

Adobe Town

The Crown Jewel of Wyoming's Desert Wilderness

A Proposed Wilderness Area In Wyoming's Red Desert



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Adobe Town is the crown jewel of Wyoming's desert wilderness, with breathtaking landscapes of national park quality, intricate geologic features, and abundant wildlife. Stretching 26 miles from north to south and encompassing 180,910 acres of wilderness-quality land, this is the largest tract of the Red Desert that still remains in its original state. Receiving on average only five inches of annual rainfall, this is the driest place in Wyoming. Threatened by oil and gas drilling, the spectacular landscapes of Adobe Town stand to be badly degraded if the federal government fails to protect them. The scars of development on these sensitive lands can last a century or more.

Conservationists are proposing to protect Adobe Town as a Congressionally designated wilderness area, and are ultimately working toward a larger National Conservation Area that would include neighboring lands of conservation concern including the Kinney Rim, Prehistoric Rim, and historic Fort LaCledé.



A lightning storm rages over Skull Creek Rim

© Joel Sartore

A Geological Masterpiece

The story of the spectacular cliffs, spires, and arches of Adobe Town began 55 million years ago, during the Eocene epoch. Volcanic eruptions in the Yellowstone area belched huge quantities of ash into the sky, and rivers flowing down into Adobe Town carried the ash to deposit it in the Washakie Basin, where Ancient Lake Gosiute had recently dried up. This water-borne ash, coupled with volcanic ash carried by the winds, built up in a formation one thousand feet thick and ultimately solidified into tuffaceous sandstone.



Pinnacles of the Adobe Town Rim

This tuffaceous sandstone is fragile and easily eroded, and for millennia the wind and water went to work on it, sculpting the solitary pillars, clusters of spires, arches, and window rocks that are the signature landmarks of Adobe Town. Interbedded with the buff-colored ash deposits, layers of maroon sandstone were resistant to erosion, forming caprocks that sheltered the underlying ash from the rain. The ash all around these caprocks washed away, forming lofty pillars, solitary buttes, and balanced rocks of all descriptions. The ash beds are striped in places with bands of red, purple, pink, and green, the legacy of trace minerals like copper, iron, and manganese within the ash beds.

The Eocene epoch was an era of giant land mammals, and during this period, primitive horses, camels, rhinoceros-like mammals called uinatheres, and large relatives of the tapir called taeniodonts thrived in a subtropical climate that resembled the Everglades of today. Rich deposits of their fossil remains are found throughout Adobe Town, making this area one of the world's most important paleontological sites.



The Field Museum Image # CK46T

A uinathera and early horses beside an Eocene lake in Wyoming. Painting by Charles Knight

Early Explorers and Outlaws

Adobe Town saw continuous human occupation for the last 12,000 years. Early prehistoric people thrived in a landscape that must have resembled a grassy savannah dotted with watercourses. Later, when the area became a desert, native peoples continued to inhabit Adobe Town, and left their legacy in an unusually rich scattering of archaeological sites. Adobe Town remains a sacred and respected place to modern Native American peoples like the Arapaho and Shoshone, who visit the area to practice their spiritual observances.

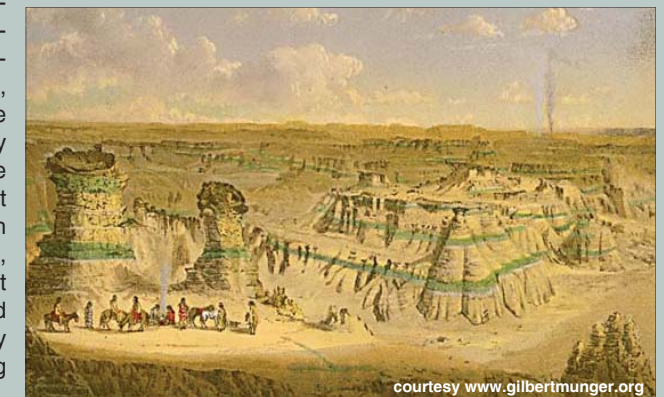
Much later, the first Anglo-Americans to visit Adobe Town came with the Geological Exploration of the 40th Parallel, which crossed the continent in 1869. These explorers remarked,

"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 fortresses. At a little distance, these sharp incisions seem like the spaces between series of pillars, and the whole aspect of the region is that of a line of Egyptian structures. Among the most interesting bodies are those of the detached outliers, points of spurs, or isolated hills, which are mere relics of the beds that formerly covered the whole valley. These blocks, often reaching 100 feet in height, rise out of the smooth surface of a level plain of clay, and are sculptured into the most remarkable forms, surmounted by domes and ornamented by many buttresses and jutting pinnacles."

