

*For centuries, the Llano*

A N C I E N T

*Estacado's draws*

H I G H W A Y S

*provided game, water*

O F T H E

*and a sense of direction*

L L A N O

*for travelers.*





*Creekbeds known as draws traverse the flat plains of the Llano Estacado. Running Water Draw south of Plainview, pictured here, no longer has running water, a consequence of the demands that agriculture have put on the Panhandle's scarce water resources.*

In West Texas and eastern New Mexico, people use the term “draw” to describe creek beds that wander through the landscape. Farther west, the proper word might be “arroyo” or “wash,” but “draw” is curiously appropriate for the High Plains, suggesting that the terrain must somehow coax scarce moisture into its course.

Out on the Llano Estacado, the draws will not drain wide expanses; this is a land that does not shed water like the rest of the country. The Llano is a vast, flat plain that gathers its random showers into playa sinks that freckle the landscape. The draws are the few real drainages to be found there.

The Llano Estacado is a land of still waters (if there is water to be found in the playas). The land of running waters lies beyond the outskirts of these flatlands in the rough country and the magnificent canyons of the Caprock Escarpment. Walking upriver in one of these canyons, a hiker would observe the valley becoming more shallow. Eventually the caliche battlements at the top would dissolve into rounded hills as the observer ascended to the plains in a shallow valley. By this time, the traveler would have ceased to be in a canyon and now would be in a draw.

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Article by Mike Harter  
Photos by Wyman Meinzer



One such trail went from the Big Spring to Mustang Springs (in Mustang Draw between Stanton and Midland). Farther west, thirsty men and animals found they could dig for sweet, shallow water at Seminole Wells or just beyond in Wardswell Draw. This trail continued to Monument Springs and the Pecos in New Mexico. Ranald MacKenzie's cavalrymen were amazed to find cart roads that followed Blackwater and Tierra Blanca Draws. When Charles Goodnight and Oliver Loving drove their cattle to the Pecos, they went up the Middle Concho and Centralia Draw. In the most dangerous part of the journey, after they had left the last waterhole, High Lonesome Draw pointed the way to Castle Gap and the river.

In the 20th century, as railroads, towns, farms and modern highways spread across the land, the historical significance of the draws disappeared. The triumphal march of agriculture

across the land eventually saw the water table drop. As a result, Running Water Draw no longer has running water.

People who live in Deaf Smith County told of an old swimming hole that was the scene of many happy picnics back in the 1920s and 1930s. They found it near the place where Frio Draw runs into the Tierra Blanca, but it is no more. Many of the springs are greatly diminished or have stopped running completely. In many places, farmers plowed the draws. The resulting runoff buried other springs.

Perhaps a greater danger comes from pollutants flowing down the draws. In one glaring example, runoff from feedlots and other sources leaked down



Tierra Blanca Draw into Buffalo Lake. Combined with a falling water table, disaster loomed. By 1968 algae feeding on the runoff began to grow at an alarming rate. When the algae consumed all the oxygen the fish died, and their stinking carcasses littered the shore. The lake simply died. Today there is no lake at the Buffalo Lake National Wildlife Refuge.

People tend to forget the draws pre-





Draws offer visual relief from the flatness of the Llano Estacado, bottom left. In the distant past, these shallow draws were deeper ravines. Blue quail, left, are among the many game species found around the draws. Running Water Draw, page 28, eventually leads to Blanco Canyon, right.



sent the danger of flash flooding. Draws may stand dry for years, absorbing what rainfall nature sends, then a huge rain upstream catches everyone by surprise. A picture taken by a newspaper photographer on May 28, 1941, shows the town of Friona being washed by a flood in Frio Draw, which appears to be a quarter-mile wide. On one terrifying night in 1978, three people were swept to their deaths and much property was destroyed by a deluge that cascaded along the draws around Canyon.

Nevertheless, the draws offer relief from the tedium of the High Plains. On some highways, motorists will enjoy the quick exhilaration of an unexpected roller coaster dive as they cross a draw and gain a fleeting glimpse of wild country again. The draws are natural park belts running through the vast tracts of plowed ground. They abound with a variety of wildlife that includes prairie dogs, horned lizards, jackrabbits, 13-lined ground squirrels, skunks, coyotes, snakes of all sorts, owls, quail and mourning doves.

Some communities have created public parks in the draws that pass their way. Brownfield, for example, built a park in Lost Draw; a wonderful grove of trees shades Lamesa's park in Sulphur Springs Draw. Gaines County Park sits in MacKenzie Draw between Seminole and Seagraves. Plainview and Lubbock have made great efforts in recent years to extend park land in their draws. In other locations, some landowners have returned cultivated tracts to grassland in the draws.

