

MARS ROVERS: ERIK MOLVAR, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF THE BIODIVERSITY CONSERVATION ALLIANCE, LEADS THE WAY THROUGH THE RED DESERT'S TRAILLESS ADOBE TOWN.



>>>THE TRIP

The Red Zone

As conservationists and energy developers fight over Wyoming's Red Desert, one thing is certain: There's no time like the present to hike through its unreal geography. *By Michael Behar*

I CREST A SHALLOW CANYON RIM IN SOUTHERN Wyoming's Red Desert and spook a family of six pronghorn antelope. They sprint into the sun, leaping in rhythmic bounds over desert scrub. It's our third day of hiking; we're seemingly lost, and several miles from our next water cache. But the antelope are so astoundingly fast and

graceful that I can't help watching them, happily letting the gravity of our situation fade for a few seconds.

Having evolved alongside the cheetah, their mortal enemy, pronghorn have supersize hearts and lungs, and can sustain speeds of 60 miles per hour for several minutes. But their flight on this May afternoon has little to

Photography by Mike Sakas

do with survival: Wyoming's pronghorn have no predators, save hunters; their behavior is triggered by bits of remnant DNA leftover from a time when cheetahs, now extinct in North America, prowled these rangelands 13,000 years ago.

Since that time, the Red Desert—a 9,375-square-mile labyrinth of canyons, hoodoos, mesas, and dunes—has seen very few visitors. Today, there are only a handful of rutted jeep roads and no trails, signage, or directional markers. And not a drop of water.

I've come here for a four-day, 30-

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: THE AUTHOR INSPECTS THE REMAINS OF A BIGHORN SHEEP; WILD HORSES ENJOY EXPANSIVE TERRAIN—AND NEAR-TOTAL SOLITUDE—IN ADOBE TOWN; EONS OF WATER EROSION HAVE CREATED PRECARIOUSLY PERCHED HOODOOS.



mile cross-country backpacking trip with Erik Molvar, a wildlife biologist and executive director of the Biodiversity Conservation Alliance (BCA) in Laramie, Wyoming. Petroleum prospectors, who've already established wells on the fringes of this region's known oil reserves, hope to expand their Red Desert operations into a sprawling industrialized oil field. But Molvar and his team at the BCA want Congress to grant the Red Desert wilderness status and permanently safeguard it from development.

"The Red Desert contains some of the most spectacular geological formations anywhere on the planet and provides key habitats for rare wildlife, ranging from mountain plovers and burrowing owls to ferruginous hawks," says Molvar. "When the oil rigs move in, the wildlife moves out."

On our traverse of a section of the Red Desert called Adobe Town—the region's premier hiking destination—I hope to see firsthand why this place demands preservation. At the moment, however, we've run headlong into a cliffy cul-de-sac and need to come up with a new plan. With the pronghorn

gone, we meander around buttes and through slot canyons, then cross a dozen low saddles between grabens of slickrock. Igneous particles coat the ground and crunch like Rice Krispies beneath our boots. It's a tour through a fantastical playground of cartoonish rock that feels organic and alive: We have stumbled into Seussville. Now if we could only find our way out.

BACKPACKING ACROSS ONE OF America's highest deserts requires tedious logistical prep work. Before setting out on foot, we drive for three hours to stash water jugs at two caches (I waypoint the locations with my GPS) along the rim of Adobe Town's 180,000-acre canyon. We'll traverse it from south to north. "It's the last place here where you can take a multiday trip and not run into any oil or gas wells," says Molvar. "The Red Desert is 6 million acres. Oil and gas projects already cover 2 million of those."

The Red Desert is wedged into a rift valley called the Great Divide Basin. This is where the Continental Divide splits, forming the country's longest big-game corridor. In Africa, the Red



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Desert would be a wildlife sanctuary or game reserve. And anywhere else in the United States, a place this geographically astounding would be made a national park. But here, subterranean pools of oil and natural gas might as well be buried cash to developers like Anadarko Petroleum and Marathon Oil, which are petitioning the Bureau of Land Management for the right to drill. (The Red Desert reportedly sits atop more than 890 million barrels of oil, as well as coal and gas.) The BLM has already allowed drilling along the edges of the proposed wilderness area, which includes Adobe Town. But industrial development here would destroy what Molvar calls “the crown jewel of the Red Desert.”

Molvar, 40, is best known as a prolific guidebook author. From 1991 to 2001, he produced 14 books, meticulously detailing backcountry routes from the Yukon to Canyonlands. Molvar has possibly trekked more of the American

West than any person on Earth. “I stopped counting when I hit 10,000 miles,” he tells me. He used to push a hand-held mileage wheel to measure his every step. Now, he’s leveraging his backcountry grit and an encyclopedic knowledge of Western ecosystems to combat oil and gas development in one of the wildest places in the Lower 48. If Molvar and his colleagues succeed, they’ll gain wilderness designation for 180,910 acres, preserving the habitat of at least 65 species of mammals, reptiles, and birds, including prairie falcons, big-horn sheep, wild horses, mule deer, the largest desert elk herd in the world, and 50,000 pronghorn antelope.

AFTER CACHING WATER, WE LEAVE a vehicle at the north end of Adobe Town and start hiking from the south. For the first quarter-mile we ascend a powdery slope flecked with juniper and clumps of prickly pear. A stiff wind hurtles stray clouds across a dusty-blue

sky. We crest a high section called Powder Rim. From here, at 7,000 feet, I look north into Adobe Town, and it makes me nervous. We’re carrying enough water for two days because we won’t reach our first cache until the second night. According to my GPS, it’s 11 miles as the crow flies between here and Camp Two. But we’re not crows. Molvar sees me contemplating and utters a canyon country Yodaism: “Many are the ways of dead ends. Fewer are the ways that go through.”

