



## Black Rock, High Rock NCA Captures Dramatic Vistas, Canyons, History

America's new Nevada Black Rock Desert-High Rock Canyon Emigrant Trails National Conservation Area (NCA) is more than just a desert and a canyon.

The Black Rock Desert Playa, which stretches for more than 160,000 acres, once formed the bed of ancient Lake Lahontan. The huge lake covered this area with 500 feet of water as recently as 60,000 years ago.

### **Deep Base of Silt**

With a silt base as deep as 10,000 feet, the area is so barren and so flat that it is possible, on a cool, clear day, to see the curvature of the earth. Ancient shorelines carved by wave action which ended thousands of years ago remain visible in places around the perimeter of the desert.

Eons ago those shores were home to imperial mammoths. Today's wild-life—antelope, wild horses and burros—can often be seen along the edges of the playa.

### **Diverse Flora and Fauna**

The region's many canyons, cliffs, mountain ranges and sagebrush flats provide a varied habitat for a dramatically diverse group of Great Basin fauna. Small shallow lakes provide seasonal habitat for resident and migrant waterfowl and shorebirds. The narrow canyons include meadow and stream-side riparian habitats.

The Calico Mountains and High Rock Canyon are home to a population of more than 150 California bighorn sheep. Significant numbers of the dwindling sage grouse populate the northwestern section of the conservation area. With keen eyes that seek unwary prey, hawks and other raptors patrol the skies throughout the region.



The dramatic topography of the Black Rock-High Rock region includes imposing rock faces, high cliff walls, and a desert playa so large a visitor can see the earth's curvature on dry land.

## *Desert Tested Resources, Endurance of Emigrants*

By Bob Stewart

As emigrants approached the end of their journey, mules and oxen were exhausted from weeks of pulling wagons across the land. There was scant forage for animals along this portion of the emigrant trail. Water sources were equally scarce, and the days required to cross this section became long, hard and tiring.

From Rye Patch Dam north of Interstate 80 through High Rock Canyon, a visitor today views the same terrain as did thousands of emigrants enroute to

# New Planning Team To Work With Public In Implementing NCA

By Bob Abbey  
Nevada State Director, BLM

The Act of Congress creating a new National Conservation Area (NCA) is only the beginning. Now the BLM begins the long, important process of developing a plan and managing this national resource. It is an exciting time for all of us, because interested citizens are an important partner in this process.

We have begun seeking public input to develop a plan that meets the needs of the NCA, the public, and the future.

The BLM's Winnemucca field office is the home of a new conservation area planning office and will be working closely with the BLM's Cedarville, California, office to manage the NCA. Appointment of a staff devoted to the Black Rock Desert-High Rock Canyon Emigrant Trail NCA will be accomplished, selecting members who understand the long-term significance of what they will be doing.

The BLM has a running start on the planning process. For several years, management planning has been underway for the desert playa area of the NCA. Some of that work can be incorporated into NCA planning.

There is only one other National Conservation Area in Nevada, the Red Rock Canyon NCA outside Las Vegas. When that site was dedicated the keynote



Bob Abbey

IN THIS ISSUE	
Recreation on the playa	3
Volunteers making a difference	4
What is an NCA?	5
Danger lurks in region's hot springs	7
Map of Nevada's new NCA	10-11
One man's story of the old trail	12
Wildlife in Northwestern Nevada	13
A very special native species	14
The region's wild horses	15
Two towns, few residents	16
A Black Rock bibliography	19

speaker, Dr. Eugene Mohring of the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, called it "the Central Park of Las Vegas." Indeed, Red Rock is a highly popular site, providing recreation and pleasure to a million visitors each year.

The more remote location of Black Rock-High Rock will, in all likelihood, result in a smaller flow of visitors from that huge number. But we already know the area is heavily visited, and that the new status will doubtless draw new visitors.

Along with the NCA, Congress created ten wilderness areas. This is another positive development for land managers and the people of Nevada. BLM was brought under the wilderness program in 1976, and by the mid 1980s the initial wilderness inventories were complete, resulting in designation of 110 Wilderness Study Areas in Nevada.

The 10 wilderness areas in the Black Rock Desert-High Rock Canyon region will require specific management plans, independent of the NCA plan.

The entire region addressed by Congress in this landmark legislation is unique, even in Nevada. Its remote location and rugged terrain have kept it isolated from heavy settlement and intensive human intrusion. Now that land will be under a long-term management program developed cooperatively to address a wide variety of activities in the region, while keeping it protected as one of the truly exciting primitive areas of America.

To make it work, BLM will need the knowledge, energy and excitement that an involved public can bring to the planning table and to the management program. We know there are thousands of people who feel strongly about the Black Rock-High Rock. Now is the time to step forward and actively participate in planning and management of this special region of our State.

# Popular Desert's Huge Playa Offers Recreation Unlimited

By JoLynn Worley

Crossing the Black Rock Desert playa was a tedious and terrible ordeal for emigrants to overcome. Today, a new kind of pioneer-avant-garde recreationists-are transforming the playa into playground for new experiences.

On a summer day on the Black Rock playa, one might happen upon someone:

- shooting high-altitude rockets,
- sailing, wind-blown across the land,
- following an emigrant trail,
- driving a car real fast,
- filming a commercial,
- playing golf or croquet,
- riding a bike or a horse,
- building a temporary city.

During the 1980s, hunters, off-highway vehicle riders and rockhounds heading to the Black Rock Desert used the playa much as the early emigrants did—they crossed it to get to the other side. These types of uses at low levels created little demand for recreational facilities or intensive recreational management.

Then Craig Breedlove and the British Thrust Team brought their jet cars to the playa, and the Burning Man event brought thousands to inhabit a temporary city. Land sailing and model rocket events are also increasing visitation to the playa, especially during summer weekends.

