

Powell in Ouray National Wildlife Refuge

Established nearly 100 years after Powell's 1869 expedition, Ouray National Wildlife Refuge straddles the Green River for sixteen miles in northeastern Utah. Ouray features picturesque landscapes with lush foliage along the riverbanks, a stark contrast to the red and orange hues of the desert landscape. The refuge provides quiet areas to enjoy the same land Powell and his men traveled through. There are ample opportunities for paddling the Green River here, as well as hiking, wildlife viewing, and photography.

The refuge has habitats that attract a variety of wildlife, but it is perhaps best known for its birds. In the early summer, songbirds nest along the river, alongside geese, ducks, coots, and grebes.



Photo: U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

Here, the canyon walls widen and the landscape is dominated by low hills of flat-bedded, soft sedimentary rocks. The dam at Flaming Gorge upstream from here has changed the river dynamics and the ecosystems in the region. Natural floods once provided abundant wetlands and the growth environment for cottonwood and willow trees that Powell described. But the lack of floods and the deepening channel mean the cottonwood forests have decreased and invasive species (tamarisk, pepperwood, and olive) are replacing them, with ripple effects to the bird populations.

For More Information:

USGS Educational Materials:
www.usgs.gov/education

USGS Ecosystems: www.usgs.gov/science/science-explorer/Biology+and+Ecosystems

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Ouray N.W.R.:
www.fws.gov/refuge/ouray

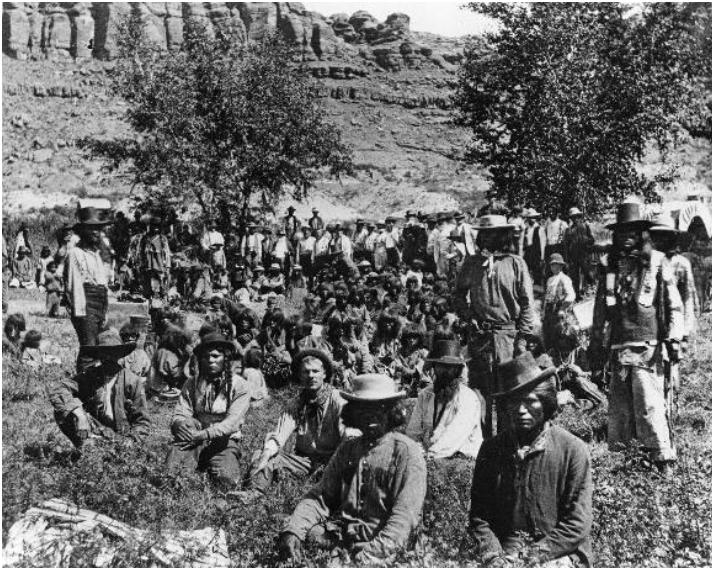
Fish populations have also been affected by the changing river. Native species that Powell would have encountered, including humpback chub and pikeminnows, are endangered today. You are much more likely to find northern pike or smallmouth bass at the end of your fishing line today.

“At daybreak I was awakened by a chorus of birds. It was as if all the feathered songsters of the region had come to the old cottonwood tree. Warblers, woodpeckers, and flickers sang above, meadowlarks sounded their notes in the grass, and wild geese honked on the river. A real morning concert for me. ...

Today we passed easily down the river, for there were no rapids.”

*John Wesley Powell,
June 6, 1869*

The 1869 Powell Expedition



Powell (standing, left) meeting with Ute Tribe members. Photo: USGS, c. 1874.

On May 24, 1869, John Wesley Powell and nine other men boarded four small boats in present-day Green River, Wyoming and set forth on their expedition down the Green and Colorado Rivers. Over the next three months, Powell and his men explored and documented much of the previously unmapped Colorado River Basin. The journey was tumultuous, the men lost crucial supplies and a boat in the first few weeks. In early July, Powell and his men took a break from the river near what is now Ouray National Wildlife Refuge. Powell met with Tau-gu, Chief of the Piaute tribe, and spent time learning about the local culture, and language.

Near this location, Frank Goodman, an Englishman who came along for the adventure, left the journey. He had lost his boat and most of his clothes upstream and decided to stay in Utah, where he lived for many years, eventually raising his family in Vernal, UT.

John Wesley Powell (1834-1902) was an American explorer, geologist, soldier, and the second director of the U.S. Geological Survey.

Find this and other educational resources at:

<https://www.usgs.gov/Powell150>

Follow USGS Youth & Education (YES) on Instagram
@USGS_YES

Learn more about the Sesquicentennial Colorado River Exploring Expedition (SCREE) at: <https://www.powell150.org>

@Powell_150 and @MajorJWPowell

Up against the odds, only six of the ten men completed the journey. Billy Hawkins and brothers Oramel and Seneca Howland left the journey just two days before its completion, concerned that the journey was too dangerous to continue. The trio were never heard from again. The six remaining explorers arrived at present-day Lake Mead (AZ-NV) on August 30th, 1869. Powell's 1869 trip is credited with being the first successful expedition to travel the entirety of the Grand Canyon.

John Wesley Powell's Pioneer River Voyage-1869-



U.S. Department of the Interior/Geological Survey