

# Off the Beaten Path Hikes

National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior



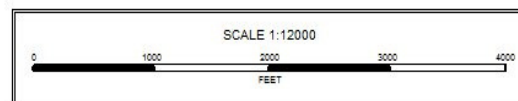
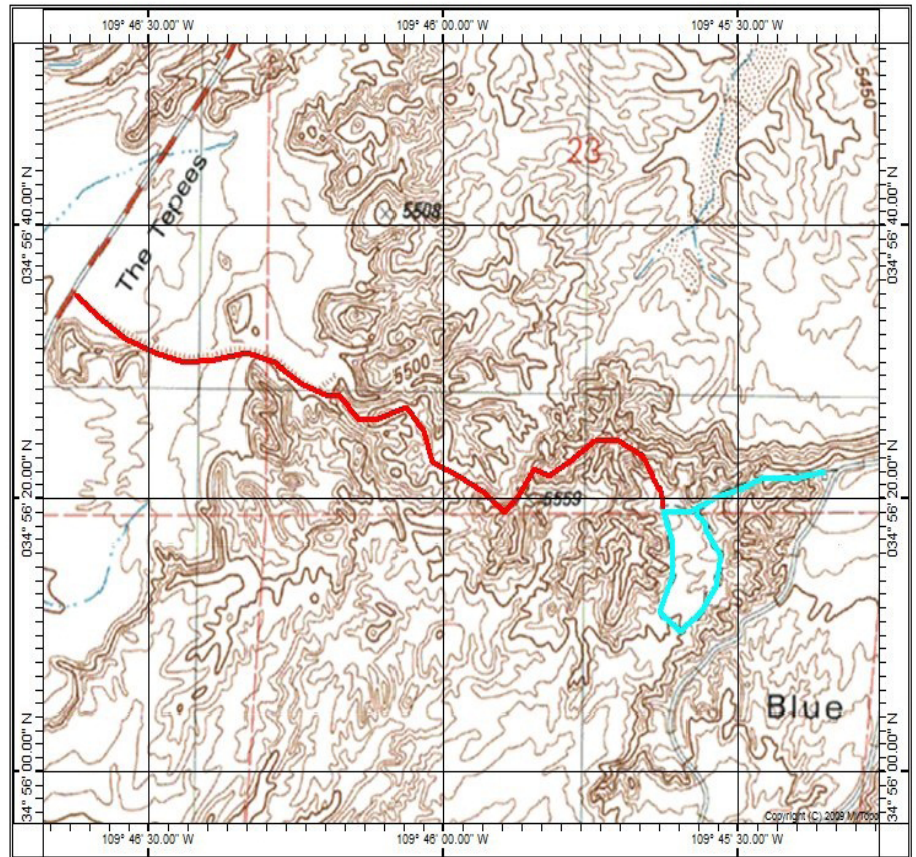
Petrified Forest National Park



View of Blue Mesa geology

## Historic Blue Forest Trail 1.5 mi (2.4 km)

The Blue Forest Trail was first constructed between 1934 and 1937 by the Civilian Conservation Corps, connecting the lower and upper Blue Mesa roads. The trail and the lower road were closed in 1955 and replaced by the Blue Mesa Loop Trail. The Blue Forest Trail was initially intended for a general audience, but was re-established in 2013 for adventurous hikers. The trail connects the main park road at the Tepees area to the paved Blue Mesa Trail, accessed from the Blue Mesa Loop Road, and is about 1.2 mi (1.9 km) long. Elevation gain and loss is about 200'. It is another 0.3 mi (0.5 mi) on Blue Mesa Trail to get to a parking spot along the Blue Mesa Loop Road, if you have a shuttle.



# Enjoy your hike safely and protect the park

The Blue Forest Trail winds through colorful blue and white badland hills. It offers a new view at every turn, and both the foreground and background hold your interest at every step. It gives the hiker a bit of history, a lot of scenery, an intimate look at petrified wood as it is being exposed by erosion, and, with a little help we'll provide here, a short geology lesson. In combining all these elements into a single trail, the Blue Forest Trail reveals the essence of Petrified Forest National Park.

**Safety Notice!** This trail is for sure-footed, safety-conscious, experienced hikers wearing sturdy boots. Footing can be bad at any time, and treacherous in wet or icy conditions – trail tread is in ball-bearing gravel some places and slippery clay in others. Walking sticks are recommended. The trail is not always easy to follow, is steep in spots, and follows a few knife ridges, all of which may cause you to be uneasy. If these conditions sound like they are beyond your abilities, enjoy the following photographs but do not attempt this hike. Do not attempt this hike if lightning is in the area. As with any trail in the Southwest, we recommend you bring water, snacks, and sun protection. In this case, we also recommend bringing the following trail description to guide you.

Please respect the visitors who follow you and leave all petrified wood, artifacts, fossils, and natural objects in their place.

Park at the roadside pullout at the Tepees area, where the 1937 gravel road is still apparent (but not open to vehicles). This is the unmarked trailhead for the modern Blue Forest Trail. The first 0.5 mi (0.8 km) follows this old road grade and is relatively flat. Please be cautious on the walking surface which consists of slippery gravel.



