



# A Course Through the Wild

## FIELD SCHOOLS UNLOCK THE WEST'S MYSTERIOUS LANDSCAPES

By DAVE PHILIPPS THE GAZETTE

LEES FERRY, Ariz. - In an oxbow of Glen Canyon where the Colorado River carves a 1,000-foot-deep loop in the surrounding sandstone desert, Ann Zwinger, a Colorado Springs naturalist and author of what she calls "eight or nine good, solid books," hovered over a

luxurious mound of white flowers.

"What is it?" asked a woman who joined Zwinger exploring the canyon floor on a recent float trip.

Zwinger knelt next to her and fingered one of the flowers. "Four white petals, the X-shaped yellow stamen. This is evening primrose," Zwinger said. "It blooms at night. On a cool evening, you can cup your hands around them and feel them open. Then they wilt the next day. Like Cinderella, just pretty for one night. . . And who do you suppose pollinates a flower by moonlight?"

To answer her own question, Zwinger picked something thin and gray out of the red sand at its base and held it up.

"This is the wing of a hummingbird moth. That's who visits this flower."

Zwinger was one of five experts fielding questions from 10 people who had signed up for the "Glen Canyon Sampler" trip. The four-day trip with the Grand Circle Field School explored the geology, history, biology and politics of the Utah and Arizona canyon country.

Grand Circle is one of a number of field schools in the West that invite people to learn about their natural surroundings through illuminating hands-on instruction outdoors.

These private organizations generally work in and around national parks and monuments.

The Grand Canyon has the Grand Canyon Field Institute, which for a few hundred dollars takes visitors beyond the ranger's rim to multiday archaeology- and geology-focused backpack and mule trips.

Rocky Mountain National Park's Rocky Mountain Nature Association has experiences for all senses, including rendering ripples and rapids in watercolor, hunting edible plants and birding by ear.

Florissant Fossil Beds National Monument has popular daylong seminars sponsored by Friends of the Florissant Fossil Beds covering birds, bees, volcanos – practically anything of interest on the west side of Pikes Peak. They often fill in a few weeks.

These organizations work with parks and monuments to offer visitors a scope of knowledge well beyond the average guided one-hour ranger tour.

"We consider ourselves the extension of the ranger programs," said Kate Miller, field seminar director of the Rocky Mountain Nature Association. "We pick up where they have to leave off and offer real in-depth instruction they're not able to provide."

It's a certain kind of person who wants to spend a vacation in an outdoor classroom instead of a golf course or amusement park, but there's no shortage of these lifelong learners.

Even though these classes cost a fairly hefty amount, many fill up months in advance.

"We just have a lot of people who want to know more about these natural areas," Miller said.

The area Grand Circle Field School represents isn't nearly as well-known as Rocky Mountain National Park.

Glen Canyon National Recreation Area and Grand Canyon-Parashant and Vermilion Cliffs national monuments are obscure corners of the desert, but they make up the starkly beautiful heart of the canyon country between Grand Canyon, Zion, Bryce and Canyonlands national parks.

"No one really visits these places. No one knows them, but they're really worth seeing," said Gary Ladd, a landscape photographer and instructor for the school.

Ladd and the other instructors are making sure this land doesn't languish unappreciated.

Like most field schools, Grand Circle draws from a pool of instructors who teach only a few days a year and spend the rest of the time doing the things that make them experts in their fields.

On the float trip through Glen Canyon, Zwinger, the botany expert, was joined by a photographer well-known for his books of red rock landscapes and an anthropologist and author steeped in the lore of ancestral Pueblo tribes that had left petroglyphs on the sandstone walls. With them was a geology professor and longtime Grand Canyon boatman who could discuss events in the canyon from the great Permian die-off when 90 percent of life was extinguished a quarter billion years ago to the more recent near-catastrophe when Glen Canyon Dam almost failed in 1983.

Together, they were a walking encyclopedia.

The quality instructors attracted Jane Cauvel, a retired philosophy professor from Colorado College, to sign up for a second trip with the school.

"I was fascinated with this area, but I'd never been here. I didn't know where to start," she said at camp, set up in a peach orchard at a historic river crossing called Lee's Ferry. "I was so impressed with the quality of the instructors here that I jumped at the chance to see this place beyond what a tourist would see. This is a true liberal arts education."

Good instructors are crucial, said Grand Circle director Judy Durzo, but just as important is the millions of acres where they ply their craft.

Grand Circle's turf encompasses slot canyons, broad swaths of river, high lonely plateaus and one of the only places in the world where people can spot the endangered California condor.

"This is the ultimate classroom. We get to hike and boat to our lessons, and at the end of the day we come back to Lee's Ferry and have food and wine waiting for us. That makes the learning go down a little easier."

The itinerary for the three-day Glen Canyon Sampler went like this:

Day One: Float Glen Canyon, learn about the politics of Glen Canyon Dam, visit rarely seen petroglyphs, and stop off at a narrow, flower-strewn slot canyon that the Park Service doesn't allow other outfitters to visit. Finish the day watching condors with the lead condor expert from the Peregrine Fund.

