



Photo: Karl Moffatt

San Juan special

The trophy trout waters of the San Juan River below Navajo Dam continue to delight anglers 47 years after the dam was completed.

Please see Page 8.

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Spring is for fishing

Where to go and what to take with you.

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Pronghorn roundup

Project renews herd at Santa Ana Pueblo

Story and photos
by Dan Williams

Pronghorn antelope No. 10, a yearling doe, appeared disoriented as she stumbled from a livestock trailer into her new home on Santa Ana Pueblo. Unlike the rest of the herd, she did not quickly flee from the view of the 50 or so Pueblo members who gathered to watch the release. Instead, No. 10 stood for a few long minutes, looking a bit dazed before moving off through the grass and junipers along the Rio Puerco.

"I'm not sure that one's going to make it," someone from the crowd whispered. "Coyotes," whispered another.

It had been a rough day for the yearling and the other 26 pronghorns in the trailer. In the span of a few early morning hours, they had been

... continued on Page 14



Antelope moved to new homes

The New Mexico Department of Game and Fish conducted its first pronghorn antelope trapping and transplanting operation in 11 years Feb. 28-March 2 in northeastern New Mexico. Twenty-seven pronghorns were released on Santa Ana Pueblo, below, and 125 were sent to Coahuila, Mexico.



Commission adopts hunting rule changes

New Mexico big-game hunters will see significant rule changes for the 2009-2010 seasons that affect the way hunters apply and pay for licenses and permits.

The new rules, adopted Dec. 4 by the State Game Commission, are in the 2009-2010 Big-Game Rules and Information Booklet, now available on the Department of Game and Fish Web site, www.wildlife.state.nm.us. A printed version of the booklet is available at more than 200 license vendors statewide, and at Department offices in Albuquerque, Santa Fe, Raton, Roswell and Las Cruces.

Rule changes and important dates include:

2009-2010 seasons

- **Customer ID number:** Beginning in 2009, everyone applying for a public-land license or permit, or purchasing a license via a private land authorization or the Valles Caldera must first obtain a Customer ID Number online at www.wildlife.state.nm.us or in person from any Department office. This number must be included on each application, or the application will be rejected.
- **Application deadline:** April 8 is the deadline to apply for public deer permits; and elk, pronghorn antelope, ibex, Barbary sheep, javelina, and bighorn sheep draw licenses. Online applications must be made before 5 p.m. Mountain Time on the deadline day.
- **Full fee up-front:** Everyone applying for a pronghorn, bighorn sheep, ibex, javelina or Barbary sheep draw license must pay the full license and application fee when applying. Online applicants will be charged for the full license fee, plus the nonrefundable application fee at the time of application. Unsuccessful applicants will receive refunds.
- **New application fees:** The new nonrefundable application fees are \$9 for residents and \$12 for nonresidents.
- **Youth encouragement elk hunts:** These hunts will be made available to youth hunters who applied for big-game hunts and were unsuccessful in the draw. The hunts will be made available on a first-come, first-served basis.



Photo: Dan Williams

Don't miss April 8 application deadline

Wednesday, April 8, is the deadline for hunters to apply for 2009-2010 deer, elk, antelope, ibex, javelina and bighorn sheep hunting opportunities allotted by draw in New Mexico.

Online applications must be received by 5 p.m. Wednesday. Paper applications must be postmarked by April 8 or delivered to the Department office in Santa Fe by 5 p.m. April 8.

Applicants are reminded that everyone applying for a public-land license or permit, or purchasing a license via a private land authorization or the Valles Caldera must first obtain a Customer ID Number online at www.wildlife.state.nm.us or in person from any Department office. This number must be included on each application, paper or online, or the application will be rejected.

The Department is expecting to receive more than 150,000

applications for about 50,000 available licenses and permits.

All applicants who were licensed to hunt deer or elk, or to hunt or trap furbearers in the 2008-2009 seasons must have submitted a harvest report to be eligible for the upcoming drawing. Hunters and trappers who did not report by the deadlines -- Feb. 15 for deer and elk hunters, April 7 for furbearer hunters and trappers -- can still participate in the 2009-2010 drawings if they submit their harvest survey and pay an \$8 late fee before applying. Hunters who fail to report their 2008-2009 harvest results -- successful or not -- will have their 2009-2010 applications rejected. Harvest reports can be submitted online at www.newmexico-hunt.com or by calling toll-free (888) 248-6866.

The drawing will take place in June, and results will be available in late June on the Department Web site or in person at any Department office.

- **New unit boundaries:** Several Game Management Unit boundaries have changed, including: the combination of Units 44 and 45 and the creation of a new Unit 59; and boundary adjustments in units 5B, 41, 45, 51, 52, 54 and 55B.
- **No deer application fees for resident disabled veterans:** New Mexico resident Disabled American Veteran applicants do not need to submit an application fee when applying for a free deer permit.

2010-2011 seasons

- **Every-other-year restrictions:** Beginning in license-year 2010-2011, anyone who held a public-draw pronghorn, or a public-draw Q (quality) or HD (high-demand) elk or deer license the previous year, must skip a year before applying for the same type of license.

For more information about hunting and fishing in New Mexico, please call (505) 476-8000.

Governor appoints Kent Salazar to State Game Commission

Gov. Bill Richardson has appointed Kent Salazar, an avid hunter and outdoorsman and regional director of the National Wildlife Foundation, to the New Mexico State Game Commission.

"Kent Salazar is respected for his deep knowledge of conservation issues both in New Mexico and nationally. I am confident he will be an excellent addition to the Game Commission," Gov. Richardson said.

Salazar runs an environmental consulting business in Albuquerque. Previously, he worked for the City of Albuquerque's Environmental Health Department for 20 years and he also has worked as an environmental planner and coordinator for the Land of

Enchantment Clean Cities Program.

Salazar has a Bachelors degree in biology from the University of New Mexico. He replaced Oscar Simpson of the New Mexico Wildlife Federation. He will finish out Simpson's term, which expires Dec. 31, 2011.

The State Game Commission is composed of seven members who represent the state's diverse interests in wildlife-associated recreation and conservation. Members are appointed



Kent Salazar

by the governor and confirmed by the state Senate. Current members are Chairman Jim McClintic, Albuquerque; Vice-chairwoman Sandy Buffett, Santa Fe; M.H. "Dutch" Salmon, Silver City; Alfredo Montoya, Alcalde; Leo Sims, Hobbs; and Kent Salazar, Albuquerque.

The commission's next meeting will be April 16 in Farmington. The commission's 2009 meeting schedule also includes: May 28, Albuquerque; July 2, Chama; Aug. 20, Albuquerque; Sept. 24, Las Cruces; and Dec. 3, Hobbs.

Meeting agendas, briefings and contact information for commissioners is available on the Department Web site, www.wildlife.state.nm.us. Information also is available by calling (505) 476-8008.



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Hunting ‘legend’ sentenced

Darner gets \$10,000 in fines, 4,500 hours community service

Kirt Darner, a former outfitter and owner of a private northwestern New Mexico elk hunting park, was sentenced to \$10,000 in fines and 4,500 hours of community service in January for illegally transporting elk and receiving stolen bighorn sheep heads.

Cibola County District Judge Camille Martinez-Olguin also ordered Darner to pay an undetermined amount of restitution to the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish, the Colorado Division of Wildlife, and a taxidermy business in Montrose, Colo., where the sheep heads were stolen. Olguin ordered Darner to serve 25 weeks of community service a year for 4 ½ years -- 4,500 hours -- in Colorado and New Mexico.

Darner, 69, pleaded guilty to the charges in June 2008. He faced a maximum penalty of 4 ½ years in jail and a minimum of \$10,000 in fines and restitution. In a plea agreement accepted by Judge Martinez-Olguin, Darner also agreed never to hunt, fish or possess a firearm in his lifetime.

The investigation involved close cooperation among the 13th Judicial District Attorney’s Office, the Colorado Division of Wildlife and the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish.

Kirt Darner, a nationally known big-game hunter and guide, and his wife, Paula Darner, were co-owners of a 40-acre game park on the Lobo Canyon Ranch north of Grants. They were indicted on multiple charges related to the possession of two trophy bighorn sheep heads and the illegal transport of stolen live elk. The Darners were accused of illegally moving three state-owned elk from the Lobo Canyon Ranch to the Pancho Peaks ranch and game park in southeastern New Mexico in 2005. Kirt Darner was paid \$5,000 for each elk.

Department of Game and Fish officers who executed



Kirt Darner

more than \$20,000 each. At Monday’s sentencing hearing, a Colorado Division of Wildlife investigator testified that a former employee of Darner’s admitted to being paid to steal the sheep heads.

Previously, in Colorado, Darner was convicted of illegal possession of wildlife in 1994. In 1999 he was convicted of second degree tampering with evidence and careless driving in an incident in which he was serving as an outfitter. Division of Wildlife officers observed Darner’s client shoot at an elk decoy in a game management unit for which the client didn’t have a license. In 2008, Darner pleaded guilty to making a false statement in order to purchase a license. He had applied for landowner vouchers with the Department of Wildlife, but did not own enough property to be eligible for the program.

The Darners currently live in Crawford, Colo.

If you have information about a wildlife crime, please call Operation Game Thief toll-free, (800) 432-4263. You can remain anonymous and may be eligible for a reward in information leads to charges being filed.

a search warrant at the Darner property in 2005 discovered a desert bighorn sheep head and a Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep head inside a vehicle. Further examination of the heads determined that they were stolen from a Montrose, Colo., taxidermy shop in 2000. The Colorado Division of Wildlife had offered a \$5,500 reward for information about the sheep-head thefts. At the time they were stolen, the sheep heads were estimated to be worth



Photo: Don MacCarter

It is impossible to tell from the above photograph whether the mountain lion in the picture is male or female. You can find out why, and how to identify male and female mountain lions by taking the Cougar Education and Identification Course.

Department offers cougar ID course

The Department of Game and Fish is offering an online Cougar Education and Identification Course and an accompanying quiz to encourage hunters, guides and houndsmen to help ensure that cougar hunting is an activity they can continue to enjoy.

The online course focuses on how to distinguish male, female and sub-adult cougars, and also includes information about cougar habitat, behavior, hunting rules, human-cougar issues, and state management objectives. The course and accompanying online exam was developed by the Colorado Division of Wildlife, which requires all cougar hunters to have passed the exam before legally hunting cougars in the state. The course and exam are voluntary in New Mexico.

The Department is asking hunters, guides, outfitters and houndsmen to:

- Contact the Department of Game and Fish toll-free, (877) 950-5466 or visit www.wildlife.state.nm.us to learn about management goals, the number of cougars allowed to be harvested, and the female subharvest limit before hunting in any Game Management Unit or Zone.
- Take plenty of time to determine a cougar’s gender and make an informed choice before harvesting the animal.

The online course, interactive quiz and more information about cougar hunting in New Mexico can be found on the Department Web site, www.wildlife.state.nm.us. Information also is available by calling toll-free, (800) 862-9310.

