

# Adobe Town

Briefing Book

Erik Molvar, Sagebrush Sea Campaign Director



A Report from

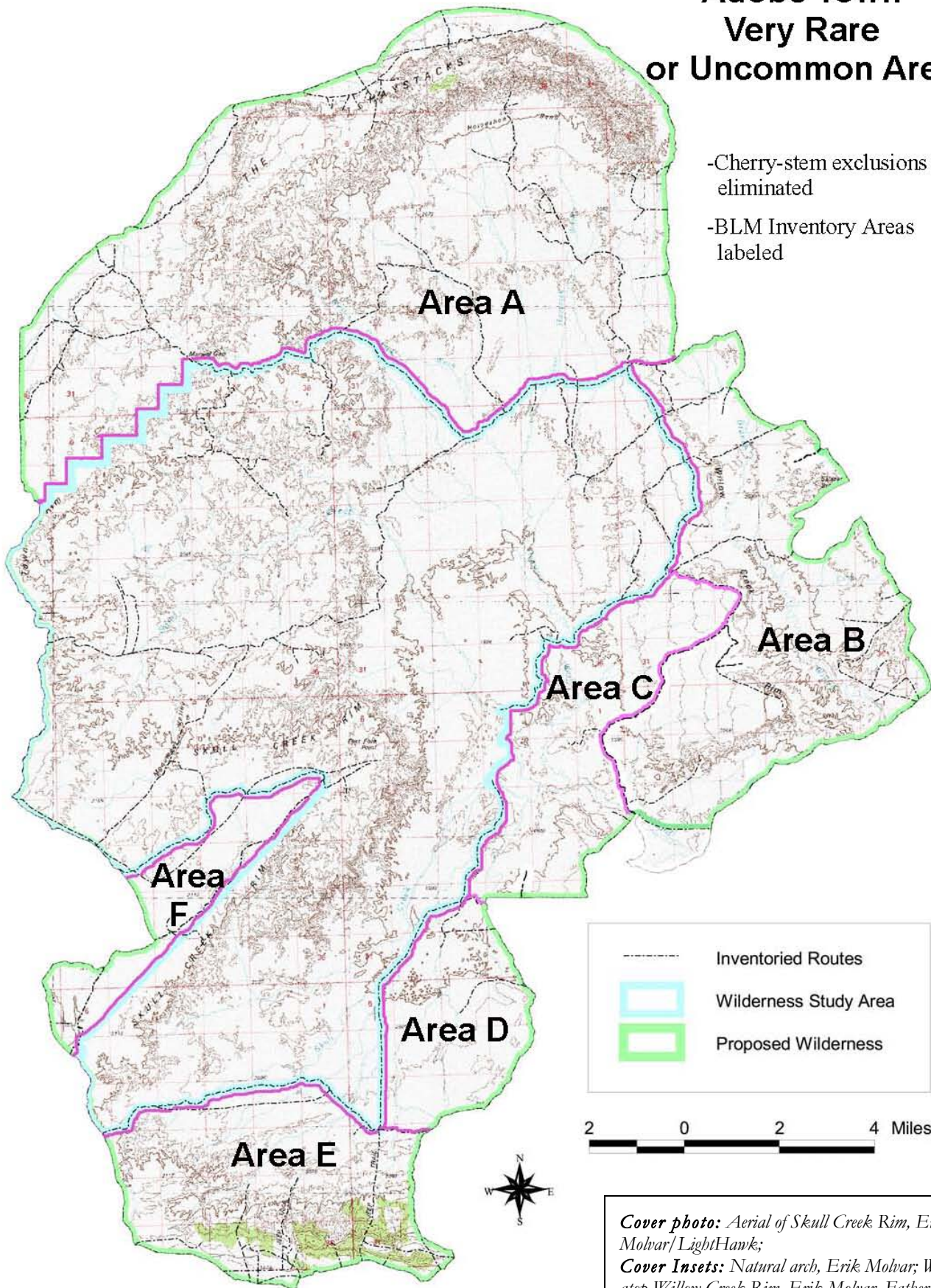


JANUARY 2015



# Adobe Town Very Rare or Uncommon Area

- Cherry-stem exclusions eliminated
- BLM Inventory Areas labeled



**Cover photo:** Aerial of Skull Creek Rim, Erik Molvar/LightHawk;  
**Cover Insets:** Natural arch, Erik Molvar; Wild horses atop Willow Creek Rim, Erik Molvar, Father with child on Adobe Town Rim, Chris Merrill.



## A 'Very Rare or Uncommon' Landscape



*Adobe Town Rim, Erik Molvar photo*

In 2008, the State of Wyoming's Environmental Quality Council designated all 180,910 acres of Adobe Town as 'Very Rare or Uncommon' under the state's Environmental Quality Act following public hearings dominated by supporters of protecting this area. This designation (see map, facing page) officially recognized the unique values of this landscape, stating:

The Adobe Town Area, including Areas A, B, C, D, E, and F, exhibits surface geological, historical, archaeological, wildlife, and scenic values that is [sic] very rare or uncommon when compared with other areas of the state or the region. These values are seldom found within the state and could become extinct or extirpated if left unprotected.

This state designation prevents the issuance of permits for non-coal surface mining that might threaten the values for which the area was designated. As a result, this area was withdrawn in a legal settlement from federal oil shale leasing under the Bureau of Land Management's Oil Shale Tar Sands plan amendments. The Wyoming legislature subsequently amended the Environmental Quality Act to preclude future designations but left existing designations (including Adobe Town) in place.

In separate deliberations, the Sweetwater County Commission adopted resolutions in 2006 and 2008 that the entire Adobe Town area should be closed to future oil and gas leasing. In 2011 this position was amended to apply only to the Adobe Town Wilderness Study Area.





*Adobe Town lithograph by Gilbert Munger, courtesy gilbertmunger.org*

## A Landscape of Historical Importance

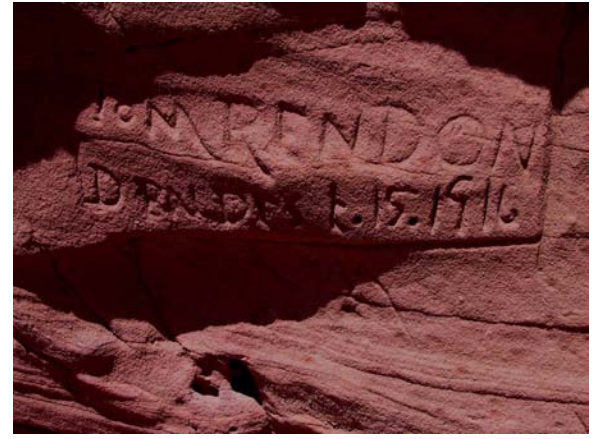
Adobe Town was discovered during the Exploration of the 40th Parallel in 1869. Early explorers had this to say:

“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.

