



Photo: Clint Henson

Wildlife areas open

The Gaining Access Into Nature program opens more wildlife-associated recreational opportunities on Wildlife Management Areas.

Please see Page 9.

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Photo: Dan Williams

Scissor-tailed flycatchers are among many bird species found in eastern New Mexico in springtime.

Spring is for birders, shed hunters

By Dan Williams

Sometimes, fresh air, exercise and scenery just aren't enough to get us off our couches and into nature. Sometimes, we need something wild to hunt.

Whether we are after game to harvest, a bird to photograph, or something to collect, perhaps a pretty rock or a shed antler, the wild things lure us to the back country. As Aldo Leopold wrote in his forward to A Sand County Almanac, "There are some who can live without wild things, and some who cannot."

New Mexico's diversity of wildlife and terrain present vast opportunities for people seeking a springtime outing. Hunters look forward to spring turkey season while anglers happily anticipate ice-off and hot fishing for hungry trout, spawning bass and walleye. Photographers, bird-watchers and treasure seekers find special thrills in spring migrations and shed antlers.

"It's always exciting when you walk up on an antler, especially if it's a big one," said Brian Novosak, southeastern New Mexico game manager for the Department of Game and Fish. "Hunting sheds is like hunting elk. They are where you find them."

Antler hunting has grown in popularity as New Mexico's elk herds continue to earn the reputation as some of the healthiest in the nation. Along with bird-watching, it is among the fastest-growing wildlife-related recreational activities in the state. According to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, almost 400,000 people regularly participate in away-from-home, non-hunting, non-angling wildlife-as-



Photo: Dan Williams

What better excuse to take a walk in the mountains than hunting for antlers? Story: Page 15.

sociated recreational activities in New Mexico. The majority of those are bird-watchers.

"Birding is fun and it is so easy to participate," said Christopher Rustay, one of the state's best-known birders. "All you need is a good birding guidebook and a pair of binoculars and you're all set. You'll find birds almost anywhere you go."

...continued on Pages 14, 15



Judge hands Gila outfitters heavy fines

Two outfitters and a guide from the Reserve area will pay more than \$7,000 in fines for violating special-use regulations while outfitting or guiding hunters in the Gila National Forest.

U.S. Magistrate William P. Lynch sentenced the three men on charges resulting from a joint investigation by the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish and the Gila National Forest. Violations included non-compliance with federal and state special-use permit requirements for commercial operations. Citations were issued in 2007.

“The permits provide guidance and direction on commercial recreation activities, which affords the public a quality recreation experience and protects the forest’s natural resources,” said Craig Cowie, Recreation Staff Officer on the Gila National Forest.

Defendants and fines included:

- Michael DeLaO, 29, Gila and Apache Outfitter/Guide Service, pleaded guilty to non-compliance with Forest Service special-use permits and use of an unauthorized guide. He was fined \$3,880.
- Jamie DeLaO, 34, Hard Core Outfitter/Guide Service, pleaded guilty to non-compliance with Forest Service special-use permits and use of an unauthorized guide. He was fined \$3,030.
- Carlos DeLaO, 36, pleaded guilty to operation of a commercial business on U.S. Forest lands without a special-use permit, and unauthorized guiding on the national forest. He was fined \$325.

Forest Service Patrol Captain Steve Edwards and Department of Game and Fish District Wildlife Supervisor Leon Redman stressed that this case demonstrates a commitment from both agencies to work together to enforce state and federal laws affecting outfitters and guides.

“Individuals holding a Forest Service special-use permit, whether for outfitting, guiding or other permitted activities, need to comply with the permit regulations and the New Mexico outfitter-guide requirements to prevent a similar situation from occurring,” Edwards said.

If you have information about a wildlife-related crime, please call Operation Game Thief toll-free (800) 432-4263. Callers can remain anonymous and may be eligible for rewards.



Photo: Dan Williams

Department of Game and Fish conservation officers stress safety while teaching beginners the basics of muzzleloader shooting at the New Mexico Outdoor Expo.

Learn to shoot, fish and more at sixth annual Outdoor Expo

Have you ever wanted to shoot a muzzleloader or try your hand at archery without investing a lot of time and money getting equipment? Would you like to introduce your children to these healthy activities?

Those opportunities will be available -- free of charge -- to anyone who attends the sixth annual New Mexico Outdoor Expo May 17-18 at the Albuquerque Shooting Range Park. The educational family event is open to participants of all ages. All you need to bring is a smile.

It’s fun, it’s free and it’s a great family activity,” said Mark Birkhauser, the Department of Game and Fish hunter education coordinator. “It’s always a pleasure for us to help people have fun and enjoy the outdoors while they learn how to safely enjoy hunting, fishing and shooting sports.”

This year’s Expo will include more displays and educational activities inside two new buildings at the Shooting Range Park, where visitors can get out of the weather and have a snack, tie a fly, or learn about aquatics. The most popular events, however, are outside.

- Anyone, regardless of age, can learn to shoot a bow or muzzleloader with expert instruction from certified hunter education instructors and Department of Game and Fish conservation officers.
- A 4,000-gallon aquarium stocked with large game fish will be the stage for expert anglers as they demonstrate how to catch the big ones using a variety of lures.
- For children seeking hands-on angling excitement, the popular catfish pond will be full of hungry, rod-bending lunkers.

The event, sponsored by the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish and the City of Albuquerque, will be from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Saturday and Sunday, May 17-18. To get to the Shooting Range Park, take I-40 west to the top of nine-mile hill, exit and drive 4.2 miles north on Paseo del Volcan, then take a left at the park sign and drive 2.6 miles to the range.

For more information about New Mexico Outdoor Expo, please call (505) 222-4731.

Ranch purchase protects habitat

The Lewis Ranch, 5,280 acres of mixed-grass and shinnery oak prairie in Roosevelt County, has been purchased by the State Game Commission using Governor Bill Richardson’s Land Conservation Appropriation.

An agreement between the Commission and former owner Tommy Lewis will allow him to graze cattle on the ranch until May 29, 2008.

The ranch adjoins two Commission-owned properties dedicated to providing habitat for lesser prairie chickens -- the Antelope Flats and Bledsoe Prairie Chicken Areas. Cassin’s and Grasshopper sparrows, Loggerhead Shrikes, and Northern Bobwhite Quail are other species of grasslands birds that occur in the area. Antelope and mule deer also use the ranch.

“This is the largest purchase to date using Governor Richardson’s Land Conservation Appropriation money,” said Bruce Thompson, Director of the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish. “The Commission and Department are extremely happy to be adding this property to our wildlife habitat and conservation portfolio in eastern New Mexico.”

Milnesand is the prairie chicken capital of New Mexico. The seventh annual High Plains Prairie Chicken Festival is scheduled April 11-13 in and around Milnesand. This is a birding event that attracts birders from coast-to-coast to New Mexico’s east side.

For more information about lesser-prairie chicken conservation efforts, please visit the Department website, at www.wildlife.state.nm.us.

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Big-game licenses net \$568,000 at auctions

Big-game conservation efforts in New Mexico picked up an extra \$568,000 at recent auctions for special licenses and permits, and the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish will triple that amount with federal matching funds for habitat restoration and big-game enhancement projects statewide.

Well-heeled trophy hunters showed once again this year how much they are willing to pay to go after record-book big-game in New Mexico, shelling out big bucks in auctions for opportunities to hunt big bucks, bulls and billies. The auctions are important fund-raising tools for the Department, which uses them to supplement money raised primarily through license sales.

A hunter from Washington made this year's highest bid of \$172,000 for a package of hunts -- deer, elk, pronghorn, oryx and ibex. The hunt package sold at the annual Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation National Convention in Reno and was one of two made available for the first time this year. The other package sold for \$145,000 to a hunter from California at the Mule Deer Foundation Convention in Salt Lake City.

Other hunting opportunities at the auctions and their prices included:

- Elk: \$90,000 to a hunter from Tennessee.
- Bighorn sheep: \$90,000 to a hunter from Illinois.
- Mule deer: \$71,000 to a hunter from Arizona.

The special licenses and permits allow hunters to harvest animals with any legal weapon during extended seasons on public land or on private land statewide with a landowner's permission.

The Department of Game and Fish calls them "enhancement" licenses and permits because the money raised in the auctions is used for big-game habitat enhancement, conservation and protection.

Most of the money raised at auctions is matched 3-to-1 with Federal Wildlife Restoration Grant money, giving the Department opportunities to restore and improve significant and meaningful areas of habitat statewide.

Enhancement funds currently are being used to restore habitat in Game Management Unit 2C and the Rio Chama Wildlife Management Area in northwestern New Mexico; Magdalena Mountain and Chupadera Mesa in central New Mexico; Pelona Mountain and the Gila National Forest in southwestern New Mexico; and the Lincoln National Forest in southeastern New Mexico.

The enhancement license program also includes annual raffles through Department partnerships with sporting and conservation groups. Tickets are available from these organizations:



Photo courtesy of Tod Reichert

Tod Reichert was the high bidder for the 2007 New Mexico elk enhancement license. He took this record-book bull in the San Mateo Mountains.

- Elk license raffle: \$20 a ticket; Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, contact Allen Kerby, (505) 454-9390 or akerby@rmef.org.
- Bighorn sheep license raffle: \$20 a ticket; Foundation for North American Wild Sheep, contact Kent Schauer, (505) 299-4426.
- Deer permit raffle: Mule Deer Foundation, contact (505) 476-8038.

For more information about the enhancement licenses and big-game hunting opportunities in New Mexico, please visit www.wildlife.state.nm.us, or call (505) 476-8038.

Tijeras Canyon Wildlife Corridor gets FHA award

TIJERAS -- The Federal Highway Administration has awarded the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish and the New Mexico Department of Transportation with the Exemplary Ecosystem Initiative Award for a state-of-the-art wildlife corridor project in Tijeras Canyon.

Governor Bill Richardson signed House Joint Memorial 3 in March 2003, creating the project to protect wildlife crossing I-40 and N.M. 333. Representative Mimi Stewart sponsored the joint memorial and \$750,000 was allocated to protect wildlife moving through the corridor.

Electric fencing and several types of wildlife crossings were built along the corridor to curb wildlife collisions with vehicles on I-40 in the East Mountains. Bears, deer, and cougars were being killed, depleting our state's resources, causing serious damage to vehicles and risking public safety.

A coalition of agencies and conservation groups made the project possible. Student members of Wild Friends, a group sponsored by the Center for Wildlife Law at the University of New Mexico Law School, wrote the memorial.

Nationwide, there are 1.5 million deer-vehicle collisions a year, causing \$1.1 billion in damage and 29,000 human injuries. Before the creation of the corridor, wildlife collisions were becoming a major problem through Tijeras Canyon. The wildlife corridor was built with



Photo: Dan Williams

Solar panels help supply power to lights, fences and highway mats designed to keep deer and other wildlife safer on busy roads.

satellite-monitored electric fencing, Animal Detection System warning lights and wildlife escape ramps. Additional wildlife corridors may be built in other areas of the state.

