

# Neither Snow Nor Rain Nor Gloom of Night....

BY DAVE CONNORS

Adam Tolman climbing  
to our highpoint in the  
shadow of Mt. Belknap.

Photo by Dave Connors

**Our cumulative travels have taken us to six continents, close to seventy countries and some of the most remote locations on the planet. We've raced in the deserts of Baja, traversed the Pan-American, Road of Bones and Rubicon Trail. It's funny then, how quickly a simple question like, "How about a third Utah Cruiser Expedition?" gets answered with a unanimous "Yes!" from a group of friends with that breadth of experience.**

Who is this group of explorers? We are mostly members of Wasatch Cruisers, the TLCA and Canguro Racing. This latest Utah Cruiser Expedition included Kurt Williams and Ryan Davis rolling in The Death Star, Kurt's 2001 100 series; J Ralls and Troy Demill in J's 1996 LX450, Lucy; Will Carroll and myself in my 2003 100 series, affectionately known as Wynonna; Adam Tolman with his two boys, Bjornn and Liam in his 2003 Tacoma; Paul May in his exceptionally equipped 2013 4Runner; and Cody McKendrick and Dan Lockington in Cody's 2011 Tacoma.

Utah is home to each of us (except Paul May, who recently moved to Arizona) and will always satisfy our need for adventure. Kurt and I have talked numerous times about how it would take many lifetimes to explore all the sparsely populated and geographically diverse terrain Utah has to offer. But for now—one life at a time, please—Utah Cruiser Expedition 3 (UCE3) will settle for the territory ahead.





### Twilight skies over the Rock Corral.

Photo by Adam Tolman

What is UCE3? Many of you may recall the previous two events and know that UCE is more than just a bunch of friends exploring for a long weekend. We set out with distinct goals and do whatever it takes to achieve those goals. That normally means covering eight hundred-plus miles of dirt in just a few days. Our first goal for this trip was to drive from the lowest point in Utah to the highest

drivable road in Utah. Next up, cross the entire Aquarius Plateau, the highest forested plateau in the world. Then descend down into the canyon country of the Colorado Plateau and push our way through Capital Reef, the Waterpocket Fold, up through the San Rafael Swell, skirt the base of the Book Cliffs and finally end up on the now closed road to the formerly highest point to which you can

drive in Utah, in the La Sal Mountains east of Moab on the Colorado border. Ideally it would take us three-plus days of hard driving. However, Mother Nature decided that we would make it halfway and have a hell of a time doing even that....

Most of you will remember the significant flooding that hit Colorado in September, causing massive damage to the communities there. Those same storms hit Utah the previous weekend, creating flash floods throughout the central and southern portions of the state. Little of the effects hit the news as the damage mainly occurred in uninhabited areas but for the five vehicles trying to traverse the state at the time, the destruction was all too real—and frankly, all too awesome.

We met off a rural exit in the far northwest corner of Arizona, exchanged handshakes and set out into the dirt for the lowest point in Utah. Instead of winding through typical juniper and prickly pear cactus, our trail meandered amongst yucca and a forest of Joshua trees. The Beaver Dam Wash flows out of the Pine Valley Mountains, across the corner of Arizona and through the town of Mesquite, Nevada. There had been no



Bjorn and Liam Tolman—being boys.

Photo by Adam Tolman

real world reconnaissance at that point so it took a bit of navigating to eventually get into the wash. Once there, it was a happy drive through the one hundred-foot deep, quarter mile wide wash, filled with rivulets of silted, unseasonably high water. Normally this wash is bone dry in September.

We were off to a good start. I was in the lead with Will and as we watched the GPS, looking for the border and elevation, we realized it was unnecessary. There was a fence on the Utah/Arizona border. We found the lowest spot, 2,178 feet, splashed around in the water and set out north toward known roads.

Our first indication that the trip would be a challenge was that recent rains had damaged every ravine, wash and gully we crossed. Our first warning that the trip might be impossible was in the "town" of Motoqua, where a road normally passable by ranch traffic had a ten-foot wide, five-foot deep hole in the middle of it. We snooped around a little bit and found what we thought would be a way around the washout. Next we had to get permission from the landowner with the no trespassing signs and a dozen abandoned cars. None of us were too eager to go knock on the door but luckily someone came walking by. We asked a few questions and within minutes were giving our alternative route a try.