Modern Trailhead – beginning of 1937 roadbed



Approximately 0.5 mi (0.8 km) from modern parking area



End of road – Original 1937 Trailhead Parking Lot

The beginning of the trail starts with a moderate incline to get up the first little hill. Look for these switchbacks and the wooden post from the end of the original 1937 road as landmarks.



Once you get on top of the first hill, start looking for the remnant gravel used by the CCC for trail tread. It's not always on the trail (it has washed downslope in some places) but it shows you where to go. Think, "Follow the yellow brick road" but in this case it's "follow the gravelly trail...". This photo is looking back towards the first hill of the trail. The white line is the route you just walked.



This photo is looking forward towards the rest of your route. The white line indicates where you will be walking. Note that big dark spot on the left is a sinkhole. They are generally stable but deep and unpredictable – keep a distance from it.



In several places the trail has been recut into the benches in which it originally ran – in these places it's more visible where the trail is.



In the next section of the trail the land changes from gray and purple badlands into a chalkier white. You will cross some knife-edge ridges in this section. The white line represents the main trail and the yellow line represents a small spur leading to an overlook.



The purple badlands are mudstones and siltstones of the Blue Mesa Member of the Chinle Formation. These rocks represent the floodplains of an ancient river channel that wound through this area more than 223 million years ago. The white represents sandstones of the Sonsela Member, which is younger than the Blue Mesa Member and represents old river channels. You will notice the difference between these rocks when you cross the purple to white transition. The white beds weather into steep, sharp ridges because sandstone is more resistant than mudstone.

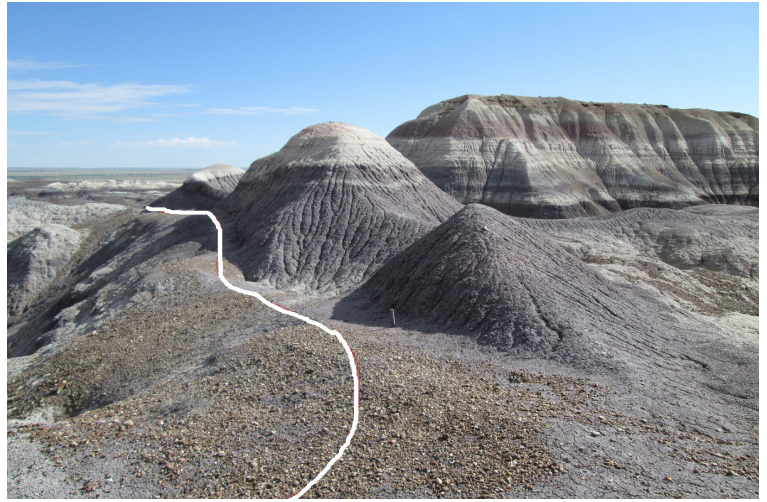


The trail continues to the left – the spur splits off here to the right just as the trail starts benching into the slope. The trail continues through what geologists call the Lot's Wife beds of the Sonsela Member. These beds alternate in color and rock type, from siltstones, to sandstones.



These beds have been geologically dated to 219 million years ago. Amazingly you have crossed nearly four million years of geological time during your hike so far. As you progress upwards you are moving forward in geological time.

It can be tough to know which way the trail is here – stay left, where the wooden stake is. Natural gravel starts to get confused with gravels that were brought in for trail tread in this area. The natural gravels originate from the ancient Triassic river beds. The gravel that was used to mark the trail is also from Triassic river beds but is out of place, brought in by the CCC workers from another area of the park.



Continue to pick your way through the badlands to the base of some steep switchbacks that will take you to the top of the mesa.



This is one of the steepest parts of the trail. Footing can be a challenge at any time and be treacherous in wet conditions. Be careful here!



Another view partway into these switchbacks. The petrified wood was placed by the CCC for erosion control, something the NPS would not do today.



The trail now comes out onto the top of the mesa. Look around! The gravel bed here is the Jasper Forest bed of the Sonsela Member. Deposited more than 217 million years ago, it represents ancient river channel. In many places it is full of petrified wood and the Blue, Jasper, Crystal, and Rainbow forests are all situated at this level although now separated from each other by erosion between the mesas.



Once you're on top, the trail may be hard to follow. Aim for that Juniper on the horizon.



Working your way towards the bush there will be more knife-edge ridges to cross. Be careful during high winds which occur regularly in spring.



Now you will begin the steep pitch down to the current Blue Mesa Trail (highlighted in blue in the top right of the picture). Footing can be very bad in this steep part. The descent takes you back down through the Lots Wife beds.



You are now going backwards in geological time from the 217 million year old rock layers to rocks that were deposited 219 million years ago.

The trail flattens out towards the bottom. Note the CCC-era petrified wood bridge or retaining structure in the bottom left – again, the NPS would never do that now but it's an interesting feature none the less and a testament to the ever changing philosophies of conservation and preservation.



The Blue Forest trail ends on the current Blue Mesa Trail near this exhibit. You can also begin the Blue Forest Trail at this point. Just turn sharp right at this exhibit sign and follow the instructions in reverse.