"We are monitoring the effectiveness of the system right now," said Mark Watson, a wildlife habitat specialist for the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish. "We know that deer are using all three underpasses since the system went live in September and black bears have been known to have used several of the underpasses."

Along with Wild Friends, the Tijeras Canyon Safe Passage Coalition, the New Mexico Land Conservancy, and the Carnuel Land Grant were influential in the completion of the Tijeras Canyon project.

Department recruiting partners in fight against spread of invasive aquatics

The Department of Game and Fish is looking for partners to help defend New Mexico from an invasion of alien organisms that threaten our fish, wildlife and aquatic ecosystems.

More than 100 aquatic invasive species already are seriously impacting New Mexico's natural resources, and the threats continue to grow despite regulations prohibiting their introduction to the state.



Eurasian watermilfoil and Brazilian waterweed are present in the state and can reduce waterfowl populations, cause fish die-offs, impede water flow and clog intakes and pumps. Toxins produced by golden alga have killed thousands of fish in the Pecos River. Potential threats include zebra and quagga mussels, which can wipe out native species, clog pipes and force costly cleanup and repairs to municipal/agricultural water supply systems and water craft.

To battle these invasive species, the Department is forming an

advisory committee to help in the development and approval process of an Aquatic Invasive Species Management Plan. Once established, the plan will make New Mexico eligible for substantial matching federal assistance funding. Currently, New Mexico is not eligible for the funding because it has no plan. Individuals, groups, organizations, tribes and agencies are encouraged to participate in the process by joining the advisory committee.

The committee's initial tasks will be to manage and review a preliminary draft management plan developed by the Department. A final draft will be presented to Governor Bill Richardson and the federal Aquatic Nuisance Species Task Force for approval.

Those interested in participating on the committee are encouraged to contact Brian Lang at (505) 476-8108 or brian.lang@state.nm.us. More information about invasive aquatic species and the planning process is available on the Department website, www.wildlife.state.nm.us.

Expect roadblocks during hunting seasons

The Department of Game and Fish will conduct roadblocks throughout the state during spring and fall hunting seasons in an effort to collect harvest data and to apprehend wildlife law violators.

Department officers may be assisted by other law enforcement agencies such as the U.S. Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, New Mexico State Police or county

sheriff's departments. As a result, hunters may encounter minor delays.

To report a wildlife-law violation, please contact your local Department of Game and Fish conservation officer or call the toll-free Operation Game Thief hotline at 1-800-432-GAME (4263). Callers can remain anonymous and earn rewards.



Muskie madness



Photo: Richard Hansen

Anglers who visit Bluewater and Quemado lakes may tie into a tiger muskie like this one shown by fisheries biologist Rachael Green.

Hungry tigers lurk in Bluewater, Quemado lakes

By Ross Morgan

Anglers used to catching catfish, trout and an occasional white sucker at Bluewater and Quemado lakes have been getting some mighty big surprises this year.

It isn't uncommon these days for anglers to tie into 30- to 40-inch tiger muskies. The aggressive predator fish are gaining quite a reputation since they were first stocked to help control an overpopulation of goldfish in 2003. They are aggressive, fast-growing and put up a hard fight.

"If the growth rates are maintained as they have been since 2003, a large portion of these tiger muskies should reach almost 40 inches by late 2008," said Rick Castell, Northwest Area fisheries manager for the Department of Game and Fish. He said the muskies are doing their job while giving anglers some unexpected fun.

"Not only are they eating goldfish, they are also eating some other less desirable and invasive fish species such as the white sucker," Castell said.

Tiger muskies are a sterile hybrid between a muskellunge and northern pike. They look like a pike with gray-green vertical bars on their sides that resemble markings on a tiger. About 100,000 tiger muskie fry have been stocked

"Not only are they eating goldfish, they are also eating some other less desirable and invasive fish species such as the white sucker."

-- Fisheries Biologist Rick Castell

in Bluewater Lake every year since 2003 to help rid the lake of an infestation of goldfish caused by anglers who dumped bait minnows into the lake.

Anglers are not allowed to keep the tiger muskies and must immediately return them to the water after they catch one. The Department of Game and Fish is considering a limited bag limit for the tiger muskies, but for now officials plan to let them continue to grow and terrorize the rough fish. The largest Bluewater tiger muskie seen by a Game and Fish officer measured a whopping 42 inches. The average size is 31 inches.

Several states have used tiger muskies to deal with overpopulations of undesirable fish and to maintain healthy game fish populations. Utah used them in several reservoirs to control populations of panfish and rough fish. The tiger muskie take-home record for Utah is 48 3/8 inches, while the catch-and-release record is 53 1/4 inches. Because Tiger Muskie's don't

reproduce, they can be managed effectively through stocking and harvest limits. This gives fisheries managers the ability to increase or decrease their numbers based on survey results.

Recent surveys at Bluewater Lake indicated the fish were eating mostly suckers and goldfish. Of the fish surveyed, 18 had empty stomachs, white suckers were found in nine stomachs, goldfish in seven, golden shiners in two and rainbow trout in one. The stomach contents in six of the fish stomachs were unidentifiable. The fish that were eaten by the tiger muskies ranged from 12 to 16 inches long.

If you are interested in heading out to Bluewater Lake to try your luck at catching one of these large fish, it's not as hard as you might think. Tiger muskies feed most actively during the early morning and evening hours. They use weed patches, rocks and stumps for cover to ambush their prey, and they prefer colder, deeper waters. If you have a boat equipped with a depth-finder or fish-finder, look for deep areas with plenty of cover.

No boat? No problem. Many anglers have caught tiger muskies from the shore near the boat ramp and rocky areas of the dam.

"There's no real trick to catching a tiger muskie," said Craig Sanchez, Department conservation officer for the Grants area. "Because they are a predatory fish and feed mostly on the goldfish and white suckers, you will want to try and imitate one of those fish by using large wooden minnows and large spoons." He said Rapala and Bomber-type lures work well, too.

Bluewater Lake is in west-central New Mexico about 4 miles south of Interstate 40 at the base of the Zuni Mountains west of Bluewater Village. Bluewater Lake State Park maintains modern campgrounds, picnic areas, restrooms and showers at the lake. Quemado Lake is about 15 miles south of Quemado off N.M. 32 in west-central New Mexico.

Remember, Saturday, June 7, is free fishing day in New Mexico. On this day, the Department will allow anglers of all ages to fish without a license or habitat stamp.

Ross Morgan is a Department of Game and Fish conservation officer and public information officer for the Northwest Area. He can be reached in the Albuquerque office at (505) 222-4707.

Private trout fishing stream goes public

Open Gate program gives anglers access to Ruidoso River

By Mark Madsen

Everyone likes fishing for trout. How about hunting for trout? It all depends upon how you go about it.

Many New Mexico anglers head to their local lake or river and fish for trout from the bank, using different rigs loaded with corn, salmon eggs, or one of the seemingly hundreds of colors of PowerBait. Others use boats to troll spinners, lures, or even "Christmas" trees. But what about those anglers who fish small, clear mountain streams or rivers? Water clarity often determines whether you can sit by a hole and dapple a hook and line or whether or not you have to sneak up on trout to get them to take your favorite lure or fly. The size of the stream or river also comes into play. Sneaking up on trout sounds a lot like hunting, doesn't it?

Cold, clear mountain streams or rivers are few and far between in southeastern New Mexico. Many of the streams in the White and Sacramento mountains have become intermittent or dry because of continued drought. Larger streams such as the Peñasco and Ruidoso rivers hold water year-round but are mostly on private property with little or no public access.

Some trout fishing opportunities exist along the upper portions of the Ruidoso River where it flows through Ruidoso. Even that can change because of low water and high temperatures during the summer. Trout fishing on the Peñasco is pretty much a pay-as-you-go operation. The fishable sections of the river are either leased by fishing clubs or controlled by landowners who charge daily use fees.

Any way you cut it, stream trout fishing in southeastern New Mexico is very limited. And when a trout stream opens to the public, it is indeed special.

This year, anglers gained another stretch of trout stream on the lower Ruidoso River through the Department of Game and Fish's new Open Gate program. The approximately two-mile stretch near Hondo runs cold and clear, with lots of pools, runs, riffles and cut banks -- perfect places to find a trout or two. The banks are

Deep holes and shade trees make the lower Ruidoso River near Hondo an excellent place to fish for trout, whether anglers use bait, lures or flies. A landowner recently leased access to a two-mile stretch of the river for public angling. The stretch was named the Lance Corporal Steven Chavez Fishing Area in honor of Chavez, a Hondo Valley native who lost his life in Iraq.

Photo: Mark Madsen



Photo: Mark Madsen

A two-mile stretch of the Ruidoso River near Hondo is now open for public fishing through Open Gate, a Department of Game and Fish program that uses Habitat Management and Access Validation funds to lease access from private landowners. The newly opened stream contains brown trout and the Department plans to regularly stock it with rainbow trout.

lined with huge cottonwood trees that promise to provide lots of cool shade during the spring and summer months.

The Department entered into an Open Gate lease agreement with landowner Walter Limacher to allow public angler access to the Ruidoso River that runs through his property. Access will be limited to walk-in traffic only, with vehicle parking allowed along the road leading from the highway to the river. Another parking area will be developed along the highway right-of-way at the eastern boundary of the property. The main access point to the property is at highway marker 283 on U.S. 70 west of Hondo.

Landowners who participate in the Open Gate program are paid through an annual lease agreement with the Department to provide access to public resources on or through their property at no cost

to all legally licensed hunters and anglers. Funding for Open Gate comes from the sale of the Habitat Management and Access Validations required as an annual purchase for all New Mexico hunters, trappers, and anglers.

At Limacher's request, his Open Gate fishing area was named for Lance Corporal Steven Chavez, a neighbor of Limacher's who grew up in the Hondo Valley and fished the stretch of river as a child. Chavez was killed while on duty serving his country in Iraq.

Shawn Denny, the Department's Southeast Area fisheries manager, plans to arrange regular trout stockings of the Lance Corporal Chavez area. The Department recently stocked 5,000 brown trout in the area. Those trout should be large enough to take a fly or lure in a couple years.

Anglers who try their luck for rainbow trout in the area should do well with salmon eggs, corn or

PowerBait in the numerous deeper holes. Anglers who prefer to "hunt" their trout may find success using small spinners or lures in the pools and riffles. The vegetation near the stream is open enough that novice fly anglers should have a good time. Patient anglers might be rewarded with a strike from one of the larger browns that prefer to ambush their prey from cutbanks, bends and pools.

Anglers need to be aware that all of the rules and regulations pertaining to trout fishing in New Mexico will be in effect for this fishing area. At this time no special restrictions are in effect for the Lance Corporal Steven Chavez fishing area. The daily bag limit will be five trout. Department officers will be patrolling the area looking for any game and fish violations, including littering.

Anglers who use the Lance Corporal Steven Chavez area are urged to remember that they are on private property and that their privilege of fishing could be removed. Please respect the resources and keep the area clear of trash so anglers can enjoy it for years to come.

Mark Madsen is a public information officer and conservation officer for the Department of Game and Fish. He can be reached in the Southeast Area Office in Roswell at (575) 624-6135 or mark.madsen@state.nm.us.