Get involved

Many organizations in New Mexico are dedicated to wildlife conservation, habitat improvement and wildlife-related recreation. Whether you are interested in birding, wildlife watching, hunting, fishing or trapping, chances are there is an outfit you’ll deem worth supporting. Here are some of them:

Safari Club International: Promotes wildlife conservation worldwide while protecting the hunting heritage and supporting numerous education and humanitarian projects. Southern New Mexico Chapter: LTC R.A. “Pancho” Maples, pancho1@plateautel.net. Northern New Mexico Chapter: Brian Payne, b_payne10@msn.com.

Ducks Unlimited, New Mexico: More than 1,500 members support the organization’s mission to restore and manage wetlands and habitats for North American waterfowl. Quincy and Carole Shores, DuMaDuck@aol.com.

New Mexico Wildlife Federation: Founded by Aldo Leopold in 1914, the organization is a strong lobbyist in the New Mexico Legislature, “dedicated to protecting New Mexico’s wildlife, habitat and outdoor way of life.” (505) 299-5404, www.nmwildlife.org.

Audubon New Mexico: Devoted to the protection, preservation and enjoyment of the environment, with a particular emphasis on birds. The organization has chapters statewide, with headquarters at the Randall Davey Audubon Center in Santa Fe. (505) 983-4609, <http://nm.audubon.org>.

Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation: A large national organization dedicated to ensuring the future of elk, other wildlife and their habitat. The organization actively supports efforts to protect and enhance elk country, conservation education and to restore elk herds. New Mexico information: (505) 454-9390. National website: www.rmef.org.

Southwest Environmental Center: Works to reverse the accelerating loss of species worldwide by protecting and restoring native wildlife and their habitats in the Southwestern borderlands, through grassroots advocacy, public education and on-the-ground restoration projects. (575) 522-5552, www.wildmesquite.org.

Southwest Consolidated Sportsmen: An organization representing at least 15 sporting and conservation groups of diverse interests. The group’s three primary objectives are to “disseminate wildlife and habitat information, participate in habitat maintenance projects, and review and comment on proposals involving wildlife habitat.” (575) 526-5056.

Trout Unlimited, New Mexico: Dedicated to the restoration, protection and conservation of all coldwater fisheries, their tributaries and watersheds and the fish that inhabit them. (505) 470-4878, www.newmexicotu.org.

New Mexico Wild Turkey Federation: Supports scientific wildlife management on public, private and corporate lands as well as wild turkey hunting as a traditional North American sport. (505) 869-3837, www.nwtf.org.

New Mexico Trout: Dedicated to the preservation and enhancement of trout fishing in New Mexico’s waters through restoration of riparian habitats and through the education of the public about trout fishing and the value of trout habitats. newmexicotrout@gmail.com, www.newmexicotrout.org.

Southwest Muskie Maniacs: This rapidly growing club was formed as the 59th chapter of Muskies Inc. in 2008 by a group of anglers interested in catching tiger muskies stocked in Bluewater and Quemado lakes, and northern pike in northern New Mexico waters. Information: Michael Bishop, mb_tigers@yahoo.com; or Jared Blaschke at jbfshn@comcast.net.



Northwest



Ross Morgan

Heron lakers challenge anglers

By Ross Morgan

Somewhere in the cool depths of Heron Lake lurks the fish of Don Wolfley's dreams -- a lake trout worthy of the record books.

No, he's not shooting for a world record. Beating the 72-pounder caught in Canada in 1995 would be quite a stretch at Heron. Seeing one of his clients beat the New Mexico record of 31 pounds, 6 ounces, however, would suit Wolfley just fine.

"We're hoping this will be another good year," said Wolfley, who has guided anglers at Heron Lake since 1997. "You never know about lakers. Some days you get into them, other days you don't. Some days you catch 22- to 23-inchers, other days you catch 25-pounders."

Heron is the only lake in New Mexico that supports a lake trout fishery. Lake trout initially were stocked as fry in 1976 and then again as fingerlings in 1987. The lake is capable of sustaining natural reproduction, which makes it such a great lake trout fishery. At Heron, lake trout are managed as a unique, trophy angling opportunity, with a harvest limit of two fish a day.

Lake trout, (*Salvelinus namaycush*) are the largest representatives of a group of fish known as char and are closely related to Dolly Varden, brook trout, and Arctic char. The slow-growing fish are also called Great Lakes trout, mackinaw, lake char, touladi, togue and grey trout. They thrive in deep, cold, oxygen-rich waters and often are found at depths of 60 to 200 feet, and occasionally in shallower waters. They vary from light green, grey, dark green, or almost black with light spots and worm-like markings on their back and sides. Their tail is deeply forked with 10-11 rays in their anal fin.

Lake trout often are described as planktivory, small fish that feed mostly on plankton; or piscivorous, larger fish that feed mostly on other fish.

"The Lake trout in Heron Lake are extremely piscivorous," said Rick Castell, Fisheries Biologist for the Northwest Area Operations of the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish, "Although they start out consuming large zooplankton, they switch to piscivory."

So what do you need to catch one of these magnificent fish? First, choose the best times to be on the water: Early mornings and late evenings are best. After that, success will depend on your knowledge of the fish, your equipment, and of course, luck. A good fish finder is essential, and because of the depths that these fish are found, you also will need a downrigger to place your lure at a desired depth.

If you are trolling, it is best to troll at low speeds with a heavy ball on your downrigger. Keep the ball as close to the bottom as possible. If you locate a concentration of fish, jigging may be your best bet. In early spring lake trout tend to move into shallow areas near the bank, where they sometimes can be caught on flies, lures and even bait. As the water warms in the summer, the fish move into deeper waters and are harder to find, and catch. Remember, it is illegal to use bait fish in Heron Lake.

Ross Morgan is the Department of Game and Fish public information officer for the Northwest Area. He can be reached in Albuquerque at (505) 222-4707 or ross.morgan@state.nm.us.



Courtesy photo

Guide Don Wolfley and his client, Denise Hipp of Albuquerque pose with Hipp's 28.5-pound, 43-inch lake trout at Heron Lake.

Head southwest for fishing smorgasboard

By LuAnn Tafoya

Looking for some variety in your fishing outings this year? Head for southwestern New Mexico, where in the span of a few days, anglers have opportunities to catch bass, catfish, walleye, trout and 40-inch tiger muskie.

"Where else can you catch and release a tiger muskie one day and bag a Gila trout the next?" said Joey Vega, Southwest Area fisheries biologist for the Department of Game and Fish. He and warmwater fisheries biologist Casey Harthorn offered the following forecasts for the state's southwestern waters:

Elephant Butte Lake

"Good water levels produced a good spawn resulting in high-quality and quantity of largemouth bass, Harthorn said. "You should be able to catch legal-size (14-inch minimum) fish." Smallmouth bass numbers have increased, but expect smaller fish this year. Striped bass fishing will be slow,

but chances of catching a heavy fish should increase. Average weights should be around 20 pounds. White bass fishing will be good, but fish will be smaller because of a slow spawn.

If you catch a walleye, you'll have a good possibility of catching one over 14 inches this year. Walleye numbers are about the same as last year.

If you're looking for channel catfish, focus on areas south of Long Point. Blue catfish will be found on the north end of the lake.

Caballo Lake

Walleye fishing should be excellent this spring, Vega said, with the peak chances of catching fish over 14 inches coming between March and May. He recommends trolling deep waters in the summer.

White bass fishing should be about the same as last year, with smaller fish but more of them. Catfish angling also looks promising for fish around 10 inches.

Silver City area

As the water starts to warm, the catfish and bass start biting at Lake Roberts. Largemouth bass fishing should start picking up after April 1. It's always best fishing from boats at Lake Roberts. Bank anglers often find themselves fighting the cattails along the shoreline.

Bear Canyon Lake is another good bet for catfish, bass and small bluegills.

Fishing should be good again this year at Bill Evans Lake, home of the state record largemouth bass. You'll also find good populations of bluegills in



Photo: LuAnn Tafoya

Alumni Pond on the New Mexico State University campus will be the site of a free kids fishing clinic on Free Fishing Day, June 6.

the lake, some average-sized catfish and trout from winter stockings.

Quemado Lake

Trout fishing almost always is good at Quemado Lake, but it is best from September to May, so hit it in early spring. When the temperatures rise, try for one of the monster (up to 40-inch) tiger muskies the Department put in the lake to clean out the goldfish. June and July are the best months for the muskies, which are restricted to catch-and-release for now.

Gila country

The Forks area of the Gila River and Sapillo Creek should offer average fishing for Gila trout. There also are special waters available for anglers who want to catch and release a Gila trout. Special regulations apply and permits are required. You can get a free permit and learn about Gila trout waters and fishing rules at www.wildlife.state.nm.us.

Free Fishing Day is June 6

This year there will be three fishing clinics on Free Fishing Day, June 6, in the Southwest Area. Clinics are great opportunities for youngsters to learn all about fishing. Locations include Alumni Pond on the New Mexico State University campus in Las Cruces, Lake Roberts, and Ralph Edwards Park in T or C. Fishing licenses are not required on this day and clinics provide stations where kids can learn about fish identification, bait and tackle, knots, casting, rules and regulations, and conservation. For more information about the clinics or fishing in the Southwest Area, please call the Las Cruces office at 575-532-2100.

LuAnn Tafoya is the Department of Game and Fish public relations officer for the Southwest Area. She can be reached in Las Cruces at (575) 532-2106 or luann.tafoya@state.nm.us.

Southwest



LuAnn Tafoya

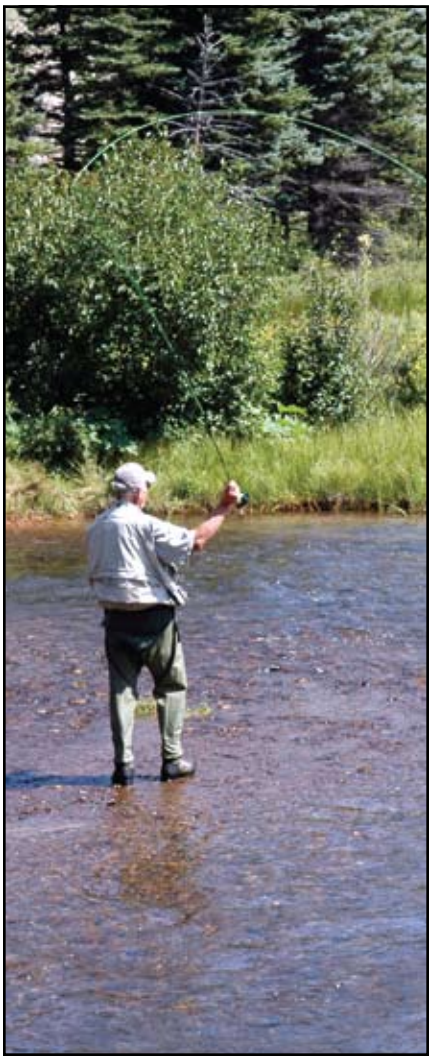


Photo: Dan Williams

Fishing outlook good for northeastern waters

By Eric Frey

Whether you're after trout, walleye or bass, northeastern New Mexico has plenty of opportunities for some nice catches this year, thanks to an ample snowpack and increased trout stockings by the Department of Game and Fish.

