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Adobe Town: Too Wild to Drill

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You can't see the signature landscapes of Wyoming's Red Desert from the interstate, traveling through at 80 miles an hour. This is a land that gives up its secrets grudgingly. But for those who are willing

to venture beyond the blacktop, the Red Desert's bumpy gravel roads lead deep into America's outback, where breathtaking high-desert landscapes are waiting, where herds of wild horses and pronghorn antelope race against the wind. And the Red Desert's most striking landscape of all is Adobe Town, a hidden treasure that lies along the Colorado line, hours from the nearest pavement.

It is easy to drive right past Adobe Town and never even know it's there. While the thousand-foot cliffs and mazes of pinnacles stretch for 25 miles above the Skull Creek plain, the main gravel road in the area stays above the rims, miles to the west and out of sight of the badlands. And there is a maze of oil and gas roads that do not appear on any map that you will have to negotiate before you get there. But all the adventure of hours navigating the poorly charted back roads is amply rewarded by the national-park-quality landscapes at the journey's end.



South end of the Skull Creek Rim
Biodiversity Conservation Alliance

In 1869, General A.A. Humphreys led the Geological Exploration of the Fortieth Parallel through Adobe Town.

His report speaks eloquently of the landscape: "This escarpment is the most remarkable example of the so-called bad-land erosion within the limits of the Fortieth Parallel Exploration...Along the walls of these ravines the same picturesque architectural forms occur, so that a view of the whole front of the escarpment, with its salient and reentrant angles, reminds one of the ruins of a fortified city. Enormous masses project from the main wall, the stratification-lines of creamy, gray, and green sands and marls are traced across their nearly vertical fronts like courses of immense masonry, and every face is scored by innumerable narrow, sharp cuts, which are worn into the soft material from top to bottom of the cliff, offering narrow galleries which give access for a considerable distance into this labyrinth of natural



View north from
East Fork Point,
Adobe Town WSA
Courtesy Erik Molvar

fortresses." During the same period, the celebrated naturalist Ferdinand Victor Hayden led explorations through this area, making some of its earliest fossil discoveries.

Later, Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid would use the Haystacks formation as a hideout for their criminal escapades. During their Tipton Train Robbery of August 29, 1900, Cassidy and his Hole-in-the-Wall Gang stashed fresh horses among the folds of the Haystacks at the northern end of Adobe Town, which helped them escape southward to the safety of Colorado's Powder Wash country. The Haystacks, with their rugged badlands and hidden pockets, are a natural hideaway. According to local lore, bootleggers used the Haystacks to hide whiskey stills during the Prohibition years of the early

1930s.

Today, the wilderness of Adobe Town is a hideaway for visitors looking to experience a last remnant of the Wild West. As drilling rigs and wellfield roads spread across Wyoming's open spaces, it's getting ever harder to find a place to experience the Red Desert in all of its wild splendor. With almost 200,000 acres of wilderness-quality land, Adobe Town is one of the most pristine bastions of wildness in this arid and windswept land.

Standing on the edge of the Skull Creek Rim in the heart of Adobe Town, the wind at your back, it is hard to imagine that the panorama of thousand-foot walls whittled by wind, sand, and time is not already part of a national park. From here, the eye can travel up and down 25 miles of ramparts, pillars, and ravines. From here, it is an easy proposition to hike down along the tops of the cliffs, where the steep badlands drop away into space above the arid plain of Skull Creek. Knobs and buttes topped by a reddish caprock provide perches and aeries for hawks and eagles, which find safety from land-based predators atop the inaccessible pinnacles. Erosion has worn natural arches and sinkholes into the soft bedrock, which is made of volcanic ash brought down from the Yellowstone Plateau by ancient rivers, and deposited in a long-vanished lakebed.