But perhaps the most astonishing single monument here is the isolated column shown in the frontispiece of this volume. It stands upon a plain of gray earth, which supports a scant growth of desert sage, and rises to a height of fully sixty feet. It could hardly be a more perfect specimen of an isolated monumental form if sculptured by the hand of man.”

--Clarence King, Geologist, Report of the Geological Exploration of the Fortieth Parallel, 1869



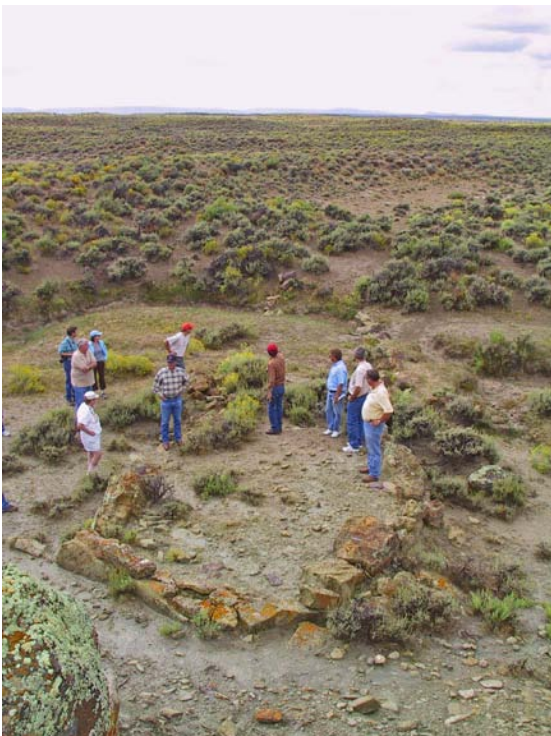


**Left:** Cabin ruins on the Powder Rim attributed to Butch Cassidy's gang. Mac Blewer photo.  
**Above:** Frontier-era carving on the Skull Creek Rim. Erik Molvar photo.

The Outlaw Trail ran right through Adobe Town. During the Tipton train robbery at the turn of the 20th Century, Butch Cassidy and his Powder Wash Gang fled southward to the Haystacks (in the northern end of the proposed wilderness), where they had hidden fresh horses to facilitate their escape. Their fresh mounts allowed them to outrun their pursuers and escape into Colorado. Recent excavations indicate that a cabin on the Powder Rim may have been a hideout for Cassidy and his gang.

Adobe Town is the site of over 12,000 years of human habitation. It is still revered as a sacred site by Native American tribes to this day. Archaeologists have uncovered an unusually high density of prehistoric sites in Adobe Town, many of which have yet to be catalogued. Adobe Town is also bracketed by historic trails. The Overland Trail, which carried a stage line and emigrants during the 1860s, follows Bitter Creek just to the north of Adobe Town. The Cherokee Trail follows the Powder Rim along the southern edge of the proposed wilderness. Still later, during the Prohibition era, bootleggers brewed moonshine in hidden stills within the folds of the Haystacks.

**Below left:** Visitors ponder ruins attributed to ancient indigenous inhabitants, Erik Molvar photo. **Below right:** Gilbert Munger lithograph of Adobe Town, courtesy gilbertmunger.org.  
**Right:** Arrowhead in Adobe Town, Erik Molvar photo.







## Landscapes of National Park Quality

The landscapes of Adobe Town rival the most spectacular landscapes of America's current desert parks. Adobe Town has been compared favorably to Bryce Canyon, Canyonlands, and Badlands National Parks, and may in fact represent the most intricate and outstanding badlands topography in the United States.

In 1979, the National Park Service and the Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service identified the resources of the Washakie Basin as possessing nationally significant and threatened natural-ecological-geological features, and listed the basin as a possibility for new study and potential inclusion as a national park, underscoring the outstanding natural attributes of the area.



**Left center:** Adobe Town Rim pinnacles, Erik Molvar photo.  
**Lower left:** Skull Creek Rim, Erik Molvar photo.  
**Right:** Adobe Town Rim, Mac Blewer photo.







***Above:** Gathering storm over the Skull Creek Rim, Erik Molvar photo*



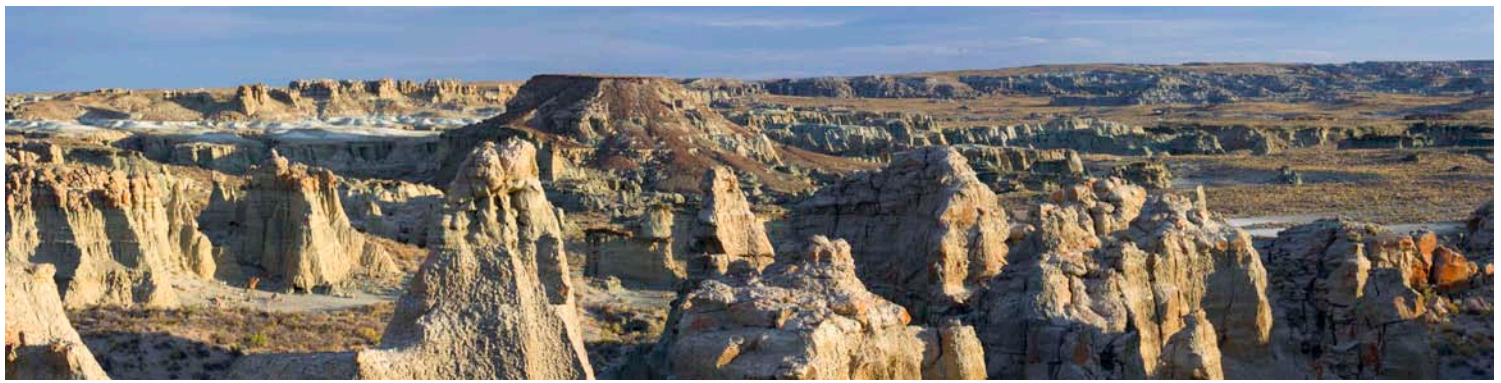
***Left:** Pinnacles, Tom Morgan photo.*

***Below:** Monument Valley, Erik Molvar photo.*

***Right:** Inside the labyrinth, Morgan Heim photo.*







The National Park Service studied the Adobe Town area for National Natural Landmark status, and rated the area as having the highest rating for ecological and geological values, a rating that reflects “high degree of national significance, recommended without reservation.”