While large, commercial permitted events on the playa draw public attention, individuals and small groups are still the main visitors. Nearly 150,000 people visited the Black Rock in 2000. The majority were what BLM calls "dispersed users," people who are rockhounding, camping, shooting, taking photographs or pleasure driving.

The BLM has also seen an increase in commercial filming and photography on the playa. Land Rover, Molsen Black Label Beer, Duralast batteries, Nissan, and Ford Motor Company are some of the commercials shot on the playa recently. Porsche Cars of North America premiered the 2001 Porsche 911 Turbo on the playa. The event was filmed by the Public Broadcasting System. Thirty-two journalists, representing the *Wall Street Journal*, the *Washington Post*, *Car and Driver*, *MotorTrend*, and others, got to test drive the Porsche 911 on the playa.

There have been some fanciful ideas about how to make the playa useful. Local lore include an idea to flood the playa and grow algae; another was for the playa to be a dump for San Francisco's garbage. A rock concert promoter briefly considered laying down acres of astroturf for a concert that would draw one million people.

Now much of the playa is within the new national conservation area. Recreational activities will continue, and it's a good bet that visitor use will continue to increase. The playa will remain a huge blank canvas, compelling some to create and others to bask in the emptiness.



Amateur-built rockets launched on the Black Rock are large-scale models which reach suborbital heights.

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## People Who Are 'Making a Difference'

# Volunteers Assist Visitors, BLM In Making Region a Special Place

By Mike Bilbo

A group called simply The Black Rock Desert Volunteers is a recipient of this year's BLM National Volunteer *Making a Difference* Awards.

The volunteer group, with a core membership of 24, works in the Black Rock Desert region to inform visitors about the area's unique natural, cultural and recreational resources. The group has been active in resource management activities including collecting visitation data, monitoring use impacts, inventorying roads, assisting with wilderness boundary marking and monitoring, and interpreting historical information for visitors. During the past four years these volunteers have contributed 120,000 hours, with a value placed at about \$1 million.

### A Second Award for Nevadans

In another part of Nevada, BLM's winter caretakers of the Rhyolite ghost town, near Beatty, were also given a national *Making a Difference* award.

The BLM National Volunteer Awards Program was begun in 1995, to acknowledge outstanding volunteers and BLM employees involved in the Volunteer Program. Presentation of the awards is made in Washington, D.C.

At Rhyolite since 1997, Riley and Suzy McCoy have contributed more than 12,000 hours to raise public awareness about conserving and protecting public lands, as well as caring for the town of Rhyolite. Mrs. McCoy has inventoried the features and artifacts within the ghost town and has published her findings in a 300-page document that includes maps, photographs and drawings.

Mike Bilbo is a recreation specialist who has worked with the Black Rock Desert region for several years. Debra Kolkman also contributed to this article.

She also authored an informational brochure about the town, which has been translated into several languages. Her husband gives tours, sometimes several times a day, of the old bottle house. He has worked with producers on filming television documentaries, and helped with repairs to the bottle house and other facilities in the ghost town.

### Black Rock Volunteers

The Black Rock Volunteers work throughout the 2,052-square-miles of mountain ranges centered on the largest desert playa in the nation.

The Black Rock Volunteers have been involved in all aspects of visitor use of the region, helping educate people on the area's unique natural, cultural and recreational resources.

Some examples of volunteer commitment and unique approaches to the work:

- John Ryczkowski, a captain with the Reno Fire Department, directed a photomonitoring project that resulted in the entire region being computer mapped and ready for photomonitor points.

- During the land use amendment planning process, BLM needed mapping of roads in a 727-square-mile area. Volunteers Art and Joann Walz, Garth Elliott and Freddie Osterhagen commenced an exhaustive road

continued on page 18



With the Black Rock Desert playa as their backdrop, Black Rock Volunteers (Burn-ing Man's Earth Guardians) rehabilitate a paleontological theft site.



Tracks across the playa tell of the passage of vehicles. When dry, the wide open 'roadway' can support tractor-trailer rigs loaded with hay. Even a small amount of moisture can turn it into a slick, unforgiving surface. Experienced visitors learn to 'read' the color of the playa.

## 'NCA' Status Brings Many Benefits to Area

By Jamie Thompson

A national conservation area, or NCA, is an area of federal public land administered by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) that has been specially designated by Congress to recognize and protect important national resources present there. Each Act creating an NCA specifies the purpose for that area's designation. The Black Rock Desert-High Rock Canyon Emigrant Trails NCA was established to:

...conserve, protect, and enhance for the benefit and enjoyment of present and future generations the unique and nationally important historical, cultural, paleontological, scenic, scientific, biological, educational, wildlife, riparian, wilderness, endangered species, and recreational values and resources associated with the Applegate-Lassen and Nobles Trails corridors and surrounding areas.... [Black Rock Desert-High Rock Canyon NCA Act of 2000, Public Law 106-554, Sec. 4(a)]

Two of the protected national resources in the Black Rock Desert-High Rock Canyon area are segments of

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Jamie Thompson is a writer-editor on the BLM staff in Winnemucca.



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historic California emigrant trails (with settings nearly unchanged from pioneer days) and the Black Rock Desert Playa (one of the largest dry lake beds in the world).

The difference between an NCA and a Wilderness is found in the laws that determine how they are managed. Wilderness areas, including the 378,600 acres of Wilderness designated by Congress within the Black Rock-High Rock NCA, is administered under authority of the Wilderness Act of 1964. Perhaps the most obvious difference in on-the-ground management between a Wilderness and an NCA is in how access is controlled. The Wilderness Act emphasizes management for wilderness values such as solitude and preservation and significantly restricts motorized vehicle access. The language of the Wilderness Act pertaining to access is as follows:

Except as specifically provided for in this chapter, and subject to existing private rights,



People standing in the foreground indicate the size of the famous 'Burning Man,' centerpiece of a week-long event held on the Black Rock Desert under terms of a permit issued by the BLM.