More angling options open for Gila trout

By LuAnn Tafoya

It's been a long time since we've had good, fishable numbers of Gila trout in the wild. Back in the early days of statehood, an adventuresome New Mexico angler could catch a creel full of these native distant relatives of the rainbow trout. Left in high, mountain waters after the last glacial period, Gila trout have survived the ravages of time.

How times have changed. After excessive angling pressure, inappropriate grazing, widespread timber harvesting, drought and forest fires it is somewhat of a miracle that these trout survived at all. By 1967, Gila trout were considered an endangered species. Streams in southwestern New Mexico were closed to fishing.

However, from the 1970s to 1990, populations steadily increased and Gila trout once again occupied 50 miles of streams.

In 1989, massive wildfires and resulting flows of ash and silt reduced Gila trout to only four populations living in about 10 miles of habitat. In the following years, agencies including the Department of Game and Fish, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and U.S. Forest Service managed to restore Gila trout to most areas where wildfires eliminated them. By 2005, Gila trout were found in 12 streams.

In 2006, the trout in New Mexico were downlisted from endangered to threatened. What this means to anglers was that Gila trout populations are more secure and less susceptible to natural calamities than at any time in recent history.

This "delisting" opened the door to allow anglers to fish for Gila trout. At the March 2007 State Game Commission meeting, the Commission approved historic

regulations opening selected streams that had previously been closed to fishing. At a Commission meeting in February 2008, additional streams were opened to Gila trout fishing. Anglers may now fish in Black Canyon, Iron, Mogollon, Gilita, and Willow creeks.

To fish for Gila trout, anglers must obtain a free Gila Trout permit. This permit allows the Department to gather information as to how many anglers are fishing in these areas, how many fish are being caught, and what their angling experience was like.

There are a few restrictions in these Special Trout Waters:

- Anglers must have a free Gila Trout Permit along with their fishing license.
- Fishermen may only use artificial flies and lures with a single barbless hook in these stream reaches.
- The season for Black Canyon and Mogollon creeks is July 1st to October 31st. The other streams are open year-round.
- The bag limits are: Catch-and-release fishing in Black Canyon and Mogollon creeks; Two trout of any length in Iron and Gilita creeks.

Gila trout streams are stocked with fish from the Mora National Fish Hatchery in Mora, N.M. Hatchery production is designed to retain "wildness" and conserve genetic diversity. They typically yield more fish than are needed to establish additional populations.

These "surplus" fish are available for stocking in the waters that



Photos: Dan Williams (above), Bill Roston (left)

U.S. Forest Service biologist Art Telles was part of a crew working to restore Gila trout to streams in the Gila Wilderness.



normally receive non-native rainbow trout. Brood fish are spawned only two or three times. After their contribution, brood fish (many in excess of 14 inches) are stocked into several forks of the Gila River and Sapillo Creek. In these streams, there are no gear restrictions and the bag limit is 5 trout per day.

Efforts are continuing for expansion of Gila trout throughout their historic homeland. In order for the Gila trout to be completely "delisted," at least 38 self-reproducing populations within 149 miles of streams must exist in

the Gila River drainage of Arizona and New Mexico.

For more information, please call the Southwest Area Office at (575) 532-2100 or the Santa Fe Main Office at (505) 476-8101.

Free permit registration and additional information can be found at www.wildlife.state.nm.us.

LuAnn Tafoya is a Department of Game and Fish public information officer for the Southwest Area. She can be reached in the Department's office in Las Cruces at (575) 532-2106.

Good spring runoff should improve southwest fishing

By LuAnn Tafoya

This year's better-than-average spring runoff should improve fishing opportunities and fish reproduction at many waters in southwestern New Mexico. Here's a quick forecast and some tips from Casey Harthorn, the Department of Game and Fish warmwater fisheries biologist:



- **Elephant Butte Lake:** Fishing for striped bass may slow a bit this year, but the size of the fish could be impressive, especially during the spring. Don't overlook other species, though. Elephant Butte has good populations of white bass, largemouth bass, catfish and walleye.
- **Caballo Lake:** This smaller cousin of Elephant Butte offers some of the best walleye fishing in the state. Experienced anglers recommend using a quarter-ounce leadhead jig with a yellow curly-tail grub tipped with bait. Later in the summer, most walleye anglers use minnows, worms, bottom-bouncer rigs, or wide-wobble crankbaits. Look for walleye in deeper, cooler pools around island structures as the water warms up.



Photo: Dan Williams

Lake Roberts was named in memory of Austin A. Roberts, a Department of Game and Fish pilot lost in the line of duty in 1960.

- **Bill Evans Lake:** This unusual lake is full of nutrients as it is filled by pumping water 300 feet up from the Gila River. It produced the state record largemouth bass and proves to be a great fishing spot, especially in the spring.
- **Lake Roberts:** Fishing for bass and trout should be fair to good this year.
- **Quemado Lake:** The lake is recovering from a fish kill from an algae bloom last year, and will be stocked as the water continues to clear. The lake was stocked with tiger muskies in 2003 to control overpopulations of goldfish. Some of the large predatory fish are in the 40-inch range. Tiger muskies are catch-and-release at Quemado Lake.



Northeast

Conchas Reservoir is known for its large walleye, like this one captured during annual egg-collecting operation.

Photo: Dan Williams

Tasty walleye thrive in New Mexico lakes

By Clint Henson and Eric Frey

As the weather finally begins to warm up, it's time to dust off the fishing gear and head outside. Spring is the best time to land one of the nation's favorite fish, and you don't have to drive all the way to Michigan or Wisconsin.

Walleye, also known as swimming fillets, are popular nationwide because they are large, challenging to catch, and very good to eat.

Walleye are not native to New Mexico. About 500,000 fry were stocked into Elephant Butte Lake in 1959, and after that they were stocked into 22 lakes in New Mexico. In the northeast region of the state, Ute and Conchas lakes are favorites, but walleye can also be found in Clayton, Stubblefield and Maxwell 13 lakes.

Walleye were brought into New Mexico for greater angling diversity. They use deeper regions of lakes and do not generally compete with other fish species. Fisheries managers have learned, however, that larger trout need to

be stocked in lakes with walleye to give the trout a better chance of survival. Trout stocked in those lakes are generally 10 to 12 inches.

Every year, the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish conducts a major effort to collect walleye eggs from reservoirs to aid the eggs' in hatching and increase survival. A crew of five department personnel conduct the spawn for about four weeks or until they reach an egg goal of about 15 million.

Walleye normally start spawning in mid-March and peak in late-March to early April.

Biologists typically collect eggs in Ute and Conchas Reservoirs, but on occasion collect eggs from the Maxwell Lakes, Santa Rosa Lake, and Caballo Reservoir.

Biologists set gill nets overnight to collect female walleye and use electrofishing boats to collect male walleye. The females are removed from the nets, and their eggs are gently squeezed into bowls. Sperm, or "milt," is collected from

the males and used to fertilize the eggs. The eggs and milt are gently stirred with a bird feather. Bentonite, a fine clay, is added to the mixture to keep the eggs from sticking together. The captured fish are then released.

The fertilized eggs are taken to Rock Lake Hatchery in Santa Rosa, where after 10 to 12 days, the eggs hatch and are stocked back into the lakes.

Fishing for walleye is tricky because you have to be fishing specifically for them. You generally won't catch one while fishing for bass or trout. Walleye are typically found on the bottom of lakes. They are also typically nocturnal, hence the purpose of their large "wall" eyes that gather any available light.

The best times to fish for walleye are spring pre-spawn and post-spawn. During the spring, walleye are very active, and they feed regularly to put on weight before and after the spawning season. Anglers have best luck with bottom-bouncing lures tipped with minnow or worms, jigging points with plastics or live baits, and



Photo: Lance Cherry

Ute Lake is one of New Mexico's best walleye lakes. Others include Conchas, Santa Rosa, Caballo and Maxwell Lakes.

trolling deep-diving lures.

Clint Henson is the Department of Game and Fish Northeast Area public information officer. Eric Frey is the area fisheries biologist. Both can be contacted at the Department office in Raton, (575) 445-2311.



Low water levels, high salinity and a bloom of golden algae killed all the fish in McAllister Lake in 2007. The Department of Game and Fish is regularly monitoring the lake's water quality and plans to restock it with trout when conditions improve.

Photos: Clint Henson

Department working to bring trout back to troubled McAllister Lake

By Clint Henson

McAllister Lake, a popular fishing spot east of Las Vegas, will remain closed until water quality conditions improve so fish can again be stocked for fishing.

Low water levels in 2007 allowed temperatures to rise and oxygen levels to plummet, resulting in a complete die-off of trout. Only carp survived in the lake, and the Department of Game and Fish planned to let the lake dry completely to remove them. However, a bloom of golden algae killed the carp before the lake went dry.

In early March, the lake held only 15 percent of its capacity and still had very high salinity -- perfect conditions for golden algae, single-cell organisms that produce toxins that are extremely toxic to gill-breathing organisms -- especially fish. Golden algae have caused massive fish kills in the lower Pecos River in New Mexico. Texas and Arizona have also experienced fish kills caused by golden algae.

The toxins produced by golden

algae are not lethal to birds, other riparian wildlife, or humans. But before any fish can survive in McAllister Lake, the golden algae must be controlled. The best way to do that, according to research by Department Fisheries Manager Eric Frey, is to add water -- lots of it.

In October 2007, Frey conducted a rigorous experiment on the lake's water quality and found that its salinity was 20 times higher than most drinking water and 10 times higher than surrounding lakes. He concluded that to manage the golden algae and support trout, seven parts of fresh water will need to be added for each part of existing lake water.

The Department of Game and Fish full allotment of water for the lake is 200 to 300 acre-feet a year. To reach the desired seven-to-one ratio, the lake needs to be raised to its capacity of 2,791 acre-feet. At the full-allotment rate, it will take seven years to reach capacity.

The Department plans to keep carp out of the lake by building a \$1,500 fish barrier in the inlet ditch.



Steep thrills

Scenery, solitude await visitors at Colin Neblett Wildlife Area

Hunters and hikers familiar with northern New Mexico agree that one word comes to mind when describing access to the back country of the Colin Neblett Wildlife Management Area.

“Steep,” says Clint Henson, a Department of Game and Fish conservation officer who patrols and does habitat work in the area between Eagle Nest and Cimarron. “Whether you decide to hike the north or the south side of Cimarron Canyon, it’s a tough climb all the way from the bottom.”

