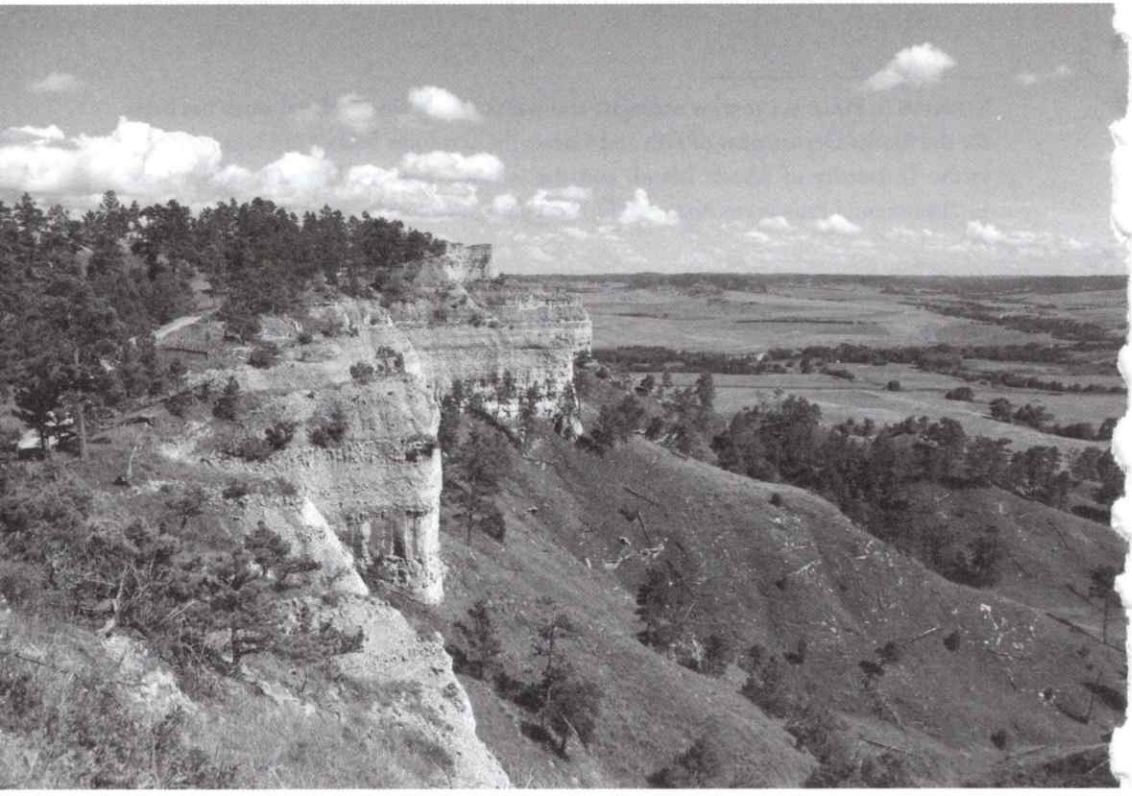
Nebraska, Anyone?

An avid hiker navigates around Jeep tracks and high prairie

Lisa Ballard



In July 2023, a professional acquaintance invited me to hike in Nebraska, where she'd recently done some work. I had never been there. I thought, *Really? Nebraska doesn't have any mountains.* When Susie Dunlea mentioned it, I thought of cornfields and prairie, far, and flat.

Yet Nebraska, I learned, is not low. The average elevation is 2,600 feet above sea level. Panorama Point, the highest natural point in the state, sounded impressive at 5,429 feet, which is higher than most of New Hampshire's White Mountains. The elevations piqued my curiosity. Maybe there's more to Nebraska than most hikers realize. Panorama Point seemed like a must.

"Don't go to Panorama Point," Susie said. "It's just a marker in the middle of a bison pasture."

I wondered what could possibly qualify as a satisfying hiking adventure if the highest point in the state was little more than a rise of land in a field. But I decided to go anyway. Why not? I had the time, and after talking to Susie, I was curious. The idea of hiking in Nebraska appealed to my sense of exploration. At the very least, I would see some new turf.

"Aren't you going?" I asked Susie.

"No, but you'll like it," she promised. "It's something different. Kerri will be there for part of your trip." Kerri Rempp, director of Discover Northwest Nebraska, was another work friend. Surely she could show me some sights.

I learned through my Google searches that one of state's most popular hiking spots is Chimney Rock. I decided to go there first. Located in the North Platte River valley in West Bayard, this 325-foot-tall phallic spire made of volcanic ash, sandstone, and clay delighted more than 350,000 emigrants traveling the Oregon Trail in the mid-1800s. It was the first hint that they had successfully crossed most of the Great Plains.

But Chimney Rock would not delight me. The original trails—paved sidewalks really—were closed from years of hundred-degree summers and subzero winters. The new paths were not scheduled to open for another three weeks. The impressive spire stood a mere 1.5 miles from the parking lot. So close, yet unattainable. "Chimney Rock is not really a hike anyway," I consoled myself, as I drove west toward Scotts Bluff, another oft-mentioned hiking spot among the handful of Nebraska's best.