With a long rope, volunteers undertake the rescue of a motorist (vehicle at left, background) who drove onto a wet area of the Black Rock playa. Vehicles lose all traction when the surface of the desert is wet.

there shall be no commercial enterprise and no permanent road within any wilderness area designated by this chapter and, except as necessary to meet minimum requirements for the administration of the area for the purpose of this chapter (including measures required in emergencies involving the health and safety of persons within the area), there shall be no temporary road, no use of motor vehicles, motorized equipment or motorboats, no landing of aircraft, no other form of mechanical transport, and no structure or installation within any such area. [Wilderness Act of 1964, Title 16 United States Code, Sec. 1133(c)]

Each NCA is administered under authority of the specific act that created it. In the portions of the Black Rock Desert-High Rock Canyon Emigrant Trails NCA that are not also designated as wilderness, mechanized travel and use of other mechanized equipment may be regulated by BLM in accordance with the purposes of the Act, but are not specifically restricted by the Act.

The act requires BLM to develop, within three years, a comprehensive resource management plan for the long-term protection and management of the area. During this planning process the public will be asked to provide comments and identify concerns which will be addressed in the final plan.

In the interim, the amendment to the existing plan is in the final stages of development. It will be modified to conform to all requirements mandated by the NCA act.

## Stay Out and Stay Alive

# Nevada's Hot Springs Hold Many Dangers; Slippery Banks Increase Hazard of Scalding

Soaking in natural hot springs is a recreational pursuit some people enjoy. But, it is a pursuit fraught with peril. All public land hot springs are dangerous. Hazards at hot springs:

- 1st, 2nd and 3rd degree burns causing disfigurement or death
- Loss of consciousness from chemical fumes
- Cuts from sharp rocks or broken glass
- Bacterial irritations, such as swimmer's itch
- Bacterial diseases, such as meningitis

Scalding from hot temperatures is the leading hazard. In Nevada there are about 450 groups of hot springs with temperatures hotter than 120 degrees Fahrenheit. Many have temperatures hotter than 150 F and even 180 F. The average temperature for home hot tubs is 104 degrees F. Skin will be scalded within three seconds in 140 F water.

It is impossible to tell how hot a spring is by looking at it. Never assume that the temperature of a hot spring is suitable for soaking. The sure way to test water temperature is with a thermometer. However, getting that close is perilous. Hot spring banks are typically slippery and steep. It can be extremely difficult, if not impossible, to get out without help after falling in.

**! The BLM does not maintain or operate any hot springs for bathing or immersion purposes on public lands in Nevada.**

Keep pets on a leash and children under control at all times around hot springs. They do not recognize the danger until it is too late.

Look for posted hazard signs or fences. If present, heed them. They are there to warn visitors about the danger of scalding water or other hazards. Never remove posted hazard signs; it could result in serious injury or death to other persons or their pets.



The steep banks and scalding water of Double Hot Springs present great danger. Pioneers record cooking meat in the water.

# Rich Heritage of Remote Lands Involves Tales of America's Emigrant Experience

continued from front page

California and Oregon a century and a half ago.

The land that is Nevada today was western Utah Territory when this section of the emigrant trail saw its heaviest use. It was unsettled frontier land. The entire Great Basin segment was much feared.

Those very scarcities are what has left the countryside largely untouched, giving today's visitor an unequalled opportunity to sense the hardships emigrants faced as they neared the end of their summer-long journey.

On passage of the enabling act, which he sponsored, U.S. Sen. Richard Bryan (D-Nev) said, "This legislation will allow countless future generations to enjoy, study and marvel at this unique landscape, as well as maintaining an important part of our Western heritage—the emigrant experience."

In the mid-1800s, emigrants to the West set forth from several points along the Missouri River. Independence, Missouri, was the original jumping-off point for the Oregon Trail. As traffic increased with discovery of gold in California, Kansas City came into being. There emigrants could make their last purchases in stores before leaving shops behind.

Soon St. Joseph, Missouri, was founded, reducing the length of the trail by a few more miles. Finally, Council Bluffs, Iowa, became the primary kick-off point.

Weeks later the emigrants crossed into the Great Basin where the banks of the Humboldt River became the high road of choice. Far downstream, where that river disappears into the sand, the trails separated. Oregon-bound emigrants headed northwest, others ventured along the Truckee River and Carson River routes to the gold fields of California. Yet another route led across the Black Rock Desert, and on through High Rock Canyon.

The history of America's western migration during the mid-1800s is written, in a literal sense, in the sands

and on the rocks of the Black Rock Desert-High Rock Canyon area. Prehistoric occupation of the region dates back 10,000 to 12,000 years. Much later, the first recorded Western exploration of the area dates to an 1843-44 expedition by Captain John C. Fremont. Fremont's notes and maps would serve as the guidepost for future travelers:

On both sides, the mountains showed often stupendous and curious-looking rocks, which at several places so narrowed the valley, that scarcely a pass was left for the camp. It was a singular place to travel through—shut up in the earth, a sort of chasm, the little strip of grass under our feet, the rough walls of bare rock on either hand, and the narrow strip of sky above. The grass



A modern-day wagon train, retracing the trail used by emigrants 150 years ago, is dwarfed by the grandeur of High Rock Canyon.

tonight was abundant, and we encamped in high spirits. (John C. Fremont, December 30, 1843)

People intent on reaching the promised lands of the California and Oregon territories focused attention on a hoped-for shortcut to their destination through northern Nevada. The wagon ruts and historic carvings in the new NCA bear witness to the attempts, sometimes deadly, to cross this unforgiving land. From 1846 through the 1850s, the Applegate-Lassen Trail served as the alternate route to Oregon.