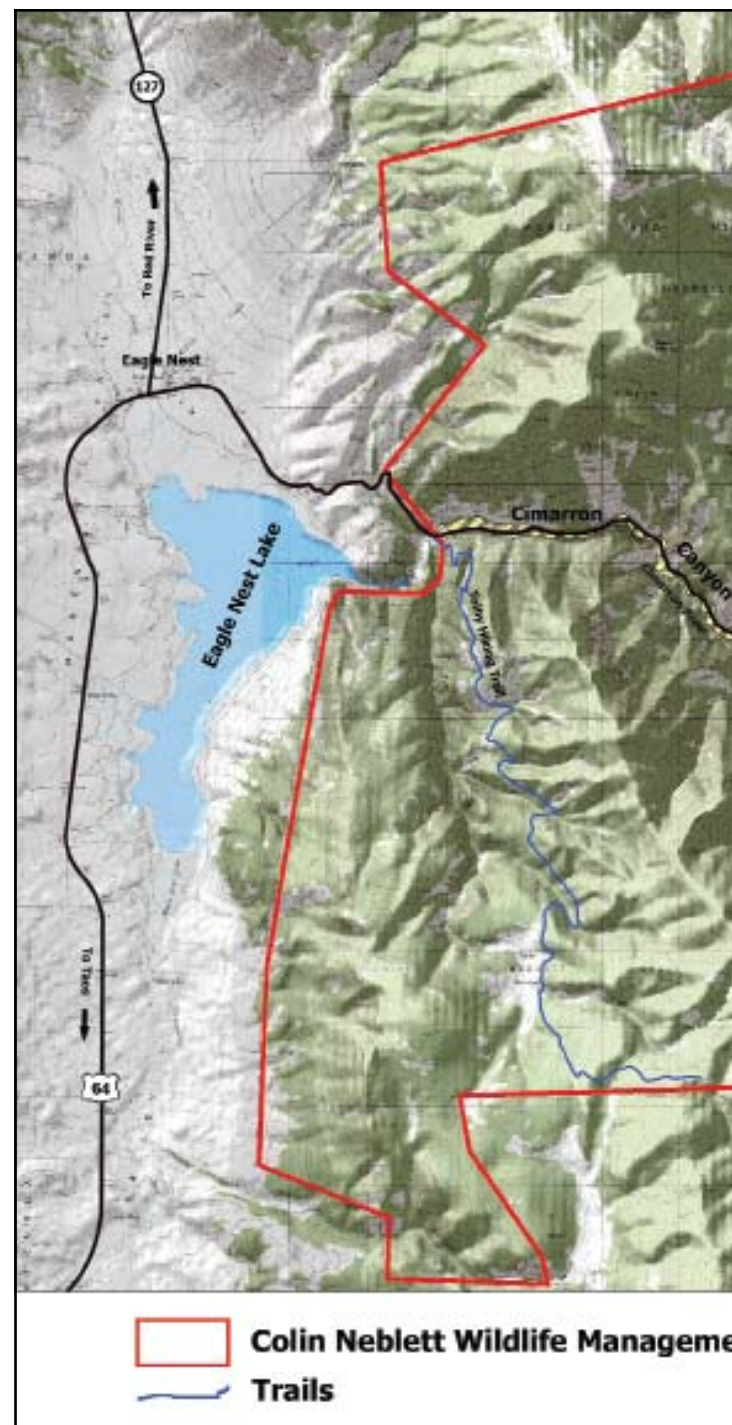
Rigorous access has its benefits. Those willing to huff and puff a bit are rewarded with some of the most spectacular scenery northern New Mexico has to offer. “And one of the neat things about it,” Henson says, “is once you get back in there you won’t see other people. It’s a great opportunity to find places where you won’t be disturbed, whether you are photographing wildlife or just enjoying the day.”

Wildlife thrives in the vast spaces of the Colin Neblett. Deer, elk, bear, turkey and

grouse lure hunters to the area every year. Wildlife watchers and photographers also enjoy the many species of birds and small mammals in the area. The best opportunities to see wildlife usually are in the canyon bottoms, where animals gather around permanent water sources.

The Colin Neblett area was purchased by the State Game Commission in 1949 to provide hunting and fishing opportunities and to protect wildlife from excessive competition with livestock. It was named after a prominent federal judge and sportsman who helped form the first State Game Commission in 1936. The 33,116-acre property is the state’s largest wildlife management area. U.S. 64 runs west to east through the center of the area along the Cimarron River, a popular camping and trout-fishing destination. Elevations range from 7,400 feet in the canyon bottom to 12,045 feet at the summit of Touch-Me-Not Mountain.

Most of the canyon bottom between Eagle Nest Lake and Ute Park is operated as a



state park by the New Mexico State Parks Division, which maintains two modern camping areas along the river. Cimarron Canyon State Park’s modest day-use and camping fees give visitors year-round access to clean campsites and restrooms. Hunters and anglers also can find free access to the Cimarron River and Colin Neblett trails from two designated no-fee parking areas.

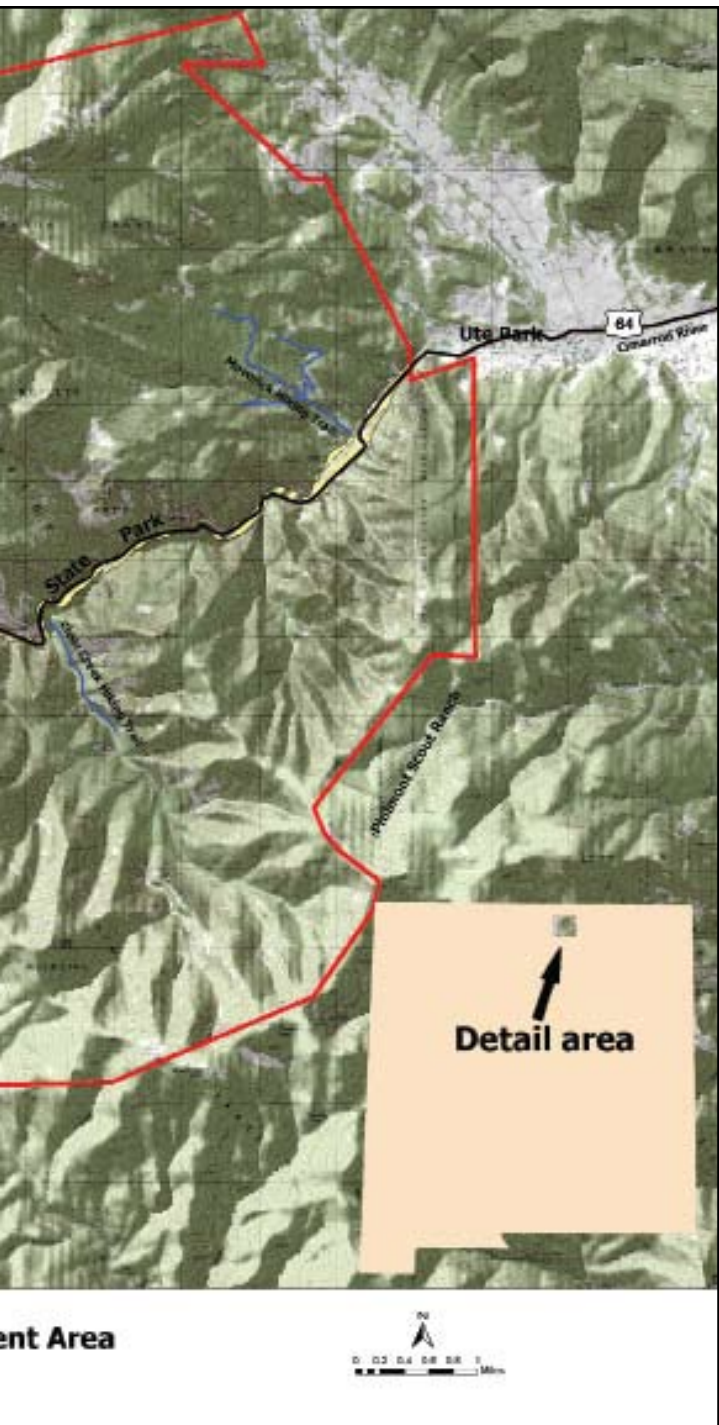
Fishing is the main attraction along the Cimarron River, which is regularly stocked with rainbow trout and is home to a large population of stream-bred brown trout. Tolby Creek and Clear Creek flow into the Cimarron River from the south, and also offer fine fishing opportunities for those willing to walk a bit. Hiking trails flank both creeks. Tolby Trail is a steep climb that emerges into large meadows, making it a popular destination for elk hunters. Clear Creek Trail also is steep and takes hikers through dense timber. Maverick Trail is the only hiking trail on the north side of the canyon. The trail starts at the Maverick Campground just east of the



Photos: Clint Henson

The Colin Neblett Wildlife Management Area is known for its fabulous trout fishing in the Cimarron River and its spectacular scenery in the high country on both sides of Cimarron Canyon.





Palisades, towering cliffs considered one of the most spectacular geologic features of northern New Mexico. Geologists estimate the rocks to be 26 to 34 million years old.

Until this year, access to the back country of the Colin Neblett area was mostly limited to hunters who held licenses and permits, and they were only allowed in the area during hunting seasons. This year, the Department of Game and Fish expanded recreational opportunities through its Gaining Access Into Nature (GAIN) program.

Beginning April 1, anyone with a GAIN permit will be allowed to pursue a variety of wildlife-associated recreational opportunities outside state park boundaries in the Colin Neblett and other state wildlife areas. Annual GAIN permits cost \$20, including a Habitat Management and Access Validation. Five-day GAIN permits with a validation are \$9. Youths younger than age 18 do not need GAIN permits. Licensed hunters don't need GAIN permits while they're in the area during hunting seasons.

A GAIN permit at Colin Neblett will open miles of trails to hikers, horseback riders and photographers. The Clear Creek Trail will be open year-round for hiking only. The Tolby and Maverick trails will be open to horseback riding and hiking, but will be closed May 15 through July 31 during elk-calving season. Mountain bikes and motorized vehicles are not allowed on the Colin Neblett at any time.

For more information about the Colin Neblett Wildlife Management Area, please contact the Department's Northeast Area Office in Raton, (505) 445-2311.

Recreation options abound at Wildlife Management Areas

Wildlife watching and other wildlife-related recreation is better than ever in New Mexico this spring with the expansion of the Department of Game and Fish Gaining Access Into Nature (GAIN) program.

Beginning April 1, thousands of acres of State Game Commission owned Wildlife Management Areas were officially opened for the first time for activities other than hunting and fishing. Allowed activities, seasons and access will vary by area to protect wildlife and habitat while providing hunters, anglers and other visitors with quality recreation. GAIN participants will pay modest fees for access to the properties, with proceeds going toward wildlife research, habitat improvement, maintenance, development and operations.

"Responsibly opening more wildlife-associated recreation opportunities on state wildlife areas makes sense," Department Director Bruce Thompson said. "GAIN will allow more people to appreciate the wildlife resources on these areas without interfering with traditional uses such as hunting and fishing. This program also helps a wider array of people to contribute to the costs of administering wildlife and habitat conservation on these important areas."

GAIN has its roots in the 2004 Governor's Conference on Wildlife-Associated Recreation, where Governor Bill Richardson recognized New Mexico's almost \$1 billion wildlife tourism industry. The program began by offering lottery-style drawings for special opportunities to watch bugling elk, bighorn sheep trapping and other special events. This spring's GAIN expansion broadens the program dramatically.