We scramble from the Powder Rim into a wide basin. As we hike toward a hardpan wash called Skull Creek, one of the few named features on our topo, a cool wind brings an earthy perfume. It’s sage, and it’s intensely fragrant. The smell tickles our noses and permeates our clothes. In the evenings, we fuel campfires with sagebrush and the scent makes it easy to imagine we’re hosting a smudging ritual.

For three miles, we gradually amble

DIY NAVIGATION: WITH NO TRAILS TO FOLLOW, THE AUTHOR'S PARTY CREATES ITS OWN ROUTE THROUGH TWISTED CANYONS AND OPEN VALLEYS (LEFT), ERIK MOLVAR (RIGHT) COOKS DINNER AT A SHELTERED CAMPSITE IN ADOBE TOWN.

downhill, to 6,700 feet, and follow a dry streambed. This area was once a leafy savannah where dinosaurs roamed, but the Yellowstone eruptions, which ended 640,000 years ago, dumped a 1,000-foot-thick bed of volcanic ash onto it. Much of the terrain we pass through is still encrusted with this ghostly white ash. It's like walking on freshly cured concrete.

Floods over many epochs have scoured the malleable soil. Erosion has left gravity-defying haystacks and hoodoos poking from the surface like a witch's bony fingers trying to claw herself from a shallow grave. Two-ton hunks of sedimentary rock tinged orange, red, and pink cap many of the pinnacles; most look poised to topple. We stop near an 80-foot-high hoodoo, and when I lean against it, I can feel



the entire structure sway. Looking up, I notice a slab of crimson rock the size of an ice-cream truck balanced atop the spire. It's resting on a 10-inch base of ash. "It's pillar formation by subtraction," says Molvar. "The cap rock acts like an umbrella, and the rain washes under it to create the vertical feature."

There isn't supposed to be water here, but at 5.5 miles, shortly before we reach Camp One, we discover a milky lake. At one end it appears that someone, a very long time ago, built an earthen dam to trap rainwater, perhaps for livestock. Molvar is baffled.



He yanks out his topo and declares, "This shouldn't exist!" Thousands of hours of fact-finding, aerial flyovers, interviews with local ranchers and historians, and yet Molvar still finds surprises in the Red Desert. That such

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a large swath of the U.S. remains virtually unexplored is magical. At one point, I find a mint-condition arrowhead the color of a tangerine, as if its owner mislaid it just hours before.

WHEN WE BREAK CAMP AT 7 A.M. ON the second day, my GPS points toward our first water cache (Camp Two), eight miles due north. But it takes

nearly 11 miles of walking to reach it. The route twists through freakish spires and dwarf canyons. Over the final four miles, we climb 500 feet to the brow of Skull Creek Rim. We teeter along a knife-edge ridge with 360-degree views, locate our water, then scurry back into the canyon a half-mile to pitch our tents beside a natural stone arch. A full moon rises at dusk

and darkness never arrives: The ashen soil, infused with glassy silica, is highly reflective and amplifies the moonlight. The needles and buttes encircling our camp glow like smoldering embers.

In the morning, we dip below Skull Creek Rim and attempt to cross Monument Valley, a scaled-down version of the famed Navajo park on the Utah/Arizona border. "It's a longer route, but there's a lot more to look at," says Molvar. If we get through.

"We're cliffed-out," Molvar calls out while peering over the ledge of a 100-foot-drop. From our perch, the landscape looks like a cross-section of an anthill. A byzantine tangle of slot canyons blocks our route. They are too deep and narrow to see bottom. We would likely wander for hours trying to find an unobstructed passage. Nevertheless, it's a stunning spot for a water break and a view well worth the extra quarter-mile backtrack.

It's getting late, and Camp Three

is still at least four hours away. To make up time, we plot a wide berth around Monument Valley and beeline across four miles of undulating sand dunes. “These are called stationary dunes,” explains Molvar. “There is just enough vegetation on them to keep them in one place.” This is good news for us because we’re trudging directly into a searing 30-mph headwind. A harem of wild horses trots to the top of a nearby dune and stops to stare at us. The extreme aridity desiccates my lungs, and after 30 minutes it reduces my voice to a whisper. We scrunch beneath a narrow ledge to rest in the shade before continuing onward.

Molvar is pleased when we reach Camp Three. It lies in a natural amphitheater protected from the howling wind. It’s harsh country, to be sure. But like the greatest wilderness areas, the Red Desert offers rewards commensurate with the effort. And I hope it always will. 🍷

PLAN IT | RED DESERT

WHEN TO GO Late spring and early fall.

Summers are scorching and winters are arctic. In any season, even moderate rain will make dirt roads impassible.

GEAR With rock-hard playa, a freestanding tent is a must (imagine putting stakes into concrete). Cache water in seven-gallon containers like the Reliance Aquatainer (\$17, relianceproducts.com).

MAPS AND BOOKS Match *Wild Wyoming*, by Erik Molvar (\$20; falcon.com), with the following USGS quads: *Upper Powder Spring, Monument Valley, Manuel Gap, Kinney Spring*, and *Cow Creek Reservoir*.

PROTECT IT Learn more about the Adobe Town citizens’ proposed wilderness through the Biodiversity Conservation Alliance (voiceforthewild.org).

THE WAY Drive west on I-80 from Rawlins to Bitter Creek Rd. (Exit 142). Drive south on Bitter Creek (CR 19), following signs to the Eversole Ranch, about 27 miles from I-80. Continue through the ranch, take the left fork in the road, and go 1.8 miles to a junction. Go straight on an unmarked BLM road for 20 miles to the starting point of the hike.



ONLINE EXTRAS For photos, video, a tracklog of the route, and waypoints for strategic water caches, go to backpacker.com/reddesert.