Here's a quick look at some popular northeastern waters and what anglers can expect this year:

Conchas Lake: Water levels continue to be below normal, but most fish populations are stable. The lake should be excellent for channel catfish and white bass fishing this year. Fish surveys indicate largemouth and smallmouth populations are stable with a few largemouth bass over five pounds caught last spring. Walleye numbers decreased slightly, but on average the fish are larger. Early April to mid-May are the best times to fish for walleye.

Ute Lake: Water levels at Ute Lake remain high and stable. The white bass population is the highest it has been in several years, and May and June will be excellent times to fish for them. The

channel catfish population is stable and fishing should remain good through 2009. Largemouth bass numbers are down, but anglers can expect slightly larger fish this year. Smallmouth bass have increased in number and fishing should be great spring through summer.

Eagle Nest Lake: The population of rainbow trout has remained stable and the lake should offer great fishing this year, especially right after the ice melts. The kokanee salmon population has increased, so summer trolling should be good this year. Yellow perch numbers remain high and spring fishing should be exceptional for the small but tasty fish.

McAllister Lake: The lake will remain closed to fishing until further notice because of an infestation of golden algae, a microscopic organism that produces a toxin that kills fish.

Pecos River: Stream flows should remain good through 2009. The Pecos River has a high number of wild brown trout and the Department of Game and Fish will stock about 50,000 rainbow trout in the Pecos Canyon this year.

Northeast



Clint Henson

Cimarron River: The river continues to hold lots of brown trout, and anglers can expect to catch larger fish this year. The Department plans to stock about 25,000 catchable-sized rainbow trout in the river, making angling prospects even brighter.

For more information about fishing opportunities in northeastern New Mexico, please contact the Northeast Area office of the Department of Game and Fish in Raton, (575) 445-2311.

Eric Frey is the Department of Game and Fish fisheries biologist for northeastern New Mexico.

Introduce a youngster to a lifetime of fun

By Mark Madsen

One of life's greatest adventures is teaching a kid to fish. All you need is a little practice, a little bait ... and a lot of patience.

Teaching a kid to fish is really quite simple. Start by teaching the fundamentals of casting, usually with a 'Snoopy' or in today's world, a 'Spongebob' or 'Transformers' rod-and-reel combo. Remember to wear protective headgear and eye protection during this stage; it has been reported that innocent teachers and bystanders have been "beaned" during casting with practice plugs or lead sinkers. Patience is the key; it may take several million practice casts until they have the hang of it and can actually get the cast headed the right direction.

Once the youngster has the cast down, it's time to head to your favorite fishing hole. You'll have better luck if your youngster actually has a chance to catch a fish or two, so don't head to your favorite catfish hole or bass hot spot. Look for fishing holes that have good numbers of bluegills, green sunfish, or yellow perch. In the winter months try waters that are stocked regularly with rainbow trout.

Keep in mind that most kids are full of energy and may not want to sit for more than a minute or two, so don't be offended if they would rather just practice their newly acquired casting skills. If they do decide to get serious about fishing, don't be surprised if they want to "check their bait" every 15 seconds. Remember, patience is the key!

When fishing with kids, keep riggings as simple as possible. Using a bobber, a split-shot or two and a single hook is a good place to start. The bobber gives the kids something to focus on and it's easy to tell when they get a bite. Worms work great and are easy to use when fishing for sunfish or perch. For rainbow trout, use salmon eggs or Power Bait.

Don't even think about fishing yourself



Photo: Dan Williams

Casting practice on dry land is a good idea before youngsters hit the water for the first time.

the first time out. You'll be busy baiting hooks, untangling lines and removing any fish caught. Once the kids get the hang of it, they'll want to try it themselves.

When a kid feels the tug of a fish on the other end of the line for the first time, she probably will do one of two things: drop the rod or stop reeling, which will result in the loss of a fish or two. If you have youngsters who have mastered casting and have too much energy to sit still, rig them up with a spinner or other type of small lure. They can then wear themselves out by casting and reeling and actually may catch a fish or two. A small curly-tailed grub can be very productive in place of a spinner or lure when fishing for sunfish or perch. Under the right conditions, it is not unusual for a kid

to catch 40 or 50 sunfish in an hour or two.

A little rusty on your fishing skills? Don't worry; you don't have to teach a kid to fish all by yourself. The Department of Game and Fish, along with other sponsors, conducts free fishing clinics throughout the state several times a year. The clinics are open to all kids and include basic instructions for casting, knot tying, fish anatomy and identification, along with other educational stations. Many clinics also offer real fishing experiences by allowing kids the opportunity to catch fish either in ponds or in some cases, swimming pools filled with catfish. Numerous fishing clinics have been scheduled throughout the state for Free Fishing Day, June 6, 2009. Check the

Department Web site, www.wildlife.state.nm.us, for details.

There are many good kid-friendly fishing spots in southeastern New Mexico that offer ample opportunities for kids to catch fish. Sumner Lake and Bosque Redondo near Fort Sumner offer good opportunities for bluegills and green sunfish. Bottomless Lakes and Lake Van near Roswell have good rainbow trout fishing during the winter. Carlsbad Municipal, Bataan, Green Meadow, Eunice and Jal lakes offer rainbow trout fishing and some sunfish. Many of these same waters are stocked with channel catfish during the summer. Spring River Park (Roswell kid's pond) and Harry McAdams Park in Hobbs are for kids only.

If you're looking for a challenge and maybe a good laugh or two, consider taking your young son or daughter fishing this spring. Even better, how about your grandkids? You can teach them the art of fishing and give them something that they will enjoy for the rest of their lives. Give them an excuse to get off the couch and away from the video games and wet-a-line and maybe catch a fish or two.

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

Southeast



Mark Madsen



Big bass thrive in small Bill Evans Lake

By Dan Williams

Sitting pretty 300 feet above the Gila River, little Bill Evans Lake doesn't appear to hold much angling excitement beyond a few bluegills, catfish or a largemouth bass or two. But as many southwest New Mexico anglers have discovered, big things sometimes come in small packages.

Bill Evans Lake is credited for producing two state-record bass -- largemouth and white -- since the lake was impounded in the late 1960s. Steve Estrada's 15-pound, 13-ounce largemouth has topped the record book since 1995. Jack Alexander's 4-pound, 13-ounce white bass stands as a state record -- and a mystery. There are no known stockings of white bass in the lake and no white bass have ever turned up in electroshocking surveys.

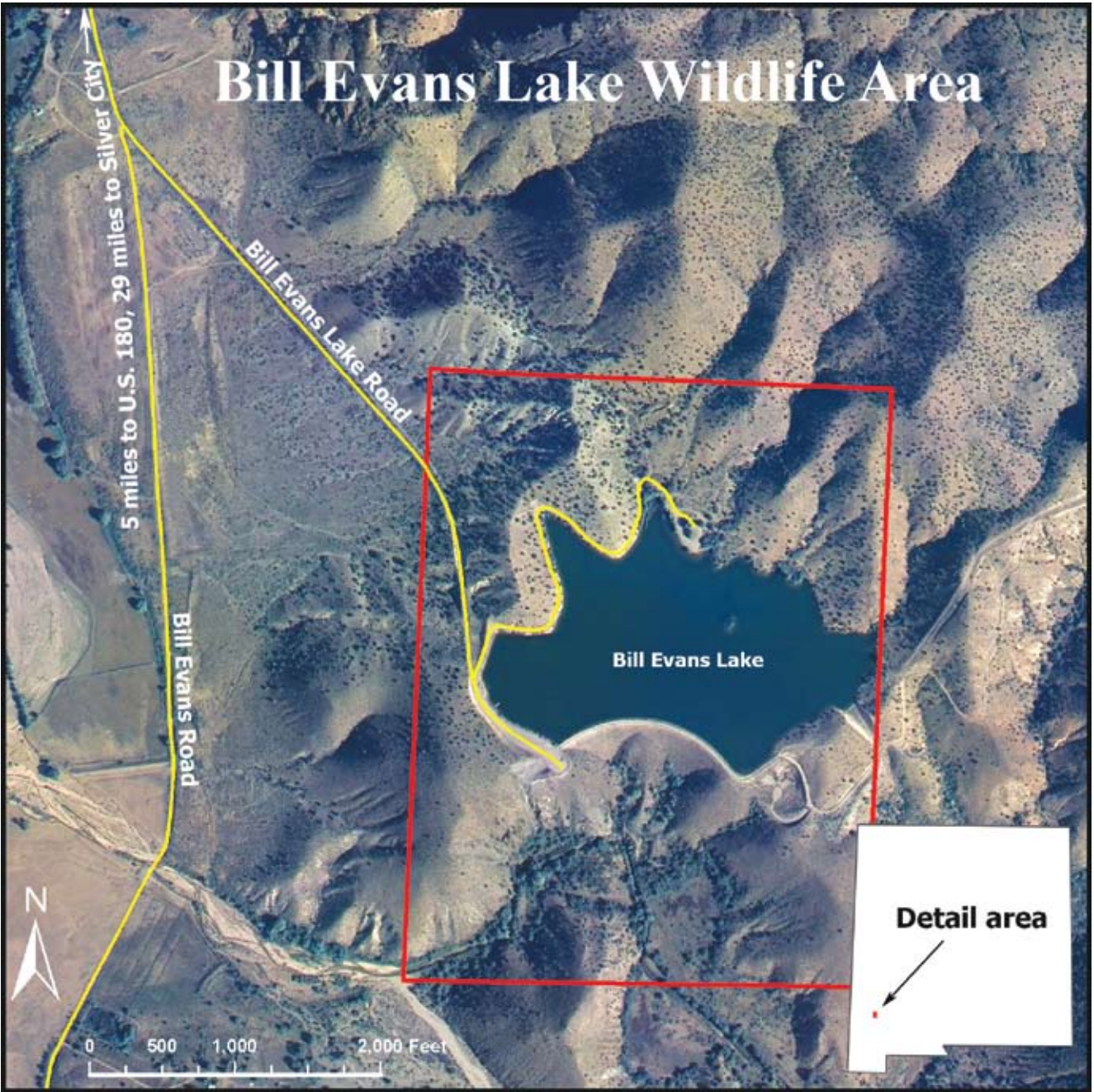
Casey Harthorn, warmwater fisheries biologist for the Department of Game and Fish, said for its size, Bill Evans Lake has a lot going for it in terms of growing big bass.

"It has a very good exchange of high-quality, oxygen-rich water and a lot of nutrients from vegetation," Harthorn said. "We also dump a lot of trout in it every year -- good food for the bass." In 2008, the Department stocked 14,582 catchable-sized and 12,529 fingerling rainbow trout in the lake.

Bill Evans Lake was stocked with Florida-strain and northern largemouth bass, but the Department stopped stocking bass when the populations became self-sustaining. The lake also has good populations of bluegills and channel catfish.

The 62-acre lake was constructed in the late 1960s by Phelps Dodge Corp. as a water source for its Tyrone mine and milling operations. Four vertical turbine pumps, each capable of pumping 4,500 gallons per minute, fill the lake from the Gila River 300 feet below. According to a spokesman for Freeport-McMoRan Copper & Gold Inc., which acquired Phelps Dodge in 2006, the lake was named after a Phoenix attorney who was instrumental in the development of water resources for the corporation.