49ers seeking gold in California also used the Applegate-Lassen Trail (perhaps as many as 15,000 to 20,000 people in the peak year of 1849). This trail was not the promised shortcut, and was never intended to



One emigrant, working his way West from Wisconsin, inscribed his name on a flat rock in High Rock Canyon. Slightly damaged by a shotgun blast in more recent years, the inscription remains intact.

handle the volume of traffic it received. The results were dried up water holes, dead animal carcasses and abandoned wagons.

The NCA includes about 120 miles of the trail, from Rye Patch Reservoir north through the Black Rock Desert, Mud Meadows, and then west through Fly Canyon and High Rock Canyon, ending near tiny Vya, Nevada.

The first wagon train to turn north onto the trace that became the new "Lassen's Cutoff" did so on Aug. 11, 1849. It was supposed to cut days off the journey and offer the emigrant less imposing obstacles than crossing the Sierra at the Truckee, Carson or Walker rivers. What was known about those crossings was fearsome. What was hoped-for in the new cutoff was promising. But Lassen's route would prove to offer many hardships.

The first section of the trail, from Rye Patch Reservoir through Fly Canyon, was undoubtedly the cruelest stretch. For mile on waterless mile the emigrants slogged through a rugged sage plain and the deep, soft sands of the desert. Reading the journal entries of pioneers who crossed these lands emphasizes the awful reality:

We started about six o'clock, with anxious hearts and sad forebodings on our perilous journey ...As I walked on slowly and with effort, I encountered a great many animals, perishing for want of food and water, on the desert plain. Some would be gasping for breath, others unable to stand, would issue low moans as I came up...my sympathies were excited at their sufferings, yet, instead of affording them aid, I was a subject for relief myself ... after covering nearly forty hours

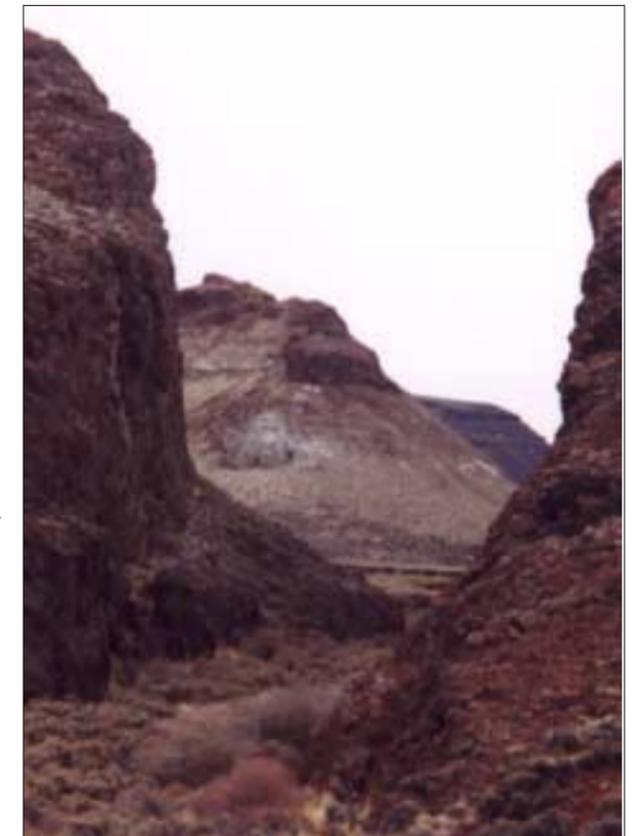
without food or water ... we found this to be an oasis in the desert. A large hot spring [Black Rock Spring] ... but we found the grass nearly consumed, and our cattle could barely pick enough to sustain life. (Alonzo Delano, August 16-17, 1849)

Another emigrant diary describes the entrance into Fly Canyon down the "wagon slide" which perhaps would have been better named the "wagon crash." He wrote:

