



Cross Country Relatives Road Trip (R19A)

It was time for my annual cross-country road trip out to the Midwest and back to see family. I planned only a handful of stops on the drive out to reduce travel time on that end of the trip. For the trip back home, I planned to swing through Wyoming to see a number of sights in the state, including a return visit to Yellowstone National Park.

Mother Nature did not cooperate. For the third year in a row I encountered winter conditions in October. With some snow-based road closures and well-below normal temperatures, I only spent one night in Wyoming. But having learned my lesson the last couple years, this time I had extra maps and brochures with me in case I needed to come up with alternative sightseeing on the way home.

For the drive east I first headed southeast to Kingman, AZ and I-40, which I then took east across Arizona and New Mexico.

I made good time, so when I reached Petrified Forest National Park in eastern Arizona I decided to take a driving break to check out the Painted Desert Overlooks at the north end of the park. As I usually enter the park from the south, I've often run out of sightseeing time by the time I get to the north end.



I made it to Gallup, NM that night, somewhat further than I had figured. That gave me time the next morning to head down to El Malpais National Monument, an area with several volcanic features, for a little bit of hiking.



Junction Cave, a lava tube at El Malpais.



I spent the night in Santa Rosa, NM, home to the Blue Hole. It's a natural artesian well, over 80 feet deep. About 3000 gallons of water flow out of the Blue Hole every minute.



South of Santa Rosa is the village of Puerto de Luna on the Pecos River. Tradition holds that Spanish explorer Francisco Coronado crossed the river here in 1541.



Of course there's no fish allowed. Have you ever tried to keep fish on a leash?

I left the interstate to head south to Fort Sumner Historic Site/Bosque Redondo Memorial, which was closed the day I tried to visit it a couple years ago. The site includes a museum, some remnants of the old fort, and a number of informational markers.

In the 1860s the Navajo and Mescalero Apache were forced to abandon their homelands and march here to an internment camp ill-equipped to care for them. Hundreds died on the march, and more died due to harsh conditions at the camp. The Apache escaped. The Navajo were allowed to return to their homeland after the Treaty of Bosque Redondo established the Navajo Reservation in 1868. The fort was abandoned in 1869.



Treaty Rock at the site.

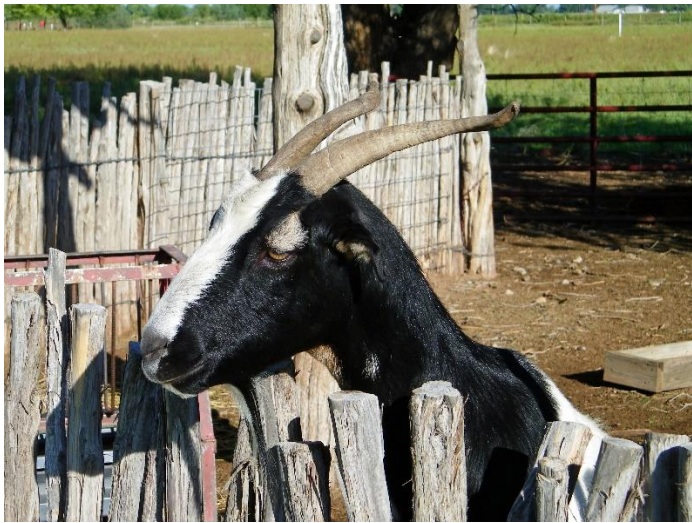
The abandoned fort was purchased by cattle baron Lucien Maxwell. He converted some of the officer quarters into a large house. It was in this house that Sheriff Pat Garrett shot and killed William Bonney, a.k.a. Billy the Kid. Bonney, two of his partners and one of his victims are all buried in the fort's cemetery.



The spot where Billy the Kid was killed.



Billy the Kid's grave (right)



Billy Goat the Kid

My travels often take me far and wide. But it's always nice to get back to...



...Earth



Should space aliens arrive at Earth, Texas and ask a local to “Take me to your leader”, they’ll probably end up here at the Earth municipal building.



Bob’s Oil Well in Matador, Texas was a gas station designed to resemble an oil well, a nice example of roadside architecture.

In Abilene, Kansas I stopped at the Dwight D. Eisenhower Presidential Library and Museum, where I checked out his boyhood home, toured the very good museum on his life, military career and presidency, and paid my respects at his grave.



