

New Mexico's Wilderness Areas

THE COMPLETE GUIDE

TEXT BY
BOB JULYAN

PHOTOGRAPHY BY
TOM TILL

Latir Peak Wilderness

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Latir Peak Wilderness

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Relatively unknown and untraveled, the Latir Peak Wilderness is classic southern Rocky Mountain high country—emerald meadows; alpine grasslands and tundra; small, clear lakes; spruce-fir forest; and some of New Mexico's highest peaks.



Heart Lake in dawn light

| | |
|-------------------------|--|
| LOCATION | In the Sangre de Cristo Mountains, northeast of Questa |
| SIZE | 20,506 acres |
| ELEVATION RANGE | 8,400 to 12,734 feet at Venado Peak |
| MILES OF TRAILS | 24 |
| ECOSYSTEMS | Spruce-fir, bristlecone pine, aspen, alpine tundra, and high-altitude grassland |
| ADMINISTRATION | Carson National Forest |
| TOPOGRAPHIC MAPS | Carson National Forest — Latir Peak and Wheeler Peak Wildernesses; Cerro, Questa, and Red River USGS 7.5-minute quadrangles |
| BEST SEASONS | Summer, early fall |
| GETTING THERE | Most people reach the Latir Peak Wilderness from the village of Questa by taking Highway 38 east briefly before taking Highway 563 northeast to packed dirt Forest Road 134, which parallels the wilderness's southern boundary. |
| HIKING | Several maintained and marked trails take hikers through the wilderness, with the sections above timberline especially appealing. |

FROM LATIR PEAK'S ROUNDED SUMMIT, look north and you can see, hazy in the distance, the jagged fang of Colorado's 14,317-foot Blanca Peak; the view to the south reveals 13,161-foot Wheeler Peak, New Mexico's highest mountain. In the company of southern Rocky Mountain giants such as these, the grassy 12,000-foot mountains of the Latir Peak Wilderness might seem easy to overlook. Indeed, many people do, for this, the fifth-smallest New Mexico wilderness, attracts few visitors. Yet four of the state's 20 highest mountains—Venado Peak (12,734 feet), Latir Peak (12,708), Latir Mesa (12,692), and Virsylvia Peak (12,594)—are here.

The relatively small size of the Latir Peak Wilderness area has less to do with natural history than human history. Although the wilderness stretches almost seamlessly from Highway 38 in Red River Canyon north to the Colorado border, more than half this wildland is within the Sangre de Cristo Land Grant—over a million acres given in 1843 to Mexican citizens Narciso Beaubien and Stephen Louis Lee by the Mexican governor Manuel Armijo. This grant was among several northern New Mexico land grants that survived the somewhat turbulent transition from Mexican to American governance after 1848.