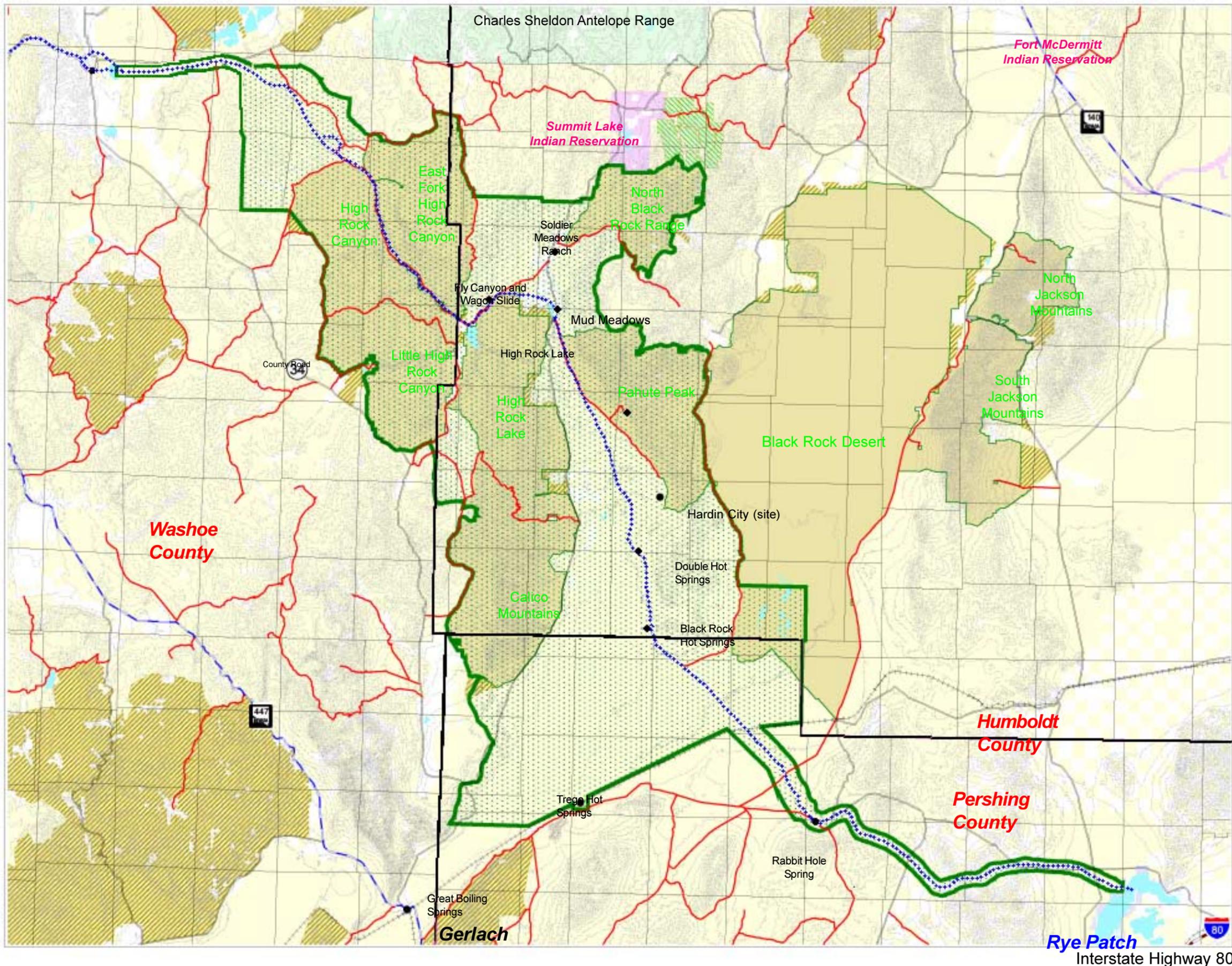
The road terminated, as it were, at the edge of the very apex of this hill, and I looked down ... the declivity and its base retained vestiges of unfortunate traveling in the shape of broken wagons, wheels, hubs, tires, axels, and three dead oxen. (J. Goldsborough Bruff, September 25, 1849)

Many of these lands have remained largely unaltered, and under the foresight of this legislation will remain so.

Reading their journals and walking in their footsteps across land little changed in the intervening years, visitors today can begin to understand the hardship people faced opening America's Western frontier.



Dramatic geologic structures line High Rock Canyon, little changed since early emigrants to Oregon and California passed through nearly a century and a half ago.



**Black Rock Desert  
High Rock Canyon  
Emigrant Trails  
National Conservation Area**

- National Conservation Area
- Wilderness
- Wilderness Study Areas
- Applegate-Lassen National Historic Trail
- State Highway
- Unpaved Road
- Land managed by BLM
- Private land
- USFWS National Wildlife Refuge
- Native American Reservation
- Water
- County Lines

0 4 8 Miles



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The fossilized remains of Imperial Mammoths that walked the earth at the end of the Ice Age have been recovered from the northeastern Black Rock Desert playa. The Nevada State Museum, repository for the remains, has constructed exhibits in Carson City and Las Vegas utilizing the Nevada mastodons. The Humboldt Museum in Winnemucca also has a mammoth exhibit.

## One Man's Reminiscence of Trail's Hardships

Alvin A. Coffey was a slave. He left Saint Louis on April 2, 1849, with a wagon train for California. Years later he provided his reminiscences for the California Society of Pioneers. His 1849 route led through the NCA, beginning at Lassen's Meadow, which he calls "Lawson's Meadow," in the area of today's Lovelock.

Coffey had been born a slave, and came West with his master. On a second trip to California he was able to buy his freedom, and that of his family.

Following is an excerpt from Alvin Coffey's reminiscences.

When we got well down Humboldt to a place called Lawson's Meadow, which was quite a way from the sink of the Humboldt, the emigrants agreed to drive there. There was good grass at Lawson's Meadow. We camped there a day and two nights, resting the oxen, for we had a desert to cross to get to Black Rock where there was grass and water.

Starting to cross the desert to Black Rock at four o'clock in the evening, we traveled all night.

The next day it was hot and sandy. When within twenty miles of Black Rock, we saw it very plainly.

A great number of cattle perished before we got to Black Rock. When about fifteen miles from Black Rock, a team of four oxen was left on the road just where the oxen had died. Everything was left in the wagon.

I drove one oxen all the time and I knew about how much an ox could stand. Between nine and ten o'clock a breeze came up and the oxen threw up their heads and seemed to have new life. At noon, we drove into Black Rock [Hot Springs camp].

Coffey's narrative then jumps to Sacramento, abruptly ending his description of the trials of the overland trail.

Sue Bailey Thurman of California has researched Coffey's life in *Pioneers of Negro Origin in California*, San Francisco, 1952. A portion of the text is included at the website <http://www.sfmuseum.org/bio/coffey.html>. Used by permission.

## Photographers Find Wildlife Challenging

# Great Diversity of Animals, Birds Brings Many Visitors to Region

By Maxine Shane

A driver, headed up the gravel road along the west side of the Black Rock Desert, is startled when a buck antelope begins running alongside. The antelope keeps pace at a speed of about 30 miles an hour. Without warning, the antelope swerves and runs across the road in front of the vehicle. The driver slams on the brakes and, this time, avoids hitting the fast-moving animal.