The State Game Commission bought the lake, water rights and 300 acres of property in 1972 as a state Wildlife Management Area. Phelps Dodge agreed to provide dam maintenance and keep the lake filled in exchange for using the water for its Tyrone operations.



Today, Bill Evans Lake is a popular fishing and birding destination that attracts visitors from throughout the state. Its population of large bass lures serious anglers, while opportunities to catch bluegills and trout appeals to families.

"It's an easy lake to fish," Harthorn said. "Almost 100 percent of the shoreline is accessible for angling, and it would be an excellent float-tube lake. Boats are allowed, but can't have more power than an electric trolling motor." The lake is kind to kids, who can cast without getting snagged because there are few bushes or trees



along the shoreline. Harthorn suggested rigging kids up with a bobber, hook and small worm -- always a good bet for the lake's plentiful and feisty bluegills.

Early spring, when the water temperature reaches about 56 degrees, is the best time to

try for large, spawning bass, Harthorn said. Techniques vary, but a favorite method is to walk the shoreline casting a crankbait at fish you often can see in the clear water. As the water warms, the bass move out where it's deeper. That's the time to switch tactics and use something like a rubber grub from a small boat or float tube.

Trout are stocked in the lake from October through March the water is cool. Spinners, lures, bait and flies are all effective at times. Watch the stocking report on the Department Web site, www.wildlife.state.nm.us, and try to fish the week after a stocking.

The Bill Evans Lake Wildlife Area is open for wildlife watching, hiking and primitive camping in designated areas. An area along Mangas Creek just south of the lake is popular with birders year-round, but especially during spring and fall migrations.

In 2008, the area was opened to wildlife-associated recreation other than fishing through the Department's Gaining Access Into Nature, or GAIN, program. All visitors of the area ages 18 or older must have either a year-round or five-day GAIN permit, and a Habitat Management and Access Validation. Costs for the permits, including the validation, are \$19 for a full year, \$8 for five days. Licensed anglers do not need GAIN permits while fishing, but need permits for other activities.

For more information about the Bill Evans Wildlife Area and GAIN opportunities statewide, please visit the Department Web site, www.wildlife.state.nm.us.



Photo: LuAnn Tafoya

Bill Evans Lake's clear water often allows anglers to see the fish they are trying to catch. Water for the 62-acre lake is pumped 300 feet uphill from the Gila River.



Desert bighorns rebound in N.M.

Downlisting highlights years of restoration for native NM species

By Dan Williams

Desert bighorn sheep, once one of New Mexico’s most imperiled native species, became a wildlife success story in 2008 when the State Game Commission removed the animals from the state endangered species list, reclassifying them as “threatened.”

“It’s not often that you can take a species on the brink and help restore it to the point of downlisting,” said Eric Rominger, a bighorn biologist with the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish. “All the time and effort by many individuals, organizations and agencies finally paid off.”

Downlisting desert bighorns from endangered to threatened under the State Wildlife Conservation Act opens more avenues for future transplants and potential new hunting opportunities. As statewide populations continue to increase, the Department is considering more bighorn hunting licenses so hunters can benefit from the restoration success.

New Mexico currently offers one desert bighorn license in the annual public drawing. A second license is sold at auction or by raffle to raise money for the state’s desert bighorn program. The auction conducted by the Wild Sheep Foundation has raised as much as \$210,000 in one year.

The road to success for the desert bighorns has had its share of potholes. Disease, parasites and predators took their toll over the years. The sharp decline in desert bighorn numbers in the early 1900s likely was due in part to diseases contracted from domestic sheep. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, the San Andres Mountain herd was reduced from about 225 to 25 sheep by an infestation of scabies mites. But the biggest threat over the years came from the top predators in rocky, desert regions.

“Cougars can have a big impact on prey species, especially when the prey species population is small,” Department bighorn biologist Elise Goldstein said. “During the 1990s, we documented that 85 percent of known-caused mortality of radio-collared bighorns was from cougar predation.”

After years of little success restoring bighorns with transplants from the Red Rock Wildlife Area captive breeding facility, the Department began a cougar removal program in bighorn ranges in the



Photo: LuAnn Tafoya

A pair of desert bighorn rams, above, are relatively safe from predators within the Red Rock Wildlife Area captive breeding facility. Sheep raised at Red Rock are released in ranges including the Hatchet Mountains, below.



Photo: Dan Williams

fall of 2001. At the time, the statewide wild desert bighorn population had dwindled to fewer than 170 sheep.

“As soon as we began cougar removal, the numbers shot up,” Rominger said. “By 2008, we had more than 400 desert bighorns in six mountain ranges.”

Fossil records, Mimbres pottery and other evidence indicate desert bighorn sheep once inhabited the Desert Southwest in significant numbers. Populations declined severely in the early 1900s and by the 1940s only two herds remained -- in the San Andres and Big Hatchet

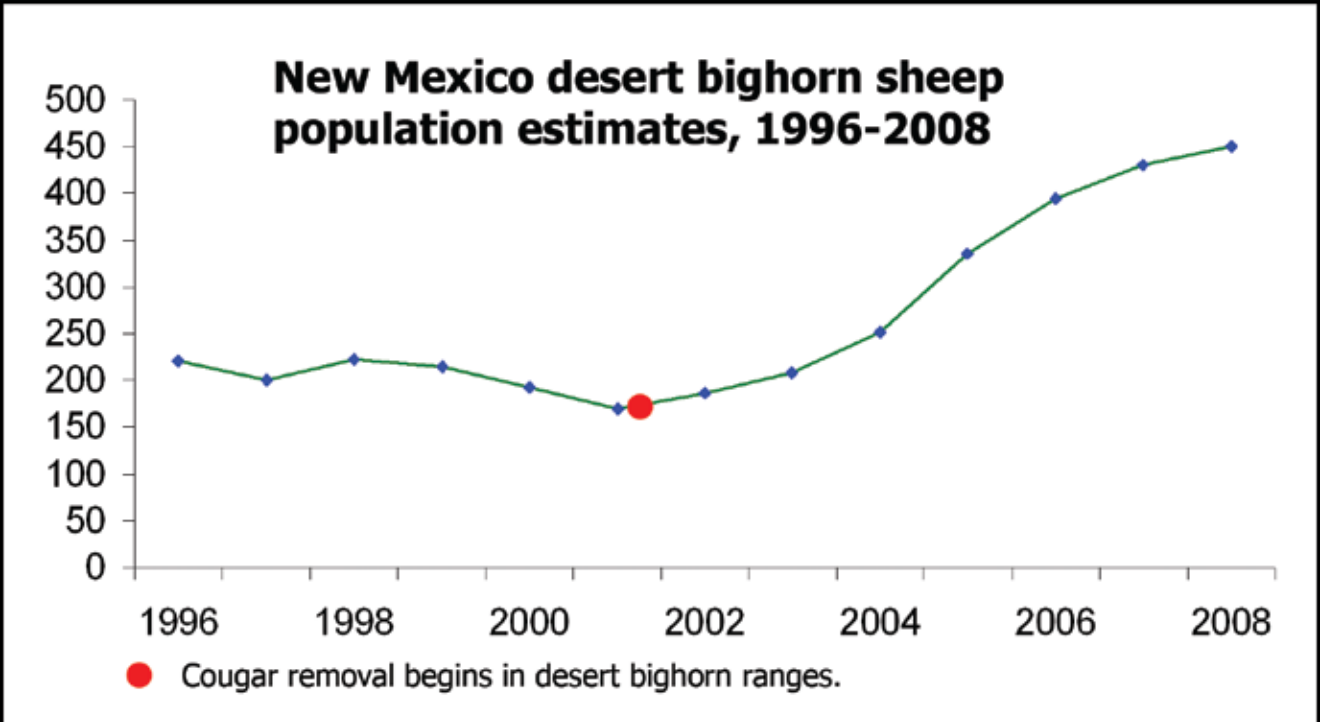
Mountains. Desert bighorns were placed on the state endangered species list in 1980, when the wild population had dropped to about 69 sheep.

The Department of Game and Fish began a captive breeding program at Red Rock Wildlife Area in 1972 to raise more bighorns and repopulate wild herds. Since then, 353 sheep have been transplanted out of the facility into the wild. Another 74 bighorns have been transplanted from Refuge in Arizona.

Biologists credit the cougar removal program for helping the transplanted sheep thrive in expanded ranges. Department research indicates that the program reduced overall bighorn mortality by 56 percent, and cougar predation mortality by 71 percent. Since 2001, an average of 3.3 cougars was removed from each bighorn range annually. The cougars removed from less than 1 percent of New Mexico’s cougar habit accounted for less than 1 percent of the statewide cougar population.

Department biologists are optimistic that future transplants and continued cougar control will allow desert bighorn herds to continue growing and possibly encourage expansion into other suitable mountain ranges.

“Now that we’ve achieved downlisting, our next objective is delisting,” Goldstein said.



Still special after all these years



Anglers from around the world travel to northwestern New Mexico every year for a chance to catch the trophy-sized trout that inhabit a four-mile stretch of the San Juan River below Navajo Dam. Fisheries biologists estimate there are 70,000 fish in the San Juan’s “quality waters.” At left, Department of Game and Fish biologists James Dominguez, left, and Marc Wethington admire a large rainbow trout before releasing it during a recent electroshocking survey.

Photo: Karl Moffatt

San Juan’s trophy trout waters challenge anglers, biologists

By Karl Moffatt

Wading around the corner of a willow-choked island at Baetis Bend on the San Juan River, I encountered a well-appointed but clearly disappointed fly fisherman.

“This river has gone to hell,” he complained.

I wondered what the problem was as I looked over the water he was deserting. After all, it was a gorgeous, late-fall day, trout were rising and he’d had this whole stretch of New Mexico’s premier trout stream all to himself.

He complained about low water flows in recent years that he believed had killed off insects that the river’s trout feed upon.

He lamented the loss of the good old days, back when water released from Navajo Dam ran much higher, scouring silt and sediment from the river bottom, producing conditions in which insects thrived, making fishing here a breeze.

He concluded that the river and the fishing had suffered and mumbled bitterly as he shuffled off around the bend.

But within minutes I was into a classic San Juan rainbow, 18 inches of fight, straining against my line, sailing through the air and making my day. Clearly, although some of what the disgruntled angler said may be true, the river’s trout population continues to thrive and most anglers are highly satisfied with the fishing.

That’s according to a recently released study of the river by the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish.

“Despite the circumstances, this is still a very healthy and productive fishery,” said Marc Wethington, the department’s fisheries biologist on the San Juan and key contributor to the report.

This year’s annual electroshocking survey revealed great numbers of vigorous trout in New Mexico’s top trophy water.

“The number and quality of the fish look real good,” Wethington said as he inspected fish netted during a late-November outing.

Floating downstream with Wethington at the oars, crew members James Dominguez and Sean Buczek leaned over a rail on the front of a 14-foot



Photo: Dan Williams

Most anglers catch at least one fish measuring 18 inches or larger in a day’s fishing on the San Juan River.

raft, armed with nets mounted on long poles.

