The Other Petroglyph Trail Guide was written by Bronwyn Mauldin, inspired by her residency as Artist in Residence at Mesa Verde National Park, Colorado, in September 2016. This trail guide is also available online in both text and audio format.

Find out more at bronwynmauldin.com.

For more information about Mesa Verde National Park and its Artist in Residence program, visit www.nps.gov/meve.

MESA VERDE
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THE OTHER
PETROGLYPH TRAIL GUIDE

It's all about water.

Based on a true story

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"Water, is taught by thirst."

Emily Dickenson

"Water storage was probably the great secret of the cliff dweller's ability to maintain himself in this arid region."

W. R. Birdsall

"The Cliff Dwellings of the Cañons of the Mesa Verde," published in 1891 in the *Journal of the American Geographical Society of New York,* Volume 23, pages 584-620.

The Other Petroglyph Trail Guide

Bronwyn Mauldin / 2017

times, ready to be deployed at a moment's notice to protect the ancient structures.

But fire is also a gift. Every fire that burns through Mesa Verde lays bare previously undiscovered artifacts and mesa-top sites like ancient check dams and terraces. New archeological techniques have been developed in the aftermath of fires, helping to expand what we know about the lives of the Ancestral Puebloans.

The plant life damaged by fire also adds nutrition to the soil. In particular, the low, brushy Gambel oaks (*Quercus gambelii*) that appear throughout the park—especially in pretty swaths across the low hills nearer to the park entrance—thrive in soil cleared by fire. Their fall colors bring the cuesta alive every fall with fiery colors of their own.

Bighorn sheep (*Ovis canadensis*) wandered this region before the piñon pine and juniper grew too thick for their liking. There is talk of trying yet again to reintroduce the bighorns now that fire has cleared out some of their old stomping grounds. Perhaps the next time you walk this trail you'll catch sight of a majestic sheep climbing the walls on the other side of Spruce Canyon.

34. Arriving back at park headquarters, well hydrated and perhaps a wee bit wiser, listen to that nagging voice inside your head pointing out how the trail guide, which shepherded you safely through the depths of the canyon and across the mesa top pygmy forest, is now soft and torn from use. Step into the cool of the museum. To the right of the door is a box where you can drop in fifty cents for this trail guide.

There you see an array of guides to all the delightful things you can do in the park. Look them over carefully to discover your next adventure at Mesa Verde. Just be sure to keep your water bag full and your tubing untied.

1. You come upon a signpost in the wilderness marked with the number one, calling your attention to the majestic tree rising up before it. Is this the very tree that Mesa Verde National Park's Spruce Tree House is named for? Maybe you should have picked up a copy of the trail guide after all. Walk back to the brown wooden box at the start of the trail where you scribbled your name and as much of your car's license number as you could remember. Grab a booklet from the stack. Don't have time to dig into the bottom of your pack to find the fifty cents to pay for it? Don't worry. It says right there on the cover that you can drop it back in the box at the end of your hike. You'll take care to keep the guide clean and tidy so you can return it later, right?

2. Notice how the canyon floor is speckled with occasional green-and-white splatters. Now scan the edge of the trail for stumpy feathers that look like they've been given a crew cut. You are standing beneath a set of trees where a rafter of wild turkeys (*Meleagris gallopavo*) roosts. Every night at sunset they toddle to the edge of the mesa-top stretch of sandstone above Spruce Tree House and hurl their bulky bodies into the air, flapping their short wings to fly awkwardly to the tiniest limbs at the very top. Look up and try to imagine half a dozen turkeys in the tree above you. Can't quite picture it? Come back at dusk tonight for the show.

If you're lucky enough to spot a turkey feather, pick it up. Rub it between your fingers and discover how soft it is. No wonder the Ancestral Puebloans made blankets from these. Return the feather to the place where you found it by the trail for the next hiker to enjoy.

3. As you walk, look around you at the piñon pines (*Pinus edulis*), juniper (*Juniperus osteosperma*), and Douglas fir (*Pseudotsuga menziesii*). Peer up at the sides of the canyon walls overhead. Look down at the stones beneath your feet

worn smooth by centuries of feet, rain, and snow. Close your eyes. Listen to the breeze as it whispers through the branches; feel its cool caress on your cheek. Half a million people visit Mesa Verde National Park each year, but only a fraction of them walk this trail. By taking these first few steps down into the canyon you've joined a select group of park cognoscenti. Enjoy the sense of adventure this gives you. You're moving on your own power, making good time, feeling fit and strong. It's an excellent day for a hike.

4. Wait, was that the canyon floor already? It looks like everything is up from here. Now might be a good time to take a drink out of the big plastic bladder of water you've been lugging around in your pack all day. Not that you need it yet, but what's inside your belly isn't weight on your back. Grab the long tube from the water bag, tuck the mouthpiece between your teeth, and suck.

