



Sclerocactus parviflorus amongst the arches

Sometimes we go to the desert to see cacti; sometimes we go to see the rocks. My quick excursion to Arches and Canyonlands National Parks in southeastern Utah in June 2012 was admittedly for the rocks.

Arches National Park is a stunning place, overlooking the Colorado River just north of Moab, with more gorgeous rock formations per square kilometer than I have ever seen. The park is close to town, the roads through the park are in pristine paved condition, the geologic features are mostly very close to the road, and many of the arches and towers of rocks are wheelchair accessible. This is not exactly my idea of wilderness, but we took one trail, with one long somewhat steep climb up a hillside, for the 2.5 km walk (each way) to Delicate Arch. Most of the walk was on bare rock, but with some occasional pockets of dirt, several of which had isolated specimens of *Sclerocactus parviflorus* (Fig. 1). This is a relatively easy hike that can even be done in bare feet, but the highlight was definitely Delicate Arch itself (Fig. 2), not the cacti.

Canyonlands National Park is a much larger and wilder place than Arches. Canyonlands is divided into three sections, Island in the Sky (north), the Maze (southwest) and the Needles (southeast), each with different road access. We only had a day and wanted to see the Needles, which are lovely rock formations in the aptly named Needles District, and also wanted to see more arches. We parked at the Elephant

2. Delicate Arch.



1. A large specimen of *Sclerocactus parviflorus* near the start of the hike to Delicate Arch.



3. Side canyon just under a kilometer from Elephant Hill trailhead. This photo was taken from the clump of a half-dozen *Sclerocactus parviflorus* growing in red sand in Figs. 4 & 5 (below).

Hill trailhead and hiked 9 km (each way) to Druid Arch. This is a fantastic hike, with fabulous views of the Needles, a spectacular short walk through an extremely narrow canyon – only one person at a time; tuck in your elbows – followed by a walk through the much wider arroyo of Elephant Canyon with many flowering milkweed plants. Other than in the canyons, even in the first kilometer of the hike (Fig. 3), there are numerous specimens of *Sclerocactus parviflorus*, always in loose red sand that eroded from the slick rock formations (Figs 4 & 5). This would be an even more spectacular hike when *Sclerocactus parviflorus* is in flower. Even with the heat during the week of the summer solstice, this was an easy hike other than the final half-kilometer. That final ascent to the arch first avoids the canyon so that hikers do not have to swim





6. Side view of Druid Arch. Near the trees to the left base of the arch there are *Sclerocactus parviflorus*.

through algae-clogged waters. Then there is a nicely done ladder and big boulders to scramble over as you climb completely out of the canyon to Druid Arch (Fig. 6). It is well worth the effort, especially since you will find more *Sclerocactus parviflorus* at the base

of the arch!

On the hikes to both Delicate and Druid Arches, *Sclerocactus parviflorus* is readily visible from the trail. I can only imagine how common this plant must be off of the trails.