The Bisti/De-Na-Zin Wilderness

The Bisti/De-Na-Zin Wilderness of northwestern New Mexico covers 45,000 acres, spread across a remote high desert region on the eastern side of the Navajo Reservation. This area was once covered by an ancient inland sea. As that sea dried up, coastal swamps formed across New Mexico where today there are barren deserts and badlands. Deeply eroded badlands are filled with weathered sandstone formations. Tall thin spires, balancing rocks, and soft stone created from millions of years of sedimentary deposits are sculpted by wind and water. The buried remains of prehistoric forests and creatures left large coal deposits and oil fields. Some of the most unusual landscapes in the Four Corners Region have been saved from destruction and given a “wilderness status” by Congress and are now protected by the Bureau of Land Management. Photographers looking for new images and remote landscapes of the Southwest must travel here to explore this wilderness.
Out in the Four Corners Region, just east of Shiprock, is Farmington, New Mexico. This small city, nearest the Bisti Wilderness, has a selection of lodgings, restaurants, and other services for visitors. There are no services located closer to Bisti. There are no campgrounds at Bisti. You can camp just outside the boundary of the wilderness area. The Bisti/De-Na-Zin Wilderness is large. You will want to stay several days to see even a tiny portion of it. Arrive during spring and you will find good weather and have a chance of finding wildflowers. Stay away during the hot months of summer, and then return again in the autumn and combine an exploration of the Bisti with a photo trip through the nearby San Juan Mountains for aspen color in late September and early October.

To reach the Bisti Badlands, head south of Farmington on Highway 371 toward Crownpoint, NM. You can find Highway 371 on the southwest side of town by heading east or west through Farmington, N.M., on Main Street (Highway 550). Turn south at the intersection of Butler Avenue. Two blocks south, where Butler Avenue crosses Broadway (Highway 64), Butler Avenue becomes Piñon Avenue and veers west when it reaches the Animas River. When Piñon Avenue crosses Murray Drive, just beyond the hospital, it becomes Highway 371. The intersection is well-marked and there is a gas station on the corner. Stop, fill your gas tank, and buy extra bottled water.

Reset your trip odometer at this intersection. A mile south, the highway climbs steeply, up and out of the San Juan River Valley. Watch the mile posts for thirty miles as you head south. At mile post 77, there is a sign labeled “Bisti Badlands” with information about the area. The sign points out that these 3,946 acres were protected by Congress in 1984 to prevent the area from being strip mined for the coal formations lying just beneath the ground and visible in spots throughout the area.

In 1996, Congress approved combining the Bisti Badlands and the much larger De-Na-Zin Wilderness Area, farther east, to form the Bisti/De-Na-Zin Wilderness Area. The original 3,946 acres was enlarged and now covers an area of 45,000 acres.

The Bisti/De-Na-Zin Wilderness is about 30 miles south of Farmington, N.M. To reach the Bisti access off State Highway 371, go 36-1/2 miles from the San Juan River crossing in Farmington to a left turn onto Road 7200 and follow the gravel road for 2 miles to the Bisti parking lot. This turn is about 46 miles north of Crownpoint N.M., just past the crest of the hill after crossing the Don Gleason Bridge over the De-Na-Zin Wash.
Do not turn left here at the sign. Continue driving south for seven more miles on Highway 371. You will pass a few examples of the type of formations you will see farther out in the badlands. These formations along Highway 371 are accessible and can be photographed from the edge of the road. Seven miles south, near mile post 70, is a marked left turn at the south end of the parallel side road marked San Juan County Road 7290. There is a Bisti Wilderness sign pointing to an unpaved two-mile road. About halfway down the road, another sign points to the left turn at a fork. The road crosses a wide wash over several large culverts. A few hundred more yards, you will find a parking area and trail register box near a gate in the boundary fence. No permit is required to hike these badlands with groups of eight or fewer people. Motor vehicles and bicycles are not allowed in the wilderness area.

Assemble the camera gear you want to carry and include some food, plus plenty of water, to your pack. Start as early in the morning as possible for the best light. You may want to park and camp here overnight. It’s legal since you are still outside the wilderness area. Carry a compass and a topo map of the area. Consider packing your cell phone. The reception is fair from the tops of the ridges. If you get lost, you can phone for help.

