

# MYSTERIES of the CANYON COUNTRY

## *The Lonely Pine--A Last Remnant or a Stubborn Interloper?*

Jim Stiles

How did the canyon country once look, in a different time and in a different world? Maybe a few hundred or thousands of years ago? In many respects, especially when it comes to our precious slickrock, the changes would almost be imperceptible. But in other ways, and in the relative blink of an eye, our part of the world is very different.

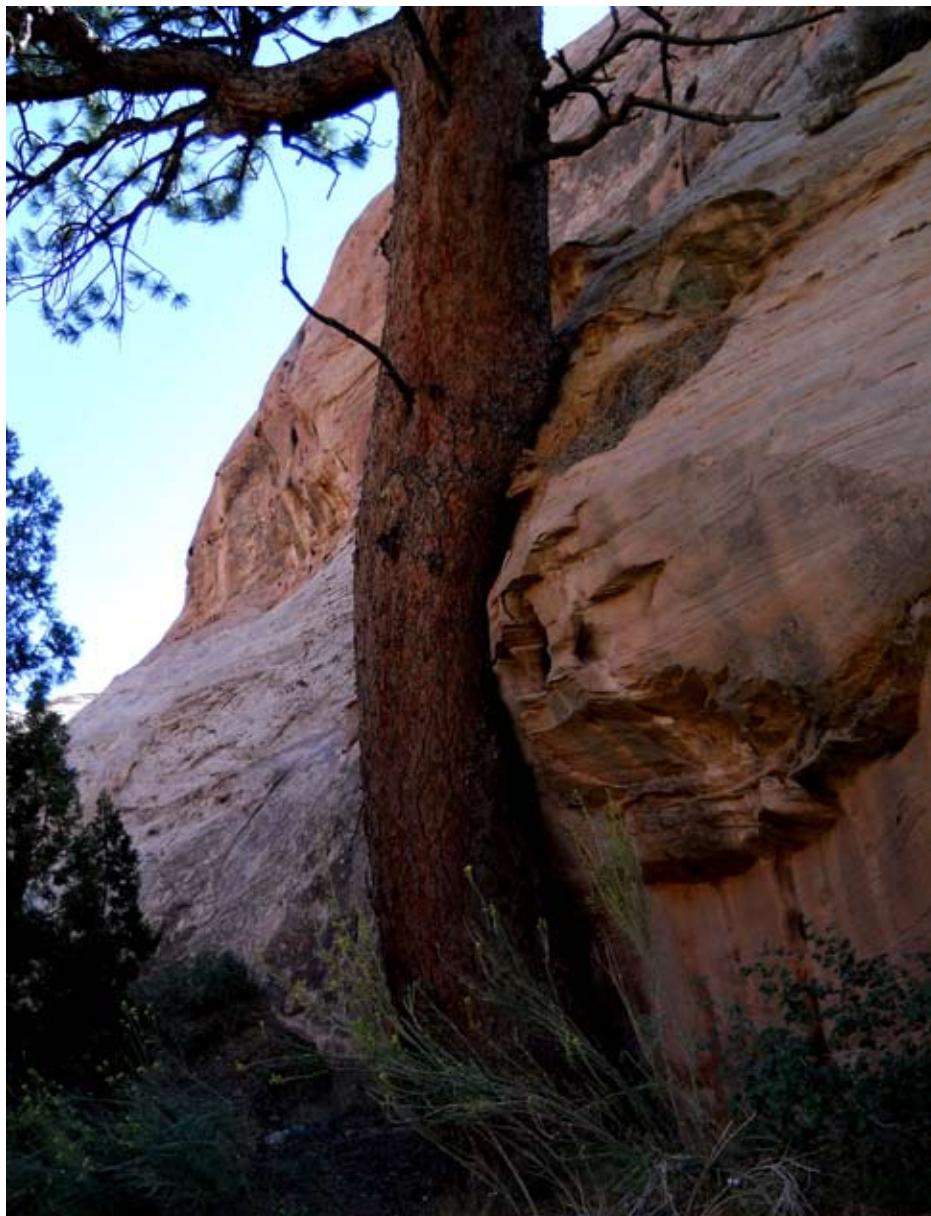
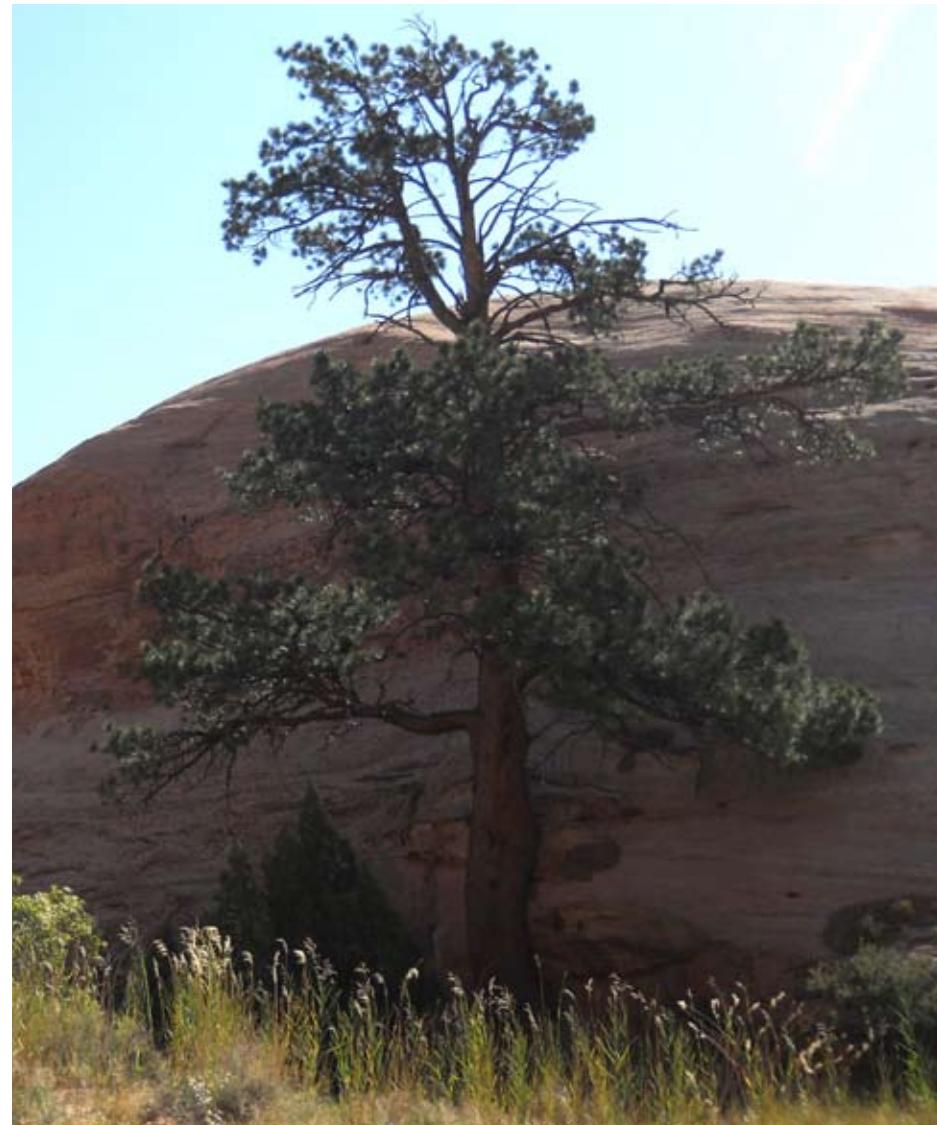
For example, in the 90s, scientists discovered a pack rat midden in a deep cave near Delicate Arch. In all that ancient excrement, they found nuts from a yellow pine, a tree that now only grows in the La Sal Mountains, some thirty miles away and 4000 feet higher in elevation. Did a pack rat carry a pine cone down the mountain, across the river, and up Salt Wash to its final resting place? No...more likely, the rats gathered these nuts from nearby pines when the tree grew prolifically at a lower elevation, in the vicinity of that cave. Later, carbon testing of the pine cone remnant and the midden pile confirmed that they were more than 12,000 years old.

