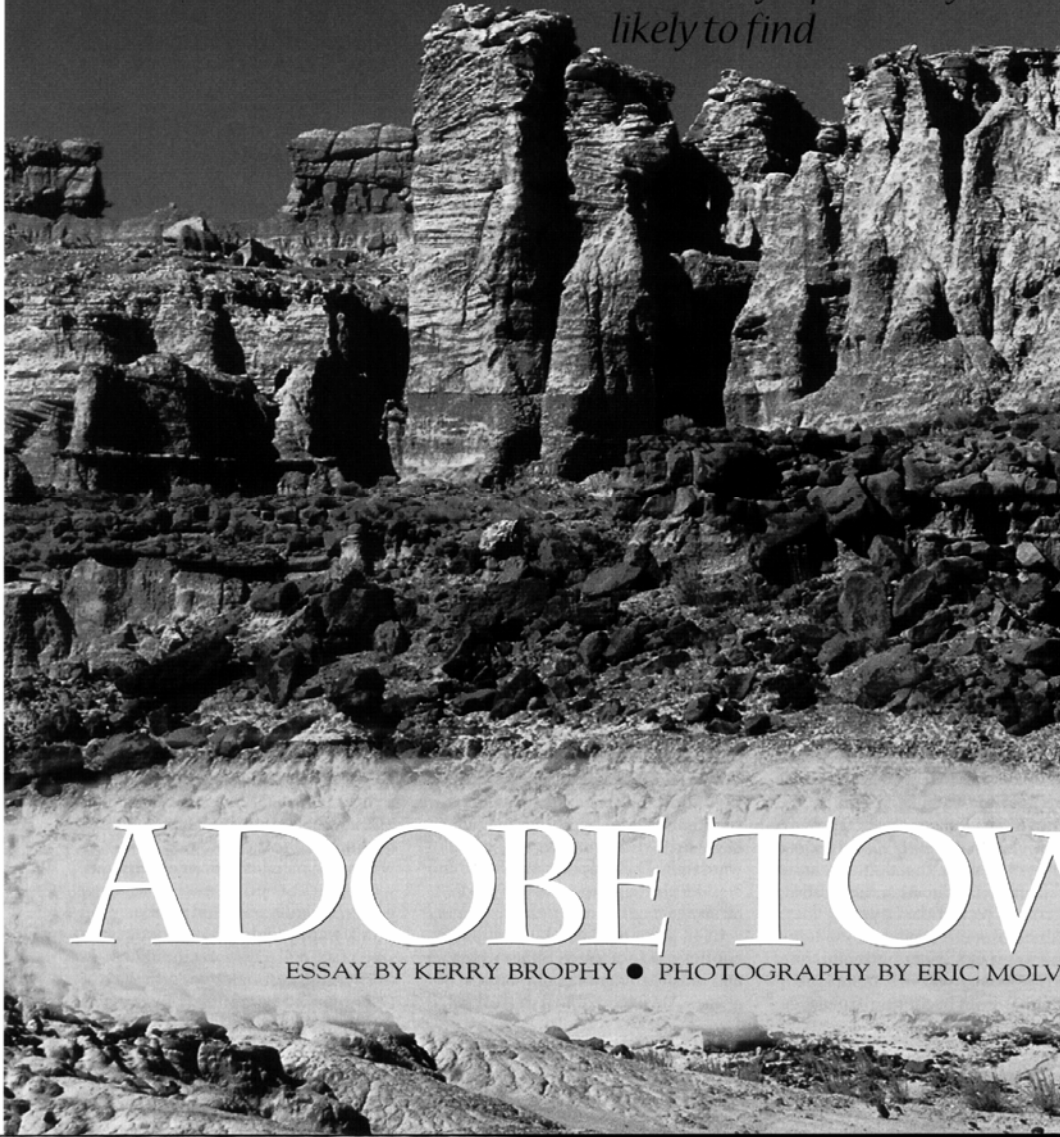


Wyoming Wildlife



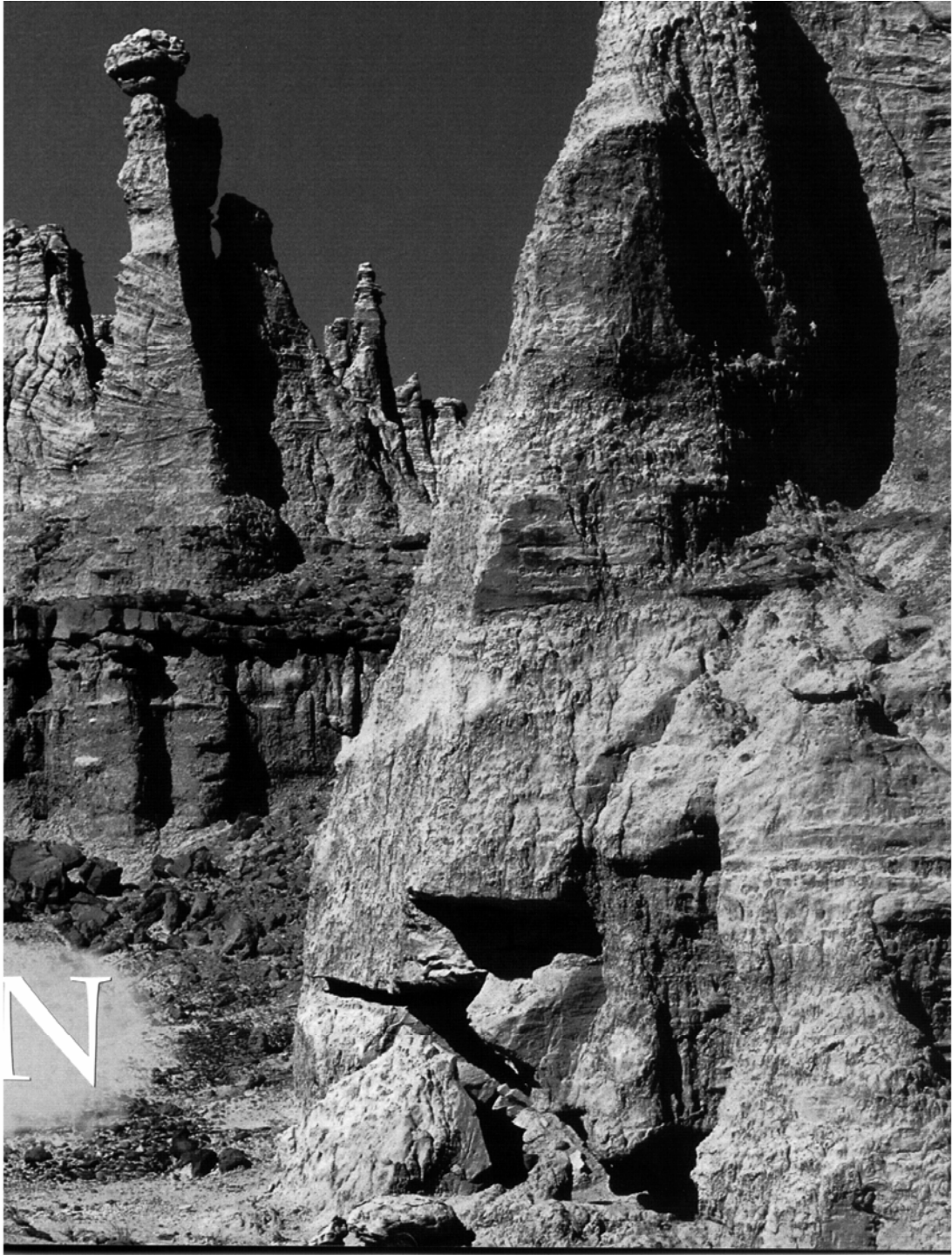
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A wilderness study area lost in the vastness of southcentral Wyoming's sagebrush steppe, these breaks are about as lonesome and lovely a place as you're likely to find



ADOBE TOWN

ESSAY BY KERRY BROPHY ● PHOTOGRAPHY BY ERIC MOLV



There aren't many wild places left on this earth, places where you can still see a stallion kick up dust without a fencepost in sight, places where the wind blows sand for miles without anything to stop it.