5. Pause for a moment to take in the view across the canyon. If you look carefully you will spot an alcove high in the opposite wall. Is that a human-made masonry wall inside it? Squint for a better look. Maybe it's time to get new glasses. You should have brought binoculars. Now scan the canyon wall until you reach the mesa top above. The Ancestral Puebloans traveled between their alcove dwellings and their mesa top farmland by hand and toehold trails they carved into the sandstone. Imagine scrambling down from the mesa top and into that alcove. Now imagine yourself doing it while carrying baskets filled with ears of freshly harvested corn. Now wonder how they managed it.

6. Mesa Verde turns everything you know about water upside down. The canyon floors are more dry and arid than the mesa tops seven thousand feet above. In this place, stone does the work of a sponge.

Even the color of water is different here. In Mesa Verde,

may grow to the height of trees in more moist climes, here in Mesa Verde they are all short and shrubby with small leaves no larger than a nickel, and a color that presents pale green as a shade of silver and gray.

You won't mistake any of those plants for the long, plastic-like tentacles of Mormon tea (*Ephedra viridis*), the boisterous yellow fuzz of rabbitbrush (*Ericameria nauseosa*), or the spiteful needle-nosed yucca (*Yucca baccata*). More than 600 species of plants occur in the park, including 151 different species of lichen. Among the most common plant species are seven different trees, eleven shrubs and 38 wildflowers. How many will you know by the time you leave?

31. Remember those friendly gentlemen who passed you back at marker 25? Do you think they were as surprised as you are to come upon marker number 31? Flip to the end of the trail guide. There are 34 markers in all. What on earth made you think there were only 30?

Better take another big old slug from your water bag.

32. Keep the faith as you continue along this long expanse between markers. If you begin to wonder whether you might have gone off the trail and could be stumbling wayward along a dry streambed, look for the spoor of the non-native rubberized sneaker-hiker shoe. Those footprints will lead you back to civilization.

33. Fire is often viewed as a negative force, and it certainly has done much damage across Mesa Verde. Some 70 percent of the park has burned since it was founded in 1906. The vast majority of fires are started by Mother Nature herself in her manifestation as lightning. The barren gray tree trunks and branches all around you are testament to the destructive power of fire. Lookout towers are manned all summer across the region, and firefighters are on call at all

smart as chimps or dolphins, with a well-developed sense of play. Here, the canyon walls amplify raven's rough voice. Does he do it on purpose, this trickster raven, crying out as he swoops through the canyon in order to hear the sound of his own voice shrieking back at him like a banshee?

28. Time for one last, long guzzle from the bag of water as you close in on marker number 30. Remember the hikers' pithy wisdom: *Better to carry it in you than on you*. Especially now that you know how to work this thing properly.

29. Notice the loose red soil blanketing the mesa top. In this place, red is a shade of yellow, the color of sand and stone, the color of home, of hand-chiseled bricks and the rich soil that spring winds carry to the mesa, full of the nutrients that give birth to corn the color of autumn, the color of coyote.

Bend down and rub the soft red loess between your fingers. It feels dry and silty like talcum powder, not gritty like sand. Each year for more than a million years this layer of soil has arrived as dust blown in from desert to the southwest. Geologists call this action "eolian," which will be an excellent Scrabble word next time you're overburdened with vowels (pro tip: it can also be spelled "aeolian").

Depending on where you are on the mesa, the loess can be up to thirty feet deep. Its high clay content means it holds in moisture well, making it excellent for farming. The Ancestral Puebloans grew their crops in areas where it was at least three feet deep. This loess soil gives life to the pygmy forest.

30. You've got your snowberry (*Symphoricarpos oreophilus*) and your skunkbush sumac (*Rhus trilobata*), and even your mountain mahogany (*Cercocarpus ledifolius*) and your bitterbrush (*Purshia tridentate*). If you can tell the difference between them by the end of this hike, it won't be because you read this trail guide. While some of these plants

water is not blue. It shows itself instead in black and white and green. Wide, dripping swaths of desert varnish show where rain has run down the face of rocks over the centuries, leaving traces of iron oxide and manganese oxide to blacken in the sun. Patches of powdery white patterning the canyon wall near your feet are calcium sulfate, showing where water once appeared, then evaporated. Green grass and mosses growing in crevices at the side of the trail point the way to hidden seep springs.

7. These two tall boulders have held the third one on their shoulders for hundreds, perhaps thousands, of years. Pass through the sandstone corridor they created. Turn around and walk through it again. Stand in the middle and slap your hands against both sides. Listen to the way the sound echoes. When we build steel and plastic playgrounds in our city parks, what are we doing but creating domesticated copies of what nature has shown us in the wild?