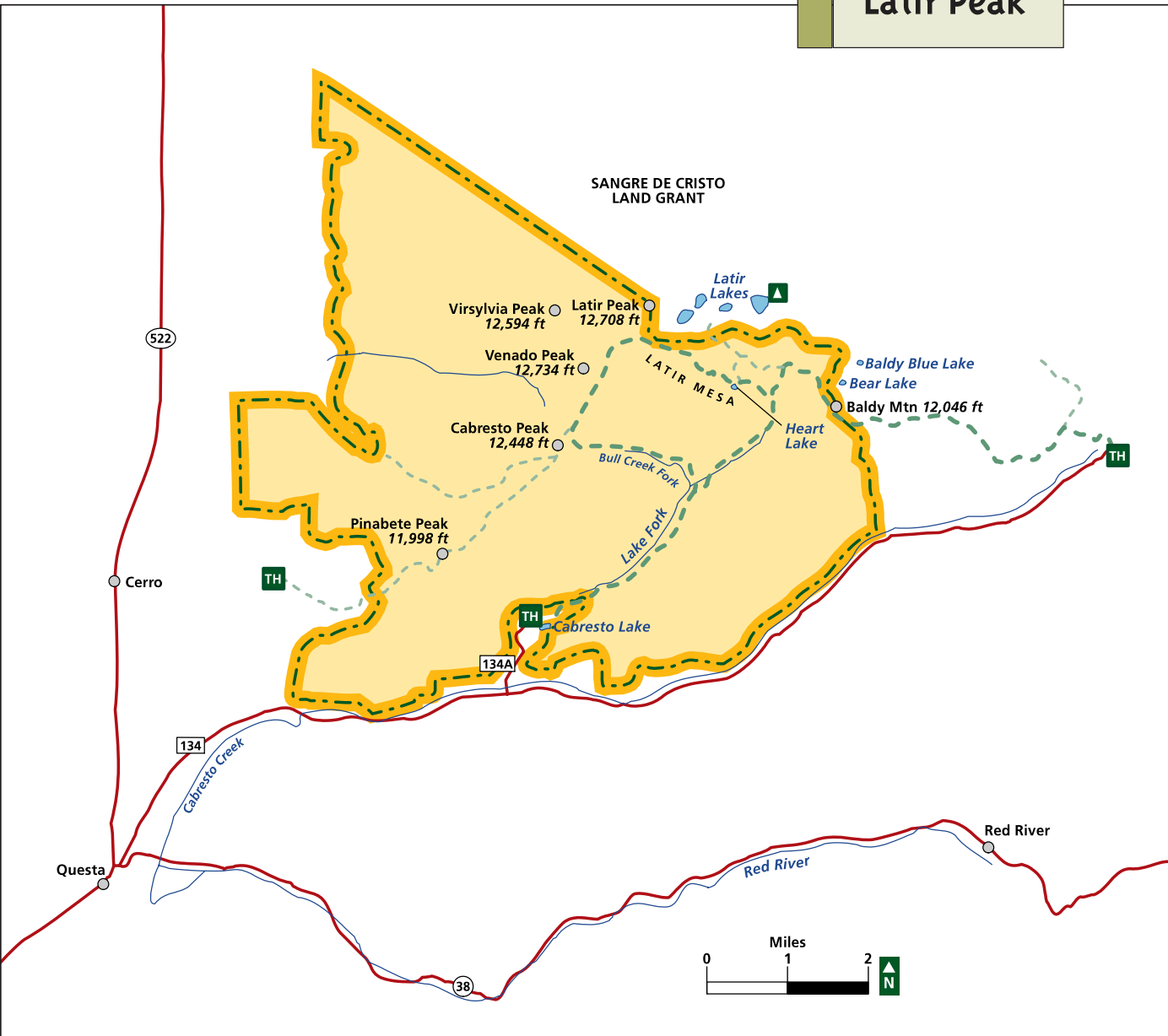
Of the other land grants in place at the time, most were later sold, dispersed, or eventually absorbed into the national forest system. Among the northern New Mexico Hispanic descendants of these land grant owners, feelings of betrayal and disenfranchisement persist, and Hispanic activists continue to press for the land-grant issue to be reopened by Congress and the courts. Whether this could affect the Latir Peak Wilderness, designated in 1980, is unknown, but at this time it's unlikely that the wilderness will be expanded northward. These northern lands are currently controlled by the Rio Costilla Co-op Livestock Associates (P.O. Box 111, Costilla, NM 87524; (505) 586-0542.) The association issues permits either at its office in Costilla or the self-service station at the park entrance in Amalia. Permits are not issued to enter its lands from the south because of difficulty controlling access.

The area's Hispanic presence is further revealed by the Spanish names in the wilderness: Venado, "deer"; Cabresto, "halter"; Pinabete, "spruce"; and Jaracito, "little willow." And Latir: while this name has been reported to be a French surname, more likely it's related to the Spanish verb, *latir*, meaning "to howl or bark," perhaps referring to wolf or coyote calls.

