The Flyin' Solo VanLife on the Highways and Byways of North America
RICK'S ROADS
Ride Along and Enjoy the People, Places, and Who Knows What

BLOG POST: 2026.06.23

The Painted Hills, John Day Fossil Beds National Monument, Oregon



In 2023, Blue Maxx and I drove across the eastern half of Oregon, en route to Idaho, on US-20, an interstate highway that runs from Boston MA to Newport OR, literally from the Atlantic to the Pacific. It was a five-hour, 300-mile-plus ride through desolation: empty, desert, sage brush, dead grass, and a 2-lane black asphalt line … for five hours. A real eye-opener.

Well, this year, we came in from Idaho, but angled westnorthwest on US-26 towards the town on John Day and the JDFBNM scenery beyond it. 26 was impressive! It was every bit as empty, but the terrain had more variety to it. I was definitely digging it, but there was also a subconscious dread: What happens if I break down out here?





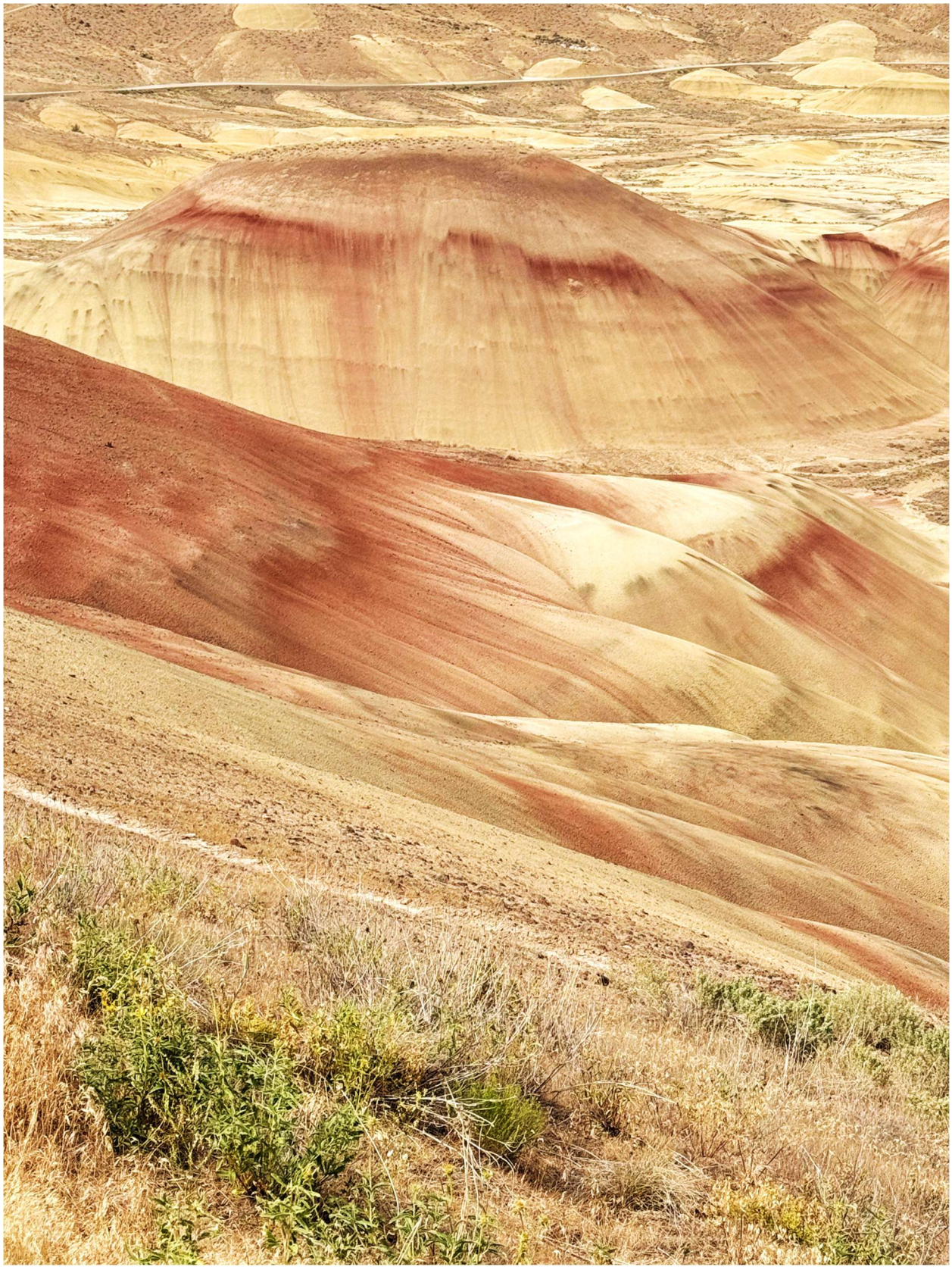
Fortunately, that did not happen. My phone can get a satellite connection to call for assistance, but where the hell is it going to come from? How long would it take? I hope I never need to find out.

John Day Fossil Beds NM is about 14,000 acres (which, as you know, is about 5,643 hectares) (or 21.85 square miles), split into three separate official (i.e., NPS managed) parcels. The actual area of west and central Oregon where fossils have been found is much, much larger.

The Painted Hills area is only about 3100 acres. It's small, so it doesn't take all day to explore. I took my sweet time, had lunch, walked a couple of short trails, and I was in and out in about two hours.

It was an overcast day, but the colors were still striking: mustard yellows, and brickish ochres, especially. A geologist could tell you what each color is; I think red is iron, black is magnesium, and yellow is … banana, but I might be wrong.

In the primary area, there are no trails among the hills and mounds. It's a KEEP OFF zone. A small area nearby has a boardwalk/path combination for up-close views.















I saw one medium-sized mound that some dumbass felt he had to climb. His fat footprints dug deep into the soft earth all the way up the slope and, from what I could see, around the crown as well. The fact that he apparently descended through the same footprints does not make him much less of a loser.

Fortunately, that was the only sign of such a violation that I saw. I only hope that a strong rain and subsequent winds would soon sweep those marks into oblivion.

As for the perpetrator, I hope he gets a case of the hiccups that lasts a month.