It's a scene repeated many times, as antelope express a peculiar challenge to visitors to their domain. "Diverse" describes the animals that make their homes in the Black Rock Desert-High Rock Canyon Emigrant Trails National Conservation Area (NCA) and Wilderness Areas. "Mosaic" depicts their home, their habitat.

For many years these qualities have drawn photographers, naturalists and hunters to the area which is prized because it has few intrusions caused by humans.

Mule deer and pronghorn antelope find homes in the sagebrush and grasslands. Bighorn sheep find escape in the rim rock areas, where mountain lions and bobcat establish dens. Wood rats, rabbits and marmots all live among the rim rock.

East of the Jackson Mountains is McGill Canyon, a Watchable Wildlife Area described as a place to see California bighorn sheep, deer and upland birds year-round. Visitors to the remote site are asked to not disturb the bighorn which lamb in March and April when wildflowers abound.

When in High Rock Canyon, keep an eye on the skyline; perhaps a curious bighorn will be looking down at you.

Chukar, California quail and sage grouse are among the huntable populations of upland game birds found in the area. Small seeps, springs and riparian areas

scattered throughout the region provide water and vegetation during hot, dry summer months for many species of wildlife. Waterfowl, both migrant and resident, include Canada geese, mallard, gadwall, cinnamon teal, northern shoveler, redhead, canvasback, and tundra swan. Shorebirds in the area include the American avocet, killdeer, black-necked stilt, and long-billed curlew.

The playa plays a part in the diversity of the wildlife habitat, providing resting and limited feeding areas for waterfowl and shorebirds.

The threatened desert dace live in warm springs; 63 acres within the NCA is designated as critical habitat for the protection of this small minnow. The species is believed to have survived in the Soldier Meadows area for tens of thousands of years. It has prominent horny sheaths on the jaws, a feeding adaptation no other minnow possesses.

Coleman Creek and the North Fork of Battle Creek are home to reintroduced Lahontan cutthroat trout (LCT). Jackson Creek in the North Jackson Wilderness Area is home to the LCT, while Mary Sloan Creek in the North and South Jackson Mountain Wilderness Areas has potential for species reintroduction. Donnelly Creek (which has tui chub) and Paiute Creek in the NCA also have been identified as having potential for recovery of the LCT.

Reptiles and amphibians abound, ranging from rattlesnakes and the Great Basin gopher snake to several varieties of lizards. Finally, hydrobiid snails and other invertebrates inhabit outflows and pools associated with springs, such as those in Soldier Meadows. This is further proof that these lands truly have something for every one who admires animals.



Cliff Swallows in Fly Canyon take advantage of a shadowed area to regulate nest temperatures.

## 'Nevada's Fish,' Lahontan Cutthroat Trout, Remnant of Prehistoric Lakes in Great Basin

The State of Nevada adopted the Lahontan cutthroat trout (*Oncorhynchus clarki henshawi*) as its official "state fish" in 1981. It was recognition of the cutthroat trout as a remnant of the last Ice Age. Many people are surprised to learn that this species of trout has survived from those early years in fourteen of arid Nevada's 17 counties.



Lahontan cutthroat trout  
Fish and Wildlife Service Photo

The Lahontan cutthroat trout is a hardy fish, occupying habitats ranging from mountain streams and alpine lakes to seasonal lowland streams and alkaline lakes where no other trout can survive.

The fish is named for ancient Lake Lahontan, which once covered large parts of western Nevada and northeastern California, including today's Black Rock Desert, during the Pleistocene Epoch or Ice Age.

At the end of the Ice Age, Nevada's climate became more arid. Lake Lahontan and other large Great Basin lakes began drying up, leaving smaller terminal lakes, including both Pyramid and Walker. Dependent on snowmelt for inflow, and losing water only through

evaporation, some of these remnant lakes have become too saline for freshwater fishes. Utah's Great Salt Lake is another remnant of such a lake, Ancient Lake Bonneville.

Today the Lahontan cutthroat is the only trout native to west-central Nevada's Lahontan Basin, a part of the much larger Great Basin. The fish was much more abundant before Nevada was settled. It was a primary food source for several Great Basin tribes of Native Americans. Loss of habitat, overfishing, and introduced fishes have greatly depleted cutthroat trout populations.

There were commercial fisheries for Lahontan cutthroats in Lake Tahoe and Pyramid Lake at the beginning of the twentieth century, continuing for a few decades and causing rapidly declining trout populations. Further decline was due to diversions of upstream water which restricted the trout's access to spawning areas.

Today a concerted effort is underway to increase the population of Lahontan cutthroat trout in Western lakes and streams.



A change in color, discernable about halfway up the Calico Range, indicates a shoreline of ancient Lake Lahontan. The Calico Range was named by emigrants, who likened its color to brightly colored cloth.

## Curious Burros Watch Humans Play Wild Horses Roam the Rangeland Surrounding Black Rock Desert

By Maxine Shane

A wild stallion and his band of mares may stare curiously at you as you wander through the new National Conservation Area or one of the Wilderness Areas of northwestern Nevada. Or, you may be fortunate enough to pique the interest of one of the few wild burros which live in northern Nevada, much to the surprise of visitors who associate burros only with the southwestern deserts.

More than a thousand wild free-roaming horses and burros live in herd management areas (HMAs) within the newly designated lands. Sometimes the HMA

boundaries are only in a portion of the NCA or wilderness area, but the animals are there, following the sun as vegetation greens up. These animals are protected and managed under provisions of the 1971 National Wild Free-Roaming Horse and Burro Act.

Perhaps reflecting their colorful land, the horses of the Calico Range include a large number of paints and palominos. Wild horses within the HMA are descendants of ranch horses that either escaped or were released.