Eisenhower's boyhood home



The Place of Meditation, where President Eisenhower, his wife Mamie, and their son Doud Dwight Eisenhower are interred.



View of the Missouri River at Nebraska City, Nebraska, where I stopped at a Lewis & Clark National Historic Trail visitor center. Their expedition passed through this area both in 1804 and 1806.



This roadside stop near Adair, Iowa – the Jesse James Historical Site – marks the location of the first train robbery in the West, carried out by Jesse James and his gang on July 21, 1873.



Here's a little more Eisenhower-related sightseeing. This home in Boone, Iowa was the birthplace of President Eisenhower's wife Mamie Doud Eisenhower.



Iowa farmland in the fall, looking west from the Wyoming, Iowa cemetery. My Sawyer great great grandparents once owned a small acreage out there.



“Up in the valley of the Jolly Green Giant
Lives a guy they call the Little Green Sprout”

I started my return trip heading west across southern Minnesota and South Dakota on I-90.

The Minnesota Valley Canning Company originated the Green Giant brand, and the Minnesota River valley is known as The Valley of the Jolly Green Giant.

A 55-foot-tall fiberglass sculpture of the Jolly Green Giant stand in Blue Earth, Minnesota.



No sign of his Little Green Sprout



Don't confuse this little guy found at a nearby convenience store for the Little Green Sprout. He's actually an A&W Drive-in Papa Burger. But with the local drive-in closed for the season, I guess he had to find other work to get his A&W Burger Family through the harsh Minnesota winter.



Mitchell, South Dakota is home to The World's Only Corn Palace, the city's civic auditorium and expo center. What makes it stand out is that every year it is decorated with a new set of murals made of corn and other grains in their naturally occurring colors.



Work was underway to remove the 2018-2019 murals (theme: Salute to the Military) and replace them with the 2019-2020 murals (theme: South Dakota Home Grown).



One of the new murals was already completed, a depiction of what the Black Hills mountain sculpture of Crazy Horse will look like once it's completed.



Mitchell, South Dakota is also the site of the Mitchell Prehistoric Indian Archaeological Site. Native Americans believed to be ancestors of the present-day Mandan tribe established a village here about 1000 years ago, and stayed here for about 100 years. It is one of the northernmost sites with evidence of corn, beans and squash agriculture.

A section of the active archaeological site is domed for visitors to see. There is also a small museum at the site.



During the Cold War, the US built several clusters of widely spaced nuclear missile silos in the western plains as part of its preparations to deter a Soviet nuclear attack. After signing a nuclear arms reduction treaty with the Soviet Union/Russia, a number of missile silos housing 150 Minuteman II missiles were disarmed and for the most part destroyed.

The Minuteman Missile National Historic Site has a museum about the Cold War and the missiles' role in it. It also preserves two of the nearby missile silos.

Ranger-guided tours take visitors into one of the silos. Visitors can check out the grounds of the second silo on their own.

These are a couple pictures from the Delta-09 Missile Silo.





It seems to be getting harder and harder for people to find places where they can smoke.



Prairie dogs are usually skittish and quickly disappear into their burrows if you try to approach them with a camera. But not this cute little fellow.



Along the road to the northeast entrance to Badlands National Park is a historic site that preserves this old farmstead, which features a rare original sod house.



Badlands geology primarily is the result of two major deposits, one occurring about 67-75 million years ago and the second about 26-34 million years ago during different kinds of landscapes – sea deposits, a tropical landscape and a woodland with meandering rivers, along with layers of volcanic ash. The weight of the deposits converted them to multi-colored layers of shales and sandstones.

A half-million years of recent erosion sculpted these layers into the shapes, bluffs and spires we see today.



Prairie grasses became established here – the Badlands preserves one of the largest undisturbed mixed-grass prairies.

Thar’s gold in them thar hills!

Actually more of a straw yellow. The colors depend on the types of sediments deposited, the minerals in those sediments, and how they react when exposed to oxygen and water.

