

Trail Information - Tabeguache Trail / Uncompahgre Plateau

By Bill Harris

Intro:

The information in this mini-guide is the result of countless days exploring the Uncompahgre Plateau of western Colorado. The information contained within is provided as a tool to help orient the traveler, but due to any number of circumstances may not be accurate due to federal land management changes, weather, vandalism, geologic occurrences and/or natural deterioration. Any backcountry travel is inherently dangerous, so be prepared and venture out at your own risk.

Off-road riding on the Plateau is as good as anywhere in western Colorado. The Plateau flies under the radar of most mountain bikers. The remoteness of the Plateau helps insulate it from the hordes, but another factor that contributes to mountain bikers not riding the Plateau could be the lack of detailed information.

The guide “Bicycling the Uncompahgre Plateau” does provide entry-level information about the plateau’s trails, but doesn’t give a lot of specifics. The book’s lack of specificity was intentional - to encourage riders to do the necessary logistic research to successfully find their way. In the last few years more detailed trail information has been printed in a few Grand Junction area trail guides, and there are new maps that have bike trails marked on them. The 2006 version of the Uncompahgre National Forest Map, Plateau Division is very helpful. Also, in 2011 National Geographic – Trails Illustrated published 2 excellent recreation maps for the Uncompahgre Plateau: North and South. Check local bike shops and sporting goods for availability.

Plateau Background:

The Uncompahgre Plateau is a monoclinical uplift - elevations range from 4700 – 9800 feet. The upper reaches of the plateau are usually free of snow and dry enough to ride by early to mid June. Lower elevations open up earlier in the year, and stay open later in the fall. Riding is possible until fall snows and cold weather sets in. Prime riding season is during the fall colors in September. Because of desert and highland environments temperatures can be quite variable with wide swings. Foul weather can blow in at anytime creating impassable two tracks and trails. Heavy rain can cause flash flooding. Warm cycling clothing and rain gear are musts no matter the season.

Because of the plateau's remoteness, backcountry and problem solving skills are important. The bottom line is that riders need to be prepared to deal with vehicle problems, bike breakdowns, injuries and a host of other problems with self-rescue being the only option. Cell phone coverage is spotty, so can't be depended upon to obtain help. The main gravel roads receive regular traffic, so asking for help is an option.

Two of the biggest challenges for through-riders are route finding and finding potable water. A section on maps is listed below. Much of the Uncompahgre Plateau maintains a low profile. Precious few high points allow riders to view surrounding terrain. Some areas of the plateau have a maze of unmarked roads and ways. Signing of trails and roads by the FS and BLM has improved in recent years. The Tabeguache Trail is marked with trail logo stickers mostly on brown fiberglass posts. Vandalism of the trail markers is not

a big a problem, but if only one sign at a critical point is down it can cause big problems. Using the markers in conjunction with maps and trail log can keep riders on-route.

Water availability in streams is variable. Desert sections of the trail have limited / no water. Early in the summer most highland streams have water. All stream water must be filtered or boiled before consumption. One strategy is to carry a water bottle that has a built-in filter that can be filled in any stream encountered along the route. Depending on the time of year and prevailing weather conditions water can be found in streams and at springs. The most reliable sources for water are Dominguez Creek, T-bone Springs along Divide Rd., Escalante Creek – East Fork, Monitor Creek, Potter Creek, Criswell Creek, and Antone Springs near Divide/Transfer Rd intersection Divide Forks, Dry Creek, Cushman Creek and at the Columbine Picnic site along Divide Rd.

Camping is allowed on BLM and Forest Service lands, except around the Lunch Loop area. You will most likely encounter lots of cattle. They can be a smelly nuisance, but please do not harass them – COPMOBA has established good relations with most ranchers and we want to keep it that way.

Tabeguache Trail Background:

The Colorado Plateau Mountain Bike Trail Assoc. (COPMOBA) opened the Tabeguache Trail in 1990 in cooperation with the U.S. Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management. It is 142 miles long, connecting the towns of Grand Junction and Montrose, CO. Nine miles of trail was constructed to connect existing roads and trails to create a continuous route. Trail surface consists of gravel road, maintained dirt road,

primitive 4WD ways, and singletrack. All unimproved roads may become impassable after heavy rain. Copies of the trail map may still be available, but COPMOBA is no longer printing the map for distribution.

MAPS:

The Forest Service's Uncompahgre National Forest map is probably the first map to obtain. They provide a general overview of the Plateau. The updated version (2006) has all the Forest Service trails and roads that make up the Tabeguache Trail route, and are marked as such periodically. The next maps to get are the BLM Surface Status 1:100000-scale topo maps. The Nucla and Delta maps have 95% of the Tabeguache Trail and it is marked. The other 5% is on the Grand Junction BLM map, but it isn't marked. In 2011 Trails Illustrated/National Geographic published the Uncompahgre Plateau maps, North (147) and South (146). The Forest Service and BLM maps are available in their Grand Junction, Delta and Montrose offices. Remember, bikes are limited to designated routes.

