**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: I located a seemingly new trailhead announcing Mount Arvon.**

The upper peninsula of Michigan is home to the Huron Mountains which consist of a collection of privately owned wilderness holdings bordered in the south and west by Highway 41 and in the north and east by Lake Superior. In terms of scope, this mountain range encompass so much remote forest land that it rivals many national parks. Indeed, according to Wikipedia “in the late 1950s, the Huron Mountains were a candidate for becoming a [national park](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National_park).” The core of the range is off limits to the public as it is owned by the exclusive and mysterious Huron Mountain Club, which some claim was influential in undermining the National Park proposal. Interestingly, Google maps can find the Huron Mountain Club, and a satellite view reveals a line of homes situated between the Pine River and the shores of Lake Superior. However, Google will not give driving directions to the club, stating “sorry, we could not calculate driving directions from [fill in the blank] to Huron Mountain Club, Big Bay, MI 49808”

Mt. Arvon, Michigan’s highest point resides with in the Huron Mountains but luckily is not owned by the Huron Mountain Club. Situated 14 miles south of Lake Superior, 16 miles south and west of the Huron Mountain Club headquarters, and 13.5 miles due east of the town of L’Anse public access is granted by its private owner Meade Paper. Along the labyrinth of dirt roads leading to Mt. Arvon are a series of diamond shaped metal signs pointing the way. Before those markers existed this highpoint had the reputation of one of the most difficult to locate. It is only about 10 miles on the backroads but even so, I made certain I had plenty of gas before leaving the paved roads in pursuit of this highpoint.

Early the same day I had hiked to the highest point in Minnesota, and my trip plan didn’t require I reach the summit of Michigan today, but I did want to get within striking distance of it. Tracing around the west edge of Lake Superior, then through Wisconsin below the south side of the same lake requires 350 miles of driving from the Eagle Mountain trailhead to the base of Mount Arvon. As such it wasn’t until about 6pm when I located a seemingly new trailhead announcing Mount Arvon.

With plenty of daylight remaining, I decided to get ahead of schedule and reach my thirty-third US State highpoint that evening. The hiking trail sign announced a distance of 1.75 miles to the summit which I covered in half an hour causing me to question that distance. The hike through the woods was pleasant and even past by a small waterfall. At one point it crossed the road to the summit. It ended at a large green sign, at the top of the mountain parking lot, stating “Welcome to Mt. Arvon, Michigan’s Highest Natural Point”. On each of the signs support posts was a diamond shaped sign, one pointing to the summit, the other indicating a view point. I headed left to the summit.

The summit contained a metal picnic table, a mail box, a highpointer bench, and a diamond shaped summit marker. I also discovered a USGS benchmark set in concrete. Before heading over to the view point, I took several pictures and signed the summit register found within the mailbox. It was a Friday evening, yet I had the place to myself.

Apparently the viewpoint is manufactured as trees had to be cleared to accommodate the scene northwest to Keweenaw Bay and the community of Baraga. Prior to 1982 Mt. Arvon was not known to be the highest natural point of the Great Lakes State, with nearby Mt. Curwood at 1,978 feet holding the title.

For variety, on the descent, I decided to walk down the road rather than retracing my steps. As soon as I got out of the slight breeze blowing over the summit, the bugs began their attack. As such I had to switch to running putting my total car to car time, including the break on the peak, at sixty-five minutes.

**Timm’s Hill, WI, 1,951 ft. – July 11, 2020, HP #34: Timm’s Hill is a mere thirty one miles from the precise center of the Northern half of the Western Hemisphere.**

The night before reaching Timm’s Hill, I camped in the Ottawa National Forest of Michigan, and the bugs were pure torture, very similar to what I experienced on Eagle Mountain, as well as the descent of Mount Arvon. Ergo, the bugless environment of The Badger States highpoint was a welcome break from that battle.

Timm’s Hill is contained within a county park bearing the same name positioned in the north-central part of Wisconsin about 110 miles from Lake Superior’s Chequamegon Bay -- it is the only US State highpoint within a county park. Timm’s hill gains it etymology from Timothy Gahan who owned a logging camp a couple hundred yards north of the highpoint at the sagaciously named lake known as, you guessed it, Timm’s Lake. The entire area is heavily forested with northern hardwood, and was last logged in the 1940s, with the county park finalized in 1983.

Located in a charming very rural area with a latitude and longitude of 45.45100°N / 90.1954°W Timm’s Hill is a mere thirty one miles (north by northwest at 346.5 degrees to be exact) from the precise center of the Northern half of the Western Hemisphere and exactly halfway between the North Pole and the Equator. As such, I’m sure there must be some claim to highpoint fame for its location.

