

Scotts Bluff

National Monument
Nebraska

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Official Map and Guide





"The appearance was that of an immense fortification," wrote Alfred J. Miller, who produced the earliest known sketch of Scotts Bluff in 1837.

Enron Art Foundation/Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha, Nebraska

Among the curious chain of landforms south of the North Platte River in western Nebraska, Scotts Bluff stands out on the landscape—and in the minds of people who have passed beneath. Gradually, inexorably, the immense sandstone and clay formation is disappearing; wind and moving water, the mighty forces that built the peaks, are dismantling the rock grain by grain. But to those who have made Scotts Bluff part of their own transitory lives, it is timeless.



For thousands of years Plains Indians relied on the vast herds of bison (called "buffalo") for food, clothing, and shelter. White hunters later hunted the bison almost to extinction.



During its 19-month existence, the route of the Pony Express followed the California Trail through Mitchell Pass at Scotts Bluff.

A Sentinel on the Plains

The North Platte River Valley, chiseled through the grassy plains of Nebraska and Wyoming, has been a prairie path-

way for at least 10,000 years. In ages past, this corridor led American Indians to places along the river where wandering bison herds stopped to drink. At one spot along the way, a huge bluff towered 800 feet above the valley floor. Its imposing size and adjacent badlands inspired the Indian name *Me-a-pa-te*, "hill that is hard to go around."



Fur traders were among the first to profit from the Louisiana Purchase which, in 1803, opened up 800,000 square miles of land to anyone who could find a use for it.

Illustrations other than cover are from the paintings of William Henry Jackson.

The early 19th century brought other hunters to the plains. Bands of trappers explored the network of rivers west of the Mississippi for hundreds of miles in search of "soft gold"—the pelts of fur-bearing animals that inhabited the mountains and valleys of the Northwest. The first whites to happen upon the North Platte route were seven of John Jacob Astor's men on their way back east from the Pacific. They reached *Me-a-pa-te* on Christmas Day 1812. By the next decade the bluff was a familiar sight to traders in caravans heading toward the Rockies where, for substantial profits, they exchanged supplies for furs. One fur company clerk, Hiram Scott, died near *Me-a-pa-te* in 1828; from then on the bluff had a new name.

Besides supplying fashionable easterners with felt hats, the traders established a trail through the mountains to the far west. Their

old caravan route became the Oregon Trail, a 2,000-mile roadway to the Pacific lands. The rugged topography surrounding Scotts Bluff so intimidated wagoners that the original route bypassed the area well to the south. After 1850, during the peak of the California Gold Rush when emigrant numbers increased dramatically, travelers favored the recently improved trail through Mitchell Pass, to the immediate south of the bluff, which subtracted 8 miles from the route—or almost a full day's travel.

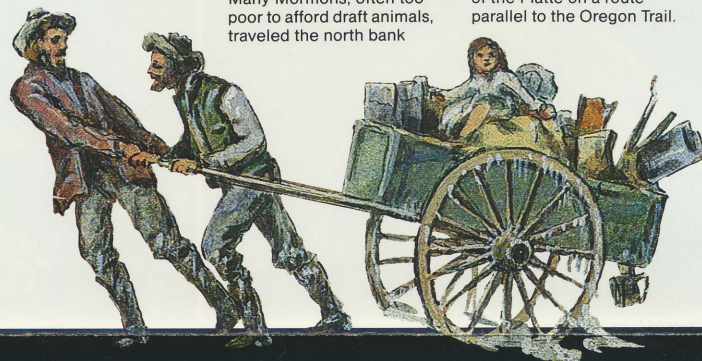
In the early 1860s emigrants shared the Oregon Trail with mail and freight carriers, military expeditions, stagecoaches, and Pony Express riders. The few occasions when travelers encountered Plains Indian war parties led to the establishment of Fort Mitchell in 1864. This fort, 2.5 miles northwest of Scotts Bluff, was an outpost of Fort Laramie.

By 1869 the Army had abandoned Fort Mitchell, emigrant traffic had waned, and a coast-to-coast telegraph strung

through Mitchell Pass had long since replaced the overland mail routes. That year the Union Pacific and Central Pacific Railroads linked up at Promontory, Utah. The Oregon Trail quickly fell into disuse as a transcontinental thoroughway. By the next decade Scotts Bluff symbolized the past for one group of settlers and the future for another. The new wave of emigrants arrived not in covered wagons but in railroad cars. And the new emigrants came to stay.

Many Mormons, often too poor to afford draft animals, traveled the north bank

of the Platte on a route parallel to the Oregon Trail.



