**Black Mesa, OK, 4,973 ft. – December 24, 2019, HP #31: There is a very pleasant lonely untamed feeling to the Black Mesa Preserve.**

At dawn we woke up, and before 8 am (Mountain Standard Time) we started our 4.2 mile hike to Oklahoma’s highest point. The trailhead is located three and a half miles south of the Colorado and Oklahoma line, roughly at the terminus of a huge volcanically formed table top ridge. This plateau, known as Black Mesa, begins in south eastern Colorado extends diagonally across the north east corner of New Mexico and slightly into the panhandle of Oklahoma ending not far from the confluence of the Cimarron River and Carrizo Creek. Black Mesa’s name comes from the layer of black lava rock that covered the plateau centuries ago.

The first 2.2 miles of the hiking route head primarily west toward New Mexico following an abandoned and over grown jeep trail. The arid terrain is rugged, and desert like – reminding one of landscape seen in old Western movies. Along the way are green painted metal arrows indicating the route. The trail makes a ninety degree turn to the south at mile 2.2 pointing directly at the north wall of the mesa, and the old jeep trail can be seen switching back and forth to the table top above. Along the way dark pumice stones are found in abundance.

Since we began hiking at the terminus of the mesa we did not fully comprehend its grand size which extends three miles, as the crow flies, to the Oklahoma New Mexico line, 10 more straight-line miles northwest from New Mexico to Colorado, and as much as another 40 miles into Colorado generally gaining elevation in that direction of travel. In reference to Black Mesa Summitpost.org states “The USGS lists the highest point in Colorado at an elevation of 5,715', however, this point flows directly up to the Mesa de Maya” - which stretches to an elevation of 6,837 feet. The mesa also becomes wider en route to its starting point ranging from 8 miles at its widest to as narrow as a half mile. The basalt lava flow which forms the ridge is thought to have originated from a volcano named Piney Mountain 65 miles north and west of Oklahoma.

The hike gains 600 feet along the switchbacks. As the trail tops out a shortgrass prairie is encountered. Having reached the table top the route proceeds south for another half mile before heading south west across the prairie. About a quarter-mile shy of the Sooners State high point an obelisk came into view indicating the end of the hike.

There is a very pleasant lonely untamed feeling to the Black Mesa Preserve. As such it is not surprising that the area enjoys an abundance of wildlife ranging from mountain lions to horned lizards. Antelope are common, and deer can be spotted grazing the sides of the mesa. The area has also been described as a birder's paradise with a variety of birds including golden eagles frequenting the area. The variety of wildlife corresponds with the weather spans, as the terminus of the mesa is not only the tallest point in Oklahoma but also both the coldest and the driest. During the summer months temperatures can easily exceed 100 Fahrenheit and hikers are encouraged to return to their vehicles by 10 am.

The afternoon before our hike it was close to 4pm when we left Mount Sunflower, KS, and began the 200 mile drive to the Black Mesa Preserve. This 1600 acre nature preserve is operated by the Oklahoma Tourism and Recreation Department in conjunction with Black Mesa State Park. The preserve protects about sixty percent of the Oklahoma portion of the mesa. The drive went fast to Pritchett Colorado. However just past Pritchett we had to exit the highway and get on gravel country roads and it was dark. My printed directions put us on CR 10, which we found easily even though at first it wasn’t labeled. Then it put us on CR 8, to CR C and from there we were supposed to encounter CR 5. Well CR 5 doesn’t exist, but we did find a CR 55, and in the dark as I got out of my truck to read the tiny sign, illuminating it with my headlamp I noticed a second marker on the same pole pointing east which read “OKLA”. “OKLA” did not register with me immediately, but as I got into the truck and began to explain to my wife what I had learned the meaning of “Oklahoma” stuck me.

Soon, within a mile, we crossed the state line, and the road turned to pavement. After 40 miles, or so, from Pritchett CO, we came to the Black Mesa Bed and Breakfast and then highway 325, and I realized we had overshot the trailhead entrance for the Nature Preserve. However, as we turned around and drove back past the Bed and Breakfast heading back to primitive camping near the state line we saw a sign for Black Mesa Nature Preserve. We laughed because in the direction we had come from Colorado the Preserve wasn’t marked with a sign. All in all we only drove an extra 10 miles, which in the dark on unfamiliar country roads in the middle of nowhere was acceptable. It wasn’t much after 9pm when we pulled into the trailhead parking area, giving us the knowledge of where the hike the next day would begin. Nearby we found a primitive spot to park for the night and we set up our bedrolls in the back of the truck. Temps were in the 40’s Fahrenheit.

After a goodnights rest under amazing nighttime skies, and better than the night before in a Colorado motel, the next morning we reached the highpoint in an hour and a half. The eight foot tall obelisk granite marker confirmed we were at the highest natural point in Oklahoma and informed us that Colorado is 4.7 miles to the north, Kansas 53 miles to the east (and slightly north), Texas 31 miles to the south, and New Mexico only 1299 feet to the west.