Scotts Bluff is a cliff band within the 3,000-acre Scotts Bluff National Monument. It forms one side of Mitchell Pass, another landmark for

This view from the Turtle Rock Trail was worth the small inconvenience of dodging Jeep tours in Fort Robinson State Park. LISA BALLARD

The author found the best hikes at landmarks in western Nebraska. LARRY GARLAND/ APPALACHIAN MOUNTAIN CLUB

westward-bound settlers in covered wagon trains. I grew skeptical when I saw the paved pathways and tourists wearing everything but hiking shoes.

"Beware of rattlesnakes," warned a ranger. "We've seen a lot of them this year."

That was something I hadn't considered. Born and raised in the Northeast, I had once seen a timber rattlesnake curled upon a decaying log by Lake George, New York. Most of what I had encountered were garter snakes. But on the Great Plains, prairie rattlers (*Crotalus viridis*) were common.

Scotts Bluff (4,649 feet) marked the end of a long, 800-foot-tall ridge of sandstone and volcanic ash. Geologically, it isn't a mountain. Mountains are land that has been pushed up. Scotts Bluff and the surrounding island of promontories are remnants of a much higher ancestral plain. As layers of sediments deposited by wind, water, and volcanic eruptions eroded away, the remaining buttes wore down at a much slower rate, which is why they now rise from the rolling prairie like a mountain mirage.

Starting at the visitor center, I planned to hike to the top via the Saddle Rock Trail, which was more of a sidewalk than a trail. As the route climbed across the grassy foothills toward the sandstone cliffs, I wondered if a paved

path qualified as a hike. Spiky yucca and sunny Mexican hats (a prairie coneflower) speckled the calf-high grass on either side. At least it felt good to move my legs and ascend something.

Suddenly, a lurching movement beside the trail caught my eye. "A snake!" I panicked, quickly backing away, but I heard no warning rattle. After a moment, I stepped cautiously toward the rustling grass to find a painted turtle about the size of my hand, foraging for insects. It immediately contracted into its shell as I approached. I moved it off the footpath and continued my climb.

About three-quarters of a mile from the parking lot, the route rounded the end of a rock wall, continuing into a shallow canyon. Then it turned upward more earnestly hugging the cliffs. The soil became rockier, and the vegetation thinned.

A quarter-mile later, the trail veered into a 100-foot-long tunnel. I paused as a red-tailed hawk screeched from a thermal above me, and several unconcerned pigeons peered at me from the entrance of the tunnel.

At the far end of the tunnel, the path veered sharply left, and there it ended. The rest of the trail was blocked by a recent landslide. A haphazard web of surveyor's tape prevented hikers from continuing to the top. Disappointed, I turned around, aborting my second hiking attempt in Nebraska.

I figured I had one more option. My next stop was Fort Robinson State Park, near Crawford. The park published a trail map with 130 miles of trails for "hikers, bikers, and horseback riders." The topography on the map looked more like breaks and badlands than prairie. If any place in Nebraska could appeal to hikers, Fort Robinson would surely be it.

Kerri met me at the information kiosk in the center of the historic fort. From there, I followed her by car to the start of the Turtle Rock Trail, which she considered one of the best hikes in the park.

"Aren't you coming with me?" I asked Kerri, shouldering my pack.

"No, I prefer to do it by Jeep," she replied. "I'll meet you in town later for a beer and a burger." Her answer confused me. A sign at the trailhead clearly said, "No motor vehicles." A real trail—unpaved—lay before me. Anxious to finally see a slice of Nebraska backcountry, I waved goodbye to Kerri, though her Jeep comment niggled at me.

The start of the Turtle Rock Trail was actually two parallel footpaths resembling an overgrown two-track. It climbed moderately at first, but after a half-mile, it turned downright vertical, and the two-track became one recently

graded dirt path about the width of a one-lane road. Instead of hiking boot treads, tire tracks imprinted the newly exposed soil. I figured the tire tracks were from the grader. Maybe that's how Nebraskans do trail work, I thought.

Suddenly three Jeeps approached me, coming down the trail, filled with happy tourists. Surprised, I quickly stepped aside onto the steep, crumbly hillside. The first two Jeeps barely slowed to pass me, but the third stopped.

"Are you lost?" asked a park ranger.

"No. I was told this is a nice hiking loop," I replied.

The ranger gave me a thumbs-up then accelerated downward to catch up to the other two jeeps.

Turned out the Turtle Rock Trail was closed to motor vehicles operated by the public, but the state park officials offer Jeep tours on it as a revenue source and recreational opportunity. Though the rest of my hike had some nice views along the clifftops, it was entirely along an unpaved *road*. Two more Jeeps passed by before I closed the loop back at the trailhead.

That evening, I packed up my hiking gear and resigned myself to seeing a few historic sites and then heading home. Hiking—off pavement, away from civilization—in Nebraska was a misnomer.

