

CHAPTER 2. DESCRIPTION AND NATURAL ENVIRONMENT

Location

Golden Spike National Historic Site straddles the Promontory Mountains on the northern shores of the Great Salt Lake (Figure 2.1). It is immediately west of Brigham City, Utah and contains 2,735 acres within its authorized boundaries. For approximately 4.5 miles on either side of the Park the railroad grades are managed as a Bureau of Land Management Area of Critical Environmental Concern (ACEC). The park stretches for 15 ½ miles across the Promontories and is divided for easy reference into three major areas: the east slope, the west slope, and the summit or “headquarters” area (Figure 2.2). It is part of the vast Great American Desert. Today, the park retains the open and isolated feeling that greeted the first explorers and early pioneers, thus enabling the historic context of this great American enterprise to be preserved.

Natural Environment

The Promontory Range in the northeastern part of the Great Basin of Northern Utah falls into the Intermountain Semi-desert and Desert Province eco-regions. Its vegetation belongs to the cold desert and semi-desert plant communities, particularly the shadscale-kangaroo rat-sagebrush biome. Vegetation of the lower areas of the park is consistent with that of salt desert communities and includes species such as greasewood (*Sarcobatus vermiculatus*) and hopsage (*Atriplex confertifolia*) [Monaco 2004]. However, the major flora in this remnant sagebrush-steppe consists of sagebrush (*Artemisia* spp.), rabbitbrush (*Chrysanthamnus nauseosus*, *C. viscidiflorus*), winterfat (*Krascheninnikovia lanata*), Bitterbrush (*Pursia tridentate*); and a variety of grasses, such as wheatgrass (*Agropyron* spp.), bluegrass (*Poa* spp.), and Indian ricegrass (*Orzyopsis hymenoides*); and numerous members of the Composite family. A copse of Chokecherry bushes (*Prunus virginiana*) occurs along the Central Pacific-constructed grade at its steepest point – six percent grade on the east side of Promontory Mountain. A number of onion (*Allium* spp.), lilly (*Calochortus* spp.), and other Great Basin herbs and forbes can be found, including many introduced species. Particularly obnoxious is the invasive Cheatgrass (*Bromus tectorum*) [Monaco 2004:2]. Russian Thistle (*Salsola* spp.) and Tumble Mustard (*Sisymbrium altissimum*) are of concern because of their propensity of “tumbling” and lodging in great numbers within the archeological sites and historic culverts where they can burn and result in loss of the resources. Allen and Curto (1995) estimate that at least 37 percent of all vascular plant species found within the park are introduced.

A very few Utah Junipers (*Juniperous osteosperma*) and two historic Box Elder trees (*Acer negundo*) grow on park lands. The exotic Matrimony Vine (*Lycium barbarum*) also abounds in the old town site of Promontory Station where it was used historically around structures to beautify the area (Ayres 1982). One Golden Current (*Ribes aureum*) remains, which was part of the Houghton establishment at Promontory Station. Over one-hundred years of grazing, fire, drought, and dry land farming, in addition to ground-disturbing railroad maintenance activities, complicates the park’s vegetation history. Both grazing and dry farming