

King Top (HMA)

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Description

The BLM's state Wild Horse and Burro Program Manager told me just a dozen members of this herd remained as of 2015, all stallions. I travelled the main roads through this area several times through 2014 and 2015, logging not a hint of their presence. In May of 2016, I spent a couple of nights camped along Snake Pass Road, devoting the better part of three days to exploring trails less travelled. This effort yielded fresh droppings and hoof prints in a few locations, as well as some stunning sights ... but no actual sightings of the rare King Top stallions.

In addition to wild horse viewing (I remain optimistic!), this area also offers fossil hunting and rock hounding opportunities in Blind Valley, rustic camping amid dense juniper groves along Snake Pass Road, and a visually stunning geologic marvel named Crystal Peak.

King Top Mountain lies immediately south of US 6 & 50, about 55 miles west of Delta, and 10 miles southwest of Notch Peak, which dominates the skyline north of the highway for most of this drive. This mountain is flanked by Blind Valley to the east and the Ferguson Desert valley to the west. The designated herd management area encompasses the entire mountain complex, including foothill areas to the east and west. Gravel roads provide access from either side.

This area is serviced by a few good gravel roads that, when dry, should present no problems for the family sedan. There are a few sandy sections, especially along Snake Pass Road, that could be a little spooky without 4WD, but Ferguson Desert and Crystal Peak Roads are less sketchy. Of course, any of the ungroomed roads and trails branching off at various locations should only be traversed with high-clearance 4WD.

This HMA is very close to the Conger Mountain HMA, which lies just a few miles directly north of US 6 & 50. In fact, the main access to the Ferguson Desert side of King Top is at the same intersection as for Conger -- head north to Conger, south to King Top -- making King Top an easy waypoint between the Conger and North Sulphur HMAs. Burbank Hills Herd Area also lies immediately southwest of King Top, at the opposite perimeter of the Ferguson Desert.

The nearest available gas, food, water and lodging is at the Border Inn on the Utah/Nevada state line, 16 miles west of Little Valley Road on US 6 & 50.

Getting There

From Delta, UT, take US 6 & 50 west just over 70 miles to the faded wooden sign near mile marker 16 indicating the turnoff to Little Valley. Turn left (south), and follow Ferguson Well Road about 5.7 miles, where it terminates in a T-intersection with Ferguson Desert Road. Turn left and follow this road as it curves southward, about 6.2 miles to Snake Pass Road, which branches east.

Viewing Locations

At the time of this writing, all I can tell you is where I have not seen these mustangs: along Snake Pass Road and near Eck's Knoll Reservoir, which the BLM webpage for this HMA suggests as the "best opportunities for viewing." But this is a very small herd, perhaps as few as 10 or 12 horses in an area encompassing over 235 square miles, and these nomadic animals could favor various locations depending upon the time of day and year.

If you want to try the BLM's suggested viewing locations, Snake Pass Road is discussed below. The road to Eck's Knoll Reservoir branches left (southeastward) from Ferguson Desert Road about 4.1 miles south of Snake Pass Road. This reservoir appears to have been barricaded and rigged with extraction pumps, likely for servicing the numerous cattle grazing this area through much of the year. I couldn't see how horses could access this water source. Nor could I spot any non-bovine hoof prints or manure piles in the vicinity.

Road Canyon is a scenic five-mile drive between King Top's western arm and Pyramid Knoll. The ridges and cliffs towering above the northern end of this road are pocked with weather-worn caves and arches. I found fresh droppings and tracks in this vicinity during my May 2016 visit. Access this route from Snake Pass Road 2.4 miles east of Ferguson Desert Road, turning northward. Take the right-hand branch as the road immediately forks. The area beyond the road is a protected wilderness study area, so leave your vehicles behind if you decide to venture further in.

Another promising location lies a few miles west of the defined herd area (mustangs are poor respecters of boundaries). A two-track jeep trail services two BLM watering troughs, and stallions have marked this trail as their own at several spots along the way. Access this southbound trail at the intersection of Ferguson Well Road and Ferguson Desert Road (see "Getting There" directions above). The first, most promising trough is about 0.7 miles in. The second trough, another two miles in, held just a small amount of stagnant water when I visited.

Other Points of Interest

Snake Pass Road runs east through the hills south of King Top Mountain, about 19.5 miles into Blind Valley. A small grove of junipers covers about 20 acres of sand on the south side of Snake Pass roughly 6 miles east from Ferguson Desert Road, offering a pleasant spot for rustic camping. The area closest to the road appears to have once served as a cattle corral, but the proliferation of cow pies diminishes

quickly as you journey a few hundred yards in. The finely-grained sand here would be the envy of many beaches, so be prepared for very loose soil if you plan to stake a tent. This area also lies just a short distance east of the back road toward Eck's Knoll.

Blind Valley offers fossil hunting and rock hounding opportunities around Fossil Mountain, located about 4 miles north of the first intersection you encounter coming out of Snake Pass from the Ferguson Desert side -- watch for the faded BLM sign reading "Garrison - Blk Rock Rd 5". Blind Valley is also directly accessible east of King Top Mountain, with clear signage indicating the turn off between mile markers 38 and 39.

Crystal Peak is the 33-million-year-old remnant of the rhyolite ring surrounding a long-since eroded volcano. Camping (undeveloped) and plenty of hiking and rock hunting available. Crystal Peak Road runs from Ferguson Desert Road (about 9.7 miles south of Snake Pass Road) 12.5 miles to Blind Valley (about 5.0 miles south of Snake Pass Road).

Key GPS Coordinates

- a. US 6 & 50/Ferguson Well Rd (Little Valley): 39° 3.610' N 113° 45.450' W
- b. Ferguson Well Rd/Ferguson Desert Rd intersection: 38° 58.480' N 113° 46.633' W
- c. Snake Pass Rd/Ferguson Desert Rd intersection: 38° 56.358' N 113° 44.117' W
- d. Snake Pass Rd/Road Canyon intersection: 38° 56.591' N 113° 41.753' W
- e. Snake Pass Rd/Blind Valley intersection: 38° 49.279' N 113° 27.036' W
- f. Crystal Peak Rd/Blind Valley intersection: 38° 45.470' N 113° 28.880' W
- g. Crystal Peak Rd/Ferguson Desert Rd intersection: 38° 48.585' N 113° 41.513' W
- h. Fossil Mountain: 38° 52.567' N 113° 27.809' W
- i. Crystal Peak: 38° 47.475' N 113° 35.885' W

Nearest Herd Areas

Conger Mountain: 20 miles north

Burbank Hills (HA): 20 miles southwest

North Sulphur: 35 miles southwest

Frisco: 45 miles southeast