The Black Rock Range East HMA has a population of the unusual Bashkir Curly horses, characterized by a wavy mane, tail and coat. The band hangs out around Pinto Mountain, just east of the Black Rock Range. They are mixed in with bays, browns, sorrels, palominos, buckskins, roans, grays, blacks, and whites.

Burros may be found in the Warm Springs Canyon and Lava Beds HMAs. Some of these are pinto, an unusual color for wild burros. The burros are all descendants of animals used by miners and sheep ranchers to pack supplies into the area. In the same HMA are wild horses, including some duns.

Bay, brown and sorrel color patterns appear among horses in the Jackson Mountains HMA

The Wilderness Areas of northwestern Nevada which contain HMAs are the North Black Rock Range, Pahute Peak, High Rock Lake, Calico Mountains, East Fork High Rock Canyon, Little High Rock Canyon, and High Rock Canyon. The North Jackson and South Jackson Mountains Wilderness Areas are also home to wild horses.

Within the NCA boundary, but outside the wilderness areas, wild horses are found in the Lava Beds and Kamma Mountains HMAs. A small population of horses occupies the Antelope Range, but the area is not managed as a HMA.

Excess wild horses and burros were removed from several of these HMAs in the fall of 2000 and the winter of 2001 to bring the populations closer to appropriate management levels as BLM strives to bring population numbers in line with available vegetation and water. Animals removed from these rangelands are offered for adoption to qualified individuals.



Huge areas of the NCA in northwestern Nevada are horse country. Riders find solitude and expansive country to enjoy. The same lands are inhabited by some of Nevada's Wild, Free-roaming Horses and Burros, protected by federal law and managed by the BLM.



Far off the beaten track, Gerlach began as a railroad siding and now becomes a key gateway to The Black Rock Desert-High Rock Canyon region of the Great Basin.

## Gerlach and Empire: Two Towns Serve as Gateway To Natural Wonders of Northwestern Nevada

By Richard Brown

If you're headed to the Black Rock Desert, you might not notice Empire. A small grocery and a couple of gas pumps on the left are just about all you can see from the road. It is well worth the trouble to pay attention to the sign above the gas pumps:

### WELCOME TO NOWHERE

And when you pass this sign, there's only one small piece of civilization left before you head into the Great American Outback, also known as the Black Rock Desert. That's the town of Gerlach, which proudly proclaims on signs, jackets, T-shirts and coffee mugs:

*GERLACH,*

*WHERE THE PAVEMENT ENDS*

*AND THE REAL WEST BEGINS.*

They're not kidding. The Black Rock Desert playa (playa is Spanish for dry lake bed) is a little more than a stone's throw from the outskirts of the town.

If you didn't fill your gas tank in Nixon, you'd better fill it again at the Empire Grocery Store, or Gerlach's lone gas station. Don't go into the Black Rock without a full tank of gas, especially the playa.

Donna Potter is a member of the Gerlach-Empire Citizens Advisory Board. She is also the Environmental Coordinator for Orient Farms and the Empire Group in Empire.

"If you're headed into the Black Rock, you've got to be prepared, just like the Boy Scouts," Donna said. "The playa's muddy for much of the year, muddy and not very forgiving. You may end up stuck out there in the mud until it dries and somebody can rescue you."

And if you don't drive on the playa, there's lots of dirt roads out there, too.

"Bring lots of food and water," Donna said. "Make sure you take two spare tires for every vehicle, a first aid kit and a shovel."

And don't forget the sun screen. If you think you might need something once you get out there, bring it.

"Let somebody know where you're going, and when you're supposed to be back," Potter said.

Gerlach's gas station and the Empire gas and grocery store close early, so if you roll into town on fumes in the middle of the night, you'll be staying the night in the town's one motel until the gas station opens the next morning.

The Empire grocery store also offers convenience-store fare and deli sandwiches. However, shopping opportunities in Gerlach and Empire are limited to the basics.

"For major supplies, most people here go to Reno," Donna said. "If it's not in Gerlach or Empire, you need to bring it with you."

Gerlach has two bars. Both of them are also restaurants.

The Gerlach Medical Center is where the town's one doctor hangs his shingle. The town also has a volunteer fire department, with an ambulance crew.

The only other lodging besides Gerlach's one motel is the Soldier Meadows Ranch bed and breakfast, about 60 miles north of Gerlach – a long drive down a dirt road.

Both Gerlach and Empire are on State Highway 447, about 75 miles north of Wadsworth, Interstate 80 and civilization. Just west of town, County Road 34 splits off from Highway 447 and eventually brings you to the settlement of Vya. A gravel road splits off from 34, and passes by the Soldier Meadows Ranch bed and breakfast about 45 miles later.

Other Gerlach amenities include a trailer park, an apartment complex, a Post Office, the Washoe County Road Department, and the Water Tower Park. Planet X Pottery is west of Gerlach on State Highway 447.



'Welcome to Nowhere' reads the sign outside a fuel station/country store in Empire. Remote Empire is one of the nation's leading suppliers of gypsum board, used to create the 'plaster' walls in buildings and homes.

John and Rachel Bogard are the proud owners of Planet X Pottery. They've lived there since 1974.

"When we got here, Gerlach was a bustling railroad town with five bars," said John. "One of the reasons we came to the Black Rock was to get away from the horrors of the rest of society."

"Me, I just ended up here and can't get out. It's a fairly inexpensive place to rent for this starving artist guy. What's fascinating is, there's nothing out here."

Rachel is concerned about the increasing popularity of the Black Rock.

"It's been discovered," Rachel said. "I have a hard time with this. The wonderful part of being out here has been the solitude."

