

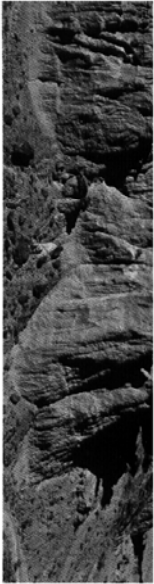
The Red Desert

ERIK MOLVAR

Stretching from Rock Springs to the Atlantic Rim, from the Ferris Mountains to the Colorado line, the Red Desert is a magnificent fragment of the disappearing Wild West. Little changed from the days when bands of Ute and Shoshone crossed the sea of sagebrush in pursuit of herds of buffalo, to this day it is known to native people as the place where the creator ran out of mountains.

Looking out across the flats, it is tempting to believe that this is an empty wasteland of sagebrush and greasewood, devoid of life. But look closely among the shrubs and at any time of year you can find an array of colorful blossoms. Even the soil is alive with a delicate mantle of lichens and mosses that gather up the moisture from infrequent rains and capture airborne nutrients for the benefit of plants. Although water is scarce, the Red Desert is rich in wild game. An ark of high-desert wildlife, it is America's last stronghold for rare creatures such as the pygmy rabbit, the ferruginous hawk, and the sage grouse. Here, great herds of antelope still course across the vast face of the emptiness, the emperors of all they survey. And white-tailed prairie dogs still stand sentinel on the tops of the rims, the key strand of a rich tapestry of life that includes rare birds such as the burrowing owl, the swift fox, and the golden eagle. Herds of wild horses flow like liquid fire across benchlands and flats, having returned to the natural order. The howling of wolves once carried across the Red Desert's vast emptiness, and herds of bison wandered the arid steppes. Perhaps they will again one day.

In the northern half of the Red Desert, the Continental Divide splits around a vast desert basin with no outlet to the sea. This geographic oddity, known as the Great Divide Basin, occurs in only one other place in the world, in the desert steppes of Mongolia. Any rain or snow that falls here trickles down to the center of the basin, pooling in brackish lakes or evaporating from salty playas. It is as if these deserts were intentionally set aside as a no-man's-land filled with secrets and mystery.



Adobe Town Rim. ERIK MOLVÅR

The Killpecker Dunes march across the heart of the Red Desert, from the sacred spine of the Bear's Tusk to the Seminole Mountains along the desert's eastern rim. Perhaps the remnants of beach sands from an ancient lake, the dunes migrate eastward across the face of the desert, pushed by ceaseless winds blowing out of the west. Each day, the winds erase the dunes and sculpt new ripples across their surfaces, and each night the parchment of the sand is rewritten with hieroglyphics left by traveling elk and birds, beetles and mice. In winter, drifts of snow pile up behind the lee faces of the dunes. The sand then blows over the snow, burying it in the heart of the dune. During summer, these buried snowdrifts supply water for dune ponds, emerald pools in the midst of the desert, supporting a startling diversity of wildlife and plants.

In the northwest corner stand the Oregon Buttes, their rugged cliffs jutting from the rolling plains as a landmark to early wagon trains bound for the lush valleys of the Pacific Coast. Just east along the Continental Divide are the colorful badlands of the Honeycomb Buttes, where ancient lakedbed sediments hide turtle shells from long-gone days when this arid land brimmed with water. Far to the south is Adobe Town, the Red Desert's crown jewel, with thousand-foot ramparts sculpted by wind, sand, and time into a maze of free-standing pillars, fragile arches, and soaring bartlements. In a lifetime of traveling Western wilderness, it is rare to encounter landscapes so wild and magnificent, so evocative of the days before the West was tamed.

This is a land of ancient rhythms and forgotten ways. Shoshone people still visit sacred buttes to offer prayers straight into the universe. The petroglyphs of their ancestors still grace weathered outcrops, and mysterious cairns of rocks and circles of tipi stones mark their passage over the land.

Here, cattle are still herded across the last of the open range, unimpeded by fences or "No Trespassing" signs. These are public lands but truly are wild country owned by no one. Horsemen work their cattle to the creak of the saddle leather, wrinkled eyes scanning the distant horizon for strays. Time is measured by sun and season and the constant movement of the cattle to prevent the overgrazing of the range.

Gaze across the great bowl of sky with mare's-tails and cirrus ruffling the fathomless blue. Notice the quick flash as white-breasted birds wheel from hidden perches, listen to the wind worrying at the tips of the sagebrush. These are gifts granted to a perceptive few. Here is a place to return to primal rhythms, to connect with nature on her own terms.

Wild desert basins across the American West have been ravaged by invading cheatgrass or carved into pieces by agriculture and subdivisions. And large tracts of the Red Desert have themselves been gobbled up by an oil industry greedy for easy profits. But there are empty quarters of this land where silence still rules and the eye can travel to a distant horizon unblemished by the hand of man.

We are running out of empty spaces on the map. This trackless wilderness, spanning a continent not so many generations ago, is now reduced to a few isolated ratters. When these last remnants of untamed country are gone, where will we go to escape the gilded cage that we have built for ourselves? Where will we go to experience the rigors of bygone eras? Where will we go to find a last remnant of a working ecosystem to use as a blueprint to heal the lands we have destroyed in our heedless arrogance?

The Red Desert is one of our last best hopes.