The name Adobe Town almost certainly derived from this expedition, which compared the area to the ruins of an adobe metropolis.

The Outlaw Trail ran right through Adobe Town, and it is said that outlaw Butch Cassidy and his gang used The Haystacks as a hide-out for fresh horses during his escape after the Tipton train robbery. During the Prohibition years of the early 1930s, whiskey smugglers hid stills to brew their moonshine in the impenetrable maze of ravines in this area.



Original lithograph from the Geological Exploration of the 40th Parallel



A greater short-horned lizard on the Skull Creek Rim

A Haven for Wildlife

Adobe Town is an excellent place to spot the Red Desert's native wildlife. The pinnacles and palisades of Adobe Town provide ideal nesting habitat for birds of prey, and a wide variety of raptors, from prairie falcons to ferruginous hawks, from burrowing owls to golden eagles, are found here. Rare wildlife like the Great Basin gopher snake and the mountain

plover find refuge in this pristine corner of the Red Desert. Adobe Town is also home to Wyoming's largest herd of wild horses, typically numbering about 1,000 head. Visitors to Adobe Town are virtually assured of seeing at least several herds of this wild symbol of the American West.

Adobe Town's Signature Landscapes

The Haystacks

Rising one thousand feet above the surrounding desert, The Haystacks are a broad arc of deeply dissected badlands that form the northern extension of the Adobe Town Rim. Loosely wooded in juniper, the many ravines and ridges of this area offer habitat to and abundance of wildlife from mule deer to mountain lions. This area is in "checkerboard" land ownership, with every other square in public ownership, dating back to the railroad land grants of the 1860s. Check with the Bureau of Land Management about current access rules.



Junipers in The Haystacks glow in the sunset

The Adobe Town Rim

One of the lower rims in Adobe Town, this is the area with the greatest complexity of geological features. Arches, window rocks, and mazes of pinnacles characterize this area, which shows off the variety and rare beauty that makes Adobe Town famous.



These striking spires are found on the Adobe Town Rim

Recreation in Adobe Town

Adobe Town is one of the Red Desert's most important recreation destinations. Ideal for short day hikes or extended backpacks, the open sagebrush of this area allows unlimited off-trail hiking options, bounded only by the architecture of cliffs and pinnacles. Adobe Town is really the only place in Wyoming's desert basins where horseback riders can enjoy a long day's ride without crossing a major road. Wildlife viewing is superb throughout the area, and hunting for pronghorn and mule deer is also outstanding.

Adobe Town offers a true wilderness experience. A good topographic map, compass, and cross-country navigation skills are a must, as the only trails were made by the wild horses, and there are no signs along the way. Water supplies are few and far between, so carry a full supply for your trip when you go.

A jeep trail follows the Adobe Town Rim along the northwestern boundary of the proposed wilderness, providing motorized access to some of the most spectacular formations. Following wilderness designation, this area will continue to provide easy access for small children, the elderly, and even wheelchair-bound visitors to some of Adobe Town's most impressive landscapes.



The Skull Creek Rim

The thousand-foot palisades of the Skull Creek Rim present the geologic wonders of Adobe Town at a magnificent scale. Here, the lofty promontories descend through badlands banded in pinks and reds to the vast and empty desert floor below. Atop the rims, there is easy traveling through eerily eroded boulders and among sand dunes stabilized by sagebrush and prickly pears, lit in the early summer by the tiny blossoms of wildflowers.