At the back of the boat, a gas-powered, electric generator chugged away, providing current to a probe immersed in the water at the bow. Strands of wire dangled from the stern to complete the circuit and provide a “stun-zone” under and around the boat.

As we floated downstream, dozens of fish darted about, running from the shock while others, caught in the current, floated unharmed to the surface.

The fish were caught in nets and then poured into a holding tank to await inspection. After a short run, the tank was brimming with trout and Wethington beached the craft and the work of weighing, measuring and inspecting the trout began.

The crew noted if the fish showed evidence of having been caught before, and in one case they delicately untangled a line and several flies

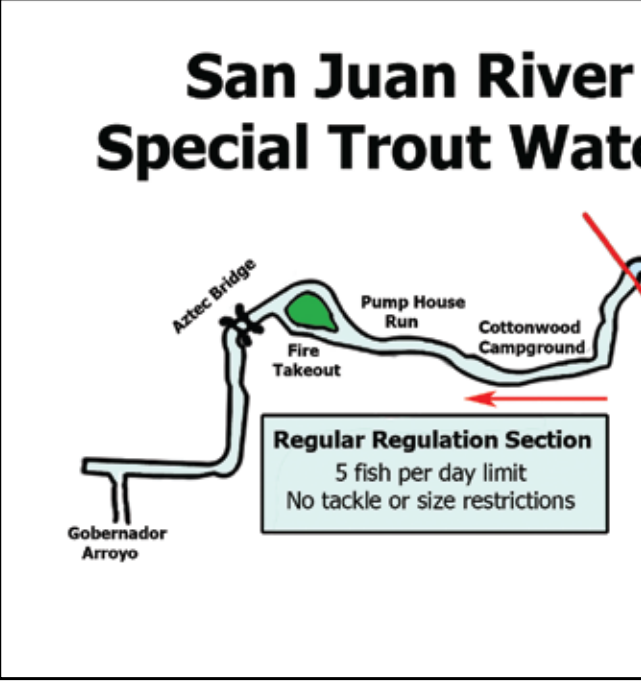
embedded in a trout’s snout.

The largest trout caught was a 24-inch rainbow. The average size was 17 inches from stretches including the Cable Hole and Upper Flats, as well the stretch downstream between Jack’s Hole and ET Rock, Wethington said.

The river’s brown trout are also increasing, with browns accounting for 65 percent of all fish caught during the electroshocking trip from Texas Hole downstream, Wethington said. That stretch also produced the most fish during this year’s expedition -- almost 700 fish-per-hour, Wethington said.

Electroshocking catch rates on the river have steadily increased in recent years, with the Texas Hole giving up the most fish last year, according to data compiled in the Department’s report. And while the data indicated that the river’s trout population is very healthy, it failed to capture the stunning number, sheer size and beauty of San Juan trout seen during electroshocking expeditions.

The survey included fish in the San Juan River’s upper four miles of quality water. Anglers are restricted to catch-and-release in the first quarter mile below Navajo Dam. The remaining quality water mileage is ruled by the same tackle restrictions, with a bag limit of one trout a day, over 20 inches. Anglers are required to stop fishing upon taking a fish.





Photos: Dan Williams

Guided anglers in drift boats, above, compete with wading anglers, below, for space to fish in popular Texas Hole on the San Juan River. The Department of Game and Fish is working with guides and anglers to address overcrowding and water flow below Navajo Dam.

The survey also takes into account three miles of downstream “bait water” where the bag limit is five fish a day with no tackle restrictions.

Information from the electroshocking survey, angler interviews and other data revealed a number of trends. For instance, the popularity of the San Juan River has steadily climbed over the years to the point that angling pressure is three times heavier now than during the mid-1980s, when the river was at its best. The Department has managed the quality section for trophy trout since the early 1970s.

The vast majority of anglers interviewed -- 92 percent -- indicated they were highly satisfied with their fishing experience on the San Juan, with an average catch of one fish per hour. Slightly more than 5 percent said they caught fish exceeding 20 inches in length.

The San Juan is regularly stocked, which accounts for the estimated 70,000 fish in its quality waters. An estimated 60,000 fingerling rainbow trout are planted annually, and many grow to become some of the San Juan’s good-looking, hard-fighting, world-renowned trout. On average, anglers reel in at least one rainbow trout measuring 16 to 18 inches in the quality section, Wethington says.

The San Juan River also supports a healthy population of naturally reproducing brown trout that can be regularly found inhabiting the same waters as rainbows.

Another 46,000 pan-sized rainbow trout are stocked in the lower stretches of the river, where anglers can take their limit. Surveys also show fish over 20 inches are consistently caught in the lower stretches of the river.



Angler survey data shows the river is busiest during late summer and early fall and slowest during the winter. The heaviest pressure is in the upper reaches, at and above Texas Hole, and the least pressure is downstream near the Pump House Run.

Anglers from across the globe are attracted by the river’s thriving population of large trout. Those anglers inject an estimated \$25 million a year into the state’s economy, according to Department estimates. The majority of anglers on the San Juan are from out of state -- about 62 percent. New Mexicans accounted for 38 percent -- 10 percent of them from San Juan County.

The Department report also addresses concerns about the river’s health due to low water flows and silt and sedimentation that some claim is caused by oil and gas development in the area.

The report notes that a United States Geological Survey study of the oil and gas industries’ impact in the area indicates that 87 percent of the silt and sediment accumulating in the river is from naturally occurring runoff. Another study by the New Mexico Environment Department determined that much of the silt and sedimentation in the river below Navajo Dam was naturally occurring and hadn’t negatively affected the river’s insect populations.

Nonetheless, the Department report says continued oil and gas development, combined with lower flows could potentially harm the fishery and emphasizes the Department’s

willingness to work with all stakeholders to minimize those effects.

Water releases from Navajo Dam are controlled by the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, which specifies a minimum flow of 250 cubic feet per second (cfs), and a maximum flow of 5,000 cfs to mimic the natural flood cycle of the river.

The bureau tries to maintain a consistent flow of about 500 cfs throughout the year, but it can fluctuate depending on storage capacity and other conditions. For instance, the federal agency did not make high springtime releases in 2002, 2003 and 2004 due to low storage in Navajo Lake.

The Department of Game and Fish report notes that flows fell below 500 cfs in the years between 2000 and 2007 about 50 percent of the time and below 250 cfs about 5 percent of the time. It also notes that in the years between 1963 and 1999, flows fell below 500 cfs only about 20 percent of the time and below 250 cfs an estimated 2 percent of the time. To see more detailed monthly flow data for the dam go to the United States Geological Services Web site at <http://waterdata.usgs.gov/nm/nwis/monthly/> and select San Juan County.

“We’d all love to see 700 or 800 cfs minimum flows, but the reality is I don’t see that happening,” Wethington said. “The reality is we expect to see even lower flows as water development continues.”

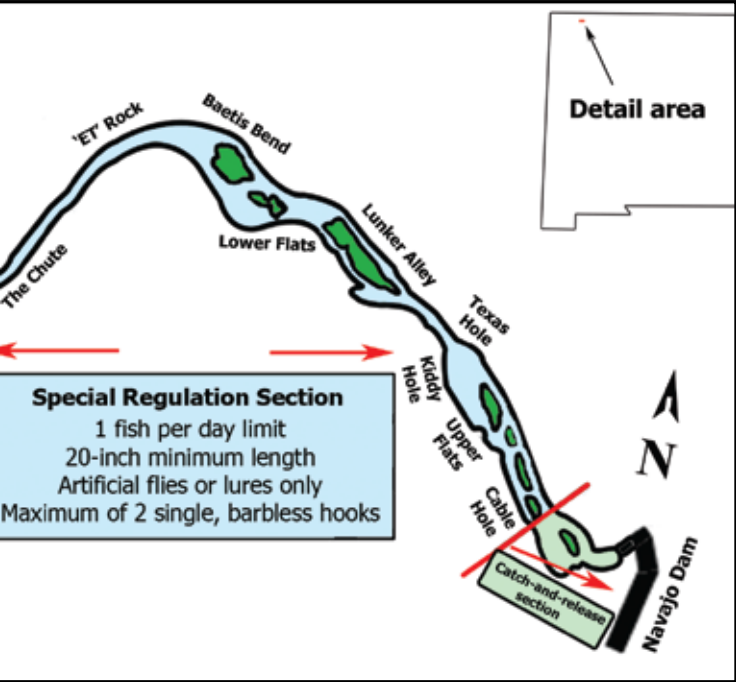
Most water stored in the dam is owned by the Navajo Nation and is expected to be siphoned off in future years to satisfy the growing demand for agricultural, municipal and other developments, he said.

Wethington noted that anglers are enjoying a fishery built on borrowed water and that advocates face an uphill battle in altering the rules governing the dam and its water.

To make the most of available aquatic habitat on the river in times of low flows, the Department of Game and Fish has geared its efforts toward installing in-stream, habitat improvements designed to help transport silt and sediment farther downstream while also providing trout better cover.

The good news is that the San Juan River is the only fishery in the state protected by a minimum flow requirement, and that bodes well for its future, Wethington said.

Karl F. Moffatt of Santa Fe is a veteran, award-winning New Mexico journalist and an avid outdoorsman. Much of his outdoor-writing and photography can be seen on his blog at www.outdoorsnewmexico.com.





Feathers & fun



Red-headed woodpecker

Photo: © Ken Stinnett

State Parks are havens for birds, birders

By Marti Niman
New Mexico State Parks

The stillness explodes in a rush and flutter as a huge creature lifts into the air above, soundless after it is airborne with a slow, singular wing beat. It is obviously a great blue heron, unmistakable with its arched neck and long beak that recalls pterodactyls of old.



Photo: Dan Williams

Great blue heron

Enter the birdwatchers, festooned with scopes and binoculars -- nose-deep in field guides -- to sort out the riffraff of feathered fauna. Many more people are joining their ranks, and some of the best places to begin birding are in New Mexico's state parks.

"Percha Dam and Caballo Lake are good year-round and are easy to get to with parking and camping close to the river so you don't have to go sit in a blind," said David Griffin, president of the Mesilla Valley Audubon Society in Las Cruces. "Percha is probably the best place on the Rio Grande, with more than 70 species such as sparrows, warblers, flycatchers, herons and bald eagles as well as waterfowl."

Ken Stinnett, a member of the Mesilla Valley Audubon Society and a volunteer at the new Mesilla Valley Bosque State Park, said the Rio Grande is probably the number one flyway for birds coming up the land for migration from South America, and a huge flyway dispersal area both east and west of the river. "Pancho Villa, Rockhound and City of Rocks state parks are special in their own right, especially Spring Canyon which is part of Rockhound," Stinnett said. "Spring Canyon is a great birding place that often has water in the canyon and many montane species such as nuthatches, jays, juncos, sage thrashers and pyrrhuloxias."

Stinnett noted that several mountain ranges run parallel to the river and provide a major raptor flyway along the San Andreas Mountains north to the Manzano Mountains, where numerous raptors pass through at higher elevations. Manzano Mountains State Park offers a perch for birders to survey the skies from the comfort of a camper or tent. Down in the valley and in the thick of Albuquerque's urban jungle, Rio Grande Nature Center State Park nests amid the bosque canopy.