Here are some details about GAIN, and where you can find more information:

Areas open to GAIN activities

- Northeast:** Pecos River Complex (Bert Clancy, Mora, Terrero and Jamie Koch areas), Charette Lakes, Colin Neblett, Elliott Barker, McAllister Lake, Rio de los Pinos, Urraca, Wagon Mound.
- Northwest:** Bluebird Mesa, Edward Sargent, Jackson Lake, Ladd S. Gordon Waterfowl Complex (Bernardo and La Joya), Rio Chama, Water Canyon, William Humphries.
- Southwest:** Bear Canyon, Bill Evans, Heart Bar, Lake Roberts, Mimbres, Red Rock, Socorro-Escondida.
- Southeast:** Brantley, Lesser Prairie Chicken, Seven Rivers, William Huey, and a new (un-named) area in Roosevelt County.

Hunting and fishing

A current New Mexico hunting or fishing license with a Habitat Management and Access Validation allows holders to hunt or fish on Wildlife Management Areas during seasons for which they are legally licensed.



License holders do not need a GAIN permit to hunt or fish on a Wildlife Management Area.

Allowed GAIN activities

Activities will vary according to area, and some areas may be closed at times during hunts and to accommodate wildlife during sensitive periods. Activities may include:

- Hiking, photography, mountain biking, cross-country skiing, snowshoeing, horseback riding.

Permits and fees

Everyone age 18 or older must purchase a GAIN permit and a Habitat Management and Access Validation to participate in activities on wildlife areas. Youths younger than age 18 don't need permits. Permits are available at license vendors, Department offices in Santa Fe, Albuquerque, Las Cruces, Roswell and Raton; and online at www.wildlife.state.nm.us. Annual permits are valid April 1-March 31. Prices, including a \$1 vendor fee:

- Statewide Annual Individual GAIN Permit with validation: \$20.
- Temporary Individual 5-Day GAIN Permit with validation: \$9.

Special opportunity permits

These permits allow participants to be involved in Department-sponsored wildlife tours, bighorn sheep and turkey trapping and relocation efforts, prairie chicken and electro-fishing surveys, and other activities. These special permits are available through a drawing. Visit the Department's website for more information.

Jamie Koch shelter use permit

Applications for the Jamie Koch Wildlife Area Community Shelter (north of Pecos) are accepted at the Santa Fe office only. Reservations are made on a first-come, first-served basis for up to four consecutive days. The cost is \$25 a day. For reservations, call (505) 476-8101.

Commercial use permits

A commercial permit is required for any activity conducted on any Wildlife Management Area for which a fee is charged. Exceptions are hunting activities conducted by Department-registered outfitters. No commercial activity is allowed until the applicant obtains approval of a completed application from the Department. Please visit the Department's website for rules and fees for Commercial Use Permits.



Students team up to monitor forest health

By Pat Walsh

When science teacher Jo Ahlm took her advanced seventh-graders into a New Mexico State Park forest to do real-world research, she didn't know one of her city girls would turn out to be a wizard in the woods.

"Her sense of direction, working with a compass -- it was just natural for her and she obviously had never been exposed to it before," said Ahlm, who teaches at Raton Middle School. "I told her father and brother how good she was in the woods and they were dumbfounded. They said, 'She's a city girl.'"

Surprises like these have been among the fringe benefits of a forest monitoring project at Sugarite Canyon State Park near Raton.

The project to monitor red and Abert's squirrel activity and their habitat began in the fall of 2006. The program is a collaborative effort among numerous agencies, including State Parks, Raton Public Schools, New Mexico Department of Game and Fish, the Cimarron Watershed Alliance, Colfax County and the Collaborative Forest Restoration Program of the U.S. Forest Service.



"This project gives the students hands-on experience on forest health and ecology," said Park Superintendent Bob Dye. "The students, in turn, benefit the park by gathering data that will be useful for future resource management. Students become allies in the protection of our natural and cultural resources."

Student Synovia Duncan, 13, of Raton seemed to bolster that idea by saying that she pays more attention to issues at the park since taking part in the project in the pilot year. What is one of her memories? Using a modified trash bag as a raincoat.

The idea for student monitoring was launched several years ago by park staff when the City of Raton began discussing plans to thin the forest in the park.

The land in the park is owned by Raton and provides a large chunk of the town's watershed. Town officials were concerned that an intense forest fire could contaminate the park's Lake Maloya, which provides most of the community's drinking water. The town's hope was to reduce the number of trees near the lake and prevent a catastrophic crown fire that could result in ash and sediment in the water. When thinning is done properly in ponderosa pine forests, it can imitate the beneficial effects of once-regular surface fires by killing small and sickly trees, letting sunlight reach the ground for forbs and grasses to grow.

Since park staff lacked resources to conduct pre- and post-thinning monitoring, Ahlm's



Photo: Don MacCarter



Photos: Karen Ordemann

Pat Walsh, above, a regional interpretive ranger for New Mexico State Parks, worked with other agencies and conservation organizations to bring Raton students into the forest at Sugarite Canyon State Park. Students monitored red and Abert's squirrels to help determine forest and watershed health.

willingness to involve her kids and grant funding made the project possible. About \$20,000 was allocated by the Cimarron Watershed Alliance and a Collaborative Forest Restoration Program grant awarded to Colfax County.

The next step was finding a research fit for the park and the kids. Mammalogist Jennifer Frey had done brief professional monitoring in the park and was interested in squirrel studies. She agreed to provide a monitoring protocol in which the kids walked transect lines looking for squirrel "sign" -- chewed pine cones and red squirrel storage middens -- and conducted random habitat surveys.

"Most of the national forests in the Southwest have identified both the red squirrel and Abert's squirrels as Management Indicator Species -- red squirrel for mixed conifer forest and Abert's squirrel for ponderosa pine," Frey said. "They are required to monitor these species to assess how forest management is influencing populations."

With Frey's permission, project intern Karen Ordemann tweaked the protocol to make it as kid-friendly as possible. She also set up several backpacks for student teams, which include a global positioning system, or GPS unit; a densitometer -- a curved mirror used to gauge forest cover; a compass; digital camera; tape measure; data sheets and a reference binder.

"The densitometer was pretty rough to learn," said student Devon Encinias. Project funds allowed the purchase of Geographical Information System (GIS) software and a laptop to run the software. Ordemann has made some basic computer maps of student data using the software, and project leaders hope eventually to involve students in computer mapping.

While the connection between squirrels and good water may not seem obvious, the Cimarron Watershed Alliance's outgoing executive director Mike Bain sees the link.

"I like to look at watershed health from a holistic point of view," Bain said. "Riverine, riparian, upland, woodland, and forested

areas are all interconnected. Many watershed projects tend to address past management mistakes. An education project like the one at Sugarite gives youth of all ages the proactive tools and understanding to avoid decisions that are detrimental to watershed health."

Ahlm's class has visited the park twice a year since the fall of 2006. Ahlm divided her students into six groups of four to five kids, and each group was accompanied by an adult. The adults included State Parks rangers and Department of Game and Fish officers. Officer Scott Draney, Game and Fish habitat specialist for northeastern New Mexico, said his crew of boys quickly adopted nicknames related to their task: "tech dude" for the boy handling the GPS unit and "recording dude" for the boy writing down the data. Draney, dubbed "field guide dude," said the hands-on approach has value.

"I think they get more out of it because they actually went out and did it," he said. "Even if one kid out of that whole class decides to go into some career related to biology, it's probably a win all the way around."

Pat Walsh is a regional interpretive ranger for New Mexico State Parks, based at Sugarite Canyon State Park.



Photo: Dan Sutcliffe

Red squirrels (above) and Abert's squirrels (left) are considered "indicator species" and are monitored to help determine overall forest health.





New Mexico State Parks sparkles for 75th anniversary celebration

By Marti Niman

A three-carat, "lightning design" diamond bracelet giveaway;

A Diamond Camping Pass with a 25 percent discount on camping;

A State Parks Geocaching Challenge with special awards;

Outdoor Classroom programs to get kids into nature...

These are just a few of the highlights of New Mexico State Parks' 75th Diamond Anniversary celebration in 2008. New Mexico State Parks evolved from a federal New Deal initiative in 1933 to a vibrant system of 34 parks serving more than 4 million people a year. State Parks kicked off its celebration Feb. 8, 2008, by honoring former state park directors, longtime volunteers and retired state park managers.

"This year, let's dedicate ourselves to protecting and improving state parks for present and future generations," State Parks Director Dave Simon said.

Visitors to all state parks can enter to win a free "lightning design" diamond bracelet, worth about \$5,000 and featuring approximately three carats in diamonds set in 14-karat gold donated by Butterfield Jewelers. Finalists for the diamond drawing will be chosen every month from each park, with a grand-prize winner drawn in late 2008. Register at any state park or office to enter.

In the same diamond anniversary vein, State Parks will offer a Diamond Camping Pass in 2008. The pass is a camping coupon booklet for 10 nights of camping. It sells for \$75, normally a \$100 value. Campers may purchase the pass at any state park or office.

The State Parks Geocaching Challenge dares cachers to visit each State Park to find the hidden treasure and learn more about parks in the state. Geocaching is an outdoor treasure-hunt adventure game in which participants use Global Positioning System, or GPS units, to track treasures. The caches, which are not buried, are waterproof containers of various sizes that contain a logbook and possibly some items for trade.

"Participating in a cache hunt is a good way to take advantage of the wonderful features and capability of a GPS unit," said Wrennee Reynolds of New Mexico Geocaching.

Each state park will have one cache and the first person to reach all 34 will get a special reward, while visitors who locate all 34 geocaches also will qualify for awards.



Photo: Marti Niman

Children learn to identify butterflies and other critters during State Parks Outdoor Classroom Program activities.

"The geocacher and park manager decide on a location for the cache, take a reading on a handheld GPS to get the longitude and latitude," Reynolds said. "A listing is made for the cache, approved and listed on geocaching.com for cachers to find."

State Parks has partnered with the Public Education Program to launch the pilot phase of the Outdoor Classroom Program, an effort to increase student academic achievement statewide through outdoor learning. New initiatives include a Clayton Lake State Park Dinosaur curriculum guide in partnership with the New Mexico Museum of Natural History in Albuquerque.

Clayton Lake also is the site of education programs with the Jicarilla Apache tribe, which has brought students on several occasions to this traditional use area. A collaborative curriculum guide for Bottomless Lakes State Park and Bitter Lakes Wildlife Refuge near Roswell also is under development, and the southern Rio Grande portion of the Bosque Education Guide has been updated.

One component of the Outdoor Education Program is the State Park "Kids N Parks" Outdoor Classroom transportation grants, which can be used to bring school children to an outdoor education program at a park, nature preserve or private ranch.

The "Kids 'N Parks" program is funded by taxpayers' voluntary contributions on the annual New Mexico Personal Income Tax form. This year, donations will permit State Parks to provide transportation grants to 26 schools in 18 communities across the state. The Friends of Hyde Memorial State Park also raised \$700 for Santa Fe schools to bus students to the park for outdoor education.