Although the wilderness has long been devoid of wolves, it remains rich wildlife habitat. As you hike above timberline, you quickly realize the trails here are trod less by humans than by elk; in the meadows below you're likely to see them grazing. Ptarmigan, marmots, and pikas live in the rocks at and above timberline. Black bears and mountain lions also live here, and boreal owls were recently discovered in the area.

Most hikers enter the wilderness from the southwest. From the village of Questa, take Highway 38 east a short distance. Then branch northeast on Highway 563, which is paved until it reaches the Carson National Forest boundary and becomes packed dirt at Forest Road 134. After 3.4 miles, Forest Road 134A branches left, climbing steeply two miles to Cabresto Lake. You'll need a high-clearance vehicle for 134A. At Cabresto Lake, the Lake Fork Trail, Number 82, traverses the lake's north side before entering the canyon to parallel the Lake Fork of Cabresto Creek. After

Latir Peak



three miles, the trail meets Bull Creek and the Bull Creek Trail, Number 85. The main trail continues another 1.6 miles to scenic Heart Lake, the destination for most hikers.

Also from the southwest, a gravel road heads east from the village of Cerro to the head of Trail 167. This climbs steeply as it enters the wilderness before it runs along the ridge over 11,948-foot Pinabete Peak. The trail reaches the junction with the Bull Creek Trail after about 4.5 miles, just east of Cabresto Peak. Just west of Cabresto Peak, Trail 167 is joined from the northwest by the 2.5-mile trail that enters the wilderness via Rito Primero (“first creek”).

The wilderness can be entered from the east via Baldy Mountain Trail, Number 81. To reach the trailhead, continue on Forest Road 134 approximately 12 miles past the forest’s western boundary. After about 5.5 miles, the Baldy Mountain Trail joins the Lake Fork Trail just below Heart Lake.

From the north, you can enter the wilderness through the Sangre de Cristo Grant, but a permit is required from the Rio Costilla Co-op Livestock Association.

The canyons in the Latir Peak Wilderness are steep, narrow, and densely forested. The streams likewise are narrow and overhung with brush and tree limbs, making them difficult to fish—one reason the native Rio Grande cutthroat trout have survived here. The lakes, too, are small; many have no fish because of winterkill. Thus, most hikers are drawn primarily to the exhilarating expanses above timberline. From a base camp at Heart Lake, located near timberline, hikers can reach several of the wilderness's 12,000-foot summits in a day. None pose any technical difficulties; although, like elsewhere in the southern Rocky Mountains, the areas above timberline are exposed to sudden afternoon thundershowers and lightning during July and August.

Relatively few hikers explore the Latir Peak Wilderness; most head either into Colorado or to the higher, more readily accessible summits of the Wheeler Peak Wilderness to the south. But the clear consensus among hikers who have been here is that the Latir Peak region is one of New Mexico's wilderness jewels.

DAY HIKE: HEART LAKE

One-way length: 5 miles

Low and high elevations: 9,100 and 11,600 feet

Difficulty: moderate

This is the most popular hike in the Latir Peak Wilderness, and deservedly so. The journey is not only pleasant but also spectacular. Heart Lake is a lovely manmade lake surrounded by high peaks, making it a perfect base camp from which to climb and explore surrounding peaks. From Cabresto Lake, the Lake Fork Trail, Number 82, traverses around the lake's north side before entering the canyon to parallel the Lake Fork of Cabresto Creek. After three miles, the trail meets Bull Creek and the Bull Creek Trail, Number 85. The main trail continues another 1.6 miles to Heart Lake. At the lake's southwest side, a marked trail begins ascending around the lake and then switchbacks up the hillside to come out atop Latir Mesa. From here the trail is often obscure, but the route is marked by cairns and posts.

