

Grand Canyon

National Park
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

The Painted Desert



WHAT IS THE PAINTED DESERT?

The Painted Desert is a well-known Arizona landscape of very colorful "badlands" extending across northeastern Arizona. (Badlands are intricately dissected, barren, and rounded landscapes that typically occur in arid regions where weak rock is prevalent). The Painted Desert is distinctly defined by exposures of a rock layer known as the Chinle (*Chin-lee*)

Formation. While several rock layers in northeastern Arizona are colorful, it is the particular beauty of the Chinle Formation that gave rise to the notion of a Painted Desert. Although the Chinle Formation can be seen elsewhere, in the Painted Desert the exposure of this rock is long and continuous.

WHERE TO SEE THE PAINTED DESERT

The Painted Desert is exposed in a band of rock trending northwest from Holbrook, Arizona to The Gap, Arizona. This band is wider in the Holbrook area and narrows significantly to the northwest. Few roads provide access to the Painted Desert.

Unquestionably, the most famous part of the Painted Desert is at Petrified Forest National Park, 190 miles from the South Rim of Grand Canyon. The Chinle Formation in Petrified Forest National Park is notable not only for its highly varied colors but also for its rich concentration of fossils, including petrified wood. Such a concentration led to the creation of Petrified Forest National Monument in 1906; in 1962, Congress established Petrified Forest National Park. Think of Petrified Forest National Park as "Painted Desert National Park."

Another accessible but more limited expanse of the Painted Desert is at Little Painted Desert County Park, 15 miles north

of Winslow, Arizona along State Highway 87. Winslow is 140 miles from Grand Canyon's South Rim.

Closest to Grand Canyon, the Painted Desert is exposed in a narrow band along U.S. Highway 89 from about 3 miles north of Cameron, Arizona (at milepost #470) to the small village of The Gap farther north. A small but visually striking example of the Painted Desert lies along U.S. Highway 160 about a mile east of its junction with U.S. Highway 89.

