



South Bluff



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The area within Scotts Bluff National Monument south of the Old Oregon Trail highway and directly across from the Visitor Center is known as “South Bluff”.

South Bluff is 4,692 feet above sea level and is a relatively unspoiled area of considerable scenic value, abounding in features of geological and botanical interest.

South Bluff rises above the flat prairie in geologic strata of sandstone, siltstone, volcanic ash and limestone.

This area is unimproved and there are no improvements planned.

Of the five notable rocks within the monument, South Bluff features three: Dome Rock, Crown Rock, and Sentinel Rock.

At the western end of South Bluff is Mitchell Pass. This pass is formed with Sentinel Rock on the south side of the pass and Eagle Rock on the north.

The eastern end of South Bluff gradually lowers in elevation, forming isolated prominences of which Dome Rock is the largest. The western end remains at a significant elevation above the prairie.

Between Sentinel Rock and Crown Rock is a “gap” referred to as Coyote Pass. Coyote Pass is 4,331 feet above sea level.

South Bluff geology is similar to Scotts Bluff (to the north) and also has similar vegetation.



History of South Bluff

The Monument lies within the western Great Plains in an area that was once almost continuous mixed and short grass prairie, but is now largely used for farming and ranching. The Monument lands encompass two large, cliff-rimmed bluffs: Scotts Bluff and South Bluff. In the book *The Great Platte River Road* by Merrill Mattes, the bluffs are described as “*Scotts Bluff National Monument now protects Mitchell Pass and the three most conspicuous of the formations which were once part of the greater Scotts Bluff. These are the main Scotts Bluff and the opposite South Bluff, with the V-shaped Mitchell Pass between them, and the huge turret shaped Dome Rock, the three together forming a semicircle or amphitheater*”.



Naming South Bluff

In the 1940's document entitled “Recommended Nomenclature for Scotts Bluff National Monument”, using the name “Scotts Bluff” to refer to the main feature of the monument was recommended.

It also recommended that the feature across the highway to the south be officially designated “South Bluff,” a name that the National Park Service had used informally.

The document explained that South Bluff was a “separate and distinct geographical feature” that stood forty-three feet taller than Scotts Bluff.

On June 11, 1941, in order to eliminate confusion concerning the typography within Scotts Bluff National Monument, and at the request of the National Park Service, the U. S. Board of Geographical Names approved the name “South Bluff” for the bluff which rises on the south side of Mitchell Pass.



Hiking South Bluff

There are no marked walking or hiking trails on South Bluff. It is accessible only by means of a steep and difficult draw or by a wide detour up a ridge far to the west and off the Monument boundary.

It is not permitted to climb Dome Rock, Crown Rock or Sentinel Rock because of the dangerously soft nature of the Brule clay formation that makes up their steep walls.

You are free to ascend South Bluff or roam on foot through this area on either side of Mitchell Pass; however, no fires or overnight camps are permitted. Rough clothing and stout footwear are recommended.



Because there are no trails, it is suggested that you let the Park Rangers in the Visitor Center know when you are climbing South Bluff.

Please check in at the visitor center to let the rangers know there will be hikers on South Bluff.

Always be alert for rattlesnakes when you hike the bluffs and avoid trespassing on the private land that surrounds the monument property.