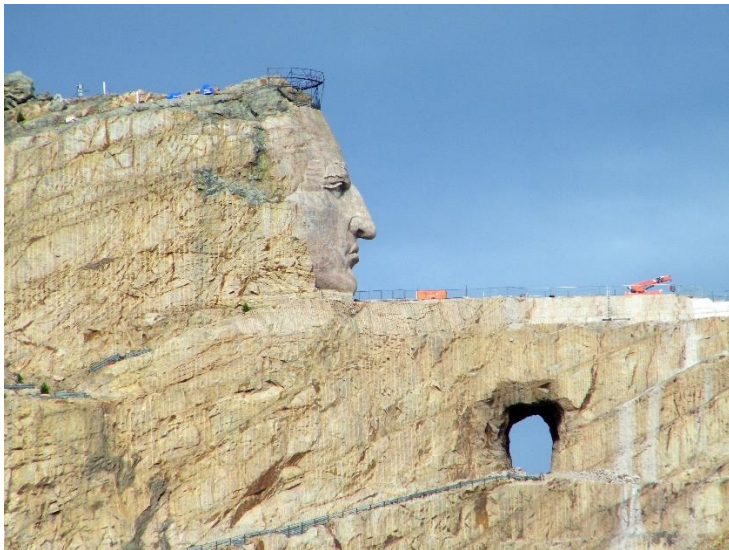


Wild buffalo are often spotted grazing in the Badlands.



Most Americans have heard of Mt. Rushmore and how the busts of four presidents have been carved into a South Dakota Black Hills mountain.

Fewer are aware of the Crazy Horse Memorial, a much more ambitious undertaking on another Black Hills mountain about 17 miles away.



The sculpture will depict Oglala Lakota warrior Crazy Horse riding a horse and pointing into the distance.

The privately funded sculpture will be about 640 long and 560 feet tall once it's completed. In comparison, the heads on Mt. Rushmore are about 60 feet high – the Mt. Rushmore heads could all fit where Crazy Horse's head is.

The idea was conceived in the early 1930s, and work began in the 1940s.



I took the picture to the left when I visited the site 28 years ago in 1991. Since then the face has been completed and much of the sides of the mountain have been removed to support the more detailed carving to be done. I don't know of a targeted completion date. (It took 14 years to sculpt the much smaller Mt. Rushmore busts.)



Even with winter weather approaching from the northwest, I did have a nice day for checking out my targeted sights in northeast Wyoming.

Just across the border from South Dakota I made a quick stop at the Vore Buffalo Jump site. It is a sinkhole that Native Americans used to herd stampeding buffalo into, trapping, wounding and killing them. The site was used from about 1500 to 1800. Archaeologists at the site are excavating through a 15-foot layer of bones and projectile points.



The Aladdin General Store dates back to 1896 when it began as a commissary for local coal miners.



The Aladdin Tipple was built when a coal mine was established here in 1898, one of the first underground coal mines in northeastern Wyoming. Coal from this mine was used in the gold smelters at Lead and Deadwood, South Dakota across the state line.

The mine closed in 1942.



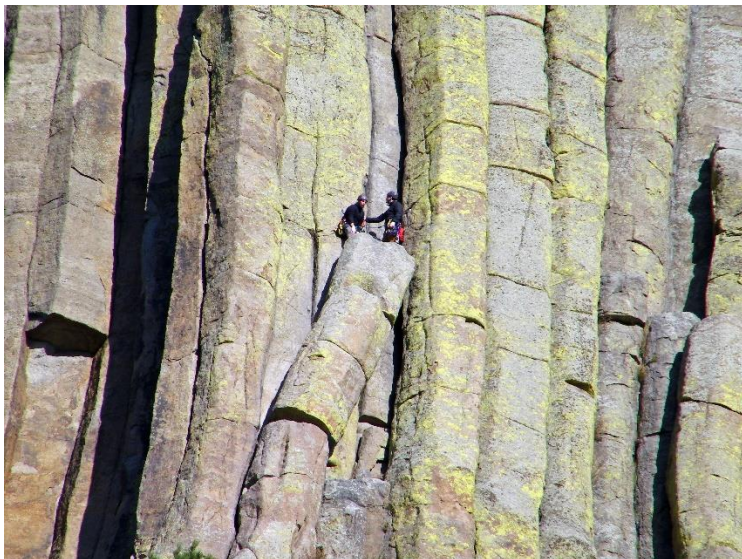
Devils Tower was my main target for the morning. The tower is a laccolith, an intrusion of volcanic rock into layers of sandstone, where the sandstone has long-since mostly eroded away.