Day Two: Tour Lee's Ferry and learn about early Mormon history in the region, then hike to the canyon rim, learning about wildflowers along the way.

Day Three: Hike a narrow slot canyon below the Vermilion Cliffs while learning about the geologic processes that created the Colorado Plateau.

Each day was capped by a hearty dinner from a camp kitchen in the orchard, followed by slide shows or talks. Any lingering questions from the day could be answered under starlight before everyone headed to their tents.

Walking to his tent after a long day of hiking, Richard Hinkel of Phoenix said he had come because Grand Circle offered exactly what he wanted.

"You get to hike. You get to boat. You get to be outdoors, and you learn a little along the way," he said. "Plus, I eat better here than I do at home."

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## FIELD SCHOOLS IN THE WEST

**Rocky Mountain Nature Association:** The country's oldest national park seminar program offers more than a dozen day, weekend and multiday seminars for kids and adults, including a new series this year in Front Range natural areas and state parks.

Tuition: about \$15 to \$215 [www.rmna.org](http://www.rmna.org) 1-800-748-7002

**Friends of the Florissant Fossil Beds:** This small but popular series of daylong seminars running through Aug. 20 takes an in-depth look at the natural and cultural history of the west side of Pikes Peak, including the monument's striking fossil beds.

Tuition: \$40 to \$65 [www.nps.gov/flfo/pdfs/seminar\\_brochure\\_web.pdf](http://www.nps.gov/flfo/pdfs/seminar_brochure_web.pdf) [www.fossilbeds.org](http://www.fossilbeds.org)

**Grand Circle Field School:** One of the newest field schools in the West, Grand Circle explores the littleseen areas of Glen Canyon, Vermilion Cliffs and Grand Canyon-Parashant with multiday river trips, backpack treks and base camp sampler tours with some of the most knowledgeable guides around talking on a variety of subjects.

Tuition: \$550 to \$1,575 [www.grandcirclefieldschool.org](http://www.grandcirclefieldschool.org)  
1-505-797-8540

**Grand Canyon Field Institute:** With temperatures climbing to 110 degrees, classes trail off in midsummer at this Grand Canyon National Park-based school, but come September, it has a full roster of day and multiday backcountry classes on subjects such as ethnobotany, secret springs of the South Rim and, of course, biology.

Tuition: \$300 to \$550 [www.grandcanyon.org](http://www.grandcanyon.org) 1-866-471-4435

**Yellowstone Association:** This Yellowstone National Park-based association has a fittingly jam-packed schedule for a park that is often jam-packed with visitors. Mostly multiday seminars on such in-depth subjects as backcountry cougar ecology and haunted hotels of Yellowstone will get students away from the crowds.

Tuition: \$75 to \$700 [yellowstoneassociation.org](http://yellowstoneassociation.org) 1-307-344-2293

**Teton Science School:** Just south of Yellowstone in Grand Teton National Park, the Science School focuses on oneday and multiday family-based classes on topics such as star gazing, the entomology of fly fishing and bird-banding breakfasts. Kids-only classes are available.

Tuition: \$12 to \$310    [www.tetonscience.org](http://www.tetonscience.org)    1-307-733-4765

**Canyonlands Field Institute:** Despite its name, CFI is more of a guide service than a field school. Still, the wellformed guided nature day trips and custom overnights around Moab, Utah, can unlock the secrets of the red rock desert.

Tuition: \$30 to \$250    [www.canyonlandsfieldinst.org](http://www.canyonlandsfieldinst.org)  
1-800-860-5262

**Mountain Studies Institute:** This Silverton-based field school offers a close look at the surrounding alpine environment. Its multiday classes in geology, stream ecology and geography are designed for college students and educators, but the general public is welcome.

A free natural history hike leaves from the institute every day through Sept. 30.

Tuition: \$150 to \$350    [www.mountainstudies.org](http://www.mountainstudies.org)    1-970-387-5161

DAVE PHILIPPS, THE GAZETTE

PHOTOS BY JON AUSTRIA, THE GAZETTE - Students and instructors of the Grand Circle Field School make their way through Cathedral Wash, a 1.5-mile-long trail that ends at the Colorado River. Grand Circle's turf includes Glen Canyon National Recreation Area and Vermilion Cliffs and Grand Canyon-Parashant national monuments.

The Colorado River winds through Marble Canyon at the end of the Cathedral Wash hike, which starts at Arizona's Vermilion Cliffs National Monument.

A California condor flies above Navajo Bridge in Arizona's Glen Canyon National Recreation Area, one of the few places the endangered bird can be spotted. Grand Circle's Glen Canyon Sampler includes condor watching.

Grand Circle Field School instructor Ann Zwinger of Colorado Springs talks with students on a hike in Cathedral Wash at the Glen Canyon National Recreation Area.

JON AUSTRIA, THE GAZETTE - Grand Circle Field School participants, from left, Melinda Treml of Colorado Springs; Marian Sussman of Fullerton, Calif.; and Peter Culbert of Santa Fe, N.M., have lunch at the top of Spencer's Trail in the Glen Canyon Recreation Area in Lee's Ferry, Ariz.