Milepost for the Great Migration

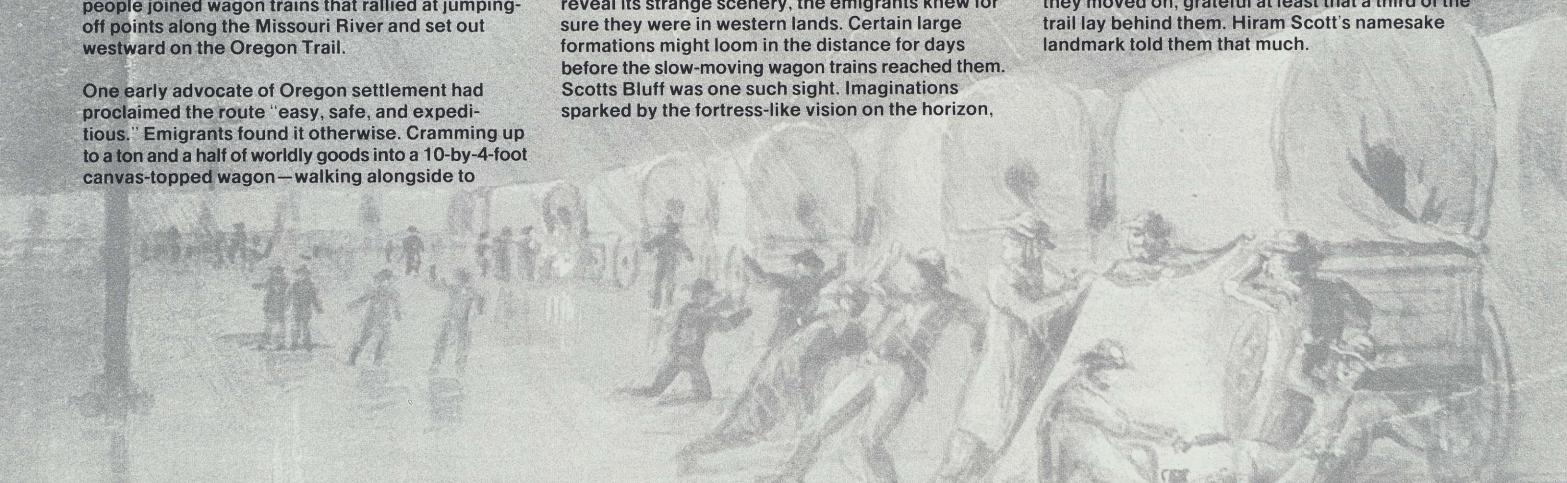
For some, the vision of a "pioneer's paradise" elicited their characteristic American optimism. Others, having given up hope for a prosperous life in the east, looked westward for land, wealth, or religious freedom. Whatever the reasons, in the years between 1841 and 1869 at least 350,000 people joined wagon trains that rallied at jumping-off points along the Missouri River and set out westward on the Oregon Trail.

One early advocate of Oregon settlement had proclaimed the route "easy, safe, and expeditious." Emigrants found it otherwise. Cramping up to a ton and a half of worldly goods into a 10-by-4-foot canvas-topped wagon—walking alongside to

lighten the load for draft animals—travelers faced unpredictable weather, violent winds, quicksand, floods, disease, buffalo stampedes, and, though rare, Indian attacks. Every mile was hard-won.

As the skyline along the Platte River began to reveal its strange scenery, the emigrants knew for sure they were in western lands. Certain large formations might loom in the distance for days before the slow-moving wagon trains reached them. Scotts Bluff was one such sight. Imaginations sparked by the fortress-like vision on the horizon,

travelers called it "a Nebraska Gibraltar" or "a Mausoleum which the mightiest of earth might covet." "I could die here," rhapsodized one voyager, "certain of being not far from heaven." Yet, few emigrants spent time at the bluff itself. Wary of being caught on the road when winter arrived, they moved on, grateful at least that a third of the trail lay behind them. Hiram Scott's namesake landmark told them that much.



Scotts Bluff

While In the Park
Firearms are not allowed on park land. Pets must be kept on a leash. When driving, stay on established roads. In order to help preserve the park, please do not litter, disturb wildlife, or deface signs or natural features.

For Your Safety
Rattlesnakes in the area are shy but will strike at humans if threatened. Along the summit trails the rock is soft and crumbly, so please stay on the paved path.

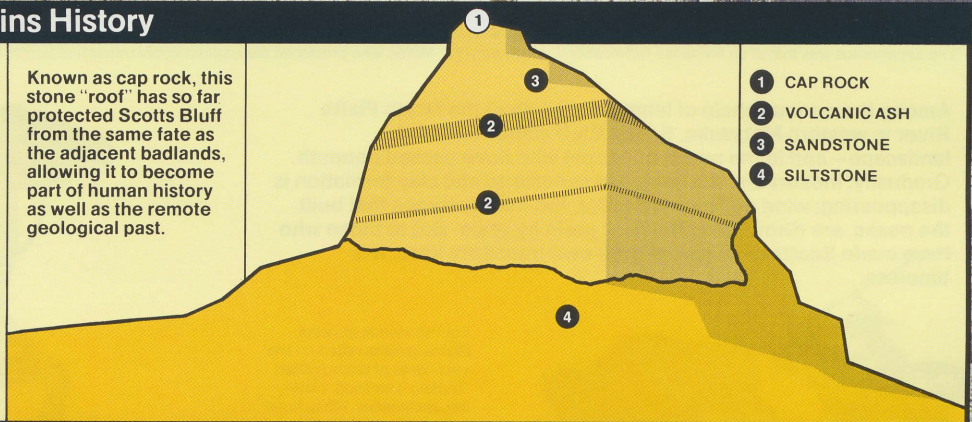
Five Hundred Feet of Great Plains History