--*Potential Natural Landmarks in the Wyoming Basin, 1976*

***Clockwise from Top:*** Adobe Town Rim, Scott T. Smith; Skull Creek Rim butte, Erik Molvar; Adobe Town Rim, Scott T. Smith; Southern Skull Creek Rim, Hester Haraguchi, Adobe Town Rim, Erik Molvar; Skull Creek Rim, Erik Molvar.





*“Why not set aside Adobe Town, and make it wilderness? Why not take a part of this huge land, and make it off-limits to mechanized industry and motorized traffic? There would remain plenty of room to drill, and to play, in the [Great Divide] resource area.”*

*-Editorial, Rawlins Daily Times, March 16, 2005*



**Above:** *Hiking through the Adobe Town Rim pinnacles, Dan Hayward photo.*

**Below:** *From the summit of the Haystacks, you can look all the way south across Adobe Town to the Powder Rim at its southern end, the entire expanse a wild, pristine wilderness. Erik Molvar photo.*



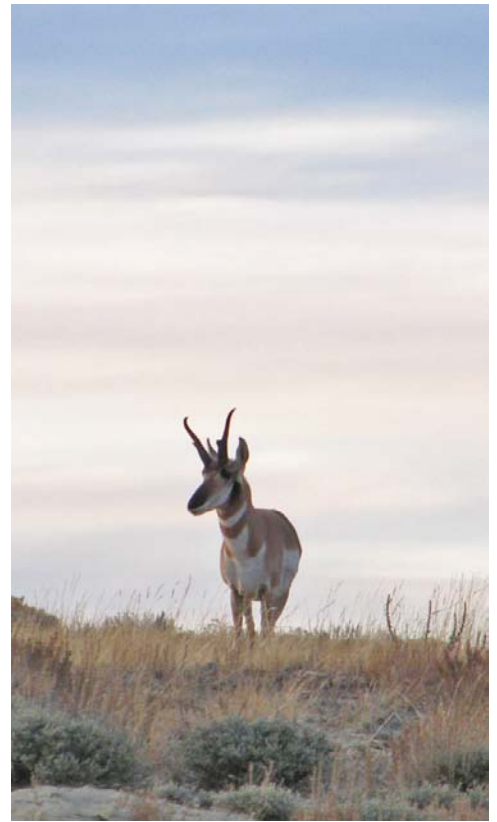


# A Rich Diversity of Native Wildlife

The Adobe Town proposed wilderness provides outstanding habitat for a variety of native wildlife. The cliffs and pinnacles that stretch across the length and breadth of the area provide ideal roosting and nesting habitats for birds of prey, from the graceful prairie falcon to the majestic golden eagle and the rare ferruginous hawk. The mountain plover, until recently a member of the Endangered Species List, is known from several locations in Adobe Town. In addition, smaller sensitive species are also found in Adobe Town, such as the greater short-horned lizard and the Great Basin gopher snake. The rare sage grouse and white-tailed prairie dog also flourish in several locations in Adobe Town

The Powder Rim, at the southern end of the Adobe Town proposed wilderness, has its own resident elk herd, the Petition Herd. Elk and mule deer also migrate to winter ranges on the Powder Rim from the faraway Atlantic Rim, Sierra Madre Mountains, and Elkhead Range in Colorado; the Powder Rim has the largest triple-overlap of crucial winter ranges (antelope, mule deer, and elk) in the state.

The area at the foot of the Skull Creek Rim and The Haystacks is a renowned trophy antelope hunting area, producing antelope bucks of exceptional size.