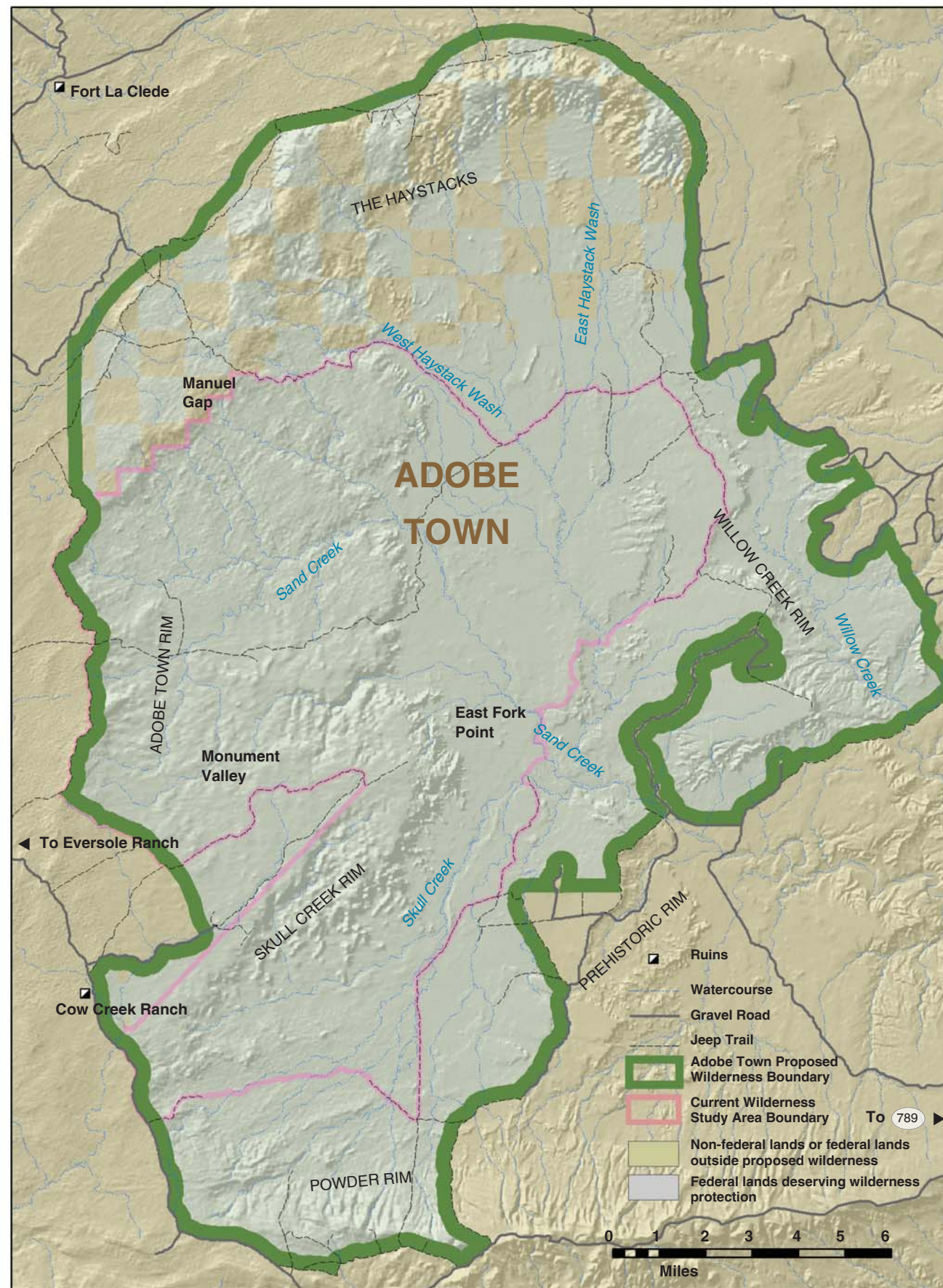
Mist settles over Skull Creek Rim

The Willow Creek Badlands

Along the eastern edge of Adobe Town are the Willow Creek Badlands, where buttes and small canyons of dun colored sandstone guard the dry wash of Willow Creek. The tall cliffs of the Willow Creek Rim rise to the west of the creek.

The Powder Rim

A broad swell of country rising along the Wyoming-Colorado border, the Powder Rim defines the southern boundary of Adobe Town. Robed in some of the largest juniper woodlands in Wyoming, this unique and wildlife-rich area is home to nine of Wyoming's rare juniper-obligate songbirds, including the Scott's oriole and juniper titmouse. The Petition Elk Herd, one of Wyoming's few desert elk herds, makes its home here, and there is crucial winter range for pronghorn antelope and mule deer. Along the base of the Powder Rim, erosion has carved colorful badlands ideal for exploration on foot.