I arrived at the county park at 8:20 am, not long after it opened. Entering the park from county road RR I encounters a pickup truck blocking my way. The owner, it turns out, was there also seeking the state highpoint, and had stopped at a map of the Ice Age Trail thinking it might lead to his destination. I assured him the trail he sought was further down the road at the parking area.

At the parking area Randy (as the truck owner is called) and I chatted for a bit comparing our highpointing resumes. He start out on the quarter mile hike, up a 140 foot hill, to the highpoint before I did. When I arrived I found him atop the ladder of the metal tower which is the taller of the two towers located on the summit. I asked him if I should join him, but he said two people on the tower at once wouldn’t be a good idea. So I climbed the staircase of the twenty foot shorter wooden tower, and took in the views from there biding my time until I’d climb the seventy foot tower.

At the base of the wooden tower, is a mail box containing a summit register but without a working pen I was not able to leave my John Hancock. So I snapped a few photos of Randy on his tower descent instead. Shortly I got my turn to climb the polished rungs of the exposed ladder which I took on in Birkenstock sandals. Certainly it was a dangerous thrill, and we were both amazed that the public was allowed to climb that rather tall and perilous ladder.

With thrill seeking completed, I next took photos at the mail box and under a sign which read “Timm’s Hill, Wisconsin’s Highest Natural Point, Elev. 1951.5 FT”. Timm’s Hill was titled the state’s confirmed highest natural point following a 1962 survey.

**Hawkeye Point, IA, 1,670 ft. – July 11, 2020, HP #35: Apparently the highpoint was not named until 1998.**

I was not in a hurry yet I thought I’d make it to Hawkeye Point in the early afternoon. The drive would take me 190 miles from Timm’s Hill, WI to Minneapolis and then an additional 190 miles to the Sterler family farm located about four miles from the Minnesota/Iowa line, and home of Iowa’s highest land point.

As it turned out the drive took about two and a half hours longer than anticipated. First I took my time getting groceries in Hudson, WI because I was tired of driving and walking around the store was a welcome change of pace. Next, after passing Minneapolis and dealing with aggressive drives along the more populated sections of highway 169 I needed another break by the time I reached the Minnesota Valley MnDOT rest stop located about fourteen miles north of Saint Peter.

About the time I left the rest stop getting back on highway 169 it started to rain. I had the radio of the rental car tuned into a local classic rock station and soon the music was interrupted by a serve weather warning. Several cities within the warning area were mentioned including Mankato and Saint Peter, but being unfamiliar with the area it wasn’t until the report mentioned mile markers on highway 169 that I realized I was driving toward a possible tornado.

Soon the rain became so heavy that it was no longer safe to continue driving. Prudently, I joined a line of several other travelers who had pulled over on the shoulder to wait out the winds and downpour. Stopped I consulted my road atlas and learned I was very near Saint Peter, and within 14 miles of Mankato.

As I waited, I worried that nearby trees would fall on the car, and also that the rain might turn to hail. Having gained my bearings I was now able to rely on the detailed coverage the radio was providing. It warned that if a tornado reached you that you should not wait it out in a car, but seek a building or lay down in the ditch and there were no building insight. Continuing to wait, soon enough, slightly after 3pm, it was reported that a tornado had touched down two and a half miles northwest of the Mankato golf course. The tornado was on the ground for less than 10 minutes, and I later learned it had a maximum width of 125 yards with peak winds of 80 miles per hour.

That second R and R, at the highway rest stop mentioned early turned out to be very fortunate indeed, because without it I would have been 15 or so miles further south on highway 169 putting me pretty much in the eye of the storm. When the rain slowed down, I ventured into Saint Peter, and pulled the car under a gas station canopy until the radio indicated the storm was no longer a threat. Luckily no hail resulted, and the trees around where I had pulled over on the highway had stayed standing.

Leaving Saint Peter sections of the road were covered in huge puddles and I hoped going through them would not damage or stall the engine. As I continued traveling southwest several miles out of Mankato the highway became dry indicating the storm had not reached this far south. And after what felt like a long time, around 5:30 pm, I arrived in Iowa, past a small campground, and pulled into the Sterler farm with no one else around.

The highpoint looked like an entirely flat piece of land, with a silo and a corn crib off to one side, several “summit” indicators in the middle, and off to the right a huge corn field with very tall green corn stalks galore. In front of the silo stood a painted board with two round cut outs allowing visitors to insert their faces and be photographed as the figures of Grant Wood’s painting American Gothic. A nice observation deck is attached to the silo overlooking an informational kiosk with its flag pole flying the American flag. There is even a picnic table and an antique farm machinery display. The lawn was nicely mowed.