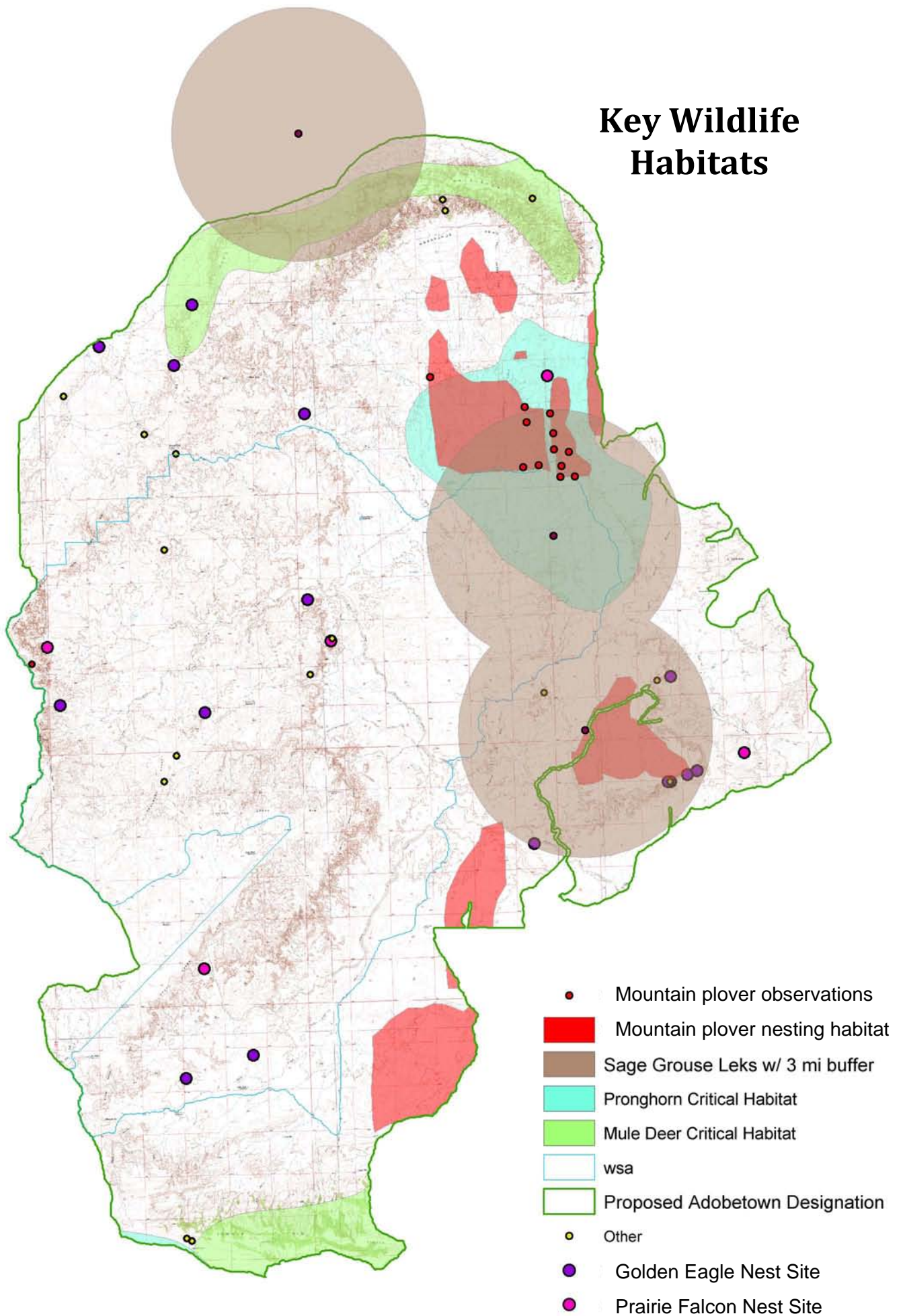


**Above:** Pronghorn buck, Hester Haraguchi photo.  
**Below** (clockwise from upper left): Short-horned lizard, Skull Creek Rim, Erik Molvar; Mountain plover, Adobe Town Rim, Erik Molvar; Depredated sage grouse nest, Adobe Town Rim, Erik Molvar; Sage grouse hen and chicks, Powder Rim, Erik Molvar; Great Basin gopher snake, Erik Molvar.





## Key Wildlife Habitats





# Unparalleled Recreation Opportunities



*Above: Backpacking below the Skull Creek Rim. Erik Molvar photo.*

Adobe Town represents some of the wildest desert landscape in the world, and yet it is easily accessible to visitors on foot and horseback. Not only is this area a haven for primitive recreation, but it also offers outstanding opportunities for hunting, wildlife viewing, and rockhounding.

Wilderness designation would do little to impede motorized access in this area, as the most popular motorized routes would continue to allow vehicles to approach some of the most spectacular landscapes in the area.



*Hester Haraguchi photo*



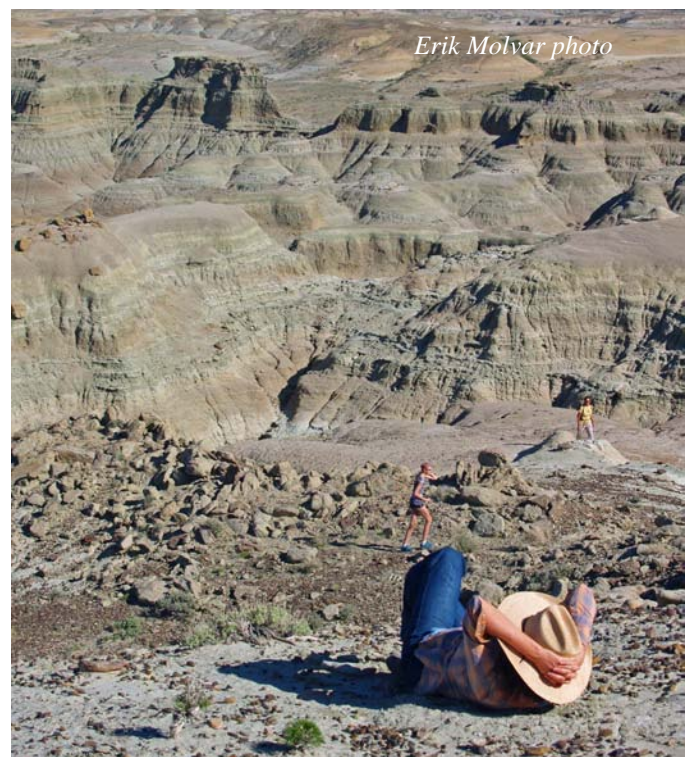
*Erik Molvar photo*

**Counterclockwise from above:**

Adobe Town Rim photography; Exploring a mud cave; Adobe Town Rim scenic overlook; Hiking Adobe Town Rim; Enjoying Powder Rim badlands.



*Erik Molvar photo*



*Erik Molvar photo*



*Erik Molvar photo*



# Wild Horses



**Above:** A wild horse navigates the maze of badlands along the Adobe Town Rim. Dan Hayward photo.

**Left:** A herd of wild horses atop the Willow Creek Rim. Erik Molvar photo.



Historically, Adobe Town was known for one of the largest wild horse herds remaining in the West, Numbering around 1,000 head. Due to aggressive “gathers” to reduce wild horse number by the Bureau of Land Management, this herd has been reduced by about two-thirds. This area still offers one of the best opportunities for wild horse viewing in Wyoming, and here one can observe the harem defense behaviors of stallions who constantly protect their mares from competitors.