Special events have long highlighted visitors' experiences at state parks and 2008 offers some highly diverse opportunities, from historical commemorative events such as Camp Furlong Days to Heron Lake State Park's Osprey Festival. This year, Ute Lake State Park hosts Stars on the Water, an outdoor stage concert featuring patriotic country crooner Steve Cochran and high-energy, honky-tonk rockers Confederate Railroad. Call 888-NMPARKS or visit www.nmparks.com for detailed information and a calendar of events at each park.

The year 2008 also marks the 75th anniversary of the federal New Deal program, which included the Civilian Conservation Corps that provided jobs for thousands of unemployed young men working on conservation projects nationwide. The CCC in New Mexico helped build some of the first state parks – including Hyde Memorial/Santa Fe River and Bottomless Lakes – and at other sites that later became state parks, such as Conchas Lake and Elephant Butte.

Mesilla Valley Bosque State Park will open this year with a new visitor center featuring green building practices. State Parks also plans to open Cerrillos Hills/Galisteo Basin State Park in 2008. The New Mexico State Parks Foundation has established a 75th Anniversary fund for programs and projects.

With the rising tide of water levels in parks across the state (Please see story, Page 12) and the rising star – or diamond – of State Parks 75th Diamond Anniversary, this undoubtedly is the year to visit your best recreation value close to home.



Entertainment and other events during Camp Furlong Days, right, at Pancho Villa State Park commemorate Pancho Villa's the March 9, 1916, raid on Columbus. At left, young women bask in the sunshine at Bottomless Lakes State Park in the 1950s. The park was one of the first in the state parks system, built in the 1930s by the Civilian Conservation Corps.

Photos: Marti Niman, right; State Parks file, left.





Bountiful runoff



Photo: Dan Williams

Ample snowpack promises wet recreation season

By Marti Niman

This year, New Mexico State Parks reaches a high-water mark with a combination of high water levels predicted for most reservoirs and copious parties and prizes offered during its 75th Anniversary celebration, making State Parks the place to be in 2008.

While powdery fluff typical of New Mexico's winter storms is coveted by snow skiers, this year's soggy snowfall bears glad tidings for boaters, anglers and water-skiers. These wet crystals hold more water than their fluffy cousins and our reservoirs rise like the tide. This winter's phenomenal wet snowpack in northern New Mexico and southern Colorado's river basins likely will raise lake levels and bring superb recreation conditions at most New Mexico State Parks in 2008.

"With a good spring runoff, most lakes will be in great shape for the season," State Parks Director Dave Simon said. "Many lakes are already higher than last year and we are extremely optimistic about recreation conditions in 2008."

The Rio Grande, San Juan and Canadian rivers are born in the high elevations of southern Colorado mountains, while the Pecos tumbles out of the Sangre de Cristo peaks near Santa Fe. The San Juan darts into New Mexico northeast of Farmington, where its upper reaches are impounded by Navajo Dam before it exits the state at Four Corners. The Rio Grande, Pecos and Canadian form the major watersheds for New Mexico and numerous state parks depend on the liquid bounty they bring from on high for water-related recreation. Every spring, officials from the Office of the State Engineer, U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, Natural Resources Conservation Service and Army Corps of Engineers gaze into those snow pack crystal balls in an effort to calculate summer runoff and reservoir levels.

Percentages of snowpack are based on a 30-year average from 1971 to 2000 by the Natural Resources Conservation Service, part of the U.S. Department of Agricul-

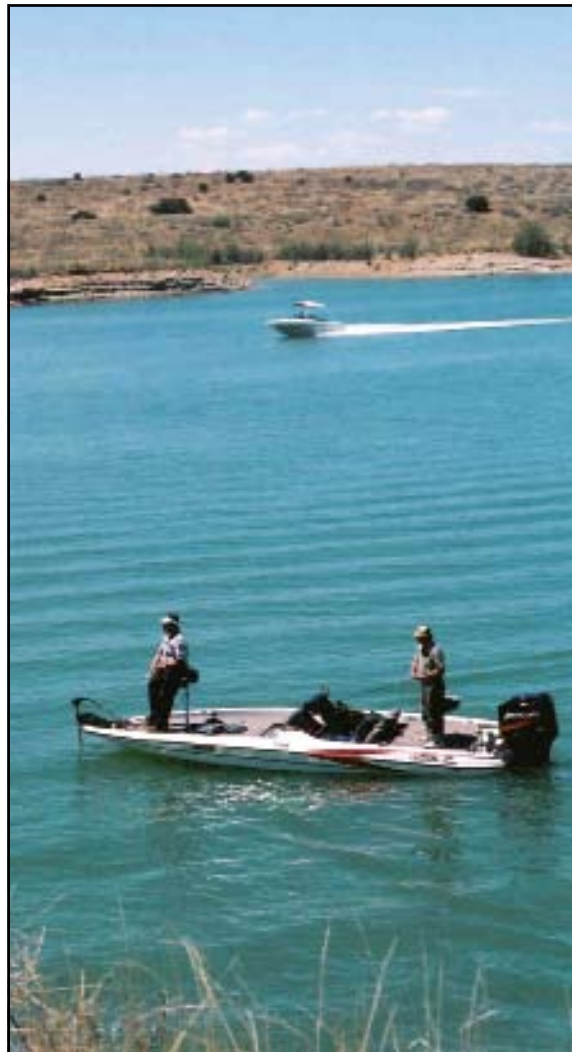


Photo: Lance Cherry

Water levels at Ute Lake State Park are almost always good because the lake water is not used for irrigation.

ture. Percentages are somewhat deceptive because they are based on the authorized capacity rather than average capacity. Elephant Butte Lake's 1,973,000 acre-feet of storage is not common and its 30-year average is closer to 50 percent.

Butte, Caballo looking good

Snowpack in the Rio Grande Basin in March was 148 percent of normal, almost half as much as last year's figures at that time. The Bureau of Reclamation estimates that Elephant Butte Lake will be at 38 percent capacity or 750,000 acre-feet on Memorial Day. Its waters could increase to 945,000

acre-feet by the Fourth of July and as high as 970,000 acre-feet, or 49 percent of capacity, by Labor Day. That may sound to some like the glass is half empty, but the Butte super-sizes most other lakes in the state. This year matches the 30-year average capacity in the lake for the first time since 2001. The last time Elephant Butte Lake reached the spillway at 4,350 feet was in 1996.

"This is the highest amount of water in Elephant Butte in six or seven years," said Rolf Schmidt-Petersen, Rio Grande Basin bureau chief for the Office of the State Engineer. "The entire lower reservoir at Elephant Butte Lake will be available for boating all year as well as portions of the Narrows early in the year."

With higher water levels, the Butte is more spread out and there is more habitat area for fish to hide, said Joey Vega, southwest area fisheries manager for the Department of Game and Fish. It will require patience and perseverance on the part of anglers, but the fish should provide fantastic fights and feasts.

"The fish will be harder to find and catch, but the quality will be outstanding," Vega said. "Right now the white bass fishing is awesome and stripers, walleyes and catfish are fat and healthy."

Caballo Lake State Park, known for its walleye fishing as well as white bass and crappie, is projected to be 50,000 acre-feet – about 5,000 acre-feet higher than last year's levels and slightly higher by the Fourth of July holiday. In the northern reaches of the Rio Grande Basin, El Vado Lake will be full as it was last year on Memorial Day, with 180,000 acre-feet and likely will finish the season at 72 percent capacity by Labor Day.

Ute, Conchas steady

In the Canadian River Basin, Ute Lake should begin the season about 10 percent lower than last year with 85 percent capacity and will remain close to that level --which supports excellent boating and fishing conditions -- through the summer.

"On our lake, water levels remain pretty constant," said Ben Newton, owner of the Rough-Neck Tackle Shop in Logan and member of the Friends of Ute Lake State Park. "There's no irrigation or municipal use, so the only water loss is to evaporation and wind. My prediction is to see some good fishing; the lake came up into the shallows a couple years ago so the spawn had a place to escape."

Conchas Lake delivers water for irrigation to the Arch Hurley Conservation District in the Tucumcari area and a combination of irrigation needs and low winter snowpack in the Canadian dropped the lake level about 10 feet between November 2007 to March 2008. Conchas Lake potentially could drop



Photo: Dan Williams

Elephant Butte Lake is projected to be 38 percent of its capacity by Memorial Day, the best start to the summer recreation season since 2001.

...Continued on Page 13



Snowpack

...Continued from Page 12

another 12 feet before reaching its permanent pool level of 4,155 feet elevation, said Jaime Ramirez, park ranger for the Army Corps of Engineers, which manages the lake and the dam. On a brighter note, a new boat ramp should be close to completion by Memorial Day, with 80 parking spots and a day use area.

Heron, Navajo up again

Heron Lake is expected to be 65 percent full with 250,000 acre-feet and may conclude the summer at 85 percent – a really good year for sail boaters, anglers and kayakers who favor this quiet, no-wake lake.

The snowpack for the San Juan River basin, which feeds Navajo Lake State Park, was 137 percent of normal in March, compared to last year at 79 percent of normal, according to the Natural Resources Conservation Service. Navajo Lake State Park will be almost full for Memorial Day with 6,075 feet in elevation and should provide outstanding recreation conditions throughout the summer in both the reservoir and the San Juan River.

Navajo Lake gets deeper rather than larger as the water levels climb due to its vertical sandstone cliffs. The lake is consistently good for largemouth and smallmouth bass, crappie and northern pike, while the San Juan River is known for its world-class trout fishing.

“The water releases from the dam are expected to run at 5,000 cubic feet per second from mid-May to the end of July,” Park Manager Doris Goode said. “We advise fishermen to wear inflatable life jackets or suspenders because it’s difficult to wade when the water’s this high.”

Pecos basin improving

The Pecos River Basin has significantly lower reservoir expectations this year compared to 2007. By Memorial Day, Sumner Lake will be 55 percent full and is expected to drop 40 percent by Labor Day. Brantley Lake likely will enter the season on Memorial Day at 16,000 acre-feet, swell by July 4 to 25,000 acre-feet and drop again to 15,000 acre-feet by the end of the summer. Although these might seem rather dour predictions for summer recreation, state

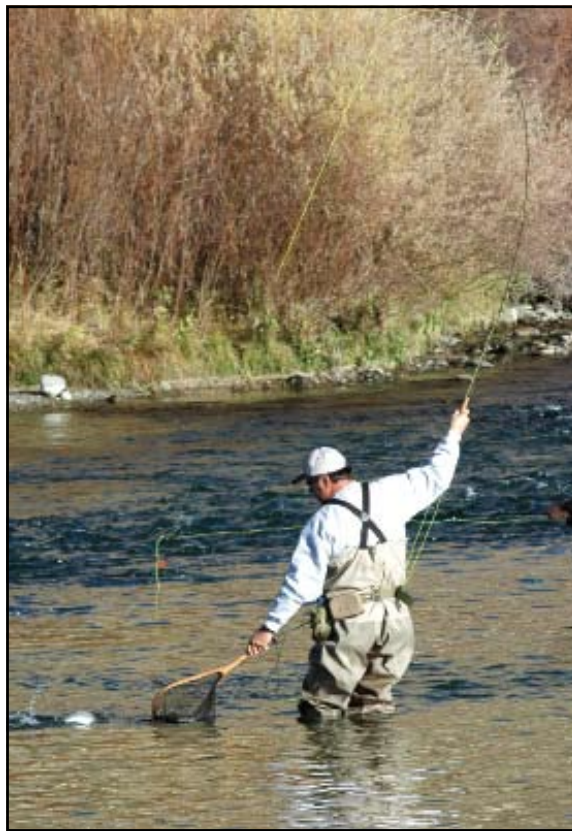


Photo: Dan Williams

The trophy trout waters below Navajo Dam are expected to flow higher and stronger this year because of an ample snowpack.

parks on the Pecos are looking really good for angling and boating, said Sean Denny, fisheries specialist for Game and Fish’s Southeast Region.