In earlier times the draws were regarded as worthless or marginal tracts good for trash dumps and little else, but changed attitudes and more careful land management hold promise for the future. It is as true today as it was in history: the draws are among the finest, if somewhat hidden and unnoticed, natural assets of the High Plains. ★

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*Although draws can stand dry for years, heavy rain upstream can result in a flash flood, as the citizens of Friona learned in May 1941, above. Frio Draw appears to be a quarter-mile wide as water rushes through the town.*



The difference between a draw and a canyon is best seen at Canyon, Texas, where Tierra Blanca Draw winds around to join Palo Duro Draw northeast of town. The first jagged edges of Palo Duro Canyon are visible in the distance. Also on the north side of Lubbock, Yellow House Draw and Blackwater Draw unite to form Yellow House Canyon. Three little draws near Tulia lead to Lake MacKenzie and the magnificent chasm of Tule Canyon. Railroad builders made a startling discovery as they erected trestles across the draws. Finding bedrock at a much greater depth than expected, they noted that these little valleys had been deeper ravines in the distant past.

Eons ago, rivers ran through the Llano Estacado directly from the Rocky Mountains to the Gulf of Mexico, but the "thieving Pecos" etched its way into New Mexico and cut off the streams. Indeed, aerial photographs of the land between Clovis and Fort Sumner, New Mexico, reveal that the Brazos River used to run from the Sangre de Cristos through this area on its way into Texas before the Pecos stole the water. Sandstorms eventually filled the ravines of the Llano's rivers, thus giving us the draws we see today.

But not all parts were filled in. West of Littlefield stands a formation that, from an airplane, looks like a half-buried canyon. Comancheros called its escarpments Casas Amarillas because in the midday heat its mirage looked like strange yellow houses at a distance. Just

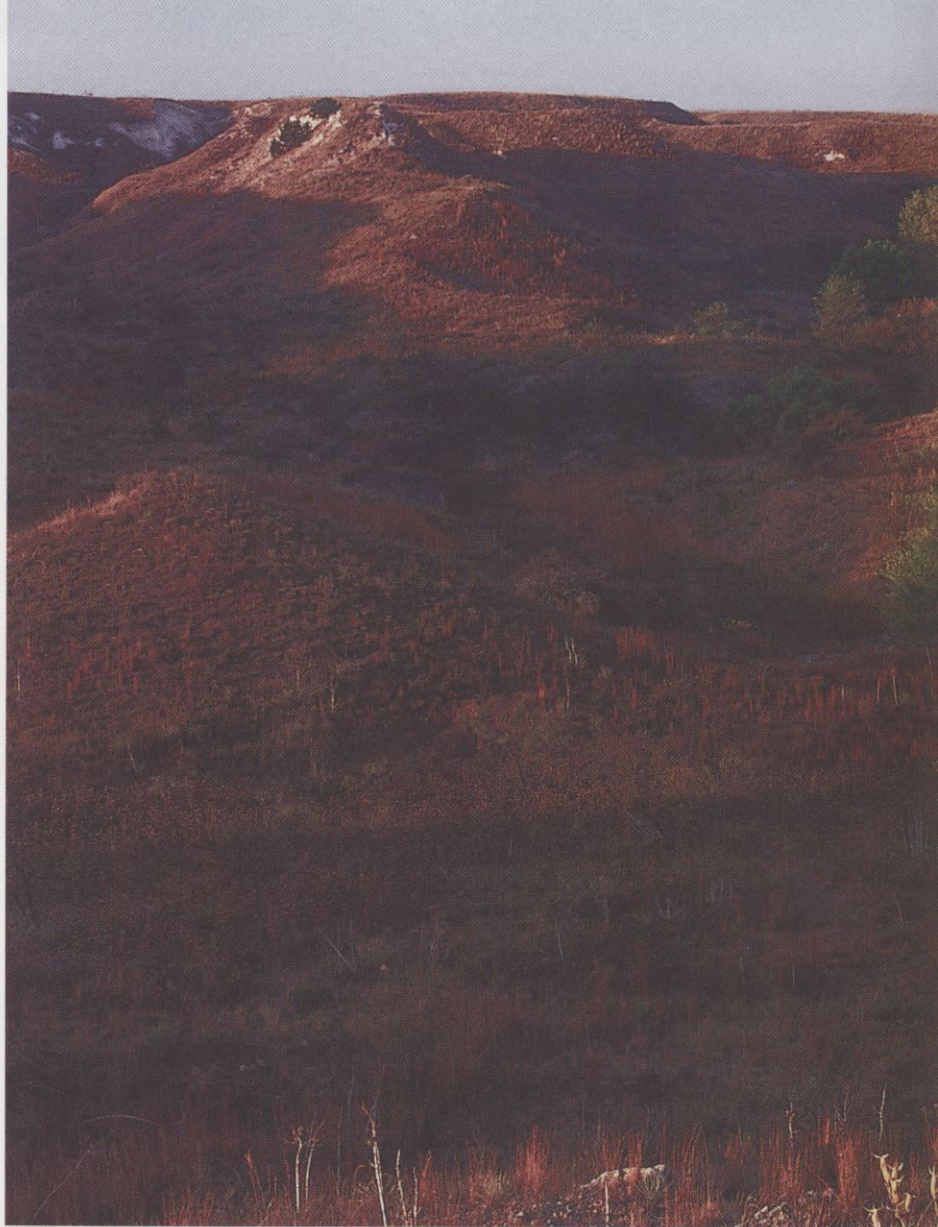
beyond it to the west lies the Muleshoe National Wildlife Refuge, smaller but similar to Casas Amarillas. Other draws were buried completely. Lost Draw makes its way through Brownfield and then, true to its name, it disappears. Once it carried the Colorado River eastward from New Mexico.