After squeezing through the gate, a narrow gap in the fence intended to keep out the livestock, you’ll see that most footprints are heading eastward. This is the “trail” to follow. About a quarter-mile east of the gate, you’ll be walking along the north side of a quarter-mile-wide, dry wash. Continue walking eastward, you’ll soon come to a barbed wire fence along the edge of the Gateway Coal Mine property on your left. A few hundred yards farther east, at the far corner of the boundary fence where it makes a right-angle bend to the north, you’ll see that most of the footprints you’ve been following veer off toward the left—the northeast. Although there are some interesting, sculpted sandstone hoo doos along the south side of this wide wash (more about these later), most of the rock formations in the Bisti Wilderness lie to the north of the wash. Heading that direction, the footprints soon scatter in all directions. The walk out to this point is flat and easy. To really explore the area, you’ll have to climb up the slopes to the ridges above the eroded stream beds.

Very little vegetation grows out on the badlands, some sagebrush and tumbleweed and cacti. You’ll soon discover the small thorns in the tumble weeds that grow across the area. They are especially annoying when they work their way into your socks. Wear high-top boots for this hike.
During my week of explorations through the Bisti/De-Na-Zin Wilderness, I used a 17mm lens plus a 24-120mm zoom lens on my Nikon. Gusty winds that kicked up during a few days in the area made large-format photography difficult. If you take a large-format camera into the Bisti, you might have problems with wind as well as fine dust blowing into your sheet film holders. To do justice to the fine detail and subtle colors of this Southwest desert, bring your large cameras including a panoramic camera. Just watch the weather forecasts for windy conditions.

One of the first things I noticed about Bisti was the color. Low, brick-red hills from a distance look like red sandstone. Up close are piles of hard and shiny chips of stone that appear to be of volcanic origin, but are actually red clay that was baked in underground coal fires long ago. Small chips of opalized petrified wood are scattered everywhere. Some low spots in narrow canyons are filled with large polished marbles of this same material. They are slippery and hard to walk on. Low rolling hills are layered with black veins of coal and coffee-colored strata, then topped with off-white sediments. Climbing a hundred feet to the top of one of the highest knolls in the area, I was surrounded by undulating ridges all formed of the same gray material. It looks like bentonite and has a “popcorn” texture, the product of rapidly eroding silts and clays. The only other thing visible from the top of one ridge I climbed was a large fallen tree in the distance. When I reached the tree, I saw that it was made of stone—a petrified tree. After photographing the muted salmon pinks and orange colors of the swirling rings still visible across the core of the tree trunk, I continued moving toward the east.

By staying high on the ridges, I could see formations and balancing rocks in the distance and headed in that direction. I photographed many large basins in the rolling hills that once held enough water to erode the more solid sandstone layers that lie deeper, beneath the present level of the land. Large slabs of sandstone are now balancing atop tall columns of softer silt. The sandstone slabs act as umbrellas and protect the pedestals beneath from the infrequent rains.

If there is any water in the stream or if the trail is muddy, you won’t get very far. The fine, dusty silt, covering the bottoms of the dry washes, becomes a slick and slippery goo when wet. You won’t be able to climb up the slopes and out of the stream beds after a rain. Go back to town and wait a few days for Bisti to dry out.
Some of these balancing stones are only a few inches thick and as large as eight feet long. Many stand ten feet in the air. Some stand on more than one pedestal and others are supporting several mushroom-shaped hoodoos in a strange, geological balancing act. When a balancing rock falls off its pedestal, the softer soil beneath begins to erode more quickly. Many wash away from the top, forming a point that soon is eroded into a tall cone shape. Whole canyon walls, formed of these tall, pointed gray cones can be found in Bisti. There are arches and tunnels, long lines of low toadstools, and fantastic sculptures. No trails lead to them and no signs point the way to the best examples. Explorations of the Bisti/De-Na-Zin Wilderness must be free-style, do-it-yourself projects. I watch my shadow and keep track of the time of day so I have a good idea which direction is north. If you park at the western gate, head east, and start exploring the canyons to the north of the wash, you are going to find some amazing subjects for your camera.

Mushroom City

From the Bisti parking area, go through the entrance gate and walk two-hundred feet around the dark ridge that looks like a vein of coal. At that point, look southeast. In the distance, there is a long row of low, dark red, mounds on the far side of the dry wash. Head toward the low red hills that are farthest to the right. Walk a half-mile and you will reach the spot in about fifteen minutes. As you approach the red mounds (thirty-feet high) look for the light-colored formations along the cliffs on the south side of the wash. As you get closer, you will see balancing rocks and some very strange stone sculptures. As you climb up into the area, don’t climb onto the formations (not allowed).
Follow the easiest route up the slopes between the hoodoos and pillars with large, flat cap rocks. When you reach the top, look west and you will see your car in the parking lot, less than a mile away. This is probably the easiest place to start your explorations of Bisti.

