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BUGLE is published bimonthly at the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, 5705 Grant Creek Road, Missoula, MT 59808-1813. Please send comments, questions or wisdom to: bugle@rmef.org or call 1-800 CALL ELK (225-5355) ext. 538.



Volume 22 | Issue 1 | Jan/Feb 2005

The Journal of the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation

Adobe Town, Wyoming

Elk wander the rims surrounding this sandstone labyrinth of twisting arroyos and towering hoodoos, which hides wild horses, fossilized crocodiles and mummified human remains.

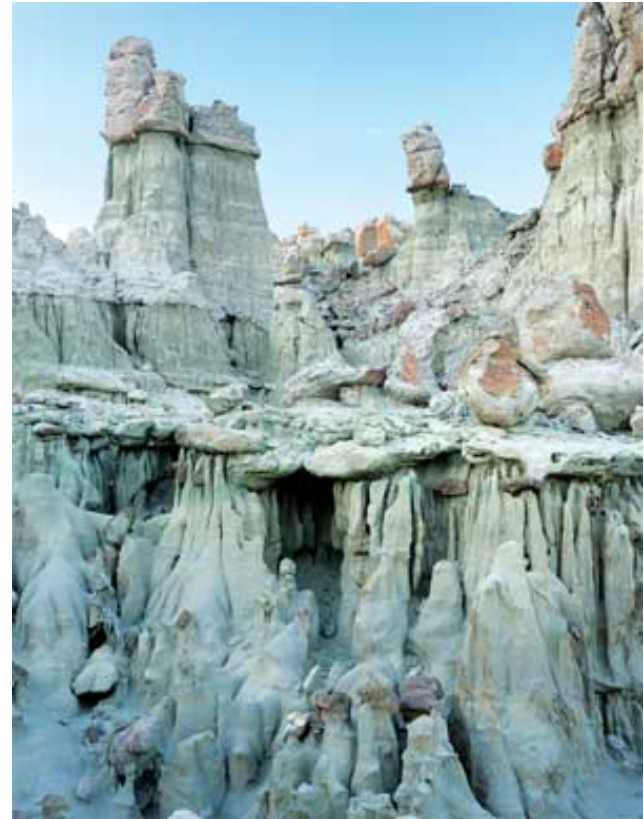
by *Lee Lamb*

Built by nature's most accomplished engineers— water and wind— Wyoming's Adobe Town has been under construction for more than 40 million years. Today, the pair continue to chisel and smooth, etch and polish, constantly reshaping a maze of pastel-painted sandstone formations—some rising a thousand feet into the air—resembling stalagmites, pueblos, haystacks, cathedral spires, the Sphinx and whatever else the imagination conjures up.

Adobe Town occupies one corner of the larger Adobe Town Wilderness Study Area, more than 85,000 acres of public land located in the southern reaches of the Red Desert and managed by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). Classified as cold desert, the region lies at an elevation of 7,000 feet and receives less than six inches of precipitation a year. Temperatures soar into the high 90s during the summer months and can dip to 30 degrees below zero in winter.

Nearly waterless now, this land was once covered by brackish marsh. During the Eocene Epoch between 60 and 38 million years ago, crocodiles, woolly rhinoceroses, giant turtles, ground sloths and other strange creatures roamed the region. Over time, as the Rocky Mountains rose to the west and wrung out the rain clouds from the Pacific Ocean, the land dried out. Since the late 1800s, paleontologists have uncovered fossils from prehistoric animals, as well as remains of the first people to live in the Red Desert. Mummified human remains have been discovered in burial sites and rock shelters dating back 12,000 years.

Today, Adobe Town and the Red Desert teem with creatures who have adapted to this high, cold country. Wild horses, antelope, mule deer, coyotes, prairie dogs, pygmy rabbits, kangaroo rats, sage grouse, ferruginous hawks, burrowing owls, rattlesnakes, short-horned lizards and many others enliven the badlands and surrounding sagebrush range and juniper woodlands. The Red Desert is home to one of the few desert elk herds left in the United



States. These elk use hills, valleys and sand dunes for cover, feed on grasses, sage and saltbush and calve in the desert's big sagebrush stands.

Since 1992, the Elk Foundation has helped fund 11 habitat and research projects in the Red Desert, enhancing 15,613 acres of habitat for elk and other wildlife and helping biologists to learn more about the effects of disturbance from gas and oil development on the Jack Morrow Hills elk herd (see "Good Partners," page 76).

An ongoing effort begun in 1990 by the BLM and Wyoming Game and Fish Department (GFD) on Little Mountain, south of Rock Springs, has improved deteriorating upland and riparian habitats for a trophy-class elk herd, mule deer and Colorado River cutthroat trout, through fencing, pipelines, burns and revised livestock grazing plans affecting 25,000 acres. In 1992, 1995 and again in 1997, the Elk Foundation helped fund three prescribed burns, rejuvenating 4,500 acres of upland grasses, forbs and shrubs to help lure elk away from recovering riparian areas.

In 1993 the Elk Foundation, BLM and GFD burned 9,000 acres of aspen, mountain shrubs and grasses on Steamboat Mountain northeast of Rock Springs, improving calving and fawning areas and winter range for elk and mule deer.

The partners teamed again in 2004 to develop an enclosed spring and water troughs at Bull Springs northwest of Rawlins. The effort also constructed 4.5 miles of pasture fence in the area to limit use by wild horses and cattle, while providing a ready water source for elk, antelope and other wildlife.

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