8. A lizard scampers out of sight under a boulder ahead. It's a couple of inches long, thin and low to the ground, with dark-brown and yellow stripes running the length of its body. If a ranger were here and you described it to her, she'd tell you it was most likely either something in the whiptail (*Teiidae*) or skink (*Scincidae*) family. Depending on her training and background, she might venture a guess as to genus, based on which are most common in the park.

If you're lucky, the lizard will pause long enough for you to get a good look at it, and perhaps even show off with a few lizard pushups.

9. Well, that was a whole lot of stairs you just climbed. Exactly how many you can't say because you lost count at fifteen. Now might be a good time to take another healthy guzzle out of the water bladder in your pack. Grab that mouthpiece by the teeth and suck, only to find that nothing

comes out. Suck harder. Accidently bite your tongue. Still absolutely nothing. Surely there was at least a liter of water in there when you started the hike. Shake your pack a little on your back. Sounds like the slosh of water. You should have checked first. Smack your lips together. You weren't really all that thirsty after all, were you? Keep walking. Everything will be fine.

10. Walk carefully down yet another a set of stairs over a smattering of red penstemon (*Penstemon barbatus*) and Oregon grape (*Berberis repens*). These small green plants are so unobtrusive they might go unnoticed the rest of the year, but when their flowers bloom their bright colors stand out like neon in this landscape of beige, dark green, and gray.

11. A short distance ahead, a gray-brown rock squirrel (*Otospermophilus variegatus*) stands upright and noble on a fallen dead tree beside the trail. She makes a pretty gray-on-gray still life on her perch. Beside her is a tall tree with a lovely swirling design carved into its trunk. Step closer to get a better look. Those dots at the ends of the swirls show where the bark beetles (*Dendroctonus ponderosae*) dug in deep at the ends of their winding tracks. Look up and realize this tree, though still upright, is dead.

The squirrel on the fallen tree is standing still, staring right into your soul with its beady black eyes. This bold little beast should have run away when you approached. It should be more frightened of you than it is. Remember reading somewhere that when wild animals don't run away, it's often because they're sick. Some squirrels carry the plague (*Yersinia pestis*) in this part of the world, don't they? Give this little demon a wide berth as you scurry past.

12. Take a look backward, across the canyon, for a view of the park offices, low-slung sandstone edifices that were made from local materials and designed to blend into their

While you sit and wonder at this beauty and history, pull the water bladder out of your pack. Exclaim a little with happy surprise when you discover it to be nearly full. Untwist the kinks in the long tube and lay the bag on its side. Suck down water warmed by the heat of your back as quickly and urgently as you can. How many times will we relearn the simple truth that *water is life*?

25. Climb onto this outcropping and take in yet another view of the canyon. Now that your thirst is quenched and you know you won't die of dehydration on the trail, you've grown a bit peckish. Grab a handful of dried apricots and salty, toasted almonds from your pack. How strange that the human body after desperately filling itself up with water would immediately crave desiccated fruit and salt, which will only make you thirsty again.

As you sit quietly enjoying the view, you hear two men with British accents coming up the trail behind you. One of them asks the other, "Why is there no one under the age of 71 on this trail?" When they come around the bend and see you, wave and say a hearty *Hello*. When they see the trail guide in your hands and ask, "How much farther do we have to go?" answer in a confident voice, *There's a total of 30 markers on the trail.* Wish them a good day as they continue on their hike.

26. Let the nice British gentlemen get well ahead on the next section of the trail before you follow because it's a tricky scramble over a heap of boulders to the mesa top. At the point where the trail disappears into the big stones, trust the signage and follow the arrow museum-ward. At the top, turn back for one last look at the majestic canyon scene.

27. Listen to the sound of a raven diving down into the canyon so close you can hear the whipping of his wings in the air. They call him a "common raven" (*Corvus corax*) but there's nothing common about him. Ravens are said to be as

22. Tell yourself you're not thirsty. Turn around and look back. The park buildings are nowhere to be seen. You are on your own now. Test the water tube again and get the same outcome: nothing. Should you turn back? No, you'll reach the petroglyphs in only two more markers. You've come too far to give up now.

23. A piñon pine grows bravely from a crack in the face of a rock. In this landscape, life is a sign of water. The small trees and shrubs that sprout from the cracks point to seeps inside the sandstone. All this vegetation tells us that water is more abundant than it is evident in this arid place.

24. Drop your pack from your sweat-stained back, place your fists on your hips, and stand beside marker 24, arms akimbo, staring out into the wide-open canyon, wondering *Where are those petroglyphs*? Look all about and beneath you on the ground beside the marker. When you're finally about to give up, turn around. There on the sandstone canyon wall behind you is a wide patch of rust-red, covered by a stunning montage of pictographs. Sit down on the boulder beside your pack. Yes, this was worth the trip.