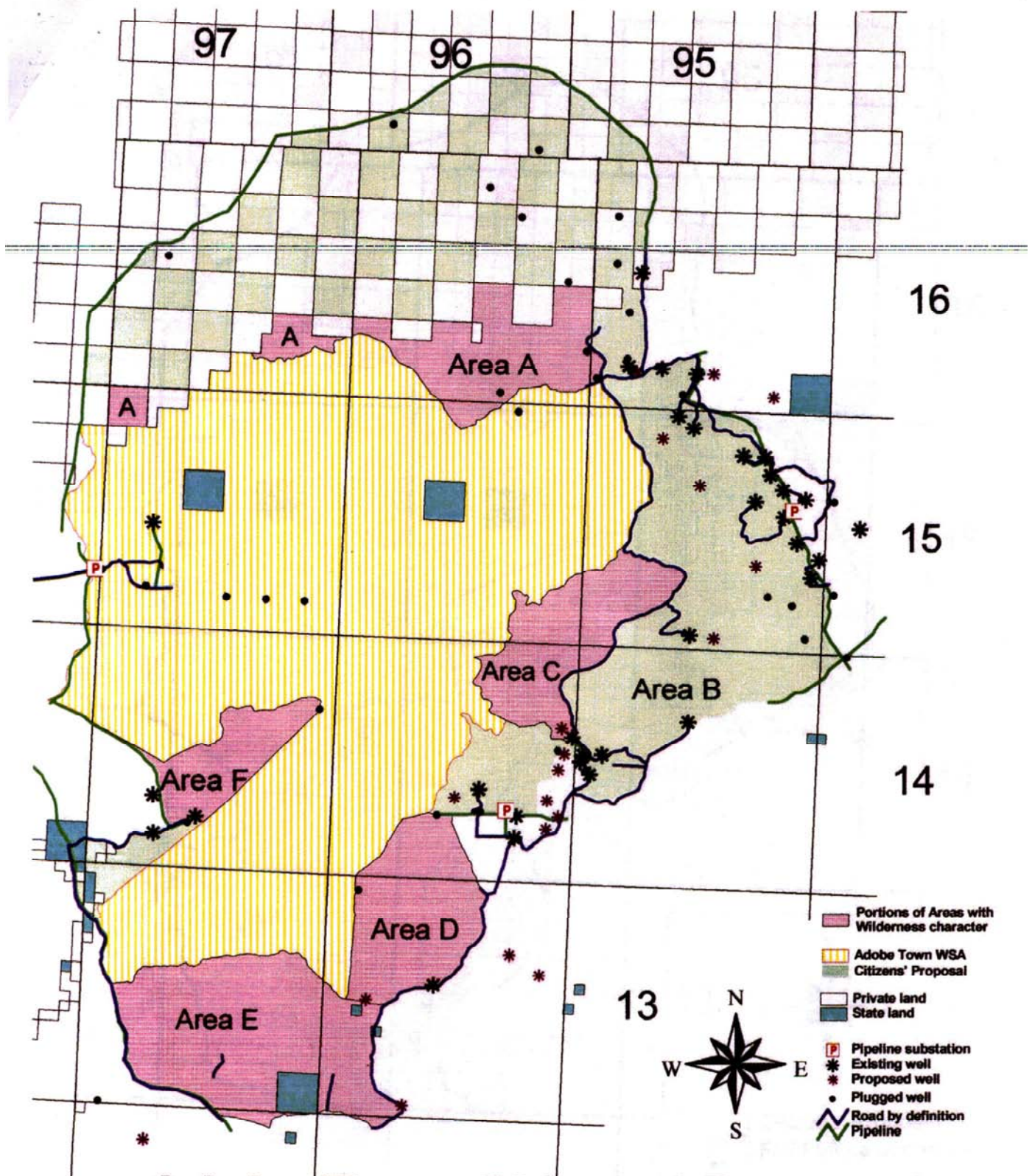
Although horses originally evolved in North America, it is believed that they went extinct on this continent thousands of years ago. The current herds in this area most likely descend from animals turned loose over the years by Spanish settlers in New Mexico, Native American tribes, and ranchers.

Once in the wild, they resumed their natural herd behaviors. It is perceived in some circles that wild horses compete with cattle and are destructive to the range. This is true only to a limited extent: Studies from the University of Wyoming indicate that wild horses use different habitats than cattle do at the various seasons of the year, and typically use different forages than native wildlife.

If Adobe Town became wilderness, there would be ample lands to the east and west where effective management of wild horse populations could take place with the aid of motorized vehicles and aircraft.



This BLM map shows the agency's official assessment of lands within Adobe Town which the agency considers to possess wilderness qualities



## Adobe Town Citizens' Proposal Portions with Wilderness Character

Map 1



# The Crown Jewel of Wyoming's Desert Wilderness

At 180,910 acres, Adobe Town is Wyoming's largest and most spectacular desert wilderness. Stretching 26 miles north to south and 19 miles east to west, this is one of the last places in Wyoming where visitors can still find views of pristine landscapes that stretch from horizon to horizon. Adobe Town is perhaps the only place in Wyoming where a horseman could take a long day's ride through desert country without crossing a road or encountering a gas well. This is a wilderness legacy that must be protected.

BLM recognized the unique and significant natural qualities present in the Adobe Town Area when it designated the area as an "Interim Critical Management Area" under the Management Framework Plans drafted prior to 1973. Early BLM assessments of the area stated that "The greatest natural value of this area is that it is still a 'howling wilderness,'" assessments published in the agency's URA Step III Assessment. BLM officials heralded the unique and outstanding natural values of the area in this document as follows. "Many of the spires take on strange life-like forms - stone sentinals (sic) frozen in time standing guard over their silent desert domain. Walking amidst groups of these strange spires gives one the eerie feeling of being watched - by beings who have witnessed the evolution of Adobe Town for millennia." The document went on to state, "Contrast between colors, sunlight and shadows, and landforms is increased creating enormous vistas....Although similar landforms are found elsewhere in southern Wyoming, these are perhaps the most outstanding example, a factor which contributes to the uniqueness of the area."

BLM's management of wilderness resources in Adobe Town began with a field inventory of the area in the 1970s to determine which lands possessed wilderness qualities. Following requirements set forth by Act of Congress in 1976, the BLM set aside 85,710 acres as the Adobe Town Wilderness Study Area ("WSA"), to be managed for its wilderness qualities until Congress could make the final determination on Wilderness designation. The WSA represents slightly less than half of the lands that qualify as wilderness today.

In 2001, Biodiversity Conservation Alliance conducted a comprehensive field inventory of wilderness qualities in Adobe Town, and submitted a petition backed by over 400 pages of photo documentation to seek protection for wilderness qualities on lands outside the WSA. In response, the BLM agreed in 2002 that over 40,000 acres outside the WSA also possessed wilderness qualities, and promised to study an expansion of the WSA during its revision of the Great Divide Resource Management Plan.

The agency also found that checkerboard lands in The Haystacks did not meet size criteria for wilderness due to private inholdings. Conservation groups agreed, but would prefer that the BLM manage these lands as wilderness until voluntary land exchanges can consolidate them into public ownership. A new road built in 2014 splits the Willow Creek Rim unit (Area B) from the rest of Adobe Town.

