



King Lear Peak rises in the distance behind Black Rock Point and the Black Rock Range. Hummocks provide habitat for wildlife.

When the pavement ends, the experience begins.

The longest intact segments (totalling 175 miles) of the historic emigrant trails to California and Oregon are located in the Black Rock Desert – High Rock Canyon Emigrant Trails National Conservation Area (NCA). Designated in 2000, the NCA and ten associated wilderness areas give protection to nearly 1.2 million acres within Nevada's Great Basin. The NCA is comprised of high-desert mountain ranges, volcanic tablelands and the Black Rock Desert playa.

Black Rock - High Rock country is a desolate and harsh landscape in which explorers, emigrants and homesteaders struggled to survive. The area and its scenery remain much the same as these early settlers experienced and provides numerous opportunities for solitude and recreation.

A land of extremes.

In this land of extremes emigrant wagons crawled along at two miles per hour, yet the landspeed record was set here at speeds of over 760 mph. From the solitude of isolated wilderness to 50,000 people in temporary Black Rock City, the uses and history of the NCA are rich and diverse.

Just as extreme, the weather can be hot and sunny one day and cold and snowy the next. Evidence of climate change can be seen everywhere. Deep parallel horizontal cuts can be seen in the rock cliffs surrounding the playa, created by the pounding waves of ancient Lake Lahontan.



Sudden dust storms on the playa lie in contrast to snow on Pahute Peak.



Box Canyon (left), South Jackson Wilderness (center), Calico Mountains (right).

Wilderness is America's Legacy

Wilderness is an indispensable part of the American story. Inspired by the untamed beauty of wilderness that became the forge upon which our uniquely American national character was created; our nation's leaders passed the Wilderness Act in 1964 and established a system to permanently protect the country's wild places.

In 2000 ten wilderness areas were designated along with the creation of the Black Rock Desert – High Rock Canyon Emigrant Trail NCA. These ten wilderness areas demonstrate the biological and geological diversity of the Great Basin desert and give a natural and virtually unaltered backdrop to the historic trails.

Landforms that define the region.

The Black Rock Desert Playa

Shaped like a lopsided Y, this desert is often described as having a stem and two arms – the west arm and east arm. The playa, the largest in North America, occupies much of the stem and the west arm.

Although this is the desert, evidence of water can be seen everywhere. Visitors can still see the effects of ancient waves on the former shorelines of Lake Lahontan, which covered this area with 500 feet of water 13,000 years ago.



Composed of fine clay silt, the playa has a smooth surface to drive on when dry. Sizing up at approximately 35 miles long and 12 miles wide, the 110,000-acre playa is where most recreational activity occurs in the NCA. This dry bed of ancient Lake Lahontan, completely devoid of vegetation, was first described as a "mud lake" by early emigrants who had no better comparison. In the early part of the 20th century, the term "playa" (Spanish for beach) came into use.

The playa is flanked by the colorful Calico Mountains to the west, and the Jackson Mountains to the east. The Black Rock Range acts as the divider of the desert, splitting it into two arms as it stretches northward. Several smaller playas can be found in the NCA as well.

Mountain Ranges

Almost entirely treeless, the Calico Mountains' 28 miles of soils and rocks display a vibrant array of colors and project uniquely shaped outcrops. Donnelly, Cherry and Cow Creeks have cut deep canyons in the range and support riparian environments. Pyramid-shaped Donnelly Peak is the range high point at 8,533 feet.

Named for the famed emigrant trail landmark, the Black Rock Range stretches nearly 50 miles. The range consists of wet and dry canyons, badlands, sage steppe and cliffs. Perennial streams originating from mountain springs feed terminal Summit Lake to the northwest. Pahute Peak near the center of the range stands at 8,594 feet.

Set apart from the other ranges, the towering Jackson Mountains are a juniper-covered, alpine-looking range that stretches for 46 miles. Numerous east-west canyons support cottonwoods, willows and aspen. Its Shakespeare-inspired high point, King Lear Peak, sits at 8,923 feet.

High Rock Canyon & Volcanic Tablelands

A tortured landscape of time and place, the volcanic tablelands in the northwest region of the NCA are the product of multiple volcanic eruptions. Accumulated layers of lava lifted the tablelands only to be cut into weather-eroded canyons. High Rock Canyon is the largest canyon complex in the NCA tablelands and is also the route of the Applegate Trail.



The Emigrant Trail through High Rock Canyon (left). Glyphs in the rocks record the passages (middle). A sheep herders wagon near Black Rock Point (right).

The Historic Trails.