All photos courtesy of Erik Molvar, BCA, unless otherwise noted.

Biodiversity Conservation Alliance seeks an open public debate on the Adobe Town wilderness proposal and the broader concept of a Red Desert National Conservation Area. We are working to build public support for withdrawing Adobe Town from future oil and gas leasing, while allowing existing lease rights to run their course. Ultimately, we would like to see National Conservation Area units established in the Jack Morrow Hills and in the southern Red Desert, with an Adobe Town wilderness area as one of the key centerpieces. We urge people in Wyoming, in the Rocky Mountain region, and throughout the nation who love wild deserts to join us in this important campaign.

Biodiversity Conservation Alliance is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit membership organization dedicated to protecting wildlife and wild places in Wyoming and surrounding states. Donations can be sent to help protect Adobe Town. Contact us at (307) 742-7978, or write to Biodiversity Conservation Alliance, P.O. Box 1512, Laramie, WY 82073. Visit our website at www.voiceforthewild.org.



Today the Adobe Town Wilderness is only a vision. But you can help make this vision a reality.

The Red Desert is currently experiencing unprecedented levels of industrial activity. In the southern Red Desert, existing or planned oil and gas fields stretch across the entire breadth of the desert, gobbling up millions of acres of public lands and leaving scant habitat for native wildlife. In light of the massive scale of drilling and road construction, it would be wise to set aside at least a few of our most outstanding natural areas, like Adobe Town, the Jack Morrow Hills, and the Kinney Rim for the benefit of wildlife and public recreation.

Over half of the potential wilderness in Adobe Town is currently open to oil and gas drilling. Twenty years ago, all of it was open to drilling, but the BLM established the Adobe Town Wilderness Study Area for a little less than half of the qualifying lands; eventually the pre-existing oil and gas leases that covered most of this area expired. But even these protections could be reversed without the Congressional protection of wilderness designation. Today, the BLM should expand protections to include all of the wilderness quality lands in Adobe Town, including key parts of the Powder Rim and remote flats at the base of the Skull Creek Rim, which form the scenic backdrop for so many of Adobe Town's breathtaking views. And the U.S. Congress should set aside all 180,910 acres of Adobe Town to protect its wilderness qualities.



Ken Driese

With strong public support, we can protect the pristine landscapes of Adobe Town, so future generations will be able to enjoy the same awe-inspiring vistas and abundant wildlife that we have today. This will take decisive action by the Bureau of Land Management to provide interim protection. It will take foresight and wisdom of our Congressional representatives to establish the long-lasting protections that this special part of the Red Desert deserves.

Getting There

It takes about an hour and a half to reach Adobe Town from the Bitter Creek Exit (Exit 142) on Interstate 80. Follow the Bitter Creek Road (County 19) south for seven miles to cross the Union Pacific railroad, then bear left and continue south on County 19, following 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 to a second junction. County Road 19 bears away to the right, but stay left on the unmarked BLM road for 3.4 miles to reach a junction. Turn left here to travel 2.5 miles to the Adobe Town Rim. Or continue straight ahead for another 8 miles or so, and turn left on a gravel road when an abandoned ranch can be seen ahead. Follow this road for 1.4 miles to its end at an abandoned drilling pad; jeep trails run north and east from this pad to the Skull Creek Rim.

From the south, take Wyoming Highway 789 or Colorado Highway 13 toward Baggs, on the Wyoming-Colorado border. Just south of the state line, drive west on the paved County Road 4 for about 20 miles. The pavement runs out at the oilfield camp of Powder Wash; here, drive north on County Road 62, staying left at the major junctions. After about 17 miles, you will drive through the abandoned Cow Creek Ranch. Take the next major gravel road to your right for the Skull Creek Rim (following the directions above), or continue north for another 8 miles, where the next major right leads 2.5 miles to the Adobe Town Rim.

High-clearance vehicles are required to get around on most of the jeep trails in the Adobe Town area, although the gravel roads are suitable for most passenger cars in dry weather. All roads in this area have a high clay content, and in wet weather, even the main county roads become impassable quagmires. Wise travelers wait for dry road conditions before attempting to drive off paved roads in this area.