Subsequent BLM inventories established most of the lands originally deemed to meet wilderness criteria by the agency as 'Lands with Wilderness Characteristics' (LWCs). See Map on page 20. Some wilderness-quality units were expanded. An important exception includes the contiguous federally owned portion of Area A, which has seen frequent reversals in the agency's wilderness determinations.

**Right:** This jeep trail was used by BLM as justification for disqualifying Area A in its LWC inventory of 2013. Erik Molvar photo.





# The Rest of Adobe Town

## *Proposed Wilderness Additions to the WSA*



*Looking out across pristine but unprotected lands from the Skull Creek Rim inside Adobe Town WSA. Erik Molvar photo.*

## The Base of the Skull Creek Rim

Unprotected lands open to full-scale oil and gas development extend almost to the base of the Skull Creek Rim. This area offers the most stunning vistas in the proposed wilderness. However, if the lands below the cliffs were converted to a gas field, the public would lose its opportunity to enjoy a wilderness experience atop the rims. Thus, the lands at the base of the Skull Creek Rim merit equal protection.

The BLM has concurred that Area C and Area D, along the base of the Skull Creek Rim, possess wilderness qualities. These areas have been designated as Lands with Wilderness Characteristics, yet they remain open to industrial development and in fact have experienced some incursion by oil and gas drilling. The close proximity of this unit to East Fork Point, loftiest overlook on the Skull Creek Rim, make it a top priority for wilderness protection.

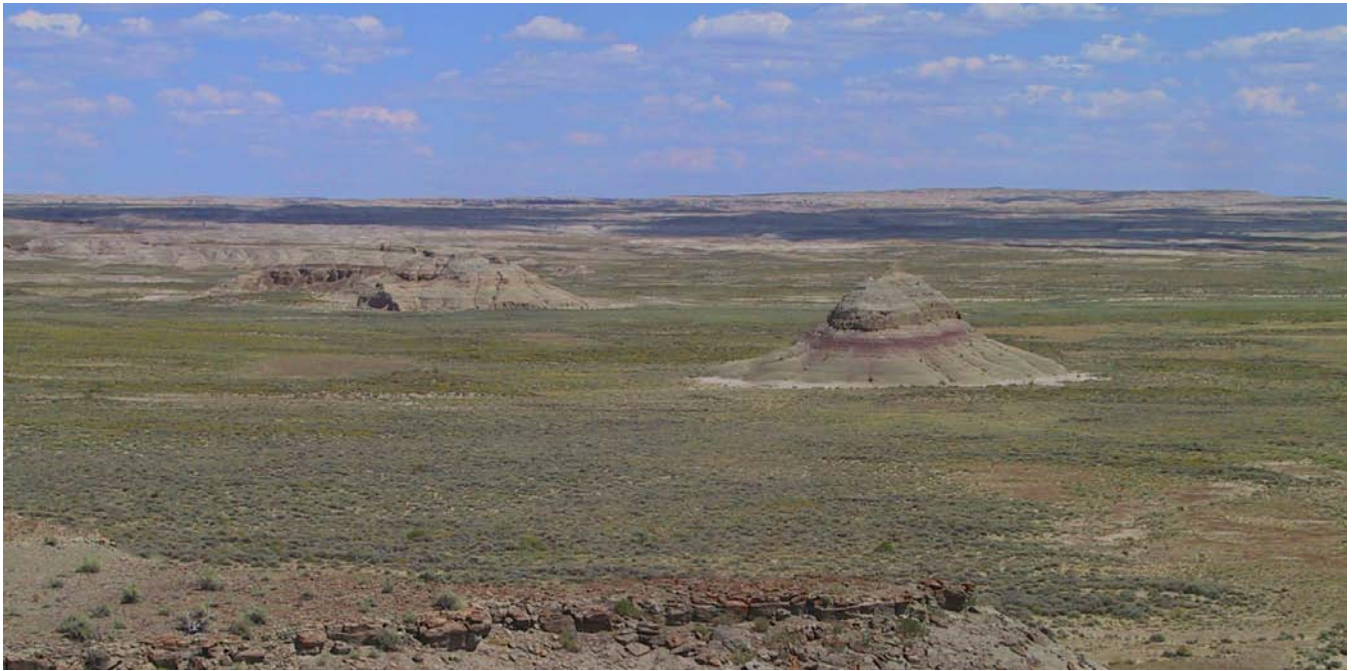


**Above:** View across “Area C,” an LWC-designated area along the base of the Skull Creek Rim.

**Below:** A drilling rig visible from East Fork Point, inside Adobe Town WSA. Erik Molvar photos.







## The Willow Creek Badlands

This unit encompasses wilderness-quality lands along the Willow Creek Rim and in the badlands of Willow Creek itself, which lie immediately to the east of the rim. The Willow Creek Rim is a tall, vertical scarp that bisects the area from north to south, affording spectacular views of the surrounding country. At its foot lies a maze of badlands that invite exploration on foot or horseback. The spectacular scenery alone is sufficient to lend the area outstanding opportunities for primitive and unconfined recreation.

In 2014, an improved grave road was built across wilderness-quality lands from the Barricade oil and gas unit to the Barrel Springs Draw field, severing the Willow Creek Badlands unit (“Area B” in BLM parlance) from the rest of Adobe Town. Fortunately, this unit remains well above the 5,000-acres threshold for undeveloped lands to meet wilderness characteristics, and also possesses a high degree of naturalness, with outstanding solitude and limitless recreational possibilities. It is bounded to the east by the Willow Creek Reservoir gas field.



“In the region of Church Buttes outliers of the Bridger group constitute detached bodies rising above the Plains in the most picturesque forms, eroded in the characteristic bad-land shapes; domed mounds and buttressed blocks remind one of a variety of architectural designs.”

-Clarence King, Geologist, *Geological Exploration of the Fortieth Parallel*, 1869

**Top photo:** Looking across the Willow Creek Basin from the Willow Creek Rim.  
**Bottom photo:** The Willow Creek Rim.  
 Erik Molvar photos.