I've set off into some of this last wild country on a dusty road, bouncing in teeth-rattling style, feeling like my brain might shake loose. The truck's differential grinds and moans as I dip in and out of ruts the size of



fishing holes. And to think I was told this was the easy way in. When I pass an old rancher on the road, he watches me continue on in puzzlement, muttering a tight warning: "There ain't nothin' out there."

He's right. Standing like a lone outpost on a vast frontier of modern-day existence, Adobe Town is so full of nothingness it feels like it might swallow you whole. Located on 230,000 acres in the midst of southwest Wyoming's Red Desert, it is a fortified city of sand domes and pinnacles, an eroding landscape of bones, wind, and water.

Technically, Adobe Town is badland country, the topography resulting from wind and water erosion of sedimentary rock. But in 1869, it

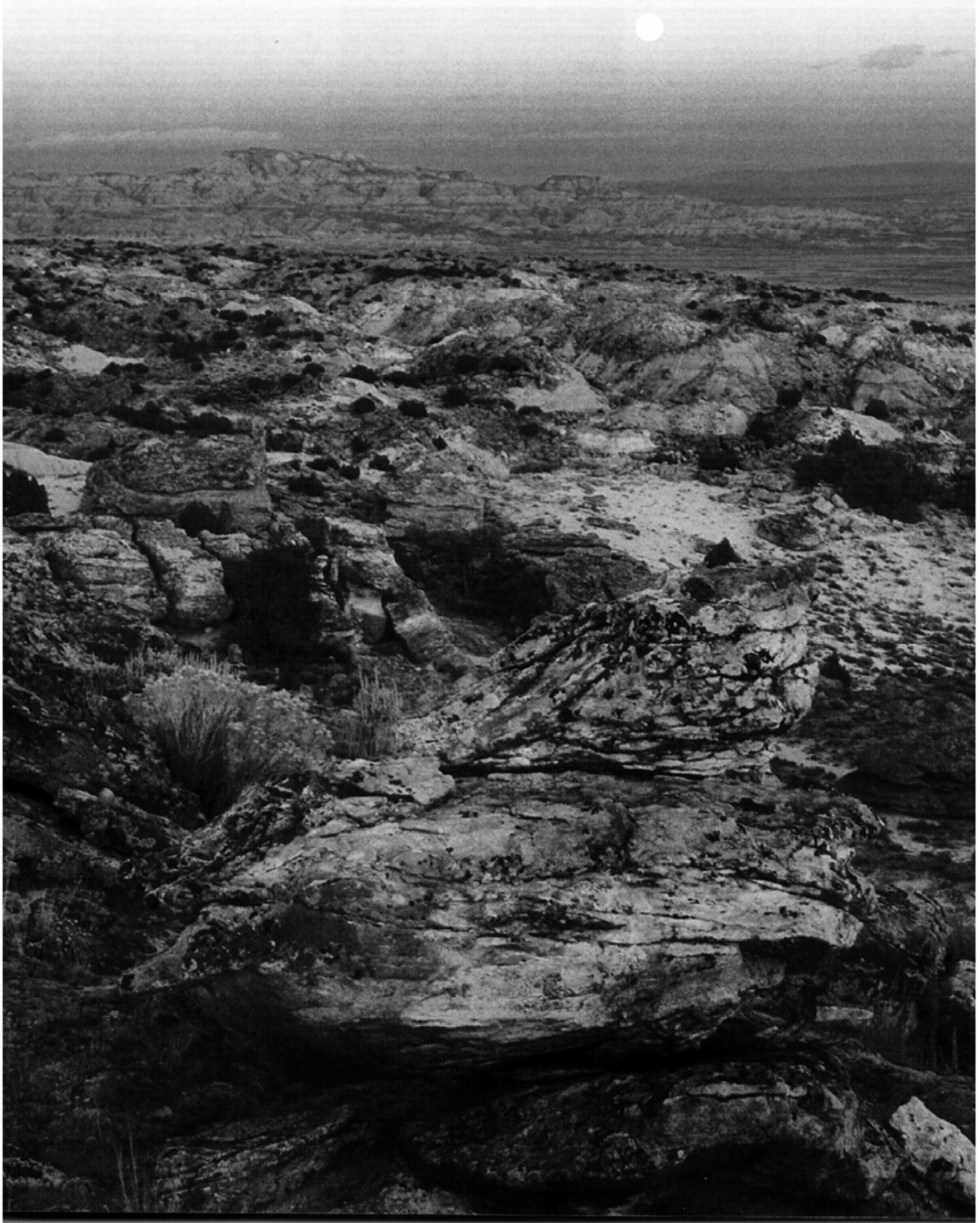
reminded General A.A. Humphrey who was leading a geological exploration of the fortieth parallel, of a "line of Egyptian structures." When I am at the edge of Skull Creek Rim looking down into this crazed city of rock, it feels like my stomach might drop over the edge. Many of the formations rise almost 1,000 feet up in the air, their columns an odd palette of red, blue, and yellow layers collected over time.