You can fill a half-day photographing this one small area. When you are ready for more adventures, climb down from the hillside and continue walking east, along the south side of the wash. Between a quarter-mile and a half-mile farther east, you will see more off-white formations on the south side of the wash, along the dark-gray canyon walls.

As you climb up and out of the wash, you enter a fantasy land frozen in stone that could be called “Mushroom City.” For hundreds of feet in every direction, you are surrounded by large and small balancing rocks. Round black stones the size of baseballs sit atop thin white pillars that are four-feet tall. Large flat stones the size of dining room tables rest everywhere on white stone pedestals. Many of the balancing stones resemble mushroom caps and their pedestals are mushroom stalks.

Scattered everywhere across the smooth, hard, flat floor of this “city” are small round stones the size of golf balls, each sitting on their tees. Groups of shapes resemble white penguins and several prehistoric creatures with long, thin necks stretching toward the sky.

Do not touch the delicate formations and don’t bump them with your tripod legs. The ground here is smooth and solid sandstone. Pack a pair of knee pads for this hike. Some of the best camera angles are close to the ground, shooting up toward the sky. It’s the only way to isolate the shorter formations.

I stayed out until dusk to watch the low rays of sunlight cast long shadows of these strange creatures across the desert. Their shadows are sharply defined on the smooth surface, the floor of this basin, and help to describe the actual shapes of these strange objects. The light-colored hoodoos stand out in sharp contrast against a dark blue sky or against the dark-gray background of the hillsides above the stream bed.
Most of the sculptures are not very colorful in mid-day sunlight. They take on a strong yellow glow at sunset.

Even in the semi-darkness after a sunset, you should have no trouble finding your car after photographing this location. Head down the wash toward the glow on the horizon in the west and, in about thirty minutes, you’ll reach the barbed wire fence, the gate, and your car.

Another route

Directly across the pavement of NM 371, on the east side of the highway, the north end of the parallel side road, marked San Juan County Road 7290, veers off toward the southeast at mile post 77. This road leads out across the desert toward the Bisti Badlands for three miles. The first 200 feet are paved; it’s graded gravel the rest of the way. After a few miles, you’ll see some strange rock formations along the left, the east side of the road. Brown plastic BLM Wilderness markers line the roadside, defining the western edge of the Bisti Wilderness.

The gravel road makes a bend to the east around a low hill. On the right, you’ll see several large buildings. The first has a blue cross painted on the west side of the building beneath a sign “Bisti Union Methodist Church.” Just beyond is a metal-roofed barn—a large Quonset hut. There are three roads at the fork near the barn. The road to the right goes to the church.

At the fork near the church, take the dirt road to the north, along the base of some low cliffs. It leads out onto a large, flat playa that may be covered with slick mud after a rain. If it looks wet and muddy out on the playa, park your car near the road at the base of the cliffs.
Start your hike by following the high ground along the cliffs to the northeast toward the barbed wire fence to your left. If it looks like it may rain later in the day, you won't want to return to find your car in the middle of a very large but shallow pond of water.

Park here where you can get through the fence. If the gate here is closed, walk a hundred yards farther east to a large gap under the fence where it crosses over a deep stream bed. There are several BLM Wilderness Boundary signs posted here.

All motorized vehicles as well as bicycles are prohibited in the badlands.

When you cross the fence and enter the Bisti Badlands, look around for landmarks you can spot from a distance to aid your return to your car. The large building with several power poles on the hill at the west end of the fence, is a natural gas pipeline pumping station. There is a large round building that looks like a water tank on the ridge to the north. Farther west, a long line of dark hills run north and south, parallel to Highway 371. When you lose your way and feel lost in the badlands, just head west toward those hills. If you can't see the hills, follow your compass, keep walking west, and you'll eventually reach the road and your car.