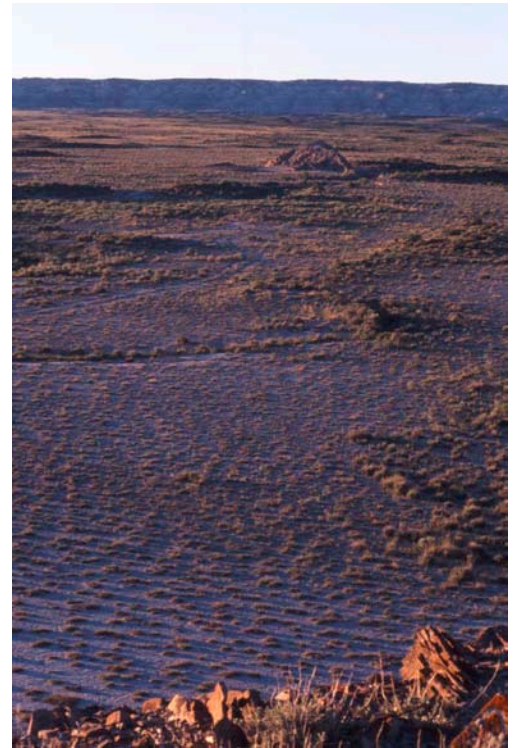
# The Haystacks

The Haystacks are a broad arc of deeply dissected badlands that extend northeast from the Adobe Town Rim. This unit (BLM Inventory Area A) contains a substantial stretch of the Adobe Town Rim with its unearthly rock formations, as well as the even taller Haystacks with some of the loftiest and most dissected badlands in the state.

According to local tradition, it was in the Haystacks that Butch Cassidy and his gang hid their fresh horses, which helped them elude their pursuers following the Tipton train robbery.

This lofty chain of ridges and badlands is home to a juniper woodland whose isolated nature within the surrounding sea of sagebrush lends it great ecological importance. It has substantial populations of mule deer and pronghorn, an abundance of nesting raptors, as well as a small population of mountain lions.

BLM should manage its lands in The Haystacks to maintain wilderness qualities and pursue land swaps from willing partners to consolidate these wilderness-quality lands in public ownership.



“A dominant feature of the landscape in the northern part of the area is Haystack Mountain. It is arcuate in shape and 10 miles long. On the north end, badland slopes of variegated sediments rise precipitously 500 feet above the adjacent plains.”

-National Park Service, 1973



**Top:** The Horseshoe, south of The Haystacks, Erik Molvar photo.  
**Above:** Pinnacles near Manuel Gap, Ken Zajac photo.  
**Left:** Badlands in The Haystacks, Marty Stupich photo.





*Looking south across Adobe Town from the crest of The Haystacks. Erik Molvar photo.*



# The Powder Rim Addition

The Powder Rim is a broad swell of high country that rises at the south end of the Washakie Basin. It is robed in a mix of juniper woodland and sagebrush meadows, and provides nesting habitat for sage grouse. The northern side of the rim slopes down into the Skull Creek basin, where it is dissected into clay badlands. The vast, old-growth juniper woodlands of the Powder Rim are home to 9 of the 10 juniper obligate songbirds found in Wyoming. These birds include such Wyoming rarities as the Scott's oriole and blue-gray flycatcher. This area provides perhaps the finest opportunities for primitive and unconfined recreation in a juniper woodland setting available in Wyoming. This area apparently escaped the BLM's 1970s-era Wilderness Intensive Inventory entirely, even though it possesses all of the required attributes.

In 2002, BLM agreed that this unit (Adobe Town Area E) possesses the full complement of wilderness attributes and committed to studying its protection under the Great Divide plan revision. Protections were withheld at that point. The BLM has subsequently designated it as Lands with Wilderness Characteristics, but it still awaits protection. The protection of this unit would secure parts of the viewshed from the southern end of the Skull Creek Rim from degradation.



*The view northward across the Powder Rim unit, with the Skull Creek Rim in the distance. Erik Molvar photo.*



***Clockwise from right:***  
*Hiking near a mud cave north of the Powder Rim;*  
*Juniper woodlands form key habitat for mule deer,*  
*raptors, and songbirds;*  
*Backcountry camping in the Powder Rim unit;*  
*Badlands at the base of the Powder Rim. Erik Molvar photos.*





# The Threat of Oil and Gas Drilling

Adobe Town has always been an area rated to possess low to moderate potential for oil and gas development. However, oil and gas drilling has threatened this landscape from the outset of its consideration as wilderness.

In the 1970s, most of the proposed Wilderness Study Area was leased for oil and gas development (see map, below). In its 1991 Wilderness Study Report, the BLM recommended for wilderness designation only a tiny, 10,920-acre postage stamp of Adobe Town, centered on East Fork Point and excluding all of the Adobe Town Rim, Monument Valley, and southern Skull Creek Rim, “because of the area’s high potential for development of natural gas.”

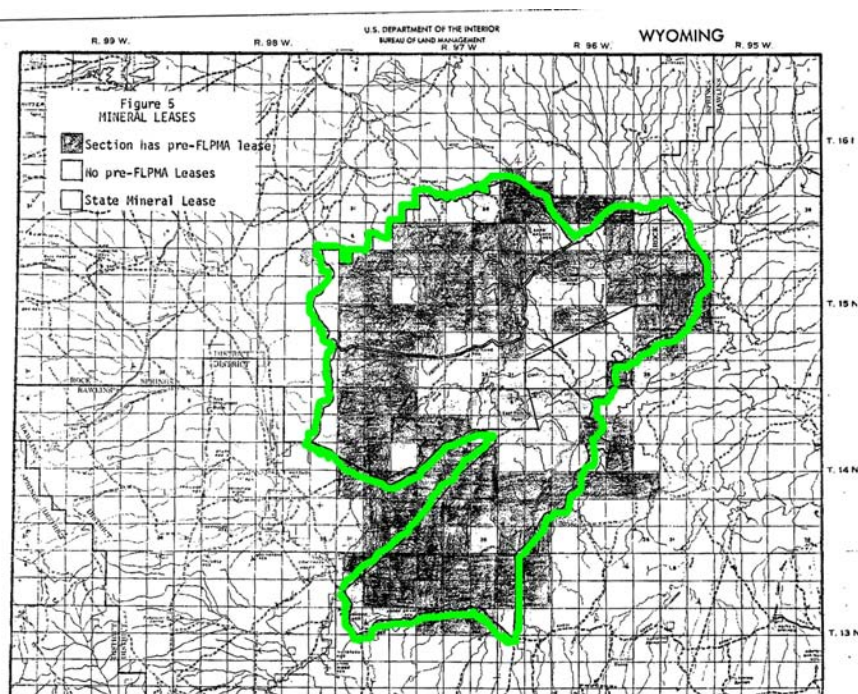
Nonetheless, all 85,710 acres were designated as a Wilderness Study Area and managed to preserve wilderness qualities while existing leases were allowed to be developed. Leases near the Adobe Town Rim were unitized, with one well drilled (the Koch Exploration Adobe Town #1) to hold the unit. The well never produced measurable quantities of gas, and ultimately was abandoned in 2002. Today, no oil and gas leases remain.

