

The Higher GROUND

Longtime *OP* contributor and Utah explorer James Kay gives us a unique look at a landscape that needs protection

*Text And
Photography
By James Kay*



Bank to the left and lift the wing,” I shout over my shoulder above the roar of the engine. I flip open the window, stick my head out into the cold air, and with a death grip on my camera to counter the blast of wind, I quickly snap a few frames as the serrated ridges of Factory Butte, 2,000 feet below me, glow in the early-morning light.

Rising 1,500 feet from the barren desert floor east of Capitol Reef National

Park, the monolithic form of Factory Butte is ground zero in the never-ending battle over the appropriate use of Utah’s public lands. While wilderness advocates have been striving to protect this stark sandstone monolith and the surrounding land as federally designated wilderness for decades, off-road vehicle (ORV) enthusiasts have had their own ideas. In the years since that predawn flight, they have turned the area surrounding the tower’s base into an unofficial off-road playground. Countless ATVs and dirt bikes

have sliced and diced its slopes into a spaghetti network of trails and scarred ridgelines. While ORV advocates would argue that the damage they cause is trivial compared to the prodigious erosive powers of Mother Nature, others often see the scars as a desecration of sacred ground, hence the battle.

When I moved to Utah in 1972, I was immediately mesmerized by the magnificently “empty” country that surrounded me, with its rugged alpine mountains reaching thousands of feet into

clear western skies and millions upon millions of acres of convoluted redrock canyons, mighty rivers and bottomless gorges. Exploring the remote backcountry of the West soon became my passion and eventually led to my career as a landscape photographer.

Eight years before I moved west, Congress passed the Wilderness Act. It defined wilderness in legal terms and allowed for public land to be officially designated and protected. The Act poetically describes wilderness as: “A wilder-

ness, in contrast to those areas where man and his works dominate the landscape, is hereby recognized as an area where the earth and community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain.” In a nutshell, the Act allows for no roads or permanent structures and no motorized or mechanized vehicles. If you want to enter, you have to ride a horse, walk or paddle a canoe—or you could simply drive up to the edge and gaze in. Now, 47 years later, of America’s 2.3 billion

acres, 4.7%, or 109 million acres, have been officially designated as wilderness. Perhaps the goals of the Act were best summarized by Lyndon Johnson when he signed the bill: “If future generations are to remember us more with gratitude than with sorrow, not only must we achieve the miracles of technology, we must leave them with a glimpse of the world as we found it, not just what it looked like when we were through with it.”

When it comes to congressionally designated wilderness, Utah is an anomaly



in the American West. From sinuous redrock canyons to glacier-carved alpine peaks, Utah has some of the most varied, unique and wild undeveloped country on earth. Yet the state has far less designated wilderness than any other western state and even less than Florida. Of its 53 million acres, Utah has 1,160,247 acres of designated wilderness, or 2.2% of its land base. California has 15 million acres; Idaho, 4.5 million; Arizona, 4.5 million; Colorado, 3.7 million; Nevada, 3.4 million. The state of Georgia has more designated wilderness than the entire redrock region of southern Utah. Many would argue that this disparity is due to the inherent knee-jerk reaction among Utah's politicians against anything that might limit revenue generation from resource extraction or land development with little recognition of the value of these lands in their undeveloped condition.

When I jumped into professional photography in the early '80s, I concentrated on adventure sports. By the mid-'90s, I became restless for a new challenge and began looking for a new direction for my work, one that was perhaps more meaningful and enduring. By combining my photography skills with my love of the outdoors, landscape photography seemed like the obvious choice. During this same period, the battle to protect Utah's redrock country as wilderness began to heat up. After all I had received over the years, both financially and emotionally, from the marvelous landscapes of the American West, I felt an obligation to put my skills to work to give something back to the land, so I approached several groups working on these issues and offered up my services, free of charge. The next thing I did was round up a few pilot friends who were also interested in these issues and willing to donate their time. Within a few weeks, we were up in the air conduct-