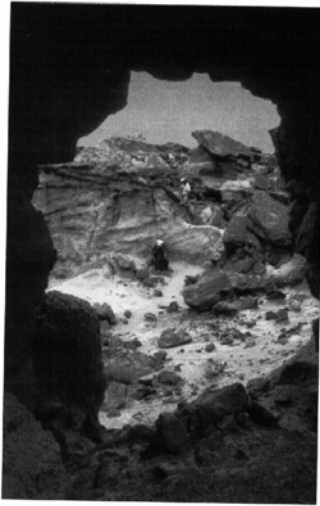
This is wild country, cold desert country, where the wind howls and the clouds cast giant shadows across sage-covered sea. At 6,500 feet in elevation, this high desert receives less than six inches of rain a year. To be classified as a desert, a place must get less than fifteen inches of annual precipitation, so to call it dry is an understatement of monumental proportions. Adobe Town is a land of extremes, hot in the summer, with the sun beating down and toasting the earth, and cold and windy in the winter, when temperatures dip to thirty degrees below.

Even in this almost waterless land, storms can come on like nobody's business. One old-timer lost his wife near Adobe Town in a sudden snowstorm. He found her three days later hunkered down in a cave with a bushy-tailed rabbit.

Regular visitors to the Red Desert call themselves "desert rats," and you can identify their trucks by the turned-up bumpers they get from long drives on rough roads. They will all tell you that weather calls the shot out here, that human visitors are at the mercy of nature and all her cruelty.

When it rains, Adobe Town transforms into a city of puddles that can last for up to a week. An infrequent visitor, water is the primary architect of Adobe Town, leaving its footprints on the creek beds and creating the





area's striking cliffs and colors. Where there's water, there's change, and Adobe Town is constantly being shaped as if by an invisible potter. Though the area's sandstone formations are over 40 million years in the making, you can see them change shape in just two years.

Moisture is an exciting prospect for thirsty wildlife, who specialize in the use of water and have adapted



to an all-or-nothing kind of living. Not a drop goes to waste. Kangaroo rats don't even drink but get all their water from the food they nibble on. Plants adapt with fleshier leaves and deeper root systems that retain as much moisture as possible during the dry spells. Deer spend most of the day in the shade, and wild horse trails create an intricate map to the few springs that lie under Adobe Town.

In a land where only six inches of precipitation falls all year long, these adaptations are crucial. Either you figure out a way to live or you die.