In the 2000s, two major seismic exploration projects covered The Haystacks as well as the southern third of Adobe Town. Few new wells were drilled, and those that were produced nothing. A 385-well oil and gas project, called “Desolation Flats,” was approved in 2004 without a plan for where roads, well, or pipelines would be located, and its quarter million acres overlapped with parts of the eastern wilderness additions in Adobe town, but final decisions regarding potential wilderness were deferred to the revision of the Great Divide Resource Management Plan.

During the revision of the Great Divide Resource Management Plan, there was overwhelming public support for closing wilderness-quality lands adjacent to the WSA to oil and gas leasing. But BLM left them all open in the Rawlins RMP that resulted, stating, “the majority of the areas under consideration were leased for oil and gas development, in which case we do not have the means to prevent impairment of any wilderness character that may be present.”

In the late 2000s, Samson Energy began drilling on a well-by-well basis atop the Willow Creek Rim, and proposed additional drilling in Area A north of the WSA. Considerable drilling has occurred atop the Willow Creek Rim, with a major road built and considerable industrialization of parts of the proposed wilderness unit. One well was drilled in Area A, but was plugged and abandoned, and a project has yet to move forward there.

Today, thanks to interim BLM decisions to defer leases from oil and gas lease auctions, several Lands with Wilderness Characteristics (LWC) units adjacent to Adobe Town are free of oil and gas leases (see map, facing page).

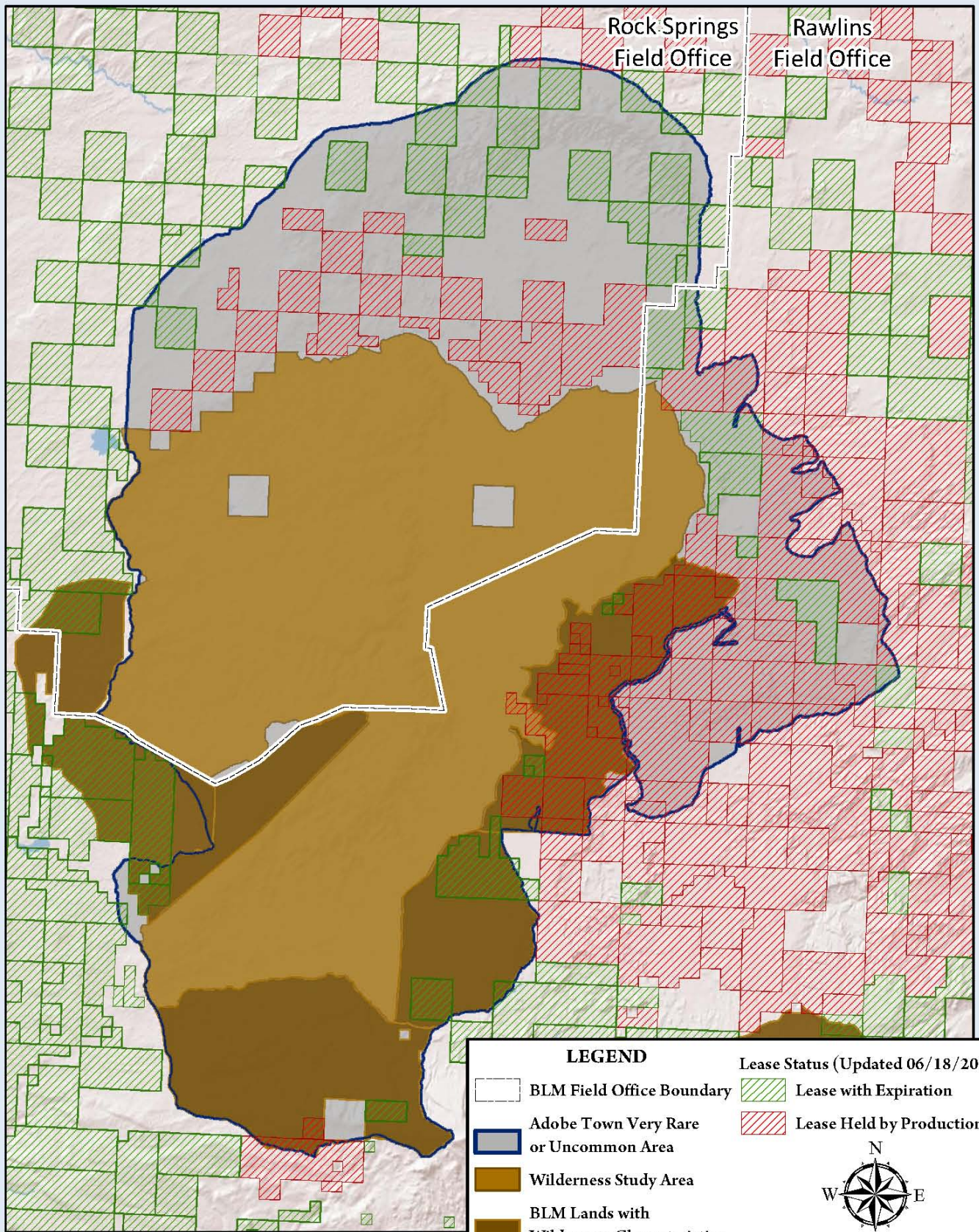


**Above:** A well drilled in Area C.  
**Below:** Staked wellsite, Area A.





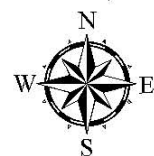
# ADOBE TOWN OIL & GAS LEASES



## LEGEND

- |   |                          |
|---|--------------------------|
| BLM Field Office Boundary                 | Lease with Expiration    |
| Adobe Town Very Rare or Uncommon Area     | Lease Held by Production |
| Wilderness Study Area                     |                          |
| BLM Lands with Wilderness Characteristics |                          |

Lease Status (Updated 06/18/2014)



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Miles

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