Santa Fe National Historic Trail
National Park Service

Boot Hill Museum
Santa Fe Trail Association

High Plains, Short Grass

Here it seems the wind always blows; some claim it drove settlers insane. But trail travelers were often awed by the wide vistas of gently rolling short grass prairie, sometimes spotted with colorful wildflowers. Glimpses of wildlife—antelope (pronghorn), coyotes, prairie dogs, hawks, elk, meadowlarks, and mule deer—were punctuated by the astonishing spectacle of enormous herds of "buffalo" (bison). Rumbling thunderstorms can be seen for miles in this treeless, semiarid country.

The plains have changed. Water irrigates fields. Cattle graze where once numerous bison roamed. Trees stand where there once was open prairie. A paved highway has replaced the Santa Fe Trail. Still, you can experience the flavor of the prairie and the High Plains of the Santa Fe Trail—if you take the time to explore.

. . .and for three hours the Arkansas was filled with the buffalo, crossing so fast that they could not stop to drink, lest they should be overwhelmed by the crowd thronging behind.

Matthew C. Field, 1839

There, too, was the wonder of the skies. Morning after morning we watched the great land flare into beauty. Evening after evening we watched the prairie sun go down in its glory, and then watched the white stars shine in the night above us.

Marian Russell, reminiscing about her 1852 trip on the trail

Clockwise from top left: western meadowlark, prairie dogs, mule deer, prickly pear cactus

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The Worst Piece of Road

For 60 years, this prairie sod was torn by the hooves of mules, oxen, and horses, and compacted by the weight of the large freight wagons they pulled. The wagons of a caravan often traveled four abreast to avoid dust and to quickly form defensive circles. They moved over when tracks became too deep or muddy, creating additional parallel ruts.

Today, the shouts and cracks of the bullwhackers' whips, and the rattling of the harness and wagons have fallen silent. The depth of the ruts has dwindled due to wind and rain erosion, but their continued existence attests to the thousands of people, wagons, horses, mules, oxen, and carriages that used this great highway.

Sunday, September 11, 1825. Morning calm and cool…The Waggons were obliged to turn out into the High Prairie, and go round a considerable distance to get past this rugged Bluff… Altogether, I believe this is the worst piece of Road we have had since we left Ft. Osage."

George Sibley,
US surveyor of the road to Santa Fe

Look for long, wide depressions, different vegetation, and water courses running at odd angles at those places where "bridges" in the path span ruts. They are easiest to see when the sun is low.

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Soule's Ditch

Local men, boys, and animals sweated long and hard to build the Eureka Irrigation Canal between 1884 and 1887. The long line below the ridge is a remnant of this early effort to irrigate semi-arid lands using the only reliable water source then available, the Arkansas River. Financed by Asa T. Soule, the canal snaked its way from Ingalls 15 miles to the west to Spearville 25 miles to the east, providing water to farmers in between.

Plagued with problems, the canal was soon seen as a failure. It suffered from breaks in the canal wall, seepage, flash floods that destroyed a dam, a low river level from irrigation upstream, and drought. People began calling it "Soule's Folly" and "Soule's Elephant," and by 1890 it was abandoned. Attempts were later made to revitalize the canal with pumps, but too much water was lost from seepage and evaporation, resulting in its final abandonment in 1921.

Remnants of the Soule Canal wind snakelike across the Kansas plains.