OPENING SPREAD, LEFT TO RIGHT: *Sunset on Factory Butte, west of the town of Hanksville, Utah; Valley of the Gods at sunrise in San Juan County, Utah; Harris Wash in the Escalante Canyons of Glen Canyon National Recreation Area, Utah. THIS SPREAD, ABOVE, LEFT AND RIGHT:* *Sunrise over Elephant Canyon, Needles District, Canyonlands National Park, Utah; Looking east at Chesler Park with Bridger Jack Mesa in the background and the Abajo Mountains in the upper-right corner, Needles District, Canyonlands National Park, Utah.*



BELOW, LEFT AND RIGHT: *Waterpocket Fold, looking south as last light illuminates the summit of The Golden Throne, Capitol Reef National Park, Utah; Pleasant Creek flows beneath autumn-colored cottonwood trees below the sandstone domes of the Waterpocket Fold of Capitol Reef National Park, Utah.*

ing aerial surveys across Utah and the West for The Nature Conservancy, The Wilderness Society and the Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance.

I soon discovered that seeing the West from a low-altitude plane provided a completely new perspective on the land—both enlightening and disturbing. Viewing familiar territory from above is like opening your eyes for the first time. I noticed things I never saw from the ground, like the way the western border of Yellowstone National Park is so clearly defined by one long clear-cut or my astonishment at the scarring of the land surrounding Moab, Utah, due to unregulated ORV use. On the mesas and canyon rims above town, there were thousands upon thousands of driver-created tracks going off in every direction as far as the eye could see. I was shocked. Keep in mind that this is from someone who once rode a dirt bike. Former Utah Governor Jon Huntsman, an avid dirt-biker himself, was appalled when presented with this information and helped to protect these lands from further abuse.

When I look back at my career, I can't think of anything else I've done that has been more rewarding than my work with these conservation groups. I'd like to conclude with a quote by Wallace Stegner who wrote extensively on the West, and wilderness, in particular. Written by Stegner to the Outdoor Recreation Resources Review Commission, many consider his *Wilderness Letter* to be the most eloquent statement ever composed on the value of these lands: "Something will have gone out of us as a people if we ever let the remaining wilderness be destroyed; if we permit the last virgin forests to be turned into comic books and cigarette cases; if we drive the few remaining members of the wild species into zoos or to extinction; if we pollute the last clear air and dirty the last clean streams and push our paved roads through the last of the silence, so that never again





ABOVE: Aerial view of Mike's Canyon, east of Nokai Dome, San Juan County, Utah.

Shooting Landscapes From A Plane



A few things to keep in mind if you're thinking about aerial photography.

First and foremost, find a skilled pilot with a high-wing plane like a Cessna 185. A competent pilot will do a better job of getting you into position, and you'll also increase your odds of returning home in one piece. Wait for a calm, clear day with minimal turbulence so the plane will provide a relatively stable platform from which to shoot. Regarding camera gear, a 24-105mm zoom works well for most situations and saves time compared to the hassle of changing lenses. I've found that a shutter speed of $\frac{1}{500}$ sec. eliminates motion blur when the air is smooth. For longer lenses or bumpier air, step up to $\frac{1}{1000}$ sec.

Dropping a camera from five feet isn't a good thing; dropping it from 2,000 feet will create a rather large crater in the landscape below and likely void the warranty. It's probably a good idea to use a camera strap although I usually avoid them due to the spaghetti factor. Don't shoot through the Plexiglas® window; for best results, open the window and stick your camera out there—small planes can slow down to around 50 mph in level flight so the wind-tunnel effect isn't too bad, but count on having a bad hair day. For a completely unobstructed view, you could remove the door entirely. For the most dramatic lighting to accentuate the land, shoot right before sunset or right after sunrise.

Pack a set of earplugs to protect your ears from engine noise or, better yet, your pilot buddy likely will have headsets, allowing for easier communication. If you're prone to motion sickness, bring Dramamine tablets. When I'm planning a route, I always mark the locations of backcountry landing strips. We often set down and camp at these deserted strips so we can get an early start the next morning, and it's also nice to know where the nearest strip is if you have an emergency.

will Americans be free in their own country from the noise, the exhausts, the stinks of human and automotive waste. Without any remaining wilderness we are committed wholly, without chance for even momentary reflection and rest, to a headlong drive into our technological termite-life, the Brave New World of a completely man-controlled environment.” or



You can see more of James Kay's Utah landscapes by visiting his website at www.jameskay.com.

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