Arches must have looked very different then. Imagine tall pine forests surrounding the Windows area of Arches National Park and in Winter Camp Wash below Delicate Arch. The climate was cooler and wetter then and the park probably bore a semblance to present-day Bryce Canyon.



But even today, if you pay attention, remnants of that long ago time still cling tenaciously to the desert, in places they shouldn't be. At the Island in the Sky district of Canyonlands National Park, a few hardy Douglas Firs maintain a foothold on a shaded northern cliff face. There must have been thousands of firs at one time. Now this relative handful is all that remains of that forest. Not far from my home in San Juan County, I discovered a stand of aspens, tucked into the shady recesses of a canyon, at an elevation less than 6800 feet. I've looked extensively for more aspens at that elevation, but have never found any other remnants. They cover the eastern flank of the Blues, up there at 8000 feet, but my secret aspen grove continues to defy the odds.

But there's one remnant that still puzzles me, if indeed it is a remnant at all. I first spotted it more than 35 years ago, tucked up



a red rock canyon, at an elevation of about 4000 feet, just a couple hundred yards from a paved highway. You have to be looking in the right direction, at the precise moment to see it. But its singularity should give pause to anyone familiar with the plant life of the canyon country.

It's a lone Ponderosa Pine tree. A big one. It must be sixty or seventy feet tall; its trunk is about three feet in diameter. The Ponderosa leans against a sandstone overhang and, in fact, it's the alcove that probably allowed the pine to grow in the first place. The overhang must have provided enough shade for the seedling to sprout and grow and it must have taken years for the little tree to reach its rocky lip and grow beyond it. Now the pine cuts into the sandstone itself.

**Ultimately, I decided I prefer NOT to know why the Lonely Pine is there. What matters to me is that while the world becomes more homogenous and less interesting, there are still mysteries and anomalies to be found, even in unremarkable little canyons.**

But why is it there? The Ponderosa grows on a sandy shelf above the water course in a sandstone canyon. It's not even close to its "normal" elevation range. I searched up and down the canyon for more pines but my lonely pine was all that I could account for. So, is this tree the last remnant of a Ponderosa forest that once covered these canyons, many thousands of years ago? Or is this tree an interloper of sorts?

I checked my maps to see if the Ponderosa lived in a canyon whose source was in the mountains—I thought maybe a cone might have been carried here by a flash flood, but the canyon was a short one, with no access that I could see to higher elevations. Other than a bird with a penchant for pine nuts, or perhaps a "Johnny PonderosaSeed," out planting pines in the desert a hundred years ago, I could find no logical explanation. But the tree IS there.

Ultimately, I decided I prefer NOT to know why the Lonely Pine is there. What matters to me is that while the world becomes more homogenous and less interesting, there are still mysteries and anomalies to be found, even in unremarkable little canyons. This is the inexplicable Ponderosa Pine that listened to the beat of a different drum. A wanderer and a dreamer. This tree dreamed of deserts never seen or known and now calls it home.

So... if you know this tree and you know why it's there, do me a favor. Don't tell me. Tell no one. This is one mystery that should remain that way.

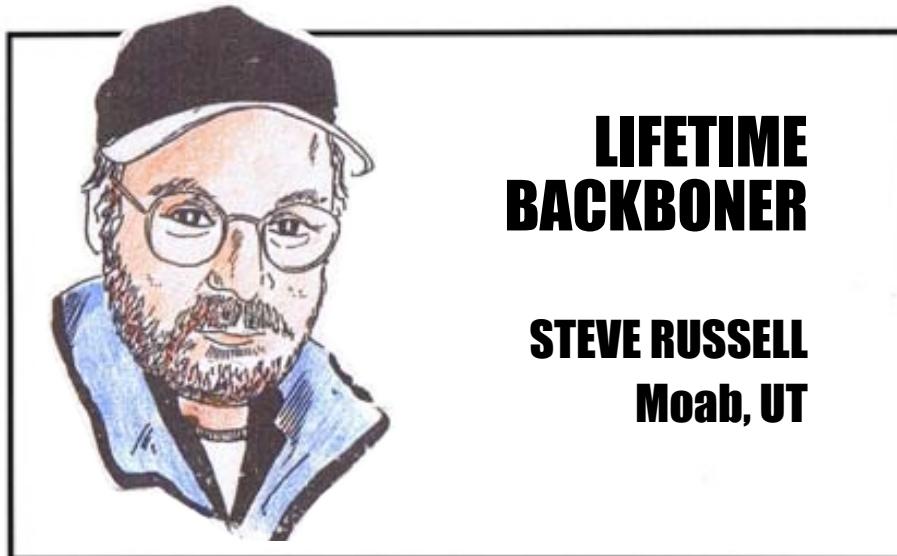
FOR MORE ON REMNANT FORESTS:

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lost\\_Forest\\_Research\\_Natural\\_Area](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lost_Forest_Research_Natural_Area)



## LIFETIME BACKBONER

**STEVE RUSSELL  
Moab, UT**



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