It rises about 870 feet from base to top, and about 1270 feet from the nearby Belle Fourche River to the top.

Volcanic rock when it hardens often cracks into 6- (and sometimes 5- and 7-) sided columns, which can be observed at numerous volcanic sites. But it is the size and shape of Devils Tower and its columns that give it its distinctive look.



I experienced a Closer Encounter with Devils Tower when I hiked the trail around its base.



This can happen to you if you stray from the marked trail.

Actually, about 4,000 people climb to the summit of Devils Tower every year.



Further west I checked out two Native American sites. The first was Medicine Lodge State Archaeological Site. The rock face of a small bluff along Medicine Lodge Creek is covered with petroglyphs and pictographs. Most date back a few hundred to a thousand years, but some are as much as 2500 years old. Archaeological excavations at the base of the bluff have found 12 layers of habitation dating back 8,000 to as much as 10,000 years ago (depending on the source).



About 11,000 years ago, there was a deep gully where that reservoir is. Clovis hunters would wound mammoths and guide them into the gully where there was no escape. Archaeological excavations have determined that this was one of the biggest known Clovis culture mammoth kill sites in North America.



I spent the night in Moreland, Wyoming, and winter weather moved in that evening. But knowing the weather outlook, I decided to skip Yellowstone and instead head south to Vernal, Utah for a couple days. But I did make some sightseeing stops along the way, including here at Hot Springs State Park in Thermopolis, Wyoming.



Believed to be one of the biggest hot springs in the world, 130-degree water flows from the ground and is captured in pools and bath houses. And about 8,000 gallons a day flows directly into the nearby Big Horn River. Minerals in the water have created this long travertine terrace.



I drove south through the Wind River Canyon, pretty anytime, but the dusting of fresh snow was a nice touch.

I'd eventually reach US 191, which I'd take to Vernal and later to Green River, Utah. The highway heads south along the east side of Flaming Gorge Reservoir, a Forest Service national recreation area.



Although I had some weather-related slow going in some of the mountain passes, I came to a complete stop here at Clay Basin. It's not a lot of snow, but a section of the highway was covered by a sheet of ice that created havoc for a semi – which blocked the road for the rest of us for about a half hour.

Even when we were finally able to proceed past the truck, most drivers passed with their left tires off the pavement, getting whatever traction they could from the gravel shoulder of the road.



The weather was nicer and the sun even came out by the time I reached the dam across the Green River near the south end of the national recreation area. It doesn't look like a very big dam, but the reservoir it creates is 90 miles long.



I first visited Dinosaur National Monument in northeast Utah near Vernal in 1997, camping there that year and again when I returned in 2000. I finally got back there again in 2009, but one of its key attractions – the dinosaur quarry for which it was named – was closed as the building that sheltered it had become unstable.

The tilting rocks of Split Mountain exposed what is believed to be a riverbed that had captured hundreds of dinosaur bones. Much of the site had been excavated, but a small section of the quarry was protected as Dinosaur National Monument, and a shelter was built over it.



Later the monument was substantially enlarged to protect large sections of the canyons of the Green and Yampa Rivers.

Here at Rainbow Park, the Green River enters a canyon it carved through Split Mountain. The mountain actually existed before the river did, but debris from the uplift that created the Uintah Mountains to the north buried it. The Green River eventually eroded down through the debris and then through Split Mountain. The debris itself eventually eroded away, exposing Split Mountain, now sliced through by the Green River.

