

DISTANCE: 3.3 miles

ELEVATION GAIN: 450 feet

ROUTE TYPE: Out & Back

Overview

The Pawnee Buttes are a Colorado icon and probably have been seen by most Coloradans in picture books if not in person. The buttes are the plains icons of the state, just as Longs Peak is the iconic figure of the Front Range and the Maroon Bells are of the heart of the Colorado Rockies.

The buttes are not made of rock, but of a fine clay- and chalk-like substance that crumbles easily under any direct pressure, which is to say they are made out of dirt. They stand sentinel in the heart of the eastern portion of the Pawnee National Grassland in Weld County, Colo. The nearest cities are Greeley and Ft. Collins to the west, Ft. Morgan to the south, Sterling to the east, and Scottsbluff, Neb., to the north. The grasslands are a patchwork of federally owned and managed grassland, private ranches, and land owned by the state.

The buttes are climbable in a strict sense, but their chalky composition offers little to no opportunity for protection. The east butte has hand and footholds carved into the chalky dirt on the north side of the uppermost "cliff band." The west butte has no climbing aides (visible as of spring 2007) and would be a tricky and risky class 5 free climb.

Both the west and the east butte offer ample opportunity for scrambling around on soft "rock," and the arroyos to the south and east of the east butte are a marvelous mini-canyonland beckoning for exploration.

The buttes offer a chance for a half-day or more climbing on and around them; and on, over, and through the arroyos to the east and south. However, the soil and flora of the area is delicate. Please tread lightly so that visitors in the future have a chance to experience the vastness of this forlorn place in a similar way.

A mild hike of five miles or so will get you from the trailhead to the buttes, and assumes you will circle and climb around on both, with a moderate excursion into the arroyos to the east and south of the east butte, and a return to the trailhead. More exploring will, obviously, add additional miles. A minimum 4 miles is required for an efficient hike to east butte and back.

Getting There

The Pawnee Buttes are literally in the middle of nowhere, so it would be best to come prepared with a detailed map of Weld County roads and a good sense of direction. There are abundant ways to get to the buttes. Listed here are the main three ways, assuming a start point in the Colorado I-25 urban corridor. If you are coming from anywhere else (Cheyenne, Sterling, Scottsbluff, etc.) these directions might not help you much. From any direction except due north, you will use Colorado Hwy 14 as a southern baseline. Coming from the Colorado I-25 corridor, go to Ft. Collins and take the Colorado Hwy 14 turnoff toward Ault. Pass through Ault and continue to Briggsdale.

1) From Briggsdale: Briggsdale is more present on the map than it is in real life. Coming east on Hwy 14, you will see a brown "attraction" sign for Crow Valley Recreation Area, directing you to turn north on WCR 77. If you take this turn, you will be on the Pawnee Pioneer Trails Scenic Highway, which is signed with blue Scenic Highway signs throughout. Follow the scenic highway north for many miles before the scenic highway begins to take you on many turns leading eventually to a National Forest and Grasslands sign denoting Pawnee Buttes area. Follow the rough trail/road into the area and to the buttes trailhead and overlook. The trail/road is passable in a passenger car.

2) From the Keota turnoff: This is the most popular route for direct access to the buttes, I'm told. The Keota turnoff is WCR 103. You will turn north onto this road from Hwy 14. It will take you through the hamlet of Keota, then on a maze of county roads to Pawnee Buttes. I am told this route is signed with "Pawnee Buttes" arrow signs, but I have not been this way.

3) From New Raymer: From New Raymer on Hwy 14, turn north on WCR 129. This route is also signed with "Pawnee Buttes" arrow signs. Turn left onto WCR 110 at an abandoned (and still standing in Spring 2007) homestead and follow the road as it jags south, then west, then north, then west again, until you see the Pawnee Buttes NF&G area sign. Follow the rough trail/road into the area and to the buttes trailhead and overlook. The trail/road is passable in a passenger car.

I cannot stress enough how valuable it is to have a detailed map, sportsman's atlas, etc., when roaming the high plains. Many roads in this area are dead-ends and some only serve private ranches. Also, if you have National Geographic Topol Software, you can use the finder function to search "Pawnee Buttes," then backtrack from there and print an area map.

Red Tape

There are no fees to view or hike to Pawnee Buttes.

From March 1 to June 30, there is a seasonal closure of the escarpment west of the buttes due to nesting raptors. Hikers from the Boulder area will be used to this concept. Hiking to the buttes, you will use a trail that passes between two escarpments through an arroyo. This is okay, just try not to explore too closely to the escarpment.

Please obey the seasonal closure on the escarpment, even if others are present there (illegally). Tourists there have said, "Well I saw a bunch of people up there so I thought it was okay." Those of you who value birds of prey will yearn for a ticket book on some days. Since the area is sporadically patrolled, the seasonal closure is almost entirely enforced at the whim of those using the area. If you see another person climbing on or around the escarpment during this time, please hector him or her if you value prairie falcons, golden eagles, etc.

The surrounding grassland is a checkerboard of private and public land. Signs near the buttes on the north side of WCR 110 warn "Keep Out." Please obey any signs that admonish against trespassing.

Alternatively, landowners have intentionally or otherwise failed to sign most land in the area. The east butte, for example, is on private property, yet visitors are welcome. An NF&G sign along the trail warns you that you are entering private property and asks you to "Respect property owner's rights." Please do so. If a sign has been erected to keep you out (there was none in spring 2007), please keep out. If the owner is present and asks you to leave, do not argue. There is a well-established trail from the NF&G land onto this private land and to the east butte. While a guest on this land, please treat it with respect and pick up any litter tourists might have "accidentally" dropped.

There are no fees to camp on the grassland, except at Crow Valley (see "Camping," below.) No camping at the trailhead and within 200 feet of streams, trails, windmills, etc. Standard NF&G rules apply. You can obtain a detailed map of who owns what at NF&G offices, otherwise, please establish a campsite on unsigned land, and not amongst cattle nor near windmills (which draw cattle).

Camping

Camping is available for free on the grassland following NF&G rules. A limited number of improved camping sites are available for a fee at NF&G-owned Crow Valley, north of Briggsdale. Water is available at Crow Valley during warm months.

If camping on the grassland, please remember to bring water. There are few and far-between streams running on the high plains, most of which are used extensively by cattle: filter and drink at your own risk.

Please obey any fire bans that are in effect at the time. Even if there is no fire ban, should you build one, please tend it vigilantly. The high plains are notoriously windy and dry, making them prone to an outbreak of wildfire if you are not careful.

Unimproved camping near a stream, a half-dozen willows, and pea-sized rocks from which a safe fire pit can be easily excavated is available near the corner of WCR 129 and WCR 94, just north of New Raymer, on the south bank of the stream and east side of the road.

Please do not hack off any branches of the dozen or so trees in the area for fire building. Collection of winter-down branches is acceptable.

Consider natural hazards when picking a place to camp. Many of the arroyos will fill up quickly in a thunderstorm, and many scenic ridges will draw lightning during same.

