

Off the Beaten Path Hikes

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



Petrified Forest National Park



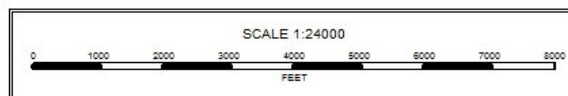
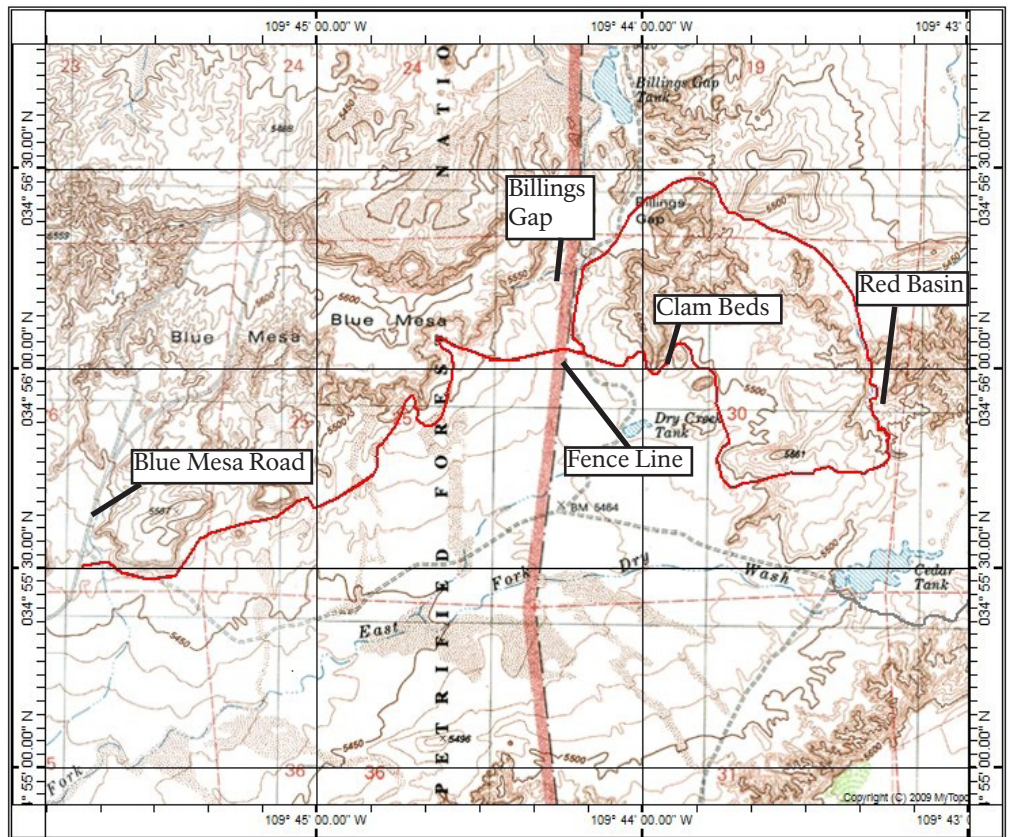
Red and purple badlands of the Chinle Formation

Red Basin Clam Beds

6mi (9.6 km)

The Red Basin is part of the newly acquired lands in Petrified Forest National Park. Once BLM land, this fossil rich site was transferred in 2007 and is now a protected area within your national park. Along this hike you will see vibrantly colored badlands in geology that is over 215 million years old, petrified wood, petroglyphs, unique erosional formations called hoodoos, and fossil clam beds. Using a GPS unit is highly recommended on this hike. The GPS coordinates for specific locations are provided in this guide.

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



Enjoy your hike safely and protect the park

This walk, although not difficult or steep, does require sturdy shoes. The footing can be difficult at any time and this walk should not be attempted in wet conditions. Do not attempt this hike if there is lightning in the area. Please take normal hiking precautions and bring food and water, sun protection, and navigation aids. Pack out whatever you packed in.

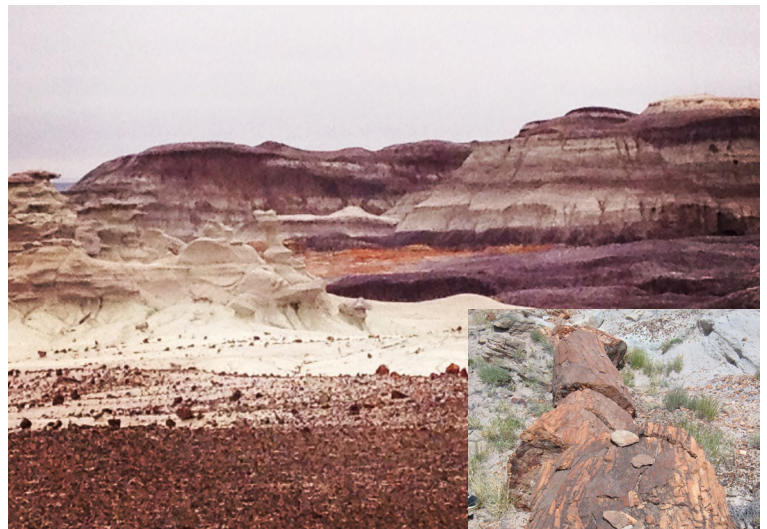
Please park at the small pull-off on your left that is immediately before the split on the Blue Mesa Loop Road. Walk back down the side of the road until you see a wooden barrier with an “Authorized Vehicles Only” sign. Walk past the barrier and continue east following the base of Blue Mesa until you reach a natural amphitheater on your left with examples of conglomerate sandstone and petrified wood eroding out of the bluffs (GPS - N34 56.093, W109 44.659). From this point, walk east to the fence line. There is a small gap in the fence (pictured right) that will allow access to the other side (GPS - N34 56.044, W109 44.266).

Once you pass through the fence, continue east to the first formation beyond the fence. Follow the base of the mesa in a counter-clockwise loop (see the provided map). Just past the first formation you will see sandstone blocks on your left with thousands of fresh-water clam fossils that are 218 million years old (GPS - N34 56.008, W109 43.977). Keep zig-zagging along the base of the mesa going southeast until you see a flat grassy area on the top (GPS - N34 55.712, W109 43.719). If you reach a dirt road you have gone too far. Climb up onto this grassy area and walk east until the grass ends, then climb back down into Red Basin (GPS - N34 55.788, W109 43.288). Here you will see colorful badlands and a hoodoo formation nicknamed The Sandcastle (pictured right). From the Sandcastle, drop down into the slot canyon below. There is a very large petrified log at the end of the canyon (pictured right in bottom corner; GPS - N34 56.063, W109 43.342). Continue following the base of the mesa on your left, going northwest then south, towards Billings Gap while staying in the bottom of the exposures (Blue Mesa will now be on your right). There will be a gap in the sand dunes that you will pass through (GPS - N34 56.386 W109 43.730) and continue east towards an unimproved road bed (GPS - N34.56.431 W109.44.057). The fence line will be visible from the road. Continue south until you hit the fence line and the gate.

The story of Petrified Forest could not be told without the river that flowed through this land about 218 million years ago. All of the colorful layers you see along this hike were formed by the deposition of sediments within that river system. The fame of the petrified wood and the Triassic reptile fossils often overshadows the smaller fossils such as the thousands of freshwater clams (pictured right). These fossilized shells represent a small but important clue to the complete story of this ancient landscape. Just imagine the Triassic creatures, such as freshwater sharks, that would have dined on this abundance of life in the river.



Entrance through the fence



The Sandcastle in Red Basin (left foreground), petrified log



Close up of sandstone with fresh-water clam fossils