"I just hope that as more people discover the Black Rock, they'll be sensitive about the environment and caring about the land."

Bill Stapleton manages Gerlach's gas station. He's lived in the town for 18 years.

"A lot of people come here and can't understand the desert," Stapleton said. "They don't last long."

U.S. Gypsum in Empire brings a lot of outsiders into the area. Empire Farms, south of Empire, grows foods which they process and dehydrate, as does Orient Farms, north of Gerlach.

"People like the playa, the solitude, the peace and quiet," Stapleton said. "Many folks who used to work

for the railroad in the 1940s and '50s have come back to Gerlach to retire.

According to Stapleton, "People from big cities like New York and Chicago come out here to get away from it all."

The locals find ways to adapt to the isolation. Many buy satellite dishes so they can watch television.

There's no distraction of having a cell phone ring when you're in a restaurant in Gerlach. Cell phones light up with a "no service" message. "But I understand a new cell phone tower is going in this summer," Stapleton said.

Victoria Williams is secretary-treasurer of the Gerlach General Improvement District. Believe it or not, in a town of just over 200 souls, she is one of three women in the area named Vicky Williams.

Victoria and her husband Cliff own the Rock Creek

continued on next page

## Regional Residents

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Ranch, about 17 miles north of Gerlach on County Road 34, near Granite Mountain. They bought the ranch in 1972, but have lived in town since 1993. Their daughter, Tonya Flowers, grew up on the ranch.

“Tonya couldn’t wait to get out of Gerlach,” Victoria said. “She went to California for a few months, and then came back home.

“She’s been back in Gerlach for ten years.”

Tonya works at the brand-new Gerlach-Empire senior center.

Victoria and her husband are originally from Hawthorne, Nevada.

“Gerlach is small and quiet, and the people are friendly. They know each other,” she said.

People either love or hate the scenery in Gerlach.

“When people come here, they either fall instantly in love with the place, or they hate it and want to leave right away,” she said. “A lot of the Burning Man people came here, fell in love with the place and stayed.”

The locals often socialize at the town’s watering holes. And for dining pleasure, you can’t beat the ravioli at Bruno Selmi’s Country Club in Gerlach.

## Volunteers

continued from page 4

inventory the resulted in identification of 70 back country roads and 22 unlawful roads in wilderness study areas. Accomplishing the task in a two-month period, they covered 2,500 miles.

- Under group volunteer services agreements, a variety of user groups have placed Leave No Trace and Tread Lightly and public safety information on their websites or linked to the BLM website, so that site visitors can learn how to care for the Black Rock Desert region.

- During the 1997 National Public Lands Day AeroPac, the High Rock Trekkers, Desert Survivors, the Jackson Family (a ranch family whose father homesteaded the region in the 1920s) and several other individuals accomplished full cleanup of an old trespass on the western playa edge. In one day, the volunteers hand piled 16 tons of metal and nine tons of wood. Included in the metal pile were 26 miles of barbed wire which had been strung around the trespass site.



Black Rock Volunteers (AeroPac Rocket Club) prepare to launch a radio controlled photo-reconnaissance aircraft to document impacts from off-highway vehicles.

- Chuck Dodd of the Oregon-California Trails Association is placing ledger books in the visitor register boxes at hot springs along the Applegate-Lassen Trail that are styled after 1849 diaries. The visitor registers have diary excerpts in them, inviting the public visiting the old trail to add their part of history to the dialog. High Rock Trekkers 4WD club builds and installs the visitor register boxes.

- When BLM needed an environmental assessment to address high-powered rocketry, public safety, sub-orbital space altitude competition and research and design, volunteers, including rocket experts and rocketeers in AeroPac, prepared a high-quality document addressing all types of high-power rockets.

- Sue Weeks founded the non-profit *Friends of the Black Rock Desert*.

### *The Volunteers:*

Nancy Adams, Carson City Nev.; Mike Anderson, Nevada City, Calif.; Barbara Bilbo, Winnemucca, Nev.; John Blunt, San Francisco, Calif.; Chuck Dodd, Chilcoot, Calif.; Garth Elliott, Reno, NV; Linda Elliott, Reno, Nev.; Trevor Elliott, Reno, Nev.; Georgia Golden, Gerlach, Nev.; Dick Golden, Gerlach, Nev.; Beth Honebein, Reno, Nev.; Peter Honebein, Reno, Nev.; Laura Levy, San Francisco, Calif.; Sue McMurray, San Jose, Calif.; Geno Oliver, Reno, Nev.; Frederick Osterhagen, Carson City, Nev.; Betty Paschal, Gerlach, Nev.; John Ryczkowski, Reno, Nev.; Mary Ryczkowski, Reno, Nev.; Bill Stapleton, Gerlach, Nev.; Joanne Walz, Yerington, Nev.; Art Walz, Yerington, Nev.; Bill Weber, Reno, Nev.; Sue Weeks, Reno, Nev..

### *The Groups:*

AeroPac (high-powered rocketry association), Nev. & Calif.; Boy Scout Troop 223, Nev.; Desert Survivors (hiking club), California; Earth Guardians of Burning Man, Nev. & Calif.; High Rock Trekkers 4WD Club, Calif.; Public Resource Associates, Nev.; Soldier Meadows Ranch, Nev.

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*This bibliography was compiled at the Nevada State Library by Mona Reno, Reference Librarian, with the assistance and advice of Deanna LaBonge, Reference Librarian, and Ronald L. Reno, Ph.D., historic archaeologist.*



A 'Sheep Camp,' abandoned many years ago, stands sentinel duty near Black Rock Hot Springs, with the Black Rock itself as a backdrop. Sheep camp wagons like this were 'home' to shepherders, many of them Basques, during the latter 1800s and first half of the 1900s.



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