**LOOP HIKE: CABRESTO LAKE – HEART LAKE – LATIR PEAK –
VENADO PEAK – CABRESTO PEAK – BULL CREEK**

Round-trip length: 14 miles

Low and high elevations: 9,100 and 12,734 feet at Venado Peak

Difficulty: strenuous

Distance and elevation are what make this hike strenuous, as most slopes are fairly gentle. Venado and Cabresto Peaks are the steepest sections, and even these don't pose any serious difficulties. Follow cairns from Latir Mesa (see Heart Lake hike) to Latir Peak. Then return along the ridge, from which you'll see a trail leading along

a narrow ridge to the lower slope of Venado Peak. Ascend this peak if your energy permits or continue west through a grassy valley, again watching for cairns and a faint track. Climbing Cabresto Peak from the junction at the Bull Creek Trail requires a sidetrip, returning to the Bull Creek Trail and following it downhill to the Lake Fork Trail to complete the loop. Coming down the Bull Creek Trail is much easier than going up.

**SHUTTLE HIKE: BALDY MOUNTAIN TRAIL –
LAKE FORK CREEK TRAIL**

One-way length: 11.1 miles

Low and high elevations: 9,100 and 12,046 feet at Baldy Mountain

Difficulty: moderate to strenuous

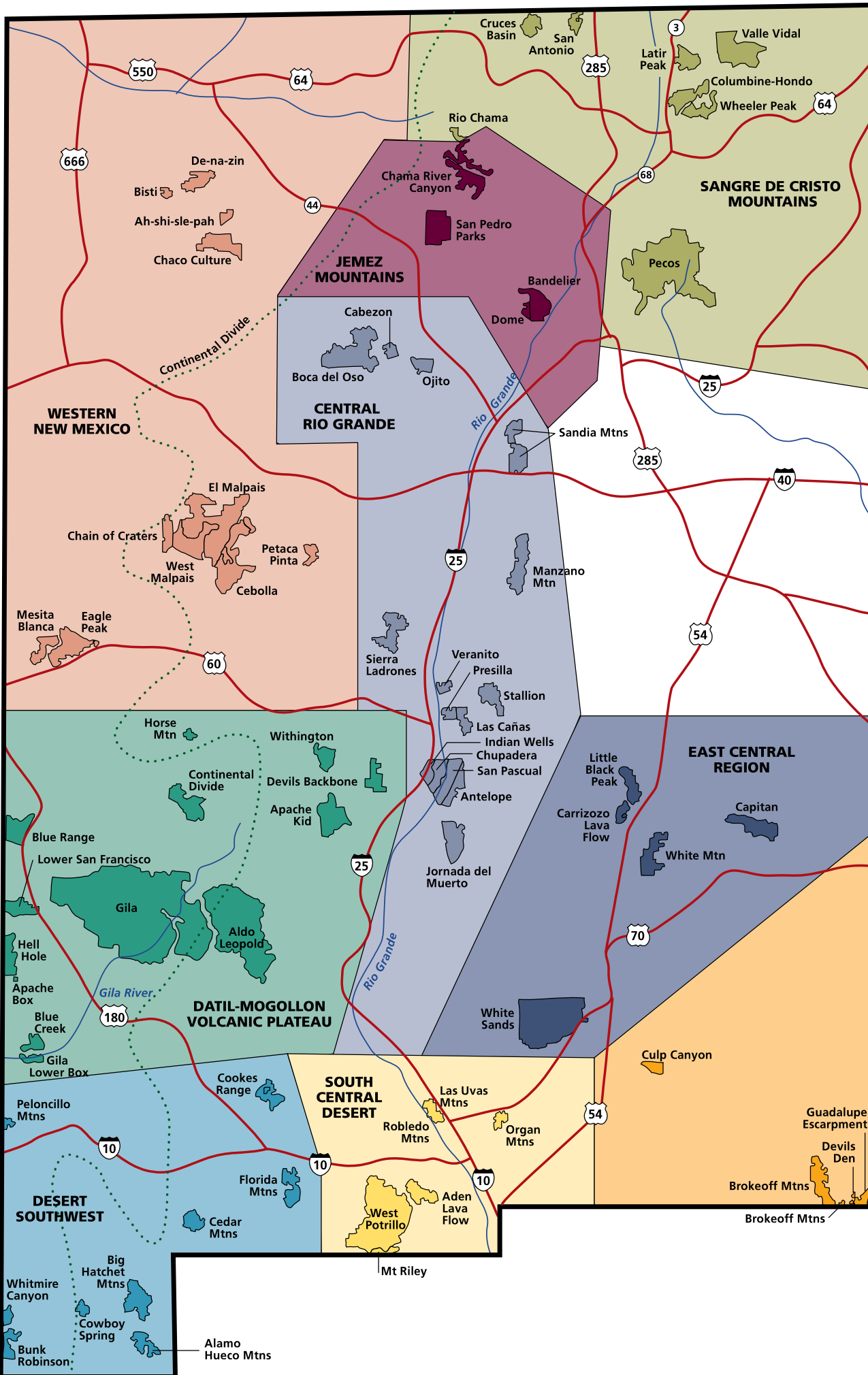
OTHER RECREATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES

Cross-country skiing and snowmobiling are allowed on the two miles of Forest Road 134A leading from Cabresto Canyon uphill to Cabresto Lake. From here only cross-country skiing is allowed on the Lake Fork Trail as it parallels Lake Fork Creek in the wilderness and eventually arrives at Heart Lake.

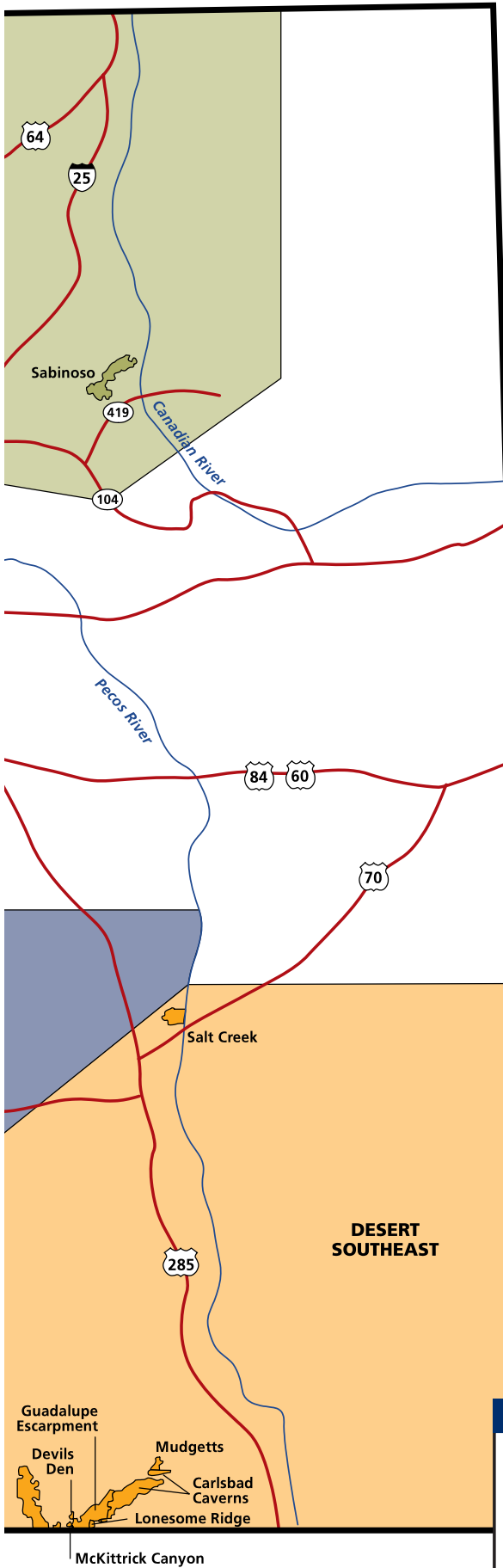
FOR MORE INFORMATION










CARSON NATIONAL FOREST, Questa Ranger District, P.O. Box 110,
Questa, NM 87556; (505) 586-0520.

