AUTHOR’S NOTE

John Muir was probably the first to confront the conservationist’s conundrum so eloquently articulated by Aldo Leopold half a century ago: “But all conservation of wildness is self-defeating, for to cherish we must see and fondle, and when enough have seen and fondled, there is no wilderness left to cherish.” Muir knew the only way to save the Sierra Nevada was to publicize its grandeur, yet he suffered as his beloved Yosemite Valley became overrun by curiosity seekers. For years I have struggled with the dilemma of writing about a place I love, a place known only to a few hearty souls. (If you are one of those who are as chagrined as I every time a new guide book appears on the shelves, forgive me). The unfortunate reality is that the San Rafael Swell suffers more immediate and more consequential threats than “discovery.” Be assured, however, that this is no guidebook. In fact, for those who have intimate knowledge of these places, you will find that certain canyons have been omitted and other locations renamed or moved, especially with regard to archeological sites. Do not attempt to recreate this journey based upon this text or its map, for you will find time and space have been deliberately distorted. Instead instigate your own journey. Buy a guide book or map to the region if you must. Better yet, simply wander off aimlessly into the desert, follow your heart up intriguing canyons or across desolate mesas, bereft of guide and map. The desert Southwest is filled with secret places, most of which are imminently threatened by development. Find that place which restores your spirit, whether it be the San Rafael, the Book Cliffs, Cedar Mesa, a redwood forest, or your local roadless area; draw your line in the sand and persevere.

The frontispiece map by Deb Van Ploen is strictly representational and not drawn to scale. It is included with Leopold’s dictum in mind and exists only to serve the reader in navigating through the text, not the landscape itself.
Stratigraphic sequence of the San Rafael/Dirty Devil