Once described as a "range of high sand hills," Scotts Bluff is really a cross-section of high plains—hundreds of feet higher than the present Great Plains—that formed in the continent's interior after the uplifting of the Rocky Mountains. Examining this 14 million-year-old vertical life history, geologists have determined the origin of the various sedimentary materials deposited on the ancient plains by

wind and water, as well as the approximate age of each layer.

Scientists have also studied the disappearance of the high plains. Four or five million years ago, the land began to erode at a faster rate than the speed at which new strata were forming. Certain concretions, in isolated patches near the surface, happened to be more durable than the surrounding material.

Known as cap rock, this stone "roof" has so far protected Scotts Bluff from the same fate as the adjacent badlands, allowing it to become part of human history as well as the remote geological past.



Hardy Inhabitants of the Great American Desert

Geographers refer to the Great Plains as Mid-latitude Steppe; 19th century explorer Stephen H. Long called it the "Great American Desert." Situated in the interior of a vast continent, the seasonal variation in temperature is extreme. Air masses heading eastward from the Pacific are thrust upward by the Rockies, the moisture condensing as it cools, and falling on the western slopes of the mountains. Instead of rain the region gets strong winds that travel unchecked across the plains. Nature continues to weed out any life unable to adapt to this environment, creating a world of interdependent plants and animals that thrive in the seemingly inhospitable climate.

A look around Scotts Bluff reveals the first sign of prairie: short and mid-length grasses. Emigrants

timed their journeys according to the emergence of this vegetation in spring; too early a start restricted grazing for livestock. Grass may form clumps like needle-and-thread, little bluestem, and western wheatgrass, or sod like blue grama and buffalo grass. This sod, with its dense, tangled roots, was about the only native material from which pioneers could build homes, or "soddies." A colorful variety of wildflowers decorates the landscape in spring and summer.

On the northern slopes of the bluffs grow Rocky Mountain juniper, with its small blue-gray cones or "berries," and ponderosa pine. In addition to discouraging soil erosion in the flood-prone, windy climate, most of these plants are food and shelter for other life. Nesting in the stunted trees or on

cliffsides are swifts and cliff swallows in summer, and magpies and kestrels year-round. Rabbits, mice, pocket gophers, prairie dogs, and squirrels live in sod or partially underground, out of sight from predators—foxes, badgers, coyotes, and several kinds of snakes. The only poisonous reptile is the prairie rattlesnake, with its diamond-shaped head and unmistakable warning sound. Highly adaptable herbivores like white-tailed and mule deer still roam the monument area. Other animals once common on the Plains—bison, bighorn sheep, and prong-horn antelopes—have disappeared with the encroachment of human habitation. The population of these animals has rebounded in isolated areas or in protected reserves elsewhere on the plains.

Prairie Rattlesnake



Plains Wallflower



Mule Deer



Black-tailed Prairie Dog Greg Beaumont



About Your Visit

Things to do The visitor center has exhibits, information, a slide program, a bookstore, and displays of artwork by pioneer photographer and artist William Henry Jackson. A short trail leads from the visitor center to where Jackson camped during his journey west in 1866. The road bed for emigrant wagons is still visible in places. Visitor center hours vary by the season; call for information.

Visitors can reach the top of the bluff by driving the paved road or hiking the Saddle Rock Trail. Both routes are 1.6 miles long and begin at the visitor center. A free shuttle goes to the summit in the summer season. A self-guiding trail on the summit of the bluff extends

to the overlooks from the parking area. A guide booklet is available at the visitor center and at the trail head on the summit. The south overlook offers a view of the Oregon Trail approach to Mitchell Pass from the east.

Getting here The park lies on the North Platte River three miles west of Gering, Nebraska, and five miles southwest of Scottsbluff. The visitor center is just off Nebraska 92.

Preserve the park Scotts Bluff National Monument preserves 3,000 acres of unusual landforms and prairie habitat. Please do not litter, disturb wildlife, or deface signs or natural features. Firearms are prohibited.

•Pets must be kept on a leash. •When driving, stay on established roads.

More information
Write: Superintendent, Scotts Bluff National Monument, P.O. Box 27, Gering, NE 69341-0027. Call: 308-436-4340. Web: www.nps.gov/scbl.

For your safety
Stay on the paved path! The rock along the Summit Trail is soft and crumbly; leaving the pavement can be extremely dangerous. Rattlesnakes in the area are shy but will strike if threatened.

 Hiking trail
 Bicycle trail

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