“If you just look at the percent of fill, it looks way down,” said Denny. “For normal operation of the lakes and boating and angling, the lakes are at vegetation level and are looking really good this year.”

Sumner and Santa Rosa lakes both went through really low draw-downs a few years ago, Denny said, so vegetation built up and added nutrients to the water. With the increase in lake levels since 2002, the fishery has rebounded.

“Santa Rosa has some really big crappie – not large numbers, but big fish,” Denny said. “Walleye, smallmouth and largemouth bass also will be good. Sumner has mostly walleye; it’ll be good through Memorial Day and then slow down as it gets warmer.”

Brantley suffers from golden algae blooms, which are toxic to fish. Because elevated levels of the banned pesticide DDT have been found in walleye and channel catfish, only catch-and-release is permitted, Denny said. Brantley is popular for boating, water-skiing and birding. Snow geese,

Canada geese and even pelicans cruise its waters during the winter months.

Mike Cantrell, supervisor for Lake Sumner Reservoir, said Brantley Lake is kept at a low level during the winter months to minimize water loss through evaporation, and tends to become alkaline as it sits during the winter. In spring, block releases are issued from Lake Sumner to “sweeten the water” in Brantley. The reservoirs in the lower Pecos Basin, which include Santa Rosa, Sumner and Brantley lakes, are used primarily for irrigation but water managers also consider sport fish needs and endangered species needs, such as the Pecos bluntnose shiner.

“We try to issue the block releases before the fish spawn in the spring so we don’t leave them in dry pools and keep a constant pressure in those stretches of the river needed for the bluntnose shiner,” Cantrell said. “But if it comes to a choice between sport fish and getting the crop to market, we’ll get the crop to market.”

Maloya, Clayton promising

Some of New Mexico State Parks’ smaller lakes are not on the “main drag” of the larger watersheds; rather, they are fed by creeks, underground springs and smaller rivers and often were designed for purposes other than irrigation.

Clayton Lake does not release water for irrigation, according to Park Superintendent Charles Jordan. In March it measured 2,000 acre-feet and 5,154 feet in elevation – about the same level as last year. It should be in excellent shape for the annual Clayton Lake Trout Derby on May 10 as well as the rest of the season. Built in 1956 by New Mexico Department of Game and Fish as waterfowl habitat, it provides outstanding fishing, camping, and hiking throughout the summer and excellent bird watching during the winter months for bald eagles, geese, ducks and occasionally pelicans.

Lake Alice at Sugarite State Park east of Raton was built in 1894 by the Raton Water Works and Santa Fe Railroad to supply steam for the railroad and drinking water to Raton – delivered via underground wooden pipes wrapped in cable.

“When we had our last drought around 2002, Lake Maloya dropped about 13 vertical feet and we found remnants of wooden pipes at the waterline,” Park Superintendent Bob Dye said. “In the early 1900s, the railroad took ice from Lake Alice into Raton during the summer for the restaurants and coal from the Sugarite Coal Camp for delivery to Oklahoma and Texas.”

Dye said snowfall has been relatively light this year at Sugarite, but April usually is the snowiest month and he’s seen two feet of snow as late as mid-May. That anything-can-happen sentiment is echoed by Peter Wilkinson, ecologist for the Interstate Stream Commission. “Right now we are way above normal snowpack in most of the state,” he said. “In 30 days, anything can happen. The snow can melt and change to water as the weather gets warmer, or it can change to a gas if the wind blows hard and all that snowfall might evaporate and head for Oklahoma and Texas.”

For New Mexicans shaking the weather-watch snow globe, let’s hope those crystal flakes fall here rather than following the historic path of the coal train eastward.

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Photo: Marti Niman

Heron Lake State Park’s no-wake restriction make it very popular with kayakers.

Springtime is for birders

...Continued from Page 1

Rustay doesn't hesitate when asked to share his favorite springtime spot to find migrating birds.

"Almost anywhere you go, especially in May, you will find birds," Rustay said. He drives more than 20,000 miles a year birding around the state. "Except for the highest elevations, you'll find migrants from Red Lake in McKinley County near the Arizona border to Red Lake outside Fort Sumner in De Baca County."

Pressed to narrow it down a bit, he and fellow birder Kevin Holladay offered some suggestions for birders who want drive the byways and beat the bushes this spring:

Rio Grande migrant trap

Percha Dam State Park just south of Caballo Lake is well-known as one of New Mexico's best migrant traps, a place with just the right habitat and location to attract numerous species of birds.



Yellow-rumped warbler

Its combination of a riparian area, large cottonwoods, open fields and desert scrub make Percha Dam an ideal spot to see Lucy's warblers, olive-sided flycatchers, western wood-pewees, warbling vireos, broad-winged and Swainson's hawks. Rare sightings include Mississippi kites, common black-hawks, vermilion flycatchers and rose-breasted grosbeaks. While you're at Percha Dam, take a trip north to areas below Caballo and Elephant Butte Lakes, always popular with birds and birders.

Diversity plus

The Melrose trap, a small stand of cottonwoods and silver poplars about 10 miles west of Melrose on U.S. 60 in southeastern New Mexico, attracts more species of birds in the spring and fall than almost any spot in the state. Birders can park off the highway and walk through a gate (always close it) a short distance to the site. There, the possibilities are nearly endless, with new species recorded almost annually. Red-headed woodpeckers and great horned owls are common, and long-eared owls are spotted on occasion. The area is famous for its numbers and varieties of eastern warblers and flycatchers. Listen and you may hear bobwhite quail calling from the brush.

Shorebird heaven

Shorebirds are easy to find in New Mexico's wetland preserves in late April and early May -- the height of their migration through the state.



Long-billed dowitcher

Head to Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge near Socorro and Bitter Lakes National Wildlife Refuge near Roswell, where you'll find American avocets, black-necked stilts and snowy plovers. Stop at the Bernardo Wildlife Management Area south of Belen for a chance to see greater and lesser yellowlegs, long-billed dowitchers, and western sandpipers.

Northern rarities

April is breeding season for one of the state's rarest migrants, the mountain plover. If you're keen on checking this bird off your life list, head north to San Antonio Mountain about 25 miles north of Tres Piedras on U.S. 285. From highway pulloffs, glass the short grassy areas for nesting plovers. Long-billed curlews also can be seen in the area. Be sure to check out the Stewart Meadows Wildlife Viewing Area off Forest Road 87 for a chance to see some shorebirds. The turnoff is 11 miles north of Tres Piedras on U.S. 285.

Northeastern lakes

Clayton Lake State Park is a well-known destination for birders in springtime. Take the nature trail through the riparian area at the upper end of the lake and look for spring migrants such as yellow-billed cuckoos, gray catbirds and rose-breasted grosbeaks. Drive south a bit to Tucumcari Lake for a visit to one of the most reliable spots in the state to see least bitterns. Look in the reeds surrounding the lake, and watch them fly back and forth across the lake at dusk and dawn. Tucumcari Lake also offers good springtime opportunities to see chimney swifts, and migrant shorebirds such as willets, stilt sandpipers and Wilson's phalaropes.

Northwestern surprises

El Morro National Monument and the El Malpais area of northwestern New Mexico are well worth the drive. The area has a stark beauty with sheer sandstone cliffs and graceful arches, and attracts a variety of birds year-round. On the 37-mile drive south of Grants, you will pass through a portion of the El Malpais region and sections of the Cibola National Forest. Western and mountain bluebirds may be found along the road, as well as western tanagers, long-distance migrants from South America. Later in the summer, hepatic tanagers sometimes appear in side canyons along the route. At El Morro, look for the white-throated swift, which was described to science for the first time there in 1851 by Dr. S.W. Woodhouse of the Sitgreaves Expedition.

Southwestern treasures

Take a drive from Socorro through Water Canyon in the Magdalena Mountains and on through the Gila National Forest and look for a variety of migrants, including warblers, painted redstarts and others. Popular birding spots include Bear Trap Canyon in the San Mateo Mountains, and the drive between Lake Roberts and Pinos Altos, which is a rewarding trip any time of year.



Photo: Don MacCarter

Gila woodpecker

Gila country

The Gila National Forest offers superb bird-watching in the spring. Red-faced warblers arrive in April, along with common poor-wills, whip-poor-wills, greater peewees and painted redstarts. Two good places to start are Cherry Creek and McMillan campgrounds north of Silver City on N.M. 15. At Cherry Creek, walk up the hill above the campground for an eye-to-eye upper canopy view of red-faced warblers in ponderosa pines. Another good spot is the Gila River Bird Habitat Area near Bill Evans Lake. There, you might find a Gila woodpecker, bridled titmouse, or a Bell's vireo.

Southeastern oasis

Rattlesnake Springs, part of Carlsbad Caverns National Park, is considered one of the state's top birding destinations, yet it never seems to be crowded with people. Those who visit the area outside the main park may see a vermilion flycatcher, summer tanager or a painted bunting. Other spring arrivals include the yellow-billed cuckoo, Bell's vireo, yellow-breasted chat, indigo bunting and hooded oriole.

Staked plains favorites

Springtime in southeastern New Mexico brings some welcome color and life to El Llano Estacado, the staked plains of southeastern New Mexico. April is breeding season for the lesser prairie chicken, a sensitive species that is making a comeback thanks to a partnership of conservation-minded agencies and land-owners. Check out the Department of Game and Fish Prairie Chicken areas near Milnesand south of Portales, where you can see the birds up close as they perform their dawn mating dances on their leks. Far eastern New Mexico also is the only place in the state to find scissor-tailed flycatchers.



Lesser prairie chicken

New Mexico birding resources

Here are some good resources for birding in New Mexico:

New Mexico Bird Finding Guide: The New Mexico Ornithological Society publishes this invaluable guide that includes a county-by-county list of bird species, locations and where to find birds seasonally. Its maps are especially helpful. The guide is available for \$20 via the society website, www.nmbirds.org.

Audubon New Mexico: The conservation organization is part of the National Audubon Society, with chapters statewide. The state website is <http://nm.audubon.org>.

Ebird: Check out this website, <http://ebird.org>, for a real-time community birding checklist program developed by the Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology and the Audubon Society.

Southwestern New Mexico Birding Trail: This free birding guide published by Audubon New Mexico and several community, state and federal agency partners includes a map with descriptions of 41 popular birding spots in southwestern New Mexico. It is available at the Silver City Chamber of Commerce or by calling the Department of Game and Fish at (505) 476-8000.