The first Euroamericans to enter this portion of what is now Nevada were a party of explorers led by John C. Frémont. During the winter of 1843-44, Frémont's party traveled down High Rock Canyon and the west arm of the Black Rock Desert, into the adjacent Smoke Creek Desert, then south to Pyramid Lake. As he explored, Fremont searched for the fabled "Buenaventura River" that was thought to provide navigable access to the Pacific Ocean. Although he didn't discover the fabled river, he did define the huge area of internal drainages now known as the Great Basin. He also laid the framework for what was to become the historic Applegate Trail.

The Applegate Trail

In 1846, Jesse Applegate, Levi Scott, and fourteen others traced a portion of Frémont's route to establish an alternate trail to Oregon, thus opening a route that avoided the dangerous Columbia River of the main Oregon Trail and gave American settlers in Oregon an escape route should there be a war with Great Britain. The trail was used for several years as the "Southern Road to Oregon." In 1848, Peter Lassen followed the Applegate Trail to Goose Lake, and then blazed his own trail to his ranch. In the High Rock Canyon area there are still historic carvings and axle grease markings on the rocks reminding present day visitors of their arduous passage.



The '49ers

The discovery of gold in California in 1848 set off a rush of gold seekers crossing through the Black Rock region. The

Applegate and Lassen Trails provided an alternative route for 49ers heading to California. Many at the end of the 1849 migration turned away onto Applegate Trail after hearing that all the grass had been consumed on the trail along the Humboldt River. However, the Applegate-Lassen route added 150 miles or more to the trek, and the thousands of emigrants quickly exhausted the available resources. The truth was this alternate route was just as difficult as the main routes.

The Nobles Trail

In 1851, William H. Nobles discovered a wagon route from the Black Rock to Honey Lake Valley, California. In 1852 the new route was laid out, and in 1856 was shortened by the discovery of Trego Hot Springs. In 1859-60, this route became part of the Fort Kearney, South Pass and Honey Lake wagon road. The Applegate, Lassen, and Nobles Trails are part of the California National Historic Trail.



Significant sections of the trail have been marked by Trails West (left center). Photo courtesy of the National Archives (bottom).

BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT



BLACK ROCK DESERT
HIGH ROCK CANYON
EMIGRANT TRAILS

NATIONAL CONSERVATION AREA

The Black Rock Desert - High Rock Canyon Emigrant Trails National Conservation Area is a part of the BLM's National Landscape Conservation System (NLCS); a diverse program that incorporates national scenic and historic trails, wild and scenic rivers, wilderness areas, and national monuments and conservation areas.

The mission of the NLCS is to conserve, protect and restore nationally significant landscapes that have outstanding cultural, ecological and scientific values for present and future generations of Americans. This 27 million acre Conservation System is said to be the most innovative U.S. land-management program in the last 50 years, joining together the crown jewels of the BLM's cultural, natural and scientific assets. Quietly revolutionary, instead of protecting "islands" of special land, it conserves whole landscapes.

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Report Wildfires
Central Nevada Dispatch Center
800-535-6076
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Black Rock Desert - High Rock Canyon
Emigrant Trails National Conservation Area

Map & Visitor Information

NEVADA
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PROTECT WILDLIFE. Do not drive on dunes surrounding the playa.



KNOW THE RULES. The few signs in the NCA are there to inform.



USE CAUTION when driving. The playa is unforgiving when wet.



Hiking in Black Rock - High Rock country (left). Badgers make their home here (middle). Bighorn Sheep in the Jackson Mountains (right).



Wilderness camping (left). Camping on the playa (middle). Spring camping in the North Black Rock Range (right).

Know Before You Go: Protect. Respect. Survive.

Recreate responsibly and protect your right to enjoy public lands. Despite the rugged appearance of the landscape, the Black Rock Desert is fragile. While few restrictions exist within the National Conservation Area (NCA), careless recreational use can cause irreparable damage to the resources.

Do your part to maintain the area. Help minimize human impacts to cultural resources, native vegetation, landscapes and wildlife by respecting the following points when traveling in the NCA:

Rehabilitation Areas and Vehicle Closures. Ongoing restoration projects protect wildlife and cultural resources that make Black Rock - High Rock country special. Avoid driving or camping in restored areas or areas marked as closed. Designated wilderness areas are closed to all motor and mechanical equipment and vehicles. See maps for boundaries. Respect seasonal closures in High Rock Canyon (Feb. - May).

Other Users. Limit noise from generators, keep speeds low through camping areas and leave the areas you visit in better condition than you found them.

Other Inhabitants. Animals can be extremely sensitive to

human disturbances, especially during critical reproduction periods in the spring and in severe weather conditions. Observe wildlife and wild horses from a distance and avoid spending too much time near water sources.

Private Property. While the vast majority of Black Rock - High Rock country is public land managed by the BLM, it is critical that people respect the property and rights of private land owners. Leave gates as you find them.