ACCESS:

Touring the TABEGUACHE:

The long distance nature of the Tabeguache Trail makes it appealing for a multi-day tour. Getting out on the trail for several days in a row really allows riders to experience the true nature of the Uncompahgre Plateau. It allows riders to get in a natural rhythm. The COPMOBA Tabeguache Trail map has useful information about the trail. Two of the most popular ways of touring is by pack or sag.

The pack trip is pretty straightforward. Load your backpacking gear into panniers or a trailer and start cranking. The extra weight slows down most riders, and can get in the

way on technical sections of trail. A pack trip gives riders a greater sense of independence.

The sag trip is appealing since more creature comforts can be brought along in a vehicle. Usually riders can cover more ground when they aren't loaded down. Logistics can get a little more complicated, but a vehicle provides an emergency bailout option. The main access roads on the plateau are graveled and maintained, so access for camping along the route is possible.

Due to logging operations, sign vandalism and the maze of existing roads and trails the Roubideau Section of the Tabeguache Trail is difficult to follow. The Roubideau Section is emblematic of the rugged nature of trail riding on the Plateau. Recent efforts with map upgrading and trail signage have improved route finding along the Roubideau Section, but it still can offer numerous challenges. For through-riders who want to avoid the Roubideau Section between East Bull Road and 25 Mesa (Tabeguache Trail log mileage 27.9 – 47.5) there is an optional, more straight forward route. Riders can now follow the Parallel Trail west from E. Bull Road to the Monitor Mesa Road (533), access the Delta/Nucla Road, ride the Delta/Nucla Rd to its intersection with the Cottonwood Road then continue on the Tabeguache Trail. As the name implies, the trail parallels the Divide Road, and is an ATV-wide trail that offers an alternative to the dusty, busy Divide Road. The overall mileage of the optional route isn't much different than the main Tabeguache Trail, but it is less difficult.

Other Trails:

The plateau has dozens of trails and dirt roads that make great mountain bike routes.

“Bicycling the Uncompahgre Plateau” written by Bill Harris, has background and access road information, plus highlights a number of rides. The maps listed above have many roads and trails marked.

The most used Forest Service trails on the south end of the plateau are Dry Creek Canyon/Cushman Mesa trails, upper/lower Spring Creek trails, Clear Creek Trail, Aspen/Buck/ Dry Creek trails system, and the Pool Creek section of the Tabeguache Trail.

The north-central section of the plateau is beginning to see more bike traffic. More visitations around Gateway are anticipated as Gateway Canyons Resort is developed. Smith Point Trail (636), Blue Creek (620), Little Creek (655), Corral Fork (652), Ute Creek (608) and Picket Trail (via F.R. 405) are just a few of the riding options.

The most under-utilized trail system on the plateau is the central section around Columbine Pass, Love Mesa and Campbell Point. Upper Bench (625), Atkinson Bench (623), 47 Trail (403), Bear Pen Gulch trails (124/124.1) offer some fantastic singletrack rides. In many places these trails are rugged, obscure and marginally maintained due to irregular use, definitely a “no buffed zone”.

A popular way of riding the Plateau is to set up a base camp in a central location for 3-4 days, then ride or shuttle to a different trail each day. There are numerous day loop rides off Tabeguache Trail. Camps near Divide Forks, Columbine Pass/25 Mesa, Dominguez Campground and States Draw allow for a number of riding options from a central location.

Once you leave the relative safety of the towns surrounding the Plateau you will find few amenities and services. Bring everything you think you might need with you. The above information may change without notice; so check with the local Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management offices in Grand Junction and Montrose for any updates. FS and BLM office information is located on the COPMOBA Tabeguache Trail map.

The Paradox Trail's eastern trailhead is on the Plateau. It is located at the intersection of the Houser Rd. (FR 603) and Divide Rd. The Tabeguache and Paradox can be connected by going east from the Paradox trailhead on Divide Rd. to FR 548. Turn left and the Tabeguache Trail crosses 548 just ahead. Another option is to take the ATV extension of the Parallel Trail near the end of the Paradox Trail over to the Pool Creek Trailhead, then follow the Parallel Trail over to East Bull Rd or follow the Grays Creek Trail (157) over to the powerlines. Turn left to access the Transfer Road section of the Tabeguache Trail.

In 1994 a group of Colorado mountain bikers organized the first known mountain bike tour that connected sections of the Kokopelli's, Paradox and Tabeguache trails to make a giant loop ride. The sag-supported tour covered 243 miles and took 6 days to complete. Riders included Brad Smith, Reed Donnelly, Alan Ardizzone, Fred Matheny, Paul Koski, Luther Davidson and Bill Harris. The loop ride has been dubbed the "Grand Loop". Mike Curiak then organized an ultra-long distance race using the Grand Loop. Google "Grand Loop Race" to access some neat websites that detail the challenges of the Grand Loop.