus*), this was the first Speckled Rattlesnake (*Crotalus mitchellii*) I'd ever seen. The sandy pink ground color and hazy darker crossbands worked well to camouflage the motionless snake among dried grass and rocks. It was the largest and most impressive reptile we'd seen during the trip.

We had taken the proverbial "road less traveled," and had come away with an experience richer than driving the paved road through the Valley of Fire. Although rugged and at times quite bumpy, getting a glimpse into the past and seeing a fair amount of local fauna made for a memorable experience.

Speckled Rattlesnake (*Crotalus mitchellii*).