CARSON NATIONAL FOREST, Supervisor's Office, Forest Service Building,
P.O. Box 558, 208 Cruz Alta Road, Taos, NM 87571; (505) 758-6200.



New Mexico Wilderness Areas



- | | |
|---|--|
|  Border |  Trailhead |
|  Trail |  Campground |
|  Access Road |  Point of Interest |
|  River |  Spring |
|  Lake | |

Please refer to this legend for all maps.

How to Use This Guide

THIS BOOK IS A GUIDE TO New Mexico's wild lands. It features the state's designated wilderness areas, but also includes more than 50 Wilderness Study Areas as well as lands that don't fit into either category but nonetheless are wild and accessible to the public.

The regions are presented as they exist from roughly the northern to the southern parts of the state. Each wild area is preceded by an information block summarizing special features, general location, size in acres, elevation range, ecosystems, miles of trails (where applicable), which land-management agencies have responsibility for the area, and which topographic maps would be most useful in exploring the area.

Wilderness Study Areas (WSAs) are those areas identified by land-management agencies as having wilderness potential, but not formally designated as wilderness. I've included the acreage of the WSAs as they exist now, along with the acreage recommended by the New Mexico Wilderness Alliance, a statewide wilderness advocacy group whose plans include introducing legislation that would change these WSAs into new wilderness areas. I have not included the acreage recommendations of the land-management agencies, particularly the U.S. Bureau of Land Management, because those recommendations were made several years ago. Since then, much has changed in public and agency thinking about wilderness concepts of biodiversity, ecosystem complexes encompassing a variety of designations, and so forth. Thus the previously recommended acreages, while still "official," may not accurately reflect the agency's current thinking regarding wilderness designation.

Following each information block is a more detailed description of the area and its natural history, including geology, plants, animals, ecosystems, endangered species, and anything important to understanding and appreciating that area. I also discuss the area's human history, because in a state like New Mexico, to ignore that is to miss much of the excitement and richness of being here. The administrative history of each area is also included—how it came to be recognized and set aside as a public wildland. I've visited and hiked each of the areas (except for some of the WSAs), and in this general description I pass along some of my experiences and observations I think other hikers might find interesting and useful.

Following the general information are descriptions of specific hikes in the area. Hikes are classified as follows:

DAY HIKES. Trails and destinations that fit an appropriate eight-hour period.

DESTINATION HIKES. Longer hikes to a specific destination that may require an overnight stay.

LOOP HIKES. Routes that circle through the wilderness to return the hiker to the trailhead via a different route. These include both day trips and overnights.

SHUTTLE HIKES. Hikes that require shuttling vehicles between the start and finish points of a one-way route—typically a multi-day trek through a long canyon or across a mountain pass.

I've endeavored to present a range of hikes, from easy ones suitable for families to more difficult backpack trips. I tend to choose hikes I've done myself, and my selection of hikes is by no means a comprehensive list of good hikes in an area. Each hike has an information block listing distance (usually one-way), low and high elevations, and an estimate of its difficulty. I tend to be conservative when rating difficulty; many hikers will find hikes I label as moderate to be rather easy. When I wrote an earlier book about hiking with children, I learned that it was far better for a group to finish a hike saying, "That was a piece of cake" than "I didn't realize this was going to be a death march!"

Following the trail description, you'll find directions to the trailhead and a brief summary of the hike itself. I recommend that hikers supplement these directions with good maps and perhaps sections from guidebooks specific to the area. I mention hazards only if they're specific to that area. Please note that some wild lands here, especially the WSAs, have no developed trails and can only be explored by going cross-country. For each area I try to pass along some tips and guidelines, but cross-country travel should always be regarded as a special challenge.