Amazingly, this high, dry desert gives rise to an enormous diversity of life. As my truck bumps along into Adobe Town, I stick my head out the window and watch a red-tailed hawk ride the wind currents above me. At the same time, a pronghorn antelope stops grazing for a moment to turn and look my way, then kicks his white butt up in the air and is off in a cloud of dust. A small herd of wild horses also passes near the truck, and while some say the herds are overrunning the desert, there's nothing quite like watching a wild horse dance across the sand.

It doesn't take long to realize how much life is making a go of it in a land that seems to provide so little. Many of these hardy life forms are dependent on a plant that doesn't always look like it's even alive—sagebrush. Sage plays an important role in the high desert, stabilizing sand dunes and providing food and shelter for a range of species, including sage grouse, pronghorn, birds of all shapes and sizes, and the pygmy rabbit. Scott's orioles, Bewick's wrens, desert elk, and juniper titmouse prefer the juniper woodlands that skirt Adobe Town.

Against all odds, the desert's animals survive, if not thrive, from prairie falcons nesting in the sandstone pillars



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to badgers, burrowing owls, bobcats, coyotes, red fox, rattlers, and golden eagles.

But it's the bones of animals long gone that have made Adobe Town such a fascinating place to dig around in since the late 1800s. A skirmish in the famous "Bone Wars" took place on this soil, a well-documented dispute between paleontologists Edward D. Cope and Othniel C. Marsh. The two protago-



nists started out as friends but got greedy when they discovered what lay in the layers of time stacked up in Adobe Town.

Ironically, this place where God seems to have run out of water used to be covered in water. Through the years, many have followed in the footsteps of Cope and Marsh, uncovering almost without effort fossils that are so out of place in the desert they seem to have been dropped there. On the shores of what was then marsh-

land walked or crawled crocodiles, giant turtles, dinosaurs, woolly rhinoceroses, and giant ground sloths that stood eight feet tall at the shoulder.

Today, their fossils tell a story frozen in stone. But Adobe Town's sands offer up other stories of the past, including remains of the first people to live in the desert. These cultural sites date back 12,000 years and include rock shelters and burial sites where archaeologists have found mummified human remains. Piles of round glass beads used for trading have turned up in Adobe Town's anthills, buried with the dead to carry with them into the next life.

Indeed, this fortress of sand buries most of its secrets. After millions of years at the mercy of a wind that never lets anything settle, this desert has been reborn over and over again. It has been transformed by wind and water but has endured as new forms of life come and go within its walls. From prehistoric turtles crawling on its shores, to Native Americans eking out an existence in its alkaline soil, pioneers traveling along the nearby Overland Trail, and desert rats bumping over its rough roads in search of adventure, Adobe Town has silently stood.

The irony is that Adobe Town may have lasted through millions of years of natural change only to be altered at the hands of man in what amounts to an instant of geological time. A proposed gas project, called the Desolation Flats Natural Gas Project, would turn 50,000 acres of proposed wilderness on the eastern flank of Adobe Town into an industrialized gas field. With this development would come visible marks on one of the few untouched landscapes in the West. To this truly wild place, the project would add 385 conventional gas wells and the accompanying construction of



roads, power lines, and pipelines.

As I sit at the edge of nothingness, I wonder what will happen to this desert in the decades and centuries to come. Will it become a national monument as many are fighting for, or will it be a checkerboard of well pads, a land of clanking metal? Will it be permanently altered to meet our temporary needs? As humans, we often feel the need to protect prettier landscapes than this, places that don't make our souls feel so empty. But emptiness is in short supply these days, and it's not something you can get back once it's gone.

Today I let my toes dangle over Adobe Town Rim, and my eyes drift without interruption over the sage and sand. I can't see a single sign of human existence, and if I squint just right I can peer right to the edge of it all, to that place beyond which we know nothing.

When she's not touring Wyoming's desert backcountry, writer Kerry Brophy works with the National Outdoor Leadership School in Lander.



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