The Llano Estacado was a treacherous land for those who had just arrived. To get around on the flat country the early hunting tribes learned to follow game trails, observe the birds and watch the heavens. In addition, they had to master the subtleties of the land. Since there were no promontories to guide the eye, the only real landmarks were depressions. They had to learn to tell one playa from another and, above all,

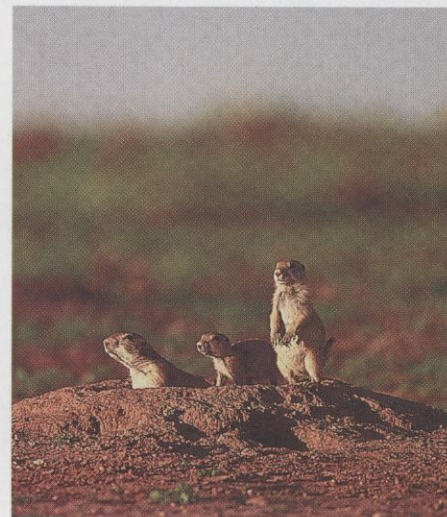
they had to learn to follow the draws.

Archeologists found evidence of the early big game hunters in the draws. Just across the New Mexico line, in Blackwater Draw, workmen at Sam Sanders' gravel pit made the famous discovery of mammoth bones in the company of unusual spearpoints. Scientists deduced that Clovis Man lived there 12,000 years ago. At Running Water Draw on the south side of Plainview, workmen digging caliche unearthed a large number of ancient bison bones, indicating that Indians drove a herd over the edge 7,000 years ago.

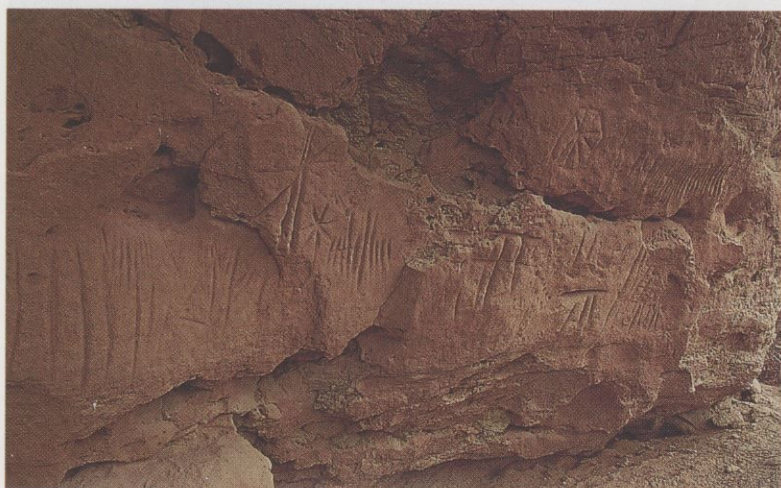
In the 1930s William Curry Holden of Texas Tech University began the excavation of Lubbock Lake in Yellow House Draw. Now a fine museum illus-







*On the north side of Lubbock, Yellow House Draw and Blackwater Draw unite to form Yellow House Canyon, left. Draws are the few real drainages in this part of the state, and they provide habitat for wildlife such as prairie dogs, above.*



*Draws were important to early hunting tribes, who learned to survive by following game trails as well as the draws. Draws not only held most of the springs of the Llano Estacado, they pointed the way to the great canyons of the east. Archeological evidence of these early people includes petroglyphs, above.*

trating those ancient hunting cultures stands there. During the terrible drought of the early 1950s, Keith Glasscock discovered part of the skull of "Midland Woman" south of the city in the blownout sands of Monahans Draw. He had found the first actual human remains dating from those times. Preliminary studies done in Seminole Draw suggest that hunting tribes camped on the north side, hoping to be downwind from the animals they intended to ambush as they drifted up the draw to the sea of grass on top.

The draws were of absolute importance to the nomads who roamed the region. Besides pointing the way to the great canyons to the east, the draws held most of the available springs of the Llano Estacado. Some of the draws even had running water. If the playas dried up, as they often did, early travelers would repair to the draws to find the water-holes; if they didn't they would die of thirst.

When Anglo-Americans began to arrive in the last century, they discovered patterns of Indian and Comanchero trails that were guided by the draws.