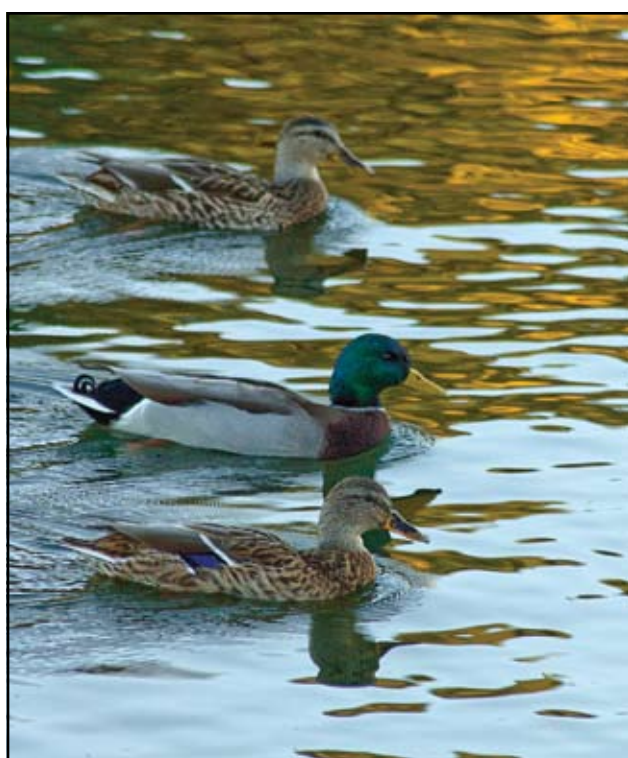


Scissor-tailed flycatcher

Photo: Dan Williams

"The Nature Center has lots of habitats so we're not stuck with just birds in the woods or just waterfowl -- we have it all," said volunteer Sondra Williamson. "We hold bird walks on weekends with a mix of experienced and beginning birders, and we have interesting nesting birds, migrating birds any time of year."

Williamson rattles off a nearly infinite list of birds commonly seen at the Nature Center, including downy woodpeckers, white-breasted nuthatches, chickadees, Bewick's wrens, eastern bluebirds red-tailed and Cooper's hawks. People come from "back east" just to see New Mexico's state bird, the roadrunner, and there are migratory shorebirds such as yellowlegs, snipes and cranes all winter long. Lots of baby mallards and wood ducks appear around the first of April and May. Hummingbird species are dominated by black-chinned but include



Mallards

Photo: Marti Niman

three others: broad-tailed, rufous and the tiny, feisty calliope.

One of the highlights at the Nature Center is an ash-throated flycatcher nest with a camera secreted inside so visitors can watch the female feed her babies on the monitor inside the Discovery Room.

"The nest box is outside the window so you can watch the babies being fed both from the window and inside the nest on the camera," Williamson said.

Rio Grande Nature Center State Park is a haven for visitors and volunteers alike to hone their bird observation skills. It was there that Rob Yaksich, instructional coordinator for State Parks, refined his erudite seminar entitled "Field Guide to Duck Butts."

"I get a mish-mash of birders in my programs that include a lot of beginners and duck butt groupies," said Yaksich. "Many have come to them several times during the last few years and say they learn something new every time."

What they learn is how to identify ducks from the rear -- basically figuring out if it's a wet butt or a dry butt by its profile.

"Looking across a pond, you see a duck back that is flat and parallel to the surface with a tail that sticks up nice and high so you can clearly see it," Yaksich said. "That's a dry butt or a dabbler, a grouping of ducks that feed at or under the water's surface. A little north of the dry butt, another back is clearly arched toward the water and it's hard to see the tail -- that is a wet butt or diver."

Wet butts include the heavy-bodied canvasbacks that can dive 20 to 30 feet under the water, and the fish-eating mergansers or other divers that feed on aquatic invertebrates in soil or plant material, Yaksich said. Divers





Sharp-shinned hawk Photo: Dan Williams

include 23 diverse species that hang out in deeper water and have heavier bodies and faster wing beats, moving swiftly along the surface of the water before becoming airborne. Dry butts, such as such as mallards, pintails and wood ducks, are very buoyant. They can dive, but it takes some exertion. Dabblers eat aquatic insects and macro-invertebrates on a different level than divers, often sifting around in mud.

“An eagle comes along you’ll see the dabblers take off right away and the divers flapping frantically to take off,” Yaksich said. “Divers are fast flyers once they are in the air, up to 70 mph for the canvasbacks.”

Although parks along the Rio Grande offer abundant opportunities to see a wide diversity of birds, birding opportunities are excellent throughout the state.

“Birds are everywhere,” said Siscily Lederman, interpretive ranger at Heron and El Vado Lake state parks near Chama. “They’re there for you; it’s not like you have to sit and wait for 50 minutes to see them.”

Heron Lake hosts the annual Osprey Festival in July, when nesting pairs and chicks are clearly visible from the road and other accessible vantage points. Heron Lake also boasts eagles in winter, waterfowl and pelicans in early spring.

“They’ve been staying longer and there’s a possibility of them establishing a nesting colony, although we haven’t confirmed that,” Lederman



Bald eagle Photo: Marti Niman

said. “During migration we get some loons and lot of western grebes. There’s a big nesting area on the Jicarilla Reservation near here and they are here in good numbers for a good part of the year.”

Santa Rosa Lake State Park sits squarely in the eastern plains of New Mexico on the Pecos River watershed.

“No matter where you go you’re likely to see canyon towhees, ravens, house finches, western scrub jays, mockingbirds, sage thrashers, indigo buntings, western and mountain bluebirds, white crowned sparrows, American and lesser goldfinches, pine siskins, western and Cassin’s kingbirds and Say’s phoebes,” park volunteer Robert Weston said. “On the lake, there are pelicans in flight, cormorants and belted kingfishers.”

Many birders get their start with what Williamson calls a “light bulb moment” – an encounter with a wild feathered thing that forever alters the way the person looks at the world.

“I grew up in Kansas and went to church camp



Broad-tailed hummingbird Photo: Marti Niman

where one of the leaders was a birder,” she said. “It was instant; I came home, got a pair of binoculars at the second-hand store, a bird book and never looked back, just up!”

Griffin said he got started as a kid in Ohio, looking at hawks and falcons. One day a scarlet tanager caught his eye with its brilliant scarlet and black coloring and got him hooked.

Yaksich recalled that his mom sent him out of the house one day when he was aggravating her, so he headed for the nearby golf course in Raton.

“I saw this spectacular black and white duck, so I went back every day for four days until it was gone,” he said. “I went to the library, got a field guide and found out it was a bufflehead.”

Sending kids out of the house may seem an invitation to trouble, but with the right guidance it can launch a lifelong career or passion in young people that could change their lives.

“We have mentored lots of young people and several are continuing their studies,” Williamson said. “One who got started here is going to Stanford to be an ecologist. These kids are good friends with older birders. Most young people stay with their peers but that’s not true of these kids; the interest is what counts and we’ve really influenced a lot of kids.”

Williamson seems to have a magic touch with

young people. Her 17-year-old grandson is involved in a rosy-finch project in the Cibola National Forest and plans to be an ornithologist – no ifs and or buts, she adds.

Many bird-watchers develop favorite species that are not necessarily exotic or spectacular birds; rather there is something in their behavior that birders find compelling. Yaksich favors ravens and jays because of their intelligence and quirky, bold behavior. Mockingbirds, with their beautiful song are a magnet for Weston because they are fighters he has seen chase off cats. Williamson picks no favorites but enjoys them all, learning patience and how to be observant from birds themselves.

Although he is not a hunter, Yaksich subscribes to another aesthetic – one that helps support habitat for all kinds of wild creatures.

“I buy duck stamps every year, and for non-hunters it’s a wonderful way to support waterfowl habitat,” he said. “It’s a competition that can make a wildlife artist’s career and 98 percent of the proceeds goes to conservation. I support duck hunters, without them there would be no refuges.”

Birders recommend getting a good pair of binoculars with a power of 7 x 35 or 7 x 42 and a good field guide, and then connecting with a local Audubon chapter. Many chapters have birding “academies” and novice birders can participate in activities and are not required to be members.

“A novice birder is an extra pair of eyes on a bird count,” Stinnett said. “They will often see something an experienced birder doesn’t notice. They have good detection skills and see the color of the bill, its shape, size, how it moves.”

State Parks offers a number of bird-focused special events, such as the Nature Center’s Winter Bird and Bat Festival, Percha Dam’s Migration Sensation and the Osprey Fest at Heron Lake (See Page 13 for a partial schedule of events). Whether novice or expert, New Mexico’s parks offer unique and diverse habitats that allow birders to immerse themselves in the magic and mystery of birds.

Marti Niman is the public information officer for the New Mexico State Parks Division. She can be contacted in Santa Fe at (505) 827-1474 or marti.niman@state.nm.us.



White pelicans Photo: © Ken Stinnett





Partnerships aid habitat projects

Selden Canyon land purchase protects fragile riparian forest

By Marti Niman
New Mexico State Parks

New Mexico State Parks, The Trust for Public Land, and the World Wildlife Fund announced in January 2009 the permanent protection of 783 acres of land along a critical stretch of the Rio Grande in Selden Canyon. The property, part of the Broad Canyon Ranch, is 15 miles north of the city of Las Cruces and contains two of New Mexico's most rare and threatened habitats: wetlands and riparian forest.

The land acquisition includes a 30-acre wetland known as Swan Pond and approximately one mile of riparian forest along the Rio Grande. The property also has access to grazing leases on an additional 4,830 acres of Chihuahuan Desert grasslands owned by the Bureau of Land Management and the New Mexico State Land Office, which will be leased and managed for wildlife habitat and recreation by State Parks. The Selden Canyon property also will be astride the route of the Rio Grande Trail, a proposed multi-use trail along the river through New Mexico.

"The dedicated support and cooperation of Gov. Bill Richardson and the Legislature, nonprofit groups, federal agencies and private landowners have made it possible to preserve and link critical riparian habitat for both wildlife and outdoor recreation," said Joanna Prukop, Energy, Minerals and Natural Resources cabinet secretary.

The new property will advance State Parks' long-range vision to establish more conservation reserves along the lower Rio Grande for river ecosystem restoration, education and recreation



Photo: Marti Niman

A stretch of land in Selden Canyon north of Las Cruces is one of the last remaining riparian forests along the Rio Grande in southern New Mexico. A recent land purchase by New Mexico State Parks, The Trust for Public Land and the World Wildlife Fund will help preserve the habitat for wildlife and recreation.

opportunities and improved river access. The property will be another important link along this stretch of the river owned by State Parks that currently includes Elephant Butte Lake, Caballo Lake, Percha Dam and Leasburg Dam state parks, and the new Mesilla Valley Bosque State Park.

Conservation of Broad Canyon Ranch also will contribute to landscape-level protection efforts along the 11-mile Selden Canyon on the Rio Grande. The ranch connects public federal lands in the Sierra de Las Uvas and Robledo Mountains with the Rio Grande and the large Chihuahuan Desert Rangeland Research Center ranch owned by New Mexico State University, which provides connections to the Dona Ana Mountains, the Jornada Experimental Range, and the San Andres National Wildlife Refuge.