There are no trails through the badlands and no signs will point the way. In some places, it's difficult to tell which side of a barbed wire fence is inside or outside the wilderness. The Bisti/De-Na-Zin Wilderness covers 45,000 acres and will look like a maze to a newcomer. If you have parked your car near the Bisti United Methodist Church, look eastward along the barbed wire fence. In the distance, you will see tall white spires and balancing rocks. After assembling all your gear and locking your car, look toward the east for the white formations where you'll head for the best photography.

If the roads and the playa are dry, drive out about a quarter-mile to the two double sets of large, wooden fence posts in the distance.
Follow the fence to the east beyond your parked car. At the far corner of the fence, where it turns south, veer to the right and you will soon enter an area of low hills filled with unique balancing formations. The large, curved sandstone slab balancing on two pedestals is located in the center of this area, east of the Bisti Church.

Try to stay up on the ridges. It’s easier than walking the narrow bottoms of the “canyons.” The deeply eroded stream beds are blocked in places with large, fallen stones. You can fill a whole day photographing the many formations located just east of the Bisti Church. You can reach them from both parking areas described above.

To find some different formations, enter the area near the Bisti Church, follow the fence eastward to the corner and bear slightly to the left—the northeast. You will be walking up another wide flat wash. In a half-mile, you’ll find long rows of strange shapes along the canyon walls.

Late afternoon light casts strong shadows across these formations lined up from east to west. After photographing a sunset up this wash, just head west to find your car. None of the formations, the washes, or stream beds were named on my maps.

During my week in the Bisti/De-Na-Zin, I made several all-day treks with a pack full of camera gear. Judging by the map I carried, I probably hiked no more than five miles into this wilderness. There were many places where I headed up a side canyon to find nothing. If I couldn’t climb up and out of the dead end canyon, I had to return and walk up another side canyon. If you are a strong hiker, you will find more and more formations and more bizarre sculptures as you continue heading eastward into the mazes of the wilderness. There are no marked trails, no boardwalks with access for the handicapped, and no visitor center here. The few signs along the highway are old, weathered, and full of bullet holes.

![Image of Bisti Church and balancing sandstone slab]

**Bad weather**

One afternoon, a strong afternoon wind began to whip the fine dust up into low clouds around the low hills on the southern edge of the badlands. I started back toward the trailhead as the wind speed increased and dark storm clouds moved in from the southwest.
I was a mile from my car and walking down the large dry wash, straight into a dust cloud blowing at least 40 miles an hour. All my camera gear was sealed in zip-up plastic bags inside my backpack. Lowering clouds seemed ready to drop a heavy rain. I rounded the last bend in the dry river bed and saw long dark columns of rain clouds just ahead. As I walked on, I stayed dry beneath dark clouds of virga—rain that never actually reaches the ground. This desert is so dry that most rain storms evaporate as they fall.

A very soft powdery sand lies at the bottom of stream beds and dry washes in this area. Hillsides are covered with fine gravel or small chips of stone. It can be hard to climb the steeper slopes to the tops of the mesas. Once up there, you can spot the best formations in the distance. Find a good high spot and look for nearby balancing rocks. You may need to double back and circle around a hill to reach a formation that lies across a deep gully. Or you may head off in one direction, toward a likely formation in the distance but get sidetracked by some other incredible balancing monolith hidden up another side canyon.

Don’t hike until you are exhausted. Stop and rest in the shade of a tall formation and take a break. Start back toward your car at least an hour before you think you should. Drink most of your water as you hike in. Save a bit of water for the walk back.

There are only two large washes that drain across the western boundary from the eastern regions of the Bisti Wilderness. One flows past the Bisti Church and the other flows just south of the official Bisti parking area. All the other major washes flowing from the eastern end of De-Na-Zin Wilderness flow southward across the remote southern boundary of the wilderness. If you are returning from a long hike into the eastern regions, follow your compass and head west. Don’t just walk down a wash hoping that it will take you back to the trailhead where you started your hike.

The De-Na-Zin

There is so much to discover and photograph in the western Bisti section of the Bisti/De-Na-Zin Wilderness that few visitors take the time to explore the more remote eastern section—the De-Na-Zin Wilderness area. The eastern De-Na-Zin region is higher in elevation than the western Bisti regions and there is more climbing involved in exploring the area. The canyons are deeper and there are many more petrified logs everywhere. Everything is on a grander scale than Bisti. Since it covers a much larger area than Bisti, it is easier to get lost. There are trees—junipers and piñon pines—and you’ll have some landmarks to guide you as you hike the De-Na-Zin.