Our bypass was a long forgotten road with many washouts and one steep, loose option to climb out of a narrow wash. Cody made a successful attempt and shortly, the whole group was on its way again, only a few hours behind schedule. We climbed out of the canyon into a rarely visited mountain range that is distinctly Mojave Desert. From the plants and cactus to the rocks and trees, this region of Utah has a unique character. We hit the road with plans to cover another two hundred miles of dirt before we camped.

A railroad access road just outside of Beryl promised high speeds for the first few miles but we then hit a half mile section of mud deep enough to swallow at least 80% of Adam's Tacoma. Well-equipped, we all made it through or around without pulling winch cable. When we finally rolled into Milford, it was getting late and instead of pushing on, we decided to make camp just outside of town in an area known as the Rock Corral. None of us had ever been there before



Adam Tolman plows his way through a rare Utah mud bog.

Photo by Dave Connors

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and the limestone cirque combined with the sunset made for a spectacular place to camp. Paul treated us to an excellent dinner and we went to bed hoping for better weather the next day. We were only about 30% shy of our goal for the day and considering the conditions we'd faced, it felt like a success.

The next morning, we bombed down into Milford, topped off gas tanks and procured caffeine. I was walking out to my truck when I glanced over at J's Lexus and noticed the telltale sign of a failed pesky heater hose (PHH)—a huge puddle of antifreeze under the truck. On past trips, when there were more 80s, we had spare parts for the PHH. J was the lone 1FZ and although he had a gallon of Toyota red coolant, we didn't have the hose. Will and I drove up to the parts store for some hose and clamps and by the time we returned, the well-trained Canguro Chase/Race team has already removed the blown hose. The new hose was installed (bypassing the hard line as a trail fix), coolant was topped off and we were back on the dirt road in less than forty minutes.

We ran incident and road damage free through the exquisite Tushar Mountains, reaching our goal of 11,500 feet near the top of Mt. Belknap and the highest road in Utah. We worked our way down into Circleville and basked in the color of the changing leaves, the smell of wet sagebrush and spotted a few dozen mountain goats along the way. Unsure which path would be best to reach Circleville, the group split up to explore two different routes. This area is famous for ATV tours and many of the roads have gates limiting vehicle width. Both roads led to the same destination and we joined up over ice cream cones in Circleville. The PHH and route finding

# 38<sup>th</sup> Annual

# Mud-N-Yer Eye Frolic

**What:** The 38th Annual Mud-N-Yer Eye Frolic, hosted by the Mountain Transit Authority 4WD Club. This is an Open Vehicle Event in conjunction with the TLCA.

**When:** April 25–27, 2014

**Where:** Hollister Hills State Vehicular Recreation Area, located 6 mi. west of Hollister, California, is set in the golden hills of the Gavilan Mountains. The San Andreas Fault runs nearby and provides terrain for some very exciting four wheeling.

**The Trail:** The Frolic is for experienced wheelers with all makes and sizes of vehicles attending. There are also by-passes for those who want to go around the technical spots.

**Dinner:** Dinner will be catered with your choice of Tri-Tip beef or BBQ Chicken dinner (Dinner includes all the trimmings). Hot Dog or Hamburger dinner for the kids.

**Registration:** Includes 2 nights camping, Saturday trail run, games, 1 poker hand, 1 dash plaque, 1 cash drawing ticket, mud hole, awards, Saturday night music and Sunday raffle.

**For registration information or questions, check out MTA's web site at [www.mta4x4.com](http://www.mta4x4.com) or contact Phil Johnson (408) 406-9629, or [pjohnson@netgate.net](mailto:pjohnson@netgate.net).**





**Big cheer for the highest point of the trip—11,500 feet.** Photo by Adam Tolman

had slowed us down a bit and combined with previous delays, we decided to skip a portion of dirt and travel twenty miles on pavement (normally a UCE sin), then get back on our route over to the Bryce Canyon area where we planned to camp at Powell Point. It was early afternoon and we figured we'd be to camp—less than seventy-five miles away—shortly after sunset.

After leaving the highway, we climbed into some cliffs and the road crossed a stream a few dozen times. Each crossing was slightly deeper with sharper edges. The grass along the edges indicated the water level had recently been close to six feet. The deepest we saw was maybe a foot and half. Radio chatter indicated we were all



**Sandstone hoodoos falling away from Powell Point.** Photo by Adam Tolman




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enjoying the road too much to worry about washouts. Then the rains came.... The first washout was not an issue. We threw some deadfall into the hole, chopped down the banks with shovels, covered the logs with dirt and drove through.