The birds and the bighorn sheep are the easiest to read. There are figures of people, too. The ones with arms that curve, one upward and one downward, have been interpreted as being "whipping kachinas" who "influenced" or "straightened out" the people and directed them in their travels. There are spirals, and is that a man's bearded face? All these images were carved into the stone with care. They are not random or offhand doodles—making them would have required hours of intense work. These symbols are communication. Their meaning would have been understood both by those who carved the images and by those who saw them. You are looking at the beginning of written language for this culture. How might it have progressed among the Ancestral Puebloans if they hadn't left this area?

surroundings. Those charming buildings are where you started from on this trail, and where you'll end up. Take a good, long look. It's the last you'll see of them for quite a while.

13. Peer deep into the crack beneath the boulder jutting out from the canyon wall. Geology is as visible in the hidden corners of the park as it is on soaring canyon walls. As you continue to walk along the trail, pause occasionally to notice the striations and ripples in the stone, layers of sediment piled up and pressed upon each other millions of years ago when this place was the ocean floor. The preacher has it all wrong—it is from water we come, and to water we shall return.

14. A group of hikers is coming up behind you on the trail. Their voices keep getting closer. They're moving at a faster clip than you. Stop at this marker and open up the trail guide, pretending to read it. That way you can catch your breath without letting them see how badly you're huffing and puffing. Really, you thought you were in better shape than this. Blame the altitude as you peruse the guide. Smile and greet the hikers as they pass.

Your throat is a bit dry from all that mouth breathing. Take another tug on the water tube. Still nothing. Tell yourself everything will be okay and keep on walking.

15. Take a closer look at the stairs in front of you. One of them is made of a swirling purple and white stone. In Mesa Verde, purple is a shade of white, a color that flashes only to leave too late a trace of where it was before we saw it, like lightning. Like the spark of a woodpecker in the trees. Like purple asters that close up their fists when night falls, to wait for the morning light.

16. A few steps before you arrive at this marker, pause

and turn your gaze up to admire an outcropping of boulders that look like Mother Nature in her most maternal manifestation, holding a stone baby against her shoulder. When you're finished admiring her handiwork, fold the trail guide into quarters so you can shove it into your back pocket. Only after you've done that, remember how you'd meant to keep the guide in pristine condition and return it at the end of the hike. Feel a twinge of guilt. Admit to yourself quietly that you should have dropped fifty cents into the box when you picked it up.

17. Okay, now you have to admit you really are thirsty. Take another suck on that water tube. Suck harder. Nothing. Dagnabit, you spent a lot of money at that three-letter outdoor store to buy this water bladder and tube because it was supposed to make hiking easier if you didn't have to stop to pull a water bottle out of your pack and unscrew the top every time you wanted a drink. Now, instead, you are going to die of dehydration almost in sight of the park ranger's office because the damn thing won't work right. Are you closer to the beginning or the end at this point? Pull out your phone and realize you didn't launch the app to track your walking when you started.

If you don't know how far you've come or how far you still have to go, there's nothing for it, is there? Keep on hiking.

18. Check out this alcove. It's like you've stumbled into history, right into someone's living room. Hidden behind you is a masonry wall that almost blends into its surroundings. Climb a few steps farther along the trail and look back to see the remains of other hand-made walls. The slanted alcove ceiling is covered with black soot from countless meals cooked a thousand years ago. Can you remember from your earlier tours of the cliff dwellings what food crops the Ancestral Puebloans grew? Here's a riddle to help you remember:

Three sisters grow up together. The eldest was <u>born</u> to be tall with silky yellow tresses. The second is <u>lean</u> and hugs her sister tight. The third dances beneath them in the <u>mosh</u> pit.

19. Are those vultures circling high up in the sky overhead? How do they already know about your malfunctioning water bladder?

There are two types of vultures in the Mesa Verde area. Turkey vultures (*Cathartes aura*) have heads that are red while black vultures (*Coragyps atratus*) have black heads. Vultures have no song so you'll probably never hear them coming, except by their grunts and hisses. Vultures find their dinner by smell, from as far as a mile above the ground. Do they already smell the doom of dehydration on you?

20. Some of these stairs on the trail are stone slabs. Others have been carved into the boulders. Petroglyph Trail and other trails in the park were built during the Great Depression (1929–39) by the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC). The CCC also built the museum and park administration buildings, cut and paved the roads, landscaped the grounds, and constructed the fire watchtower at Park Point—be sure to stop there on your way out of Mesa Verde to experience the 360 degree view.

For every stretch of stairs you walk up or down, take a moment to thank the CCC, the Works Progress Administration, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, and a time in history when America believed that providing work, skills, and an income to people in need would benefit everyone.

21. That was a long stretch. It's good to come upon another sign of civilization, though, truth to tell, you were hoping you'd missed a marker or two and that you'd turn out to be farther along than this.