Hidden in the eroded stone are the fossils of ancient mammals, such as woolly rhinoceroses and giant ground sloths that stood eight feet tall at the shoulder. Thousands of years ago, grassy savannas covered these lands during a period of more moderate climate, and a rich fauna that included primitive horses, camels, and antelopes roamed this land. Adobe Town has become one of the nation's most important dig sites for paleontologists studying these long-extinct animals. Much later, the lakeshore environments found here were frequented by bands of early prehistoric peoples, who left a rich records of their passing in the form of campsites and tool-making stations are only beginning to be studied by archaeologists.

East Fork Point is a great promontory that anchors the center of this line of cliffs. Traveling south from this point, the ramparts dissolve into a series of isolated buttes that are scattered like an archipelago across a sea of sand.

To the west is a high peneplain, where small dunes robed in sagebrush huddle around flat pans sparsely covered in hardy desert grasses. Herds of wild horses

hide among the vegetated dunes and gallop across the flats, tiny puffs of dust rising from every strike of their hooves. Often the horses are shadowed by an antelope or two, racing silently like pale ghosts across the desert. The Adobe Town herd is the largest herd of wild horses in Wyoming, numbering over 1,300 animals. Visitors to Adobe Town can expect to see half a dozen herds each day roaming free across the desert.

The Powder Rim rises along the south edge of the proposed wilderness, a rounded swell of high ground robed in woodlands of gnarled and ancient juniper. Here, birdwatchers can find rare Wyoming residents such as the Scott's oriole, Bewick's wren, and the juniper titmouse. Mule deer are abundant in these hills, and a desert elk herd known as the Petition Herd haunts its woodlands year-round. The Powder Rim provides crucial winter habitat for many types of big game animals, and is an important migration corridor as well, receiving elk from as far away as the Sierra Madre and Elkhead Mountains. The western end of the Powder Rim is a howling wilderness, but was originally excluded from the Adobe Town Wilderness Study Area by the Bureau of Land Management. Thus, it is currently unprotected. But the BLM has since re-inventoried the area and recognized its wilderness qualities, and may soon offer some protection for this wild corner of Adobe Town.



Adobe Town Rim
Biodiversity Conservation Alliance

Farther north, the Adobe Town Rim makes its grand arc across the northwestern quadrant of the proposed wilderness. Here, the rims are lower - only a few hundred feet tall - but they have been whittled into a fantastic gallery of shapes. Here, in a maze of jagged walls and box canyons, the landscape is at its most complex and intriguing. Walls of pinnacles, cathedrals of stone complete with flying buttresses, ruined turrets, all are scored with deep grooves that give them the appearance of being built from adobe blocks. This maze of box canyons and standing rocks stretches for miles, a wonderland of sculpted stone offering endless possibilities for off-trail ramblings lasting for hours, days, or even weeks. The tortured rock found here rival Bryce Canyon or Badlands National Park in their variety and complexity. Hikers who penetrate into this maze of badlands will do well to learn from its wild inhabitants - the wild horses know the way to the top of the rim, and their trails provide reliable pathways through the pinnacles from lowland to rim.

At the south end of the Adobe Town Rim lies Monument Valley, one of the most isolated corners of the proposed wilderness. Here, lone pillars rise from a rolling sea of sagebrush, standing like sentinels in the midst of the desert. It is a long hike along an abandoned jeep trail to approach this area from the southwest.

To the north, the Adobe Town Rim curves around a vast, flat basin known as The Horseshoe. Here, the Adobe Town Rim merges with The Haystacks, a rocky backbone that culminates in a tall promontory of loose and unstable rock. The southern side of The Haystacks resembles the Adobe Town Rim on a grander scale, while on the north slope, rumpled ridges studded with junipers embrace level pockets where wild



Adobe Town Rim
Biodiversity Conservation Alliance

horses are often seen. The northern third of the proposed wilderness, including The Haystacks, lies within the "checkerboard," a no-man's land of mixed ownership dating back to the giant land grants that the federal government made to the railroads. In this area, half of the lands remain in public ownership, but every other square mile is in private ownership, a situation that makes land management in this area virtually impossible. The best hope for this part of the wilderness is for the BLM to provide protection for the public parcels, while acquiring the private inholdings through land swaps.