We climbed a little higher and the soil began to change—as did the rain. What had been tacky dirt was increasingly becoming slippery clay. The slight drizzle was now a downpour. What had been small but drivable washouts became off camber, Cruiser swallowing holes. The progress slowed, the sunlight faded and the adventure was just beginning.

After negotiating innumerable washouts, we finally came to a spot that required our full attention—all ten of us. Kurt was in the lead in his very heavy 100 series. We started by filling—with a dead tree, rocks and as many limbs as we could find—a Cruiser size hole on the downhill side of a washout. We worked for about an hour, put Kurt's truck on a winch cable to the far side to keep him from sliding or rolling and he gave it a go. All that work took him safely through about two feet of mud.

Time for a new plan: break out the MaxTrax. Four of the five trucks had a set so out they came. The clay at this point was ten inches deep. Shoes were being lost. People were falling down. Dan was barefoot. After we laid a path of MaxTrax for Kurt's downhill tire, he gave it another shot. Not a problem



Road building the UCE way—in flip-flops and rain jackets.

Photo by Adam Tolman

this time as he cruised right through the hole. We then got him turned around so he could winch the remaining rigs through. After J made it with the winch as security, the uphill rut was deep enough to hold a tire and the MaxTrax were working perfectly. The last four trucks decided a little momentum would do the trick and we were safely through.

The rains continued and we were faced with a decision. We could continue on our current route and fight all the way to Bryce (and probably sleep in our trucks in the middle of the road) or we could take an alternative route and fight our way down to Panquitch. It had taken us roughly three hours to traverse four miles. We were still in good spirits and having fun but also had the wisdom to know that things could change dramatically in a hurry. So we took the shorter route.

Less than a mile later, things did change dramatically. Kurt turned an off camber outside corner a bit too quickly and began sliding toward a one hundred foot drop. He managed to get the truck stopped but couldn't move forward or backward without sliding over the edge. J hooked a strap to Kurt's bumper to anchor him but couldn't find the traction to pull him back onto the road. Again, we got the MaxTrax and built a "road" to get Kurt back to a level spot. Troy and I walked down the road to see if it was worth getting through this tricky spot. Just a bit further down, the road made a sharp left hand hairpin with a quick descent. If Kurt could get down that one hundred foot descent, the soil changed and traction would be far better.



Kurt Williams, high centered but with a great pit crew.

Photo by Adam Tolman



**Dave Connors and Kurt Williams navigating the storm on Boulder Mountain.**

Photo by Adam Tolman

Kurt decided to give it a shot and made it without incident. To be safe, I walked ahead of him with my headlamp on for the next mile, scouting the road while Will drove my truck. The mud and adventure continued for two more hours and what could have been done on a parallel paved road in about fifteen minutes took us five hours—and we were now a full day behind. We cleaned the mud off the MaxTrax in a parking lot puddle in Panquich, topped off our tanks, then found a place to crash at Red Canyon State Park near Bryce—an awesome day, pulling out every trick in the book and everyone escaped unscathed.

We woke on Saturday and hit the road again. The Aquarius Plateau rises six thousand feet above the canyons below to an elevation over eleven thousand feet. The view is truly breathtaking. On a clear day, you can see to Colorado and Arizona, hundreds of miles away. Fifty miles to the northeast lay Choke Cherry Point—it would take us a full day to get there.

The top of the plateau—Boulder Mountain—is a mix of trees, meadows and boulders. Mostly boulders—they're everywhere. The route finding proved difficult as the road

degraded to a two track, then little more than traces of a road through the aspens. Without signage indicating we were on the right path, we probably would have turned around. The rain began to fall and as the clouds settled in around us, it turned to sleet and we found patches of snow in the deep

recesses of the forest—and the meadows took on an eerie feel not at all akin to Utah.

Then we hit Chokecherry Point. Absent the views of Powell Point, this was just a sign on the edge of the plateau and the start of a boulder-strewn descent of twenty five hun-



**The Tolman boys camping in style.**

Photo by Adam Tolman

dred feet in just a few miles. It was slippery, slow and resplendent in yellow aspens. It took over an hour to reach Highway 12 but there were no complaints—a beautiful afternoon in a surreal landscape.