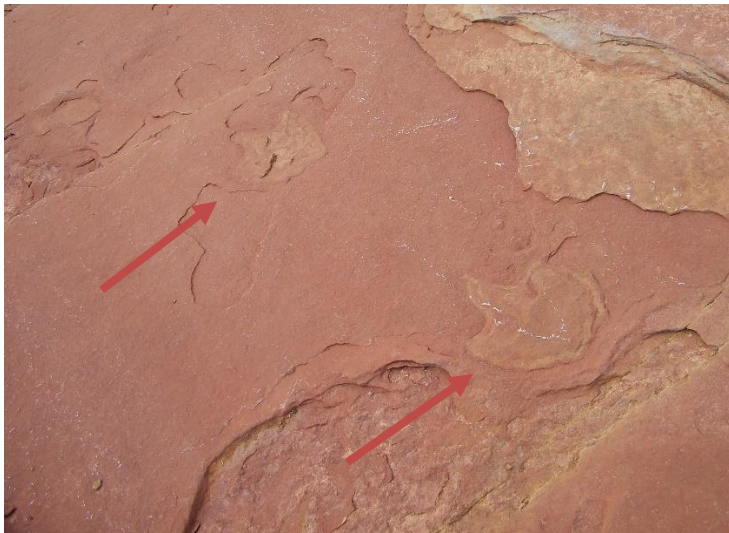


There are a number of excellent petroglyph sites in the regions including the national monument's own McKee Springs site along the road to Rainbow Park.

I think we use the same hair stylist.



The dinosaur fossils for which the monument is named can only be seen in the area around the visitor center, and mostly at the dinosaur quarry. A giant slab of the exposed tilted ancient riverbed – the dinosaur quarry – features hundreds of fossilized dinosaur bones.



At Red Fleet State Park, a short trail (no more than 3 miles round trip) leads out to a dinosaur trackway – a track site that includes sequences of tracks from the same dinosaur. You can see a sequence of theropod tracks in the picture to the left.

I was expecting to eventually see some Morrison Formation landscape as I hiked along the trail, but the rock I was seeing instead suggested petrified sand dunes.



It turns out that although the trackway is fairly close to the national monument's dinosaur quarry as the crow flies, the tracks are about 50 million years older, dating back to when the area was covered by an expanse of sand dunes. The trackway is believed to have been formed at a muddy lake/oasis area in the ancient dune field.

Vernal itself is home to the Utah Field House of Natural History State Park Museum, which provides an introduction into the geology and paleontology of the region.



Near Hanksville, Utah, about 15 miles from the highway in the area behind Factory Butte. I first sampled this area last spring, but I wanted to take the road back to where Wild Horse Road fords Muddy Creek to see what the crossing was like. There are some hiking trails back there in the San Rafael Swell area, but I wasn't keen on the approach on Wild Horse Road from the north. I did get some great views of the scenery surrounding the North Caineville Reef, an uplift-tilting of the colorful layers of rock.



Here's the main ford at Muddy Creek. I'll need a bigger Jeep with bigger tires to cross here. Or take one of the easier crossings that others have created in the area, if I really want to get across. But I'd still have to check for water levels and quicksand patches, just to be safe.



This is Muddy Creek about 25 miles downstream, where I did some hiking. Looks dry, which is deceptive. With all the sandstone erosion, creeks and rivers in the region are filled with sand. Even if there's not enough water to flow on top of the sand it will still flow through it, creating pockets of quicksand. So I bring a cheap 5-6' bamboo garden stake with me when I hike in these areas so I can test the ground I'm walking on. Dry as it looks on the surface, I found a handful of quicksand pockets about 3' deep, and one where my stake didn't reach bottom.



The Morrison Formation is a layer of sedimentary rock that was deposited in an area from northern New Mexico to the Canadian border back in the Jurassic period, dating from about 156 million years ago to about 146 million years ago.

Morrison Formation sites have been the biggest sources of dinosaur fossils in the US. There's a bluff about a mile behind me where dinosaur fossils regularly fall out of the slowly eroding bluff.

The top layer of the Morrison Formation is the Brushy Basin Member, which includes bentonite, colorful clay layers that formed from volcanic ash deposits. You can see it in the bluff. You can also see it in the mostly dry floor of Horse Bench Reservoir near Green River. When the clay dries it has more of a popcorn look than the cracked look of dried mud. You can walk across the crunchy reservoir bed – there were even tire tracks crossing it in places. But avoid white patches like this. When natural water evaporates out here it leaves salty minerals behind that will eventually blow off. So this white patch wasn't firm. Not at all. When I tossed a rock on it, it splashed like you might expect a bucket of paint to do. But if you did accidentally step in the wrong place and sink into the clay, you wouldn't have anything to worry about. Bentonite has a number of routine uses, including as a bulk laxative.

This was my last day of sightseeing. Temperatures dropped well below freezing the next morning, but my only plan for the trip's final day was driving the final stretch back to Las Vegas.