One of those historic sites was the Hudson-Meng Education and Research Center in the Oglala National Grasslands, 20 miles from Crawford. The center houses one of the most significant paleo-archeological discoveries in North America. Shortly after the last Ice Age receded from this part of the Great Plains, about 14,000 years ago, about 600 *Bison antiquus* (a giant predecessor of today's *Bison bison*) mysteriously died in that spot, leaving a giant bone pile. Their bones reveal ancient prairie giants that were 7.5 feet tall, 15 feet long, and weighing 3,500 pounds.

After touring the Hudson-Meng center, Kerri suggested I hike from there to the Toadstool Geologic Park.

"It's one of my favorite hikes, about three miles one way," said Kerri. "Just follow the brown fence posts with the yellow paint on top."

I wasn't interested. I had struck out on Nebraska hikes, and Kerri, who had suggested the Jeep track, didn't have a lot of credibility with me regarding hiking routes.

"I don't have any of my hiking stuff with me," I said. No pack. No water. No map. But I was wearing my Lowa hiking shoes, hiking shorts, and a technical sun hoody—my standard summer traveling get-up.

After more urging, I agreed to go if Kerri would meet me at the other end and take me back to my car, so I didn't need to hike out and back. I expected

Visitors thread their way along an ancient river valley between sandstone mounds in Toadstool Geologic Park. LISA BALLARD

to be underwhelmed again. At least I would get some exercise, and it was kind of Kerri to give up her favorite hike to get me back to my car. What's more, a car drop would have taken over an hour, and the day was already waning.

The faint trail started at the door of the research center, heading across a pasture. Several Black Angus stopped grazing to watch me pass. Tall grass tickled my bare legs as I crested a slight rise on what seemed like a cow path rather than a footpath.

A few steps later, an ocean of grass engulfed me. I felt alone and exposed, like hiking solo in the alpine. The landscape had a similar windswept, massive feel. Grasshoppers scattered in front of me with each footfall, as I carefully followed the fence post trail markers. There were no other landmarks for guidance, and I felt dangerously unprepared if I got lost.

A mile into the hike, I came to white sandstone breaks that looked like underwater sand carved by waves. Maybe they were millions of years ago. The route dropped into one of these ravines, then the fence posts disappeared. Now what?

I spotted an old boot print among a maze of deer prints in the sandy soil, and I trusted it was a clue where to ascend the opposite side of the ravine.

Erosion of volcanic debris over eons made these mushroom-shaped rocks in northwestern Nebraska. LISA BALLARD

With relief, I spotted another fence post above me as I climbed a steep crumbly hump, and soon I was treading across the ocean of grass again, following the markers like a line of buoys.

A half-mile farther, I came to a junction. According to a wind-battered sign, both trails lead to the Toadstool Geologic Park and forbid motor vehicles. One continued across the prairie while the other dipped steeply into another ravine with equally steep, aggressive waves of hardened sediment on the other side. I chose the ravine, figuring a Jeep or all-terrain vehicle couldn't possibly navigate such a challenging, vertical route. The ravine walls rose at least 25 feet.

I dropped to the bottom of it, where now the walls looked about 50 feet tall. The fence posts disappeared again, but the trail direction was obvious. There was no way out except the way I had come or along the mucky gully floor.

A half-mile farther, I spotted a marker atop a tuft of grass. I came to a T intersection. The trail turned left, continuing through the ever-deeper chasm.

The walls looked like rock dunes atop a cliffy labyrinth. The trail now followed a streambed, which luckily was running only a trickle.

A little while later, the landscape morphed into a canyonland and then a slot canyon. Walking became more difficult as gumbo, a pale gray mud, caked to the bottom of my shoes like gunky mortar. I nervously thought, If it rains, there's no place to escape. But the chance of rain in July was slim, and the sky was blue.

I followed the streambed through the slot canyon. Powerful, flowing water had worn the rock into smooth, rounded walls. Striations in the bulges and curves resembled artful sculptures carved by the periodic hydraulics that rushed through the sandstone gorge.

Then I saw it: a giant toadstool-shaped rock on top of a low sandstone ridge. The farther I went, the more rock toadstools appeared. Some stood alone. Others were clumped together like mushroom forests. Yet others lined up like top-heavy sentinels watching over their surroundings. I felt like Alice when she stepped through the looking glass, except that this Wonderland was all rock in shades of white and beige.

Eventually the mushrooms petered out along a cliffy band of slick rock. Then the trail descended down a sandstone rib to a trailhead and campground. Kerri waited for me in her car.

"How was your hike?" she asked.

"Unique. Otherworldly!" I blurted. "Fascinating. Quite an adventure for only a three-miler." I felt awed by what I had just experienced.

When friends ask me where I trekked last summer, I know they expect me to say something like the Andes or the Himalaya, knowing that I usually travel far away. When I tell them Nebraska, they look at me like I'm a little crazy. Maybe I am. After all, I accepted an invitation to go hiking in Nebraska. However, sometimes the wackiest notions provide the most memorable adventures.

Longtime Appalachian Mountain Club member Lisa Ballard writes about her adventures for magazines and websites when she is not climbing or schussing down a mountain. She lives in Red Lodge, Montana, and Chateaugay Lake, New York. She is the author of thirteen books on hiking and the outdoors and has won many awards for writing and photography. Visit her at LisaBallardOutdoors.com.