We hung out for about an hour posing for Christmas Eve photos in our Santa caps, and eating an early lunch before returning the 4.2 miles. When we covered the distance down from the summit and reached the bend in the trail, two miles from the highpoint, we soon spotted farm buildings and a house tucked into a hill to the northeast. The angle had caused the homestead to be out of sight on the ascent. The return trip took about the same amount of time as did the climb.

Around 12:30 pm we were on the road heading to Santa Fe NM 260 miles away. Between Las Vegas NM, and Santa Fe the sun began to set and snow began to fall.

**Eagle Mountain, MN, 2,301 ft. – July 10, 2020, HP #32: The bug problem was as bad as I have ever had to deal with, causing me to not enjoy this hike.**

It was a long day having been up since 4:30 am. Add to that a trip that was twice as long as it should be because my flight from Salt Lake City to Minneapolis connected through Dallas, TX. Tag on five hours of driving, after waiting for the inevitable travel setbacks, and you understand why the day was long.

Arriving in the North Star State began with my luggage not arriving. Next I had to wait over an hour inline to get my already booked and reserved rental car, only to walk away and realize they had made a mistake with the charges. Before correcting the rental car error, I checked in with the baggage claim people and was told my bag would arrive on the next flight from Dallas, in about two hours. I always try to pack my carry-on with essentials in case my bag is lost, but I was relieved, to know I would not have to attempt this four high point trip without my tent and sleeping bag. During the wait I was able to sort out the rental car issues, and eat my dinner which I had packed in my carry on.

Getting out of Minneapolis was easy enough, and soon enough, albeit two hours behind schedule, I was on Interstate 35 heading north to Duluth 165 miles away. From Duluth I followed highway 61 along the west shore of Lake Superior for 92 miles, in the dark, to the tiny town of Lutsen within the Superior National Forest. Twenty or so miles north of Lutsen I found the Eagle Mountain trailhead. It was about midnight by the time I found a place to camp, and climbed inside my tent away from the legions of mosquitoes.

The next morning I was at the trailhead by 5:20 am, and I quickly grabbed a self-issued permit filling it out inside the car. It was impossible to stand still and not be attacked by hordes of mosquitoes – for that reason I had also eaten my breakfast inside the car. The trail heads north, and within twenty minutes of hiking a sign informed me that I was entering the BWCA Wilderness; a million acre wilderness area within the Superior National Forest, and home to Minnesota’s highest geographical point. The BWCA is bordered on its northern side by the Canada/USA line located only fourteen miles due north from the summit of Eagle Mountain - making it the northern most highpoint in the lower 48. BWCA stands for Boundary Waters Canoe Area, and about twenty percent of the area is made up of water consisting of 1,100 lakes and many miles of flowing water, as such the mosquitoes thrive here. Thanks to the wilderness designation of the BWCA it contains the largest area of uncut forest in the eastern portion of the United States.

Continuing along to the north, the area became full of bogs with wooden plank walkways making the passage of them easy. Soon enough the trail arrived at Whale Lake, about two miles into the three and a half mile (one-way distance) hike where the track turns to the west and heads northwest along the edge of the lake. I soon reached the north end of the lake from which point the highpoint of Minnesota is under a mile away as the trail gains about 400 vertical feet making it is the only steep section. Here the trail splits with the right fork heading to Brule Lake, and the left to the high point. It took me about 20 more minutes from the fork to the summit.

Just before the wooded summit a nice view to the west opened up, and for just a few minutes a slight breeze picked up. The light wind presented me with a brief opportunity to remove the mosquito head net I was wearing allowing me to remove my shirt and undershirt, and replace the shirt and head net just before the relentless mosquito attack returned as the breeze subsided. Earlier I had used a bandana over my hat to protect the top of my head, along with the back of my neck, from the insects, but heading up form Whale Lake it had slipped off, and so I know replaced it with my undershirt.

At the viewless summit I found a weathered and worn commemorative plaque attached to a good sized rock outcropping. The inscription informed me this point was determined to be Minnesota’s highpoint in 1961, and that “the igneous rock composing Eagle Mountain is as old as the Duluth Gabbro, which geologist estimate at over a billion years in age”. Around the rock outcropping was thick forest. With the constant attack having gained momentum I hurriedly signed the summit register, and managed to take a couple of photos, before quickly heading down.

Very soon I crossed paths with my missing bandana. I exchanged my undershirt with it, allowing me to turn the undershirt into a fly swatter of sorts. At times I ran as the bugs were almost unbearable. I returned to the car at 8:00 am, having not seen another person since Lutsen the day before.

The mosquitoes were horrible, and many followed me into the car forcing me to leave the empty parking lot immediately and drive with the windows down to keep them off me. The bug problem was as bad as I have ever had to deal with, causing me to not enjoy this hike. A few days later I noticed dozens of mosquitoes bites along my outside forearms where my shirt sleeve placket openings allowed them in. In protecting myself from my attackers, I had overlooked those two areas (left arm, right arm) as they are not easily seen.

**Mount Arvon, MI, 1,979 ft. – July 10, 2020, HP #33: The bug problem was as bad as I have ever had to deal with, causing me to not enjoy this hike.**