

Perched alongside the roadway, this ponderosa pine tree is the unofficial representative of dozens of other trees that suffer from its same affliction but are too remote to be seen by human eyes. This tree, like many others around here, is a casualty of a lightning strike. We don't know when it was hit or how many other nearby trees have been hit but it's safe to say that it is a relatively common phenomenon around here.

Rising from volcanic origins, much of the monument's Colorado Plateau ecoregion contains basalt ledges, ponderosa pine forests and pinyon-juniper woodlands. Mount Logan and Mount Trumbull are known as "Islands in the Sky" due to their high elevations and secluded stands of ponderosa pine trees. Drought-tolerant, sun loving species, these pines offer a cool and pleasant respite from the arid, lower lands that surround them. This enchanting area in the Monument's Uinkaret Mountains is part of the largest ponderosa pine forest in the world: a swath of trees that extends from west-central New Mexico into northern Arizona. The forest cloaks plateaus, ridges and canyons, marking the 7,000-foot elevation where it grows most comfortably.

Little more than a hundred and fifty years ago, the ponderosa pine forest looked very different than it does today. Grand, yellow-barked pines towered over an understory rich with grasses, shrubs and wildflowers. Analysis of tree rings has shown that until 1863 low-intensity fires raced through every few summers. Small fires consumed the grasses and ladder fuels such as shrubs and small trees. The lack of ladder fuels protected old growth trees because the fuel load was insufficient to propel the fire into the forest canopy. As a result, ground fires helped maintain open, park-like stands.

Land use practices of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries altered the forests. Logging removed large trees that were replaced over time by many smaller trees. Attempts to suppress fire allowed fuels that normally would have been removed on a regular basis to build up. The absence of fire has allowed tree density and fuel loads to increase from an average of 28 trees per acre in the late 1800s to more than 500 trees per acre today. The high fuel loads and increase in ladder fuels have changed the fire regime from high frequency/low intensity to one with a high likelihood of high intensity, catastrophic fire. Though ponderosa pines have thick bark for surviving low intensity ground fires, flames that reach the forest canopy can kill many trees. Forest communities are drastically altered, soils damaged, and human safety threatened.

Lightning is the primary cause of fire around here and this tree is a living example of that. The stripe of black charcoal that swirls around the trunk like a candy cane before entering the ground is a sure scar of a lightning strike. The force and energy that coursed through this tree in a fraction of a second must have been tremendous. Most trees don't survive such brutality but this one keeps growing. Its needles are bright, its bark healthy, and the tree seems almost proud to wear its blackened badge of honor.

Don't open until you arrive

10. Candy Cane

Take a picture!

N 36° 20' 56.1"
W 113° 11' 52.0"

The colors on this giant candy cane are a bit off...

From County Rd. 5, take BLM Rd. 1044 to BLM Rd. 1064. Pull over as far as possible and park along roadway away from any blind corners or hills.

Difficulty: ♦♦ - -

#FindItAtParashant