To find the trailhead into the De-Na-Zin Wilderness, drive south on Highway 371 to a BLM Wilderness sign at the corner of San Juan County Road 7500. It’s fourteen miles east, on a well graded, unpaved road, to the next BLM sign pointing out the left turn into the parking area at the trailhead. The trail from
the parking lot goes straight north, out across a flat sage-covered plain for a quarter-mile. When you get close to the edge, you’ll see the canyons below. The trail follows an old two-rut 4x4 road to the bottom. From there, the footprints seem to spread in every direction. Most head upstream or downstream along the bottom of a dry wash.

Petrified logs are scattered everywhere, usually located in small clusters of six to eight trees. The bark patterns are very similar to redwood trees. Some had no visible growth rings and others had strong, black-and-white patterns of wide annular rings up to 1/2” wide that were obvious and easy to photograph.

After several days of clear, blue skies, I was pleased to see a few wispy clouds blowing in from the southwest. Clouds add a nice touch to landscape compositions. When I found an especially good composition, I not only bracketed the exposure but experimented with several different filters. I added and then removed polarizers and warming filters for several scenes. The clear, blue skies of the Southwest can easily be over-polarized. Often, the best image is made with no filter at all. Sometimes, when a dark stone pillar blended into a dark sky beyond, I removed the filter. In a few cases, I added a blue filter to lighten a sky and to increase the contrast between a foreground and background.

My favorite photographs of the badlands were almost all made with a wide-angle lens. I tried using a longer telephoto to tightly frame a distant stone balancing atop a tall pedestal. But the results were seldom successful. Without a foreground and a background and a feeling of depth in my photographs, the images don’t convey any sense of the true size of the subject. The balancing rock may be three-inches tall or thirty feet tall. There is no way to tell when the subject is framed too tightly.

When I returned to De-Na-Zin a few days later, the same wispy clouds streaked across the horizon. That all-day hike was done with a lighter pack. I carried only the Nikon with a wide-angle lens and filters. My day pack was filled with water, a lunch, and a compass. I made a large loop around the eastern end of the wilderness area by hiking upstream, up the dry wash as far as I could without doing any serious climbing, then heading north through some very rugged country. After hiking several miles, I turned toward the west, following a wide and flat wash. When I estimated that I had completed three sides of a large square, I turned south and covered some new ground. My landmark was a tilted juniper high on a ridge along the southern edge of the wilderness. When I finally returned to that tree after a six-hour hike, I was only a quarter-mile from the parking area.
Planning your trip

Bisti/De-Na-Zin Wilderness is open year round. There are no water sources and no designated trails. The western sections are fairly flat and easier to hike. The eastern, De-Na-Zin areas require more climbing and it’s easier to get lost out there. Fewer visitors enter the eastern regions of this remote BLM Wilderness area.

Bisti is located seventy-five miles east of Canyon de Chelly and twenty-five miles north of Chaco Culture National Historical Park. Farmington is thirty-five miles south of Mesa Verde. From my motel window in Farmington, I could see the snow-covered peaks of Colorado’s San Juan Mountains not far to the north. If you are planning a loop trip through New Mexico, include the Four Corners Region and schedule several extra days to visit and photograph the Bisti/De-Na-Zin Wilderness Area.

For more information about the Bisti/De-Na-Zin Wilderness, contact the BLM Office located on the west side of Farmington at 1235 La Plata Highway. Their phone number is (505) 599-8900. There is a good selection of motels and restaurants in Farmington.

Have a great trip and send me an email!

My life-long career in photography began at San Jose State University in 1957. After college, I enlisted in the U.S. Army Signal Corps, serving as a photographer and darkroom technician. In Germany, my skills and experience with equipment and lab work were developed and polished. I took the opportunity to photograph the beauty of nature in the Black Forest. Returning to California in 1965, I produced industrial and military training films for Raytheon Electronics and began showing my color nature prints. From 1969 through 1981, my photography was exhibited and sold in West Coast galleries. During the early 1980’s, I taught color darkroom workshops, then expanded to include field trips. Former customers, who had purchased my framed photographs, wanted to learn photography. My Pacific Image Photography Workshops offered adventures to the Pacific Coast, the Southwest deserts, national parks, Hawaii, New England, Canada, England, and the South Pacific. The workshops evolved into writing and sharing my adventures with others. Photograph America Newsletter provides information on where, when, and how to discover the best nature photography in North America.

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