Tread Lightly. Travel and camp on durable surfaces. Watch your step. Sensitive species exist throughout the NCA. Living soils can be easily damaged and recovery takes years.

Protect Archaeological Sites. Sites are protected on public lands by federal law. Leave artifacts where they are so that others can see the story of the past. Removing or vandalizing artifacts is not only illegal, it limits their scientific value and the experience of future visitors.

Campfires. Bring your own firewood. Fires on the playa and dunes must be contained and elevated to protect the surface from scarring. Extinguish all fires before you leave.

Leave No Trace, pack out only what you pack in.

Recreation in the NCA.

Hiking

Undeveloped, wild country. With the exception of a few short trails, there are no established routes. Those that do venture here will discover a multitude of canyons, ridge lines and peaks, where few humans have traveled. The Desert Trail, a scenic corridor that runs from Mexico to Canada, crosses through the NCA.

Hunting

Sportsmen pursue coveted tags for hunting trophy big game animals, such as California bighorn sheep, mule deer and pronghorn antelope. Excellent chukar hunting also exists in the NCA. Wildlife and fisheries are managed by the Nevada Department of Wildlife (NDOW). Valid State of Nevada hunting licenses and applicable tags are required for all hunting and fishing. More information can be obtained from the NDOW offices or online at ndow.org.

Wildlife and Wild Horse Viewing

The wildlife within the NCA are a typical representation of the northern Great Basin fauna. Mountain lion, antelope, mule deer, bighorn sheep, sage grouse, badgers, raptors and an assortment of reptiles make their home here. Wild horses and burros are a common sight in the area.



Rock and Mineral Collection

Geodes, agates, opal, jasper, petrified wood and fossils can all be found in the NCA. Collecting for personal use is allowed. Protect mineral resources and ensure long-term opportunities for collection. Within the NCA and associated wilderness areas only hand tools may be used to dig for minerals and fossils.

Do not collect vertebrate fossils such as fish, mammals, reptiles.

Rock and mineral collection is limited to 25 pounds plus one piece per day for a total of 250 pounds per year and are for personal use only.

Using motorized equipment for collection purposes is prohibited.

Hanging Rock Petrified Forest and the Charles Lund Petrified Forest are closed to collection.

Alternative Recreation

Because of its surface conditions and stark, unpopulated landscape, the playa is conducive to many diverse activities. You'll find amateur rocket launches, land sailing, land speed trials, hot air ballooning in addition to other unique forms of recreation that can only take place in this environment.



Camping in the NCA.

In the NCA the best campsites are found, not made. If you can't find an existing campsite, locate your camp on durable surfaces such as gravel, rock, dry grasses or dry washes (when the chance of flash floods is low).

Camping in the same site for more than 14 days within a 30 day period is prohibited, including cabins.

Nevada State Law and BLM regulations require that users camp at least 300 feet from spring and water sources.

Pack it in. Pack it Out. There is no garbage removal in the NCA. Practice Leave No Trace ethics.

Dispose of human waste properly, burying it at least 200 feet away from water and campsites.

The Playa. Camping on the playa is an experience in itself, offering wide open vistas, vibrant sunsets with dark night skies and thousands of acres to explore. Always be prepared for changing conditions. Winds can be erratic and summer thunderstorms are not unusual. If camping out in the open playa, be sure to stay near your vehicle and use reflective material on your tent to avoid accidental nighttime collisions with vehicles traveling on the playa.

It is illegal to ride Off-Highway Vehicles in the dunes surrounding the playa, as they are sensitive habitat areas.

Soldier Meadows Area of Critical Environmental Concern (ACEC). Primitive camping facilities are located in the ACEC. Camping is allowed at seven designated sites with fire rings, vault toilets and trails leading to and around the hot springs. Soldier Meadows Ranch offers private camping, lodging and hot springs for a fee.

Camp only in designated sites in the ACEC.

High Rock Canyon. Five primitive campsites are designated throughout the canyon and provide excellent opportunities

to experience a scenic portion of the Applegate Trail.

Camp only in designated sites in the ACEC. Climbing is not allowed in High Rock Canyon.

Stevens Camp and Massacre Ranch. Several established campsites can be found in addition to rustic user-maintained cabins which are available on a first-come first-served basis.

Future campsite designations will be made at Black Rock Hot Spring, Double Hot Spring, Trego Hot Spring, Stevens Camp, Massacre Ranch, segments of the Emigrant Trail and in the Lahontan Cutthroat Trout Wilderness Study Area.



STAY OUT AND STAY ALIVE.

Hot Springs. The BLM does not manage hot springs for recreation use. Use extreme caution around hot springs. People and pets have been severely scalded or killed.

Mines. Abandoned mines are dangerous. Some of the potential hazards are old, unstable explosives, poisonous gases, rattlesnakes, unseen vertical shafts, and cave-ins.

