

## High Country News

### Secret getaways of the National Landscape Conservation System

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*Editor's Note: This is Part 2 of two-part story on the National Landscape Conservation System.*

*Encompassing more than 27 million acres of rugged, beautiful public land out West, it's run by the Bureau of Land Management as a sort of shadow National Parks System. It's all yours to explore, as author Craig Childs does in this story, finding solitude, wildlife and ancient rock art. Click [here](#) for Part 1.*

**Rem Hawes doesn't wear hiking boots.** The Agua Fria National Monument manager had on what you might expect of a government fireboss: worn leather boots with flashing at the toe. At the younger side of middle age, he was fit and trim, a long-range hiker.

We drove out together one February day from Phoenix with Scott Jones, the Southwest director for the Conservation Lands Foundation, a nonprofit dedicated solely to bolstering BLM's national conservation lands, including Agua Fria. After an hour's drive north from Phoenix on I-17, we took an exit where the freeway cut up to the top of a black basalt mesa and drove east into the monument. The road turned to dirt right away and we bounced in a Jeep across the ruts and ditches of bouldery grasslands.

"The monument has a hundred miles of drivable roads," Hawes said from behind the wheel. "Seven miles are graded."

That was a boast. The dwindling arteries of roads in the monument help spread people out, he explained, rather than drawing them to a single place. The monument has no center, no viewpoint, no ramada at the end of the road with a lonely row of picnic tables waiting just for you. It is wide-open, challenging country—what makes the West unique.

"There are some places your classic visitor can go here," Hawes continued. "You can look on a map and find a destination, but the bigger purpose here is that the landscape itself is a destination. Where is the one waterfall everyone's supposed to see? Where are the geysers? This isn't that kind of place."

"It's not the Devils Tower experience," Jones added.

Ruts turned to naked boulders and dust, and Hawes downshifted into 4-low. We parked at an unmarked spot near towering metal pylons and then got out with daypacks. I peered up the tight sway of high-tension power lines that cut across the middle of the monument. Walking under and past them, we could hear the hum and crackle of electricity high overhead. I thought, *This isn't wilderness.*

The power lines, Hawes pointed out, are part of what protects Agua Fria's sense of solitude.

He gestured toward the barely discernable motion of semi-trucks six miles off, visible through a gap in the rolling dry grass and agave stalks. "I-17 on one side and the power lines on the other form a boundary, and people really don't think about what's in between."

Tiers of half-mile-wide canyons carve down through the mesa's edge where we walked. You wouldn't see them unless you stood at their edges. Palisades and steep boulder fields led to garlands of cottonwood and sycamore, some of the canyons running with streams, or at least prosperous springs.

Like Gold Butte, Agua Fria takes in a big sweep of land, in this case most of a mesa 10 miles long and six miles wide, crowned with high-desert caprock, and wreathed at the base by the Agua Fria River, where clear, cool water flows beneath tall saguaros, carving the mesa's southern edge into steep, rugged drops.

Jones and I followed Hawes down a flood-polished channel of basalt, ducking around spiny mesquites. Barrel cacti grew among agaves and black, bubbled boulders. "Right up here you start seeing them," Hawes said.

At first, we found simple etchings on boulders, stick figures and rectilinear designs. Then we saw hundreds of delicately pecked images of animals, people and great, interwoven spirals on flat walls of basalt outcrops. We were in the thick of the 11th century, the Perry Mesa culture, ancient Puebloan people living in the high desert of central Arizona. You'd expect the ground here to be beaten smooth by visitors, little arteries breaking away to view each rock art panel. But there were no trails at all.

As we explored the galleries of rock art, hopping from boulder to boulder, we encountered a fat, dust-colored rattlesnake. It barely buzzed, lazy with the morning. We crouched and watched it slowly glide through the grass.

"It's locals' territory," Hawes later said, describing what national conservation lands tend to have in common.

"The ranchers know this place—the hikers, people on ATVs, horseback. Blue-collar sign-shooter ATV groups ... are a major base for us."

The monument is loaded with four-wheeling opportunities, but much of it is accessible only to foot and horse. The Arizona Wilderness Coalition has recommended two wilderness study areas here, totaling 28,667 acres that would seal off the more remote country.

At a gap, we climbed up through caprock to the smooth mesa top. On this higher, wind-blown sweep, the ground was littered with broken pottery, potsherds dating back several centuries, in some places so thick you could scarcely avoid stepping on them. Early agriculturists once lived here, pueblo-dwellers, corn and agave growers. Calling to each other, bending down and picking up design-painted sherds to show each other, we slowly worked our way toward a rise. It turned out to be a rock-stack of ruins, an ancient pueblo at the mesa's edge. The depressions of old room-blocks and the checkerboard rise of mostly toppled walls took up nearly an acre. Hawes had been here before, though he hadn't remembered exactly where it was. Every time, he said, he has to find his way anew.