The national land conservation organization The Trust for Public Land acquired the ranch in November 2008 and conveyed it to State Parks. The Trust for Public Land worked with the landowners, ranchers Joe and Karen Gray, on the purchase during much of the past year as part of TPL's Rio Grande Protection Program. The Grays had owned the property since the 1960s.

"We are very pleased to have helped protect this important ranch for future generations of New Mexico and to have been a part of a successful coalition that included State Parks and many, many partners," said Jenny Parks, Trust for Public Land state director. "The protection of Broad Canyon Ranch was possible only by putting together a creative combination of state, federal and private funds."

The lower Rio Grande is a key ecological corridor for the northern Chihuahuan Desert, one of the world's most biologically significant deserts. It is a priority area for the conservation efforts of the World Wildlife Fund, which has been working with partners Elephant Butte Irrigation District and the U.S. International Boundary and Water Commission on a large restoration initiative known as the Rio Grande Canalization Collaborative Project.

The partners hope to better integrate flood control, irrigation deliveries and habitat conservation restoration along a 105-mile reach of the river from Caballo Reservoir to American Dam, Texas, including Selden Canyon.

"Selden Canyon is a focus area for the World Wildlife Fund because it provides a wonderful mosaic of native river habitat including wetlands, meadows and riparian forest," said Beth Bardwell, manager of the group's Las Cruces Chihuahuan Desert Program office. "It also has its share of exotic vegetation like salt cedar which we hope to remove. Broad Canyon Ranch will provide great opportunities for recreationists as well as multiple benefits for wildlife."

The total purchase price of the acquisition was \$1.65 million. Key components of the funding included: \$400,000 from the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation and The Nature Conservancy; and \$1.25 million through New Mexico State Parks that was a combination of state and federal funds, including \$500,000 from the State of New Mexico's Land and Wildlife Program.

The federal funds came through the Land and Water Conservation Fund, which has been supported by the New Mexico congressional delegation, including U.S. Sen. Jeff Bingaman. Additional funding came from capital outlay appropriations provided by State Sen. Mary Jane Garcia (D-Doña Ana) and State Rep. Jeff Steinborn (D-Doña Ana).

Bottomless Lakes wetlands restoration work under way

New Mexico State Parks and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers have started construction on the first phase of a \$2 million, 40-acre wetland restoration project at Bottomless Lakes State Park. The project will revitalize a previously degraded wetland in the park, prevent flooding of historic structures and facilitate spring flow from Lea Lake to the restored wetland and the adjacent Pecos River.

"This is a fantastic partnership project that will dramatically improve the park and the lower Pecos River, and be a new community asset for the Roswell area," State Parks Director Dave Simon said.

"The Corps is extremely pleased to participate with the state in restoring over 40 acres of wetland habitat in New Mexico," said Patricia Phillips, project manager with the Corps.

The primary impetus for the project is to improve ecosystem health, diversifying wetlands hydrology by

removing salt cedar and other invasive species, creating additional open water areas and planting native wetland species such as baccharis – shrubs commonly called brooms – salt grass and bull rush.

The project also will prevent flooding of historic structures such as the Lea Lake pavilion and tower which were constructed by the Civilian Conservation Corps in the 1930s. Significantly increased flow into Lea Lake from subsurface artesian springs has caused flooding in the park over the past several years, creating both the need and the opportunity for this multi-faceted project.

"This project will create exciting new recreational activities at the park such as bird watching and wildlife viewing," Park Manager Steve Patterson said. "It also will serve area schools as an outdoor classroom for science-based learning activities."

The aquatic ecosystem enhancement

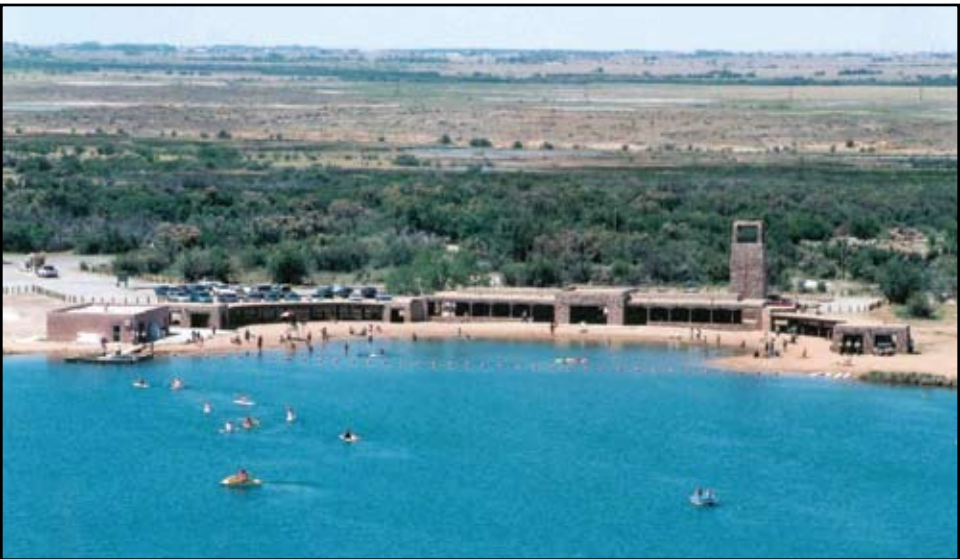


Photo: Dan Williams

Restoring 40 acres of wetlands will help protect historic buildings at Bottomless Lakes State Park from flooding.

will benefit numerous plant and animal species, including the endangered Pecos sunflower and Pecos pupfish, as well as numerous dragonflies, birds and other wildlife. Interpretive facilities also are planned in the second phase of the project, including a loop trail with wildlife viewing blinds, a boardwalk and a parking area.

Funding for the project is through a federal-state cost sharing program with 65 percent federal and 35 percent state funding sources. Construction of the first phase is expected to be completed in fall 2009. The project contractor is Gardiola Construction of Ruidoso, selected by the Corps of Engineers in a competitive bidding process.





Sensational season

State Parks 'signature' events 2009

From children's fishing clinics and nature walks to herb festivals, concerts and even a motorcycle parade, there's an event for almost everyone at a New Mexico state park in 2009. Here are some of the parks special 'signature' events:

April 18 – Rockhound Desert Alive: Native plant walks, silent auction, unusual arthropods and butterfly walk.

April 25 – Storrie Lake Kite Festival: Native storytelling, live raptors, kite constructing exhibit and school presentations.

May 2 – Brantley Lake Fishing Clinic.

May 2-3 – Leasburg Dam Challenge: Families and campers sharpen their archery and bow hunting skills with targets on groomed trails and open meadows.

May 7-10 – Living Desert Zoo and Gardens Annual Mescal Roast: Mescalero Apache interpretive and ceremonial event with mescal pit blessing, Native American arts and crafts show, interpretive round table, Apache feast, war dances and Dance of the Mountain Spirits. The event concludes with the mescal pit opening and tasting ceremony.

May 9 – Cimarron Canyon Annual Children's Fishing Derby.

May 9 – Rio Grande Nature Center Herb Festival: Herbs and native plants of the bosque are featured with programs on water-wise and wildlife-friendly gardening, speakers, slide shows, guided bird and nature walks, plant sales, live raptors, kids crafts and bird identification.

May 16 – Navajo Lake CAST (Catch a Special Thrill): A day of fishing on the lake for disadvantaged and disabled kids, who will receive tackle, T-shirts, awards and a free barbecue.

May 22-24 – Rockhound Third Annual Bluegrass Concert: Five bluegrass bands live on stage.



★ New Mexico State Parks

May 25 – Vietnam Veterans Memorial Day Celebration: Honor those who have died in our nation's service with ceremonies, songs and Ride for the Wall motorcycle parade.

May 30 – Oasis Lake Old Tyme Music Festival: The Triple L Band of Portales performs bluegrass music.

June 5 – Coyote Creek/Morphy Lake Kids Fishing Clinic with the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish.

June 6-7 – Clayton Lake Trout Derby: Cash prizes offered for the largest fish in children's and adult categories; door prizes, hot dog eating contest, horseshoe tournament and sand digs.

June 13 – Ute Lake Stars on the Water: Outdoor concert on the lake featuring well-known country-western singer Steve Cochran.

June 20 – Santa Rosa Lake Kid's Fishing Clinic: Learn the basics of fishing, including knot tying, how to cast, bait selection and aquatic education for kids and adults.

June 27 – Sugarite Canyon Butterfly Festival: Join butterfly expert Steve Cary to learn the art of stalking these amazing creatures during the annual butterfly count, and enjoy a ranger program on the incredible journey of monarch butterflies, pollinator secrets, native plant butterfly gardening and butterfly face-painting.

July 4 – Conchas Lake Fireworks on the Water.

July 12 – Hyde Memorial Corvette Show: Old Santa Fe Trail Corvettes Club takes a run up to Hyde Park Lodge with more than 150 classic and new Corvette cars.

July 10-12 – Heron Lake Osprey Festival: See these magnificent raptors up close and personal. This event raises awareness about preserving natural habitat for birds and other wildlife while offering boat rides, live raptors, a fabulous feast and more.

July 18 – Sumner Lake Youth Daze: Paddleboard races, egg toss, relay races, fish painting, cookout and

interpretive programs for young people.

Sept. 5-7 – Bottomless Lakes Bubble Fest: Designed for scuba divers and their families, events include a dive poker contest, underwater games, snorkeling, swimming, beach volleyball, nature hikes, ranger talks and more. Reservations for camping are recommended.

Sept. 19-27 – Eagle Nest 16th Annual Eagle Nest Fish Fest.

Sept. 24-27 – City of Rocks Fall Star Party.

Aug. 8 – Rio Grande Nature Center Summer Wings: Hummingbirds, dragonflies and other winged creatures of the bosque are featured in this full-day event. Speakers, slide shows, guided bird and nature walks, live raptors and hummingbirds, kid's crafts, bird identification and demonstrations.

Aug. 22-23 – Oliver Lee Memorial Dog Days of Summer: Native plants, constellations and planets are featured.

Sept 12 -13 – Elephant Butte Lake Balloon Regatta.

Sept. 26 – Fenton Lake National Hunting and Fishing Day with the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish: Archery clinics, fishing clinics, aquatic education and more.

Oct. 2 – Caballo Lake/Percha Dam Migration Sensation: Birding, raptors, falcons and more are featured in this park on the Rio Grande corridor and flyway, recognized as an Important Bird Area by the Audubon Society.

Dec. 19 – Sugarite Canyon State Park Christmas on the Chicarica: Annual tradition includes more than 2,000 farolitos lighting the River Walk Trail, a visit by Santa and music, hot chocolate, red chile and a telescope.

Dec. 19 – Villanueva Las Luces de Villanueva: Walk along a pathway lined with farolitos and visit campground shelters decorated for Christmas while enjoying hot chocolate and cookies.

All events are subject to change or cancellation. Please call the park, 1-888-NMPARKS (667-2757) or visit www.nmparks.com for current information.





“On another day there easily could have been another couple hundred antelope in the same area.”

A helicopter was used to herd antelope into a customized wing trap, where crew members then fell in behind and pushed the animals into a corral lined with tarps and nets.