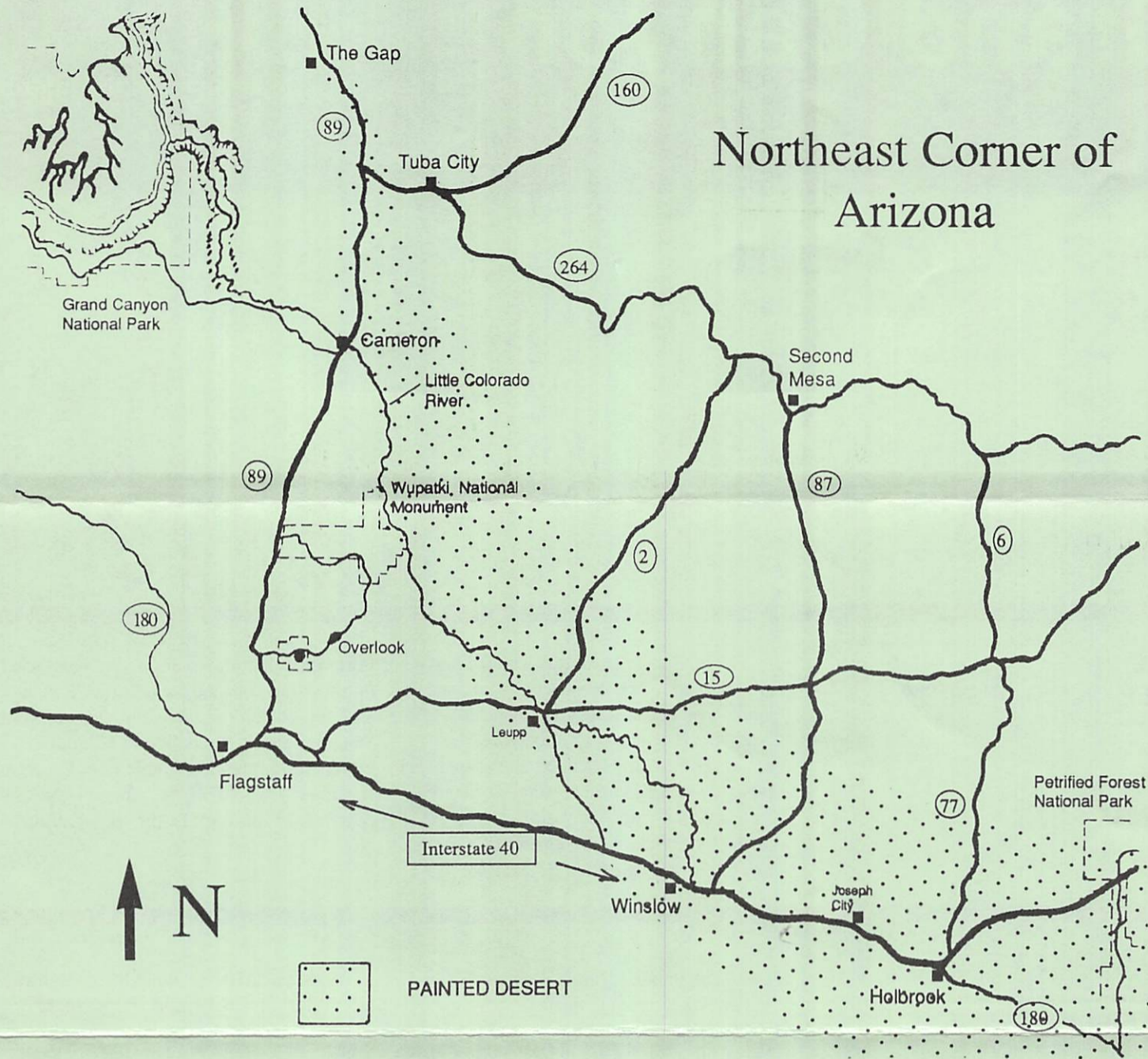
For those travelling the scenic road that connects Wupatki National Monument with Sunset Crater National Monument, the Painted Desert lies off to the east; there is a specific viewpoint designated as an overlook for the Painted Desert along this road. The view from this overlook, however, is from afar and does not provide an intimate experience with the nuances of the Painted Desert.

CAN YOU SEE THE PAINTED DESERT FROM GRAND CANYON?

You cannot see the Painted Desert from Grand Canyon National Park because the Painted Desert is too far away. Certain books and maps indicate that the Painted Desert extends to the eastern edge of the park, but unfortunately these books and maps are in error. (Technically, along the East Rim Drive at Desert View, a person

with powerful binoculars who knows exactly where to look can see the Painted Desert; practically, one has to leave the park to experience this particular scenery). From the eastern edge of the Grand Canyon what can be seen is something referred to as "high desert" - but not the geographically precise Painted Desert.

Northeast Corner of Arizona



UNOFFICIAL "MINI-PAINTED DESERTS"

As noted previously, the colorful Chinle Formation is not restricted to the Painted Desert. Outcroppings of the Chinle Formation--unofficial "Mini-Painted

Deserts" so to speak--abound in northern Arizona and nearby states. As you travel, be alert for references to the Chinle Formation and its scenic opportunities.

THE PAINTED DESERT AND THE GRAND CANYON SUITE

Interestingly, one of the five movements of Ferde Grofe's "Grand Canyon Suite" is entitled Painted Desert," despite the fact that this colorful landscape is well

to the east of Grand Canyon. Grofe's music was intended as an homage to the Arizona landscape in general but as symbolized by Grand Canyon.

IS IT WORTH SEEING THE PAINTED DESERT?

Is it worth seeing the Painted Desert? This common question has no easy answer. "Worth" requires a value judgment varying from individual to individual. For those travelers trying to decide about seeing the Painted Desert, relevant locations are

provided in this document. Locate a book or two about the Painted Desert, read some words and peruse some pictures, and decide for yourself whether the Painted Desert is worth seeing.

Bon voyage!