At the crumbled edge of this pre-Columbian citadel, we looked down stair-stepped cliffs and boulders into a canyon-bottom riparian zone a few hundred feet below. There were no trails. Hawes told me the place was not something you'd even pick up on the Internet as a destination, a canyon unnamed on most maps.

Below the ruin, we sat out of the wind. "Last day of freedom," Jones said to Hawes.

I asked what he meant and Hawes explained that he was taking a higher position within the BLM managing a bigger, more broken-up piece of desert outside Phoenix. No national conservation lands.

"Is this what you wanted to do on your last day?" I asked.

Hawes looked past his boots, propped on a boulder, to the canyon open beneath him, and laughed, "This is what I would do every day if I could."

**Now, anytime I drive I-17 north of Phoenix**, my mind wanders into the monument. That stretch of freeway no longer seems just a quick way to get from here to there. Instead, it's the edge of a much larger landscape, one not dominated by us.

Rountree has remained my enabler, sending me notes with new locations, places I just had to visit. He mentioned Sonoran Desert National Monument south of Phoenix and I found myself sitting on one of its high, craggy ridges at sunrise, first light streaming across the desert with not a trail or road in sight.

One place he spoke about, often with a longing sigh, was Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument in southern Utah. Starting in high alpine elk-and-spruce, the 1.9-million-acre monument—the largest in the system—takes a dazzling plunge through canyons and cliffs into the desert. Containing a thousand miles of dirt roads in various conditions, the monument is seven times the size of nearby Zion National Park.

On a warm week in early March, I hooked up with a friend to backpack 20 miles cross-wise, in and out of canyons on the northeastern lobe of the monument. He was a fishing guide from the nearby town of Escalante. We didn't follow trails. Instead, we let our bodies carry us, scanning ahead for gaps, feeling routes with our hands and through our bootsoles. We also didn't bring enough rope, so we did a lot of sliding on our asses with full packs.

Wherever we saw cairns, we destroyed them. The most gaudy stackjobs we pushed over, redistributing their rocks to wipe them from memory. Others we just kicked down, leaving a rock or two as a more subtle route-marker.

My friend told me that if you don't control them this way, cairns swiftly overpopulate, establishing new colonies hither and yon, until you can't go anywhere without seeing them. His way of keeping the land wild was to take them down.

This wasn't so much an act of sabotage, as compliance with NLCS strategy. Ace Kvale, a global mountaineer-adventurer turned volunteer backcountry ranger for Grand Staircase-Escalante, actually thanked me for removing cairns in his monument. I told him I had been a little hesitant at first, just following my buddy's lead, but it felt good. Even Rountree told me he'd kicked down cairns.

"It's in the mission statement of the monument to preserve wilderness characteristics," Kvale said. "Places tend to get over-cairned and eventually people are just following the dotted lines. They need to keep their eyes open, not just follow breadcrumbs. We want them to experience the wilderness on its terms."

Kvale, like many NLCS backcountry rangers, goes by specific guidelines for cairns in little-visited country. On major routes and trails, you should be able to see only one at a time. He tends to knock over every other cairn in places like this, leaving the rest as reliable but not ostentatious trail-markers. Out in deeper country, however, in untrailed wilderness, he takes down almost every one he sees.

"I think of true, untouched wild nature," Kvale said. "We have that here in the canyon country. If you're out that far, you shouldn't need cairns to find your way. I don't mind seeing a subtly placed one or two rocks tastefully done at an important juncture on a route, that's OK. Just a signal to let you know you're on the right track.

"We're not trying to get anybody killed," he added. "You just have to know a little about what you're doing out here."

But there was one cairn that really caught the attention of my buddy and me. It was made of two softball-sized rocks leaning against each other, the sandstone of one weathering into the sandstone of the other. No telling the exact age, since any lichen had been blasted off by wind. This subtle cairn was on an exposed rock-dome leading into the dim hole of a canyon. It was exactly the kind of thing Kvale would let alone, probably using it, like us, as a marker for a way down through perilous country. Maybe it was put here by hunters 50 years ago, or early canyoneers in the 1960s. I like to imagine it was much older than that, left by Paiute travelers who stitched their way across these canyons much as we were doing today, traveling across this far, wild land with their senses heightened, eyes constantly scanning for the next step.

That cairn, we left.

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