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chased by a helicopter, herded into a trap, manhandled, poked, prodded, clipped, collared, tranquilized and trailered. A journey that began on the flat prairie grasslands of northeastern New Mexico ended 200 miles away in the rolling hills of Santa Ana Pueblo.

“They’re tough little boogers,” said Darrel Weybright, big-game project manager for the Department of Game and Fish. He and Department Pilot Tom Sansom coordinated the Feb. 28-March 2 operation in which 152 antelope were captured and relocated to Santa Ana and three wildlife areas in Coahuila, Mexico. “We were especially happy to hear they all made it to Santa Ana,” Weybright said.

Despite the stressful capture and unfamiliar environment, the Santa Ana pronghorns couldn’t have landed among a more appreciative crowd. The native animals became the first of their kind to reside on the pueblo in more than 40 years.

“The pueblo is excited about this,” said Glenn Harper, Range and Wildlife Division manager for the pueblo. “Antelope are a very important component of pueblo spirituality. They are revered through dances and prayer.” He said antelope populations that historically inhabited pueblo lands had gradually vanished as highways and development of Rio Rancho fragmented suitable habitat.

The pueblo had hoped to transplant 60 pronghorns onto their land west of Bernalillo, half in the low country along the river, the other half atop the mesa. Harper said he hopes the Department will try again next year to complete the effort that was two years in the making. A \$200,000 federal Tribal Wildlife Grant allowed the pueblo to undertake special habitat projects and put about \$10,000 into the trap operation costs.

“This was a good pilot for us,” Harper said. “Now it’s going to be a management challenge. These animals are going to have to adapt to rolling terrain to be successful,

so it’s going to be interesting. The only thing predictable about restorations is that they’re unpredictable.”

Weybright said that as unpredictable as trapping and transplanting wild animals can be, the pronghorn operation went fairly smoothly. Only seven antelope died while they were being captured and transported to Santa Ana and Mexico -- far below mortality rates experienced in earlier operations.

“Anything less than 5 percent is excellent,” said Kerry Mower, the Department’s wildlife health specialist. He said stress and injury can cause mortality rates as high as 10 percent before the animals are released. After that, they can suffer capture myopathy, a disease of the muscle tissue caused by very hard exertion for long periods.

Mower and three veterinarians were on hand during the capture to help the antelope survive their journey. Before they were loaded in trailers, each antelope had its horns clipped for safety and was given shots to fend off parasites and pneumonia. They also received vitamin supplements, ear tags and a tranquilizer for the road. Some were fitted with radio collars so they could be tracked in their new habitats.

Wildlife ranches in Mexico paid approximately \$40,000 or their share of the estimated \$70,000 project. Santa Ana Pueblo paid \$10,000 and the Department of Game and Fish covered the remainder in employee salaries and equipment. In exchange, Mexico agreed to send 10 desert bighorn rams to supplement the gene pool at the Red Rock Wildlife Area near Lordsburg.

Weybright said he hoped to capture and move almost 500 antelope -- 300 to Mexico, 60 to Santa Ana, and at least 100 to release sites in New Mexico. Mexico ended up with two ranches getting 45 antelope each, and another ranch getting 35. Three animals died in Mexico after they crossed the border.

“We were a little disappointed that we
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Pronghorn antelope prefer not to jump over fences and other obstacles, but when pressed, they can jump quite high. Above, trapped pronghorns attempt to jump over an 8-foot-high, tarp-covered fence.



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weren't able to capture as many animals as we wanted, but these traps are so unpredictable," Weybright said. "We had an excellent crew, the weather was good and we captured pretty much everything that was available to us those days. On another day there easily could have been another couple hundred pronghorn in the same area."

If all goes well, he said the Department will try again next winter.

"We already have some ideas about improving the trap," Weybright said. "We get better at this every time we do it."

This year's trapping operation was the Department's first in about 11 years. Before that, traps were fairly common as the agency continued its efforts to relocate antelope and build the statewide population. Using an improved version of a wing trap invented in 1937 by Department wildlife biologist T. Paul Russell, the agency gradually brought pronghorn antelope from a low of 1,740 reported by Aldo Leopold in 1916 to around 35,000 to 40,000 today.

This year, Rosebud Land and Cattle rancher Don Walker saw first-hand how the trap worked on his 3,520-acres, where as many as 400 antelope a day were visiting his irrigated fields of alfalfa, wheat and grass in recent winters. He said he likes seeing antelope on his property, but he welcomed the Department moving some of them elsewhere.

"I guess I griped about them long enough," he said.

There are approximately 1,500 antelope in the Rosebud-area herd of northeastern New Mexico herd that spends time on property owned by Walker and his neighbors. Some landowners would like to see the herd trimmed to lessen the animals' impact on agricultural crops. Others enjoy having larger herds for more hunting opportunities. All the landowners receive hunting authorizations each year, which they can give away or sell, sometimes for substantial profits.



In memoriam
Mark Olson, Northwest Area Habitat Specialist with the Department of Game and Fish, helped trap 27 antelope and release them Feb. 28 at Santa Ana Pueblo. Olson, 46, died suddenly at his home in Edgewood on March 5. He is survived by his wife, Kristy, and daughters Kaitlyn, 15, and Amanda, 11.



Captured pronghorns were held with their hooves off the ground as they received ear tags, radio collars, and inoculations to ward off pneumonia and parasites. At left, a pronghorn buck surveys its new range on Santa Ana Pueblo, and a view of the Sandia Mountains.

Walker said he's never put a dollar figure on how much wheat and alfalfa the antelope eat every fall. "But I think everyone could see I had a problem, especially during the drought," he said. "When everything else is brown, we have something green -- and that really brings them in."

By March 2, there were 152 fewer antelope on Walker's property, thanks to trapping methods honed over the years by hundreds of Department personnel.

"It's a very delicate operation, and each time, we try to make it a little better," said pilot Sansom, who has helped trap more than 2,300 antelope over the years in dozens of trapping operations.

The wing trap is a simple V-shaped design, with fences set up along traditional antelope routes. Crews set up the trap days in advance, pounding posts and lining wire and netting with 8-foot tarps so the trapped animals can't see out or easily escape as they are driven into a small corral, first by a helicopter, then by a line of crew members who fall in behind and block the

gaps. As the animals approach the corral, a hidden gate is quickly closed behind them before they realize they are in a trap.

Once they are in a the corral, the antelope are allowed to settle down a bit before they are forced into a padded, darkened chute called the "grinder," where two crew members catch and carry the animal to waiting veterinarians. To help keep them calm once they are caught, the animals' hooves are not allowed to touch the ground until they are released into the trailers.

The entire capture operation for the Santa Ana herd was completed within a few hours.

"To me, it was quite amazing that we were able to do all that, and they were able to open the trailer at Santa Ana and watch all the animals get out," Mower said.

And what about little pronghorn No. 10?

"She's still with us," Harper said. "I've seen her a couple times and she still seems kind of lethargic. She doesn't seem to get excited about anything, but we're hoping maybe that's just her personality."



Pronghorn antelope No. 10, a yearling doe, appeared dazed when it first set foot in its new home on Santa Ana Pueblo.





Spring into fishing fun

By Colleen Welch

Spring is “gone fishing” time, the season to enjoy more daylight and the season when the watery homes of fish become warmer in our southern lakes. The higher mountain streams, home to native trout, are cold with chilling snowmelt rushing over boulders. As you plan your fishing adventures, think about some important basics of fishing.

As you imagine the fish you will catch, remember to check your tackle boxes for fresh bait, fishing line, hooks and non-lead weights called splitshot that you can reuse. Even though this is a lot to remember and pack, the most important thing is to plan for safety.

Being safe is all about wearing life jackets and fishing with other people. You might think that life jackets are just to wear on boats, but it is safest to also wear a life jacket while fishing from the shore. Rain or snowmelt can create deep and fast flowing water along with slippery stream banks.

Planning where to fish and figuring out where different kinds of fish live will help you be successful in making that tasty catch for dinner. New Mexico has community and children’s fishing waters such as Aztec Pond near Farmington, city lakes such as Tingley Beach in Albuquerque, and Shuree and Cowles children-only ponds in mountain areas. If you have a boat, you may want to visit large reservoirs, such as Heron and Elephant Butte lakes.

As spring approaches, you might dream about that big catch. Here are some lakes in New Mexico where people have caught record-size fish:

- **Biggest largemouth bass:** Bill Evans Lake.
- **Biggest trout:** Santa Cruz Lake.
- **Biggest walleye:** Clayton Lake.
- **Biggest catfish:** Elephant Butte Lake.

It is helpful to know different types of fish, where to catch them and the state fishing laws. For example, some laws state how many fish you can keep. Other rules tell you where you can catch fish but must release them back into the water. You can find the “New Mexico Fishing Rules & Information” booklet in some stores, at the Game and Fish offices or at this Web site: www.wildlife.state.nm.us. This booklet also has color pictures of warmwater and cold-water fish in New Mexico.

It’s fun to catch fish. If you are fishing from a dock, you often see the fish below and you do not have to cast. Just drop your baited hook into the water and wait for that tug on your line. When you fish along mountain streams or along the edges of



Photo: Dan Williams

Blue Hole Park Pond in Santa Rosa is regularly stocked with fish -- just for kids.

large lakes, you will need to cast your line out into the water. Sometimes it helps to practice casting with an adult helper or a friend who knows how to cast.

Remember to plan ahead. Check out these two kid-friendly Web sites to help you plan your fantastic fishing trip:

www.boatingsidekicks.com and www.WaterWorksWonders.org.

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.

WHERE'S THE FISH?

Sally and her dad are fishing Big Catch Lake. The only “catch” about catching a big “catch” on Big Catch Lake is finding where the fish are to be caught. Even though you can’t see the fish, you can tell where they might be hiding by what is poking out of the water. It also helps if you have some knowledge about the bottom of the lake. While fish in lakes, such as largemouth bass, muskellunge, pickerel, crappies and bluegills, move to different water depths at different times of the year and different times of the day, most seek out structure. Structure is anything that is different from the smooth bottom of a lake, pond, river or stream. Submerged stumps, rocks, trees, weeds, log banks, brush piles and drop-offs as well as manmade structures, such as boat docks, are all structure. Fish are attracted to these spots for a number of reasons. Structure gives a predator fish (like a pike) a place to strike, and it gives its prey (like a bluegill) a place to hide. Structure gives fish a shady place to stay on a sunny day. Structure gives you the target for your cast.

FISH KEY

FISH KEY	HOW MANY?
PUMPKINSEED	<input type="text"/>
WHITE CRAPPIE	<input type="text"/>
BLUEGILL	<input type="text"/>
LARGEMOUTH BASS	<input type="text"/>
NORTHERN PIKE	<input type="text"/>
MUSKELLUNGE	<input type="text"/>
BULLHEAD CATFISH	<input type="text"/>
CARP	<input type="text"/>

FIND THE FISH

Help Sally find all of the fish in Big Catch Lake. Find out how many of each kind of fish are in the lake. Some are easy to find, and others are playing “hide and seek.” Use the fish’s shape or color from the “fish key” to find and list how many you see.

www.BoatingSidekicks.com