The route from this point was supposed to take us across the highway and down into Capitol Reef National Park. I had scouted this route in July and nearly got stuck in a muddy, spring-fed wash so I made an executive decision for the group—one that would prove wise the next day. We hustled into Boulder, got some gas and set out for a camping spot we'd used on the first UCE. For the first time since we'd left Salt Lake three days earlier, the skies cleared. The sun came out and we enjoyed another excellent meal from Paul around a campfire. That night, we broke off and did a bit of our own thing. Some people went for a hike, others cleaned and dried out gear, some listened to college football but all of us continued to stoke the fire and laugh a lot. It was a late night around the fire.

Morning broke clear and warm and we set out down the Burr Trail for the Notom-Bullfrog Road. We'd all agreed the night before that we'd head out tomorrow via dirt until we reached Hanksville and then go our separate ways—no chance we were making it to Moab. Aside from getting my 100 series stuck in some soupy mud—and Will was nice enough to remind me that he'd once driven his girlfriend's Dodge Neon through it—the day was gorgeous and uneventful.

We ran into a Cruiserhead friend in Hanksville who had been out exploring the San Rafael Swell that weekend. The road we intended to take down from Chokecherry Point was completely washed out and legitimately impassable. At one point, Highway 24 was covered for four hundred yards with four feet of water and mud. While we said our goodbyes and spent more time chatting about the destruction around us than we did about the experiences we'd had over the last few days.



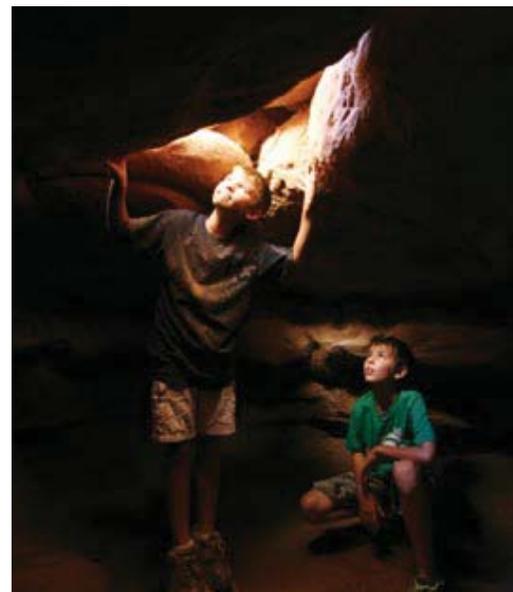
**Probably not the best route for a Volkswagen Jetta.**

Photo by Adam Tolman

We all hit the road at our own pace with a different route home. Some took pavement all the way while others opted for a bit more desert wandering. On our way north, Will and I passed an extremely out of place Japanese couple on the side of the road. They were not hitchhiking, nor did they have a car. They were just standing at a turn off to a back road into Goblin Valley State Park. We turned around to talk to them and discovered it was a classic case of tourists in a rental car trusting their GPS. They had

realized a half-mile down the road that they were on the wrong path. In an attempt to turn around, they got their Jetta stuck in the sand. Adam had arrived to help at this point but they were stuck enough that we couldn't just push them out. A quick tug with a tow strap and they were free. We told them to follow us but when we got back on the pavement, they took off towards Hanksville and the safe roads they'd already driven.

The stuck Japanese couple was a stark reminder of what can happen to the unprepared and inexperienced. They had plenty of water and did make the right decision to stop but they were lucky that the temperature was well below average. These were the thoughts going through my head as the six of us went our separate ways in the beautiful backcountry of the state that we have the tremendous good fortune to call home.



**Bjornn and Liam Tolman exploring the depths of Goblin Valley.**

Photo by Adam Tolman

Adam stayed on the road to take his kids to Goblin Valley and Will and I wound our way home through the San Rafael Swell. It can be easy to take for granted our experience gained over the years. We had faced some very difficult challenges in the previous few days. There was rarely debate or contention. Decisions were made quickly and actions executed collectively. We achieved only half of our planned mileage but everyone was satisfied with the adventure. That's the beauty of taking a trip with people you trust. When things don't go as planned, you still have a plan.



**A double rainbow leads the way to the Burr Trail campsite.**

Photo by Adam Tolman.