Under the Bush Administration, the Red Desert is under siege, the onslaught of oil and gas drilling is threatening to overtake Adobe Town. The BLM has proposed to open 50,000 acres of Adobe Town to full-field gas development under the "Desolation Flats" project. (There actually is no feature named Desolation Flats in this part of the Red Desert; oil and gas projects are now given misleading names to fool the public into thinking that favorite landscapes will not be desecrated.) The cruel irony of the Desolation Flats project is that while it would give blanket approval for the drilling of 385 new wells, the corporation who holds the mineral

rights - Marathon Oil - has no plan to develop their leases, and instead is looking to sell its interests in the area. The most rational explanation for this bizarre situation is that Marathon seeks a blank check to drill the leases, hoping that the pre-approval will raise their sale value.

But the prognosis for this spectacular wilderness is not all bleak. The BLM has identified 40,000 acres of unprotected land in Adobe Town that it concedes has all of the attributes of wilderness, and the agency has promised to consider adding these lands to the existing Wilderness Study Area when it rewrites its Great Divide Resource Management Plan. While this promise may now be complicated by the Interior Department's recent position that it lacks the legal authority to create new WSAs, there is still the possibility that these lands will be withdrawn from industrial use under the new Plan. And if this occurs, there is a clause in the Desolation Flats project that would withdraw the wilderness lands from drilling.

And there is a growing recognition that Adobe Town is one of America's priceless national treasures that we cannot afford to squander for the sake of a trickle of natural gas. Wyoming's political leadership, ranging from Democratic Governor Dave Freudenthal to Republican Senator Craig Thomas, have recognized the irreplaceable value of Adobe Town and the need to protect it. And over 20,000 citizens wrote the BLM during the initial Great Divide comment period to call for protection for this magnificent landscape. But the true test still lies ahead - the draft version of the new Great Divide plan is being released this spring, and the BLM will take comments from a range of stakeholders, from the general public to the big oil companies, before they decide the fate of Adobe Town (see the box to get involved).

We are living in a watershed moment. On one hand, this could be the year that the crown jewel of Wyoming's high desert wilderness gets the protection it deserves. On the other, ours could be the generation that squandered one of the Red Desert's signature landscapes for the sake of a handful of marginal gas deposits. We must make a wise choice.

How to Get There:

From Interstate 80 drive west from Rawlins to Exit 142, the Bitter Creek exit. Take the Bitter Creek exit and drive south on Bitter Creek Road (County 19). After crossing the railroad tracks at approximately mile 7, stay on County 19 and follow the signs for the Eversole Ranch. The ranch is about 27 miles from I-80 exit. Drive through the ranch, taking the left fork in the road, and go 1.8 miles. The road forks again here, so go straight ahead on an unmarked BLM road; do NOT take County 19 which turns to the right (SW). Follow the unmarked road for 3.4 miles. Turn left onto a gravel road going east to the Adobe Town Rim. The Rim is about 2.5 miles after you turn onto the gravel road.

Adobe Town Needs Friends

This spring, the Rawlins BLM is revising its Great Divide Resource Management Plan, a long-term blueprint for the management of 3.5 million acres of public land, including most of Adobe Town. To help, write a letter asking the BLM to withdraw the unprotected parts of Adobe Town from industrial use, and send it postmarked by July 6th to:

Dave Simons
Rawlins Field Office, BLM
1300 N. 3rd St.
Rawlins, WY 82301

Or DesFlats_WYMail@blm.gov

Biodiversity Conservation Alliance is leading the charge to protect wildlife and wilderness in the Great Divide region, not just in Adobe Town but in other wild places like the Powder Rim, Wild Cow Creek, and the Pedro Mountains. For more information on how to help protect the Red Desert's public lands, contact Maggie Schafer, BCA's community organizer, at (307) 742-7978. Future generations will thank you for doing your part to protect our wilderness heritage.

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