I used a tripod to get photos of myself in front of a stone monument labeled Sterler Farm and inscribed with the outline of Iowa with Hawkeye point marked and labeled with its name and elevation. I also took photos of a few of the directional signs mounted on tall posts pointing to each of the other forty nine state highpoints – namely my home state highpoint Kings Peak, and Timm’s Hill where I had come from. I also photographed the classic tile mosaic, associated with the site, of the compass rose with the state outline in the center.

Iowa’s highpoint is located a stone’s throw from the home on the Sterler family farm, and according to Wikipedia the land was donated to the Osceola County “with the stipulation that the land be turned into a park”, and I would say the county has done just that. The park is very nicely done and very appealing for a highpoint in spite of the absence of majestic mountains. I don’t know when the land was donated but apparently the highpoint was not named until 1998.

**Charles Mound, IL, 1,235 ft. – August 1, 2020, HP #36: The top of the hill is only a quarter mile from the Illinois/Wisconsin border to the north.**

Sunday I had a rental car reserved for 7:30 pm, but similar to Minneapolis a few weeks earlier the line to pick up the car was huge and it took an hour before I got it. From Chicago O'Hare International Airport we drove 150 miles (2.5 hours) via I-90 and US 20 to Charles Mound highest point in Illinois.

July 20, 2020, two days prior my wife and I had flown to Chicago from Utah. The next day we spent looking around the windy city. One thing that really impressed us, and that we agreed with, was how much more respectfully and seriously folks in Chicago seemed to take the ongoing Coronavirus pandemic then what we were used to in our home State. While in the city we took the opportunity to visit the Willis Tower (formerly and more commonly known as the Sears Town) were we took the sky deck tour. It is interesting to note that the Willis Tower rises 1,450 feet, and has a ground elevation of 583 feet. Meaning the top of the Willis Tower is at an elevation of 2,033 feet making it is the highest manmade point in the state placing it nearly 800 feet higher than the natural highpoint of Charles Mound.

Charles Mound is part of a farm on private property. In fact the owners of Charles Mound have their home on the mound just a few hundred yards from the USGS markers. The region is rolling farmland and quiet country roads where we discovered corn growing abundantly this time of the year. The owners are kind enough to allow public visits but they set the dates and have a reputation of being very stick about only their set dates which typically are the first full weekends of June, July, August and September. In addition the owners do not allow driving up to the highpoint but instead allow visitors to walk in on a farming track about a mile in length but not after dark. Pets, thank goodness, are also not allow.

Even though Charles Mound is a gentle hill I was surprised with its size, finding it rather large and a landmark I was able to pick out from several miles away. It is not just a simple flat spot like Hawkeye or Panorama Point as I had anticipated. Charles Mound is located within what is referred to as the Driftless Area a region that includes southwestern Wisconsin, southeastern Minnesota, northeastern Iowa, and the extreme northwestern corner of Illinois. Theory has it that unlike the rest of the region the Driftless area was not flattened by glacial activity eons ago. In addition to rolling hills the area also has some limestone bluffs and the pleasant scenery is more than just flat farm land. The Driftless Area's plants parallel the Great Lakes region rather than Midwest.

There were several cars parked along the road when we arrived an hour behind schedule due to the delay picking up the rental car. At the farming road, leading to the highpoint, we encountered an open gate and a hand painted sign asking visitors to “not block the driveway”. As we walked up the overgrown road several groups were coming down and one lone hiker passed us on his way up.

We arrived on top seeing just the lone hiker. We located three geological markers atop the hill as well as “Welcome to Charles Mound” sign put up by the owners. After a while a couple guys appeared from the behind the trees next to the highpoint but they were on their way down.

There were two chairs at the highpoint which we used once we were alone. The weather was nice, no bugs around, and the views north were open and nice. It is interesting to realize from where we sat we were only a quarter mile south of the Illinois/Wisconsin border. Just after we signed the summit register, another couple arrived and asked to sign it. We gave them the chairs and after they left we moved the chairs into the shade and enjoyed the view for a while longer.

As the next group arrived we returned the chairs and then headed down by walking on the mowed grass circling the trees where we saw the two guys mentioned above, and in so doing we saw the farm house.

On the hike back to the car we saw just a couple other parties heading up. Nevertheless there were still a lot of cars on the road, many more than there were hikers around and I found that strange as there was no other apparent reason to be there.

From the highpoint of Illinois we drove the twelve miles or so to the historic tourist attraction town of Galena before returning to our motel in Chicago.

**\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_, IL, 1,235 ft. – August 1, 2020, HP #37: Apparently the highpoint was not named until 1998.**