Shed hunters prize New Mexico's antlers

By Dan Williams

If you're among the growing number of people who get excited about antler hunting in New Mexico, you probably should skip the math. It could keep you up at night.

The statewide elk population now stands between 70,000 and 90,000, according to the latest Department of Game and Fish estimates. Based on surveys and hunter reports, about one-third of those elk are bulls. That means somewhere around 60,000 antlers hit the ground each spring. Key word: somewhere.

Finding antlers can be challenging for even experienced shed hunters. Elk tend to drop them in rough country, usually far from roads and away from hiking trails. Once the antlers are on the ground, they are hard to spot because they blend into the terrain. Then there's the competition -- from other shed hunters and rodents that like to snack on the calcium in the bones.

"Going back 25 years, we're seeing an increase each year in shed-hunting activity," said Kevin Rodden, the Department of Game and Fish elk management specialist for the Southwest Area, which includes the Gila National Forest. "One reason is the price of antlers. And, of course, the Gila is known for its' big bulls."

To a shed hunter, a good find is more than just a piece of bone. It's a treasure, a discarded weapon, a symbol of male potency. A large antler feels good in the hands -- rough and knobby, yet smooth to the touch. Finding one is always a thrill. Many hunters choose to keep their prizes, sometimes just to decorate the garden or hang on the fence. Others sell them to eager buyers who use antlers a number of ways. Prices vary widely and can range from \$1 a pound for old chalky antlers, to \$7 or more for fresh sheds. Matched sets are worth much more.

Anglers make good lamps and chandeliers, handles for knives and doors, racks for hats, coats and guns. Scrimshaw carvers turn them into belt buckles, bolos and other works of art. Asian cultures grind them up and use the powder as a food supplement to promote overall health and stamina. A matched set of shed antlers can mean big bucks for taxidermists. Mounted with a nice cape, a large set can fetch thousands of dollars from a lodge, restaurant or cabin owner looking for an impressive wall ornament.

"A really nice set can sell for several thousand dollars," Rodden said. "Everybody out there is looking for that big bull that scores 375 to 400 (inches)."

Elk shed their antlers every year, usually from mid-March into early April. Deer tend to shed their antlers a bit later, but exactly when they are shed depends upon the animal's health, age and other factors. If you're serious about finding them, it's best to do a little homework. Find out where the elk and deer spend the winter -- and most importantly, where the bulls and bucks are when it comes to antler-dropping time.

"Elk antlers usually are a little easier to find because the bulls tend to hang together, so when you find an antler, there usually are more around," said Brian Novosak, the Department's game manager for the Southeast Area, which includes the Sacramento



Photo: Dan Williams

Northern mountains

In far northern New Mexico, shed hunters will have to avoid the large areas of private land unless they have written permission, but some areas of public land offer good shed-hunting possibilities. Perhaps the best, Department officer Clint Henson said, is the Valle Vidal Unit of the Carson National Forest. The only catch to hunting sheds in the Valle Vidal is you have to work around closure times for wintering and calving elk.

The east side of the Valle Vidal is closed Jan. 31 through March 31 annually to protect wintering elk. The west side is closed May 1 through June 31 to protect calving elk.

Other northeastern areas to try include public lands around Tres Piedras and Taos. Take a walk in the aspens and through draws to look for sheds, but be careful not to trespass onto private land without written permission.

Mountains. "Deer antlers are harder to find, mainly because the deer tend to be more evenly distributed."

Department game managers and conservation officers offered some advice for novice elk antler hunters:

Gila country

"Our elk herd is doing fantastic right now," Rodden said. He suggested looking for antlers in Game Management Unit 15 between Reserve and Quemado, or Unit 16 north of Silver City. Unit 16 includes the Gila Wilderness and the Black Range, areas known for large elk populations.

Rodden said the best places to look for sheds are "typically the nastiest, roughest country." He advises walking high ridgetops to find where the elk were wintering. Some good areas include Elk Mountain, Bear Wallow and Eagle Peak. "But the average shed hunter will have it pretty tough," he said.

Sacramento Mountains

One of the state's most productive elk herds is in the Sacramento Mountains of southeastern New Mexico near Cloudcroft and Ruidoso. Novosak said the best chances of finding a really big shed is in Unit 36 north of Ruidoso, an area managed for trophy elk. Unit 34 near Cloudcroft also has good shed-hunting potential because it contains large numbers of elk.

Most of Units 34 and 36 are on National Forest land, which makes shed hunting easier. Novosak suggested searching mountain meadows and ridges in higher elevations. "Look for obstructions where elk would have to break out of heavy timber or jump over a fence -- natural places for them to bump an antler off."

Novosak said shed-hunting competition can be heavy. "There are not that many folks doing it, but those who do are very dedicated."



Photo: Mark Gruber

Big hauls of elk sheds like this one are rare. This young man collected his antlers during a special event for youth groups at the Valles Caldera National Preserve.

Know the shed-hunting rules

Where to hunt legally: Antler hunting is allowed on U.S. Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management property throughout New Mexico.

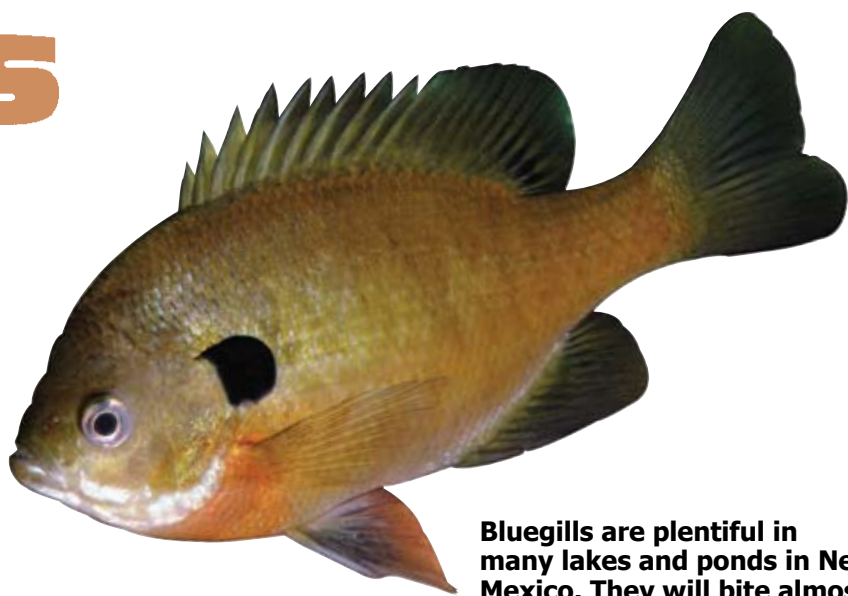
Private land: Antler hunters must have written permission from the landowner.

No hunting allowed: With few exceptions, antler hunting is prohibited on New Mexico state parks, national parks, monuments, wildlife and waterfowl preserves, and New Mexico State Trust lands. Rule of thumb: Always check with the landowner or controlling agency before you go antler hunting.

Commercial antler hunting: Permits and fees may apply. Be sure to check with the controlling agency or landowner before collecting antlers for profit.

Antlers and skulls: It is legal to possess naturally shed antlers. Skulls, however, are state property and must be purchased from the state. If you find a skull of any protected wild animal, with or without antlers, leave it where it is and contact a Department of Game and Fish conservation officer. You can purchase the skull at fair market value, and you will be given paperwork to prove you legally possess the skull.

Sunfish funfish



Bluegills are plentiful in many lakes and ponds in New Mexico. They will bite almost anything -- even a hotdog.

They're easy to catch, fun to watch, and yummy to eat

By Colleen Welch

With the arrival of spring, the sun is higher in the sky and its warmth invites us out to play and to fish. Many of New Mexico's waters are home to three *native* sunfish -- green sunfish, bluegill and longear sunfish. Sometimes they are called "panfish" because they are small and easily fit in a frying pan. Sunfish are easy to catch, make great campfire eating, and are really fun to watch in clear waters along shorelines.

Sunfish are kind of like China dishes shimmering in clear pools of water and along reservoir shorelines. Springtime is one of the very best seasons to watch these colorful fish as they crowd each other in their *frenzy*, or wild excitement to make nests in the sandy bottoms.

Walk quietly along the shore and you may see what looks like the bottom



of the lake moving! Look closer and you can see that the sunfish

are busy turning and swirling and swooshing up gravel as they make nests. When you look at sunfish from the front, you can see that their bodies are kind of like fat



Photo: Joe Fagan

Hungry little sunfish are almost always eager to bite your hook and bring a smile to your face. Look for them in the state's warmwater lakes and ponds.

pancakes. Flat bodies help the sunfish make quick turns.

If you would like to learn a new word and impress your friends, the scientific family name for sunfish is *Centrarchidae*.

Sunfish are fun fish. Watching and catching them bring big smiles to the faces of kids and adults. Here are some tips on watching and catching sunfish:

- Wear a hat and sunglasses to protect your eyes from the sunny glare of the water.
- Use a store-bought fishing rod and reel or just a long pole with some line tied to it. Put a small sinker and a hook on the end of the line.
- Sunfish will bite almost anything. Small pieces of earthworms or hotdogs work great!
- Remember, the rules say you can only keep 20 sunfish a day!
- If you want to eat your catch, ask

an adult to take the scales off or filet it. Put it in a frying pan with some butter, salt and pepper. It will be ready to eat in about five minutes.

- If you want to release your fish, wet your hands and hold the fish by gently "combing" the spiny top dorsal fin back just like you would do with your hands to comb back your hair. Gently take the hook out of its mouth and hold the fish in the water. When it wiggles, let it go.



Sunfish are plentiful in many of New Mexico's reservoirs. Try Santa Rosa Lake in central New Mexico, Elephant Butte in the southwest, or Bosque Redondo at Fort Sumner near the eastern grasslands. Be sure to check the New Mexico Fishing Rules and Information Booklet for fishing rules. Booklets are available at sporting goods stores and on the Department of Game and Fish website, www.wildlife.state.nm.us. Look on page 16 for a list of "youth-only" waters where only kids under age 12 can fish.

Colleen Welch is co-coordinator for conservation education and Project Wild for the Department of Game and Fish. She can be contacted at (505) 476-8119 or colleen.welch@state.nm.us.

Learn to fish



Free Fishing Day is Saturday, June 7, in New Mexico -- a special day when no one needs a license. Free community fishing clinics are planned all over the state. Look for a list of them at www.wildlife.state.nm.us.



Kids Fishing Day at the Seven Springs Hatchery youth-only pond in the Jemez Mountains is Saturday, July 26.



Bring a free fishing clinic to your school. Here's who to contact: Kevin Holladay, (505) 476-8095; Colleen Welch, (505) 476-8119; Ti Piper, (505) 281-5647.

Who needs a license?



You don't need a license if you're under age 12.



If you're 12 to 17 and live in New Mexico, you'll need a \$5 license.



If you fish on U.S. Forest Service or Bureau of Land Management waters, you will also need a \$5 Habitat Improvement Stamp.