Regarding the names in this book, geographic names are subject to change and variation, especially in a multilingual state such as New Mexico. While not denying the validity of name variants, I have used the names approved by the U.S. Board on Geographic Names and listed in the Geographic Names Information System database. By federal law, these are the names approved for federal maps and publications, including the U.S. Geological Survey and its maps, the U.S. Forest Service, the National Park Service, and the U.S. Bureau of Land Management. I felt readers would be best served if the names here are those found in the federal maps of the wilderness areas discussed.

These federal maps must also adhere to the policies and principles of the U.S. Board on Geographic Names, including dropping the possessive apostrophe in names such as Cookes Peak, Saint Peters Dome, and Devils Backbone. My goal in this book is twofold: 1) to give you the basic information you'll need to begin exploring New Mexico's wildernesses yourself; and 2) to share with you what I've found in the hope that it will kindle in you the same fire that was ignited in me so many years ago.

Abbreviations

| | |
|-------------|--------------------------------|
| USFS | U.S. Forest Service |
| USGS | U.S. Geological Survey |
| BLM | U.S. Bureau of Land Management |

Permits

At present, the only areas requiring permits for backcountry camping are Carlsbad Caverns National Park, Bandelier National Monument, and White Sands National Monument. Chaco Culture National Historical Park does not require permits for its short backcountry trails, but camping is not allowed. In other areas, camping may be allowed generally but prohibited around specific vulnerable areas, such as lakes in the Pecos Wilderness. Certain trails in the Sandia Mountains Wilderness are closed when peregrine falcons are nesting. Some areas impose restrictions when fire danger is extremely high. It's always a good idea to contact the appropriate ranger district or visitor center before entering a particular wilderness, not only to see what regulations might apply but also to check on current conditions.

Water

Cattle are ubiquitous in New Mexico's wilderness areas and you need to treat all backcountry water by filtering, boiling, or adding chemicals such as iodine. I arrived at this conclusion with great regret and reluctance, because I grew up drinking wild water with no ill consequences. But while I've never had the intestinal parasite *Giardia lamblia*, I've known people who have, and they assure me that it's far more serious, debilitating, and difficult to treat than a simple case of the trots. Besides, even diarrhea can ruin a backcountry trip. Not wanting to play those odds, I now treat water and recommend that others do as well.

Maps and Directions

The maps in this book are intended to provide general orientation only and not substitute for more detailed maps, which I've listed for each wilderness area. Similarly, the hike descriptions are intended to guide you to some of the more interesting or representative hikes for the area, but with a few exceptions they are not comprehensive listings of trails within a wilderness. The Gila Wilderness, for example, has 700 miles of trails.

I've expressed trail mileages as decimals, but that may imply far greater precision than actually is possible. Still, I've tried to be as accurate as I can.

ISBN: 1-56579-291-2

PHOTOGRAPHY

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PRODUCTION

MANAGER: Harlene Finn

EDITOR: Kristen Iversen

DESIGN AND

PRODUCTION: Rebecca Finkel, F + P Graphic Design; Boulder, CO

PUBLISHED BY: Westcliffe Publishers, Inc.

P.O. Box 1261

Englewood, Colorado 80150

www.westcliffepublishers.com

PRINTED IN: China through World Print Ltd.

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LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA:

Julyan, Bob.

New Mexico's wilderness areas : the complete guide / text
by Bob Julyan : photography by Tom Till.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references (p.) and index.

ISBN: 1-56579-291-2

1. Hiking—New Mexico—Guidebooks. 2. Wilderness
areas—New Mexico—Guidebooks. 3. New Mexico—
Guidebooks. I. Till, Tom. II. Title.

GV199.42.N6J85 1998

98-19238

796.51'09789—dc21

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PLEASE NOTE:

Risk is always a factor in backcountry, high-mountain, and desert travel. Many of the activities described in this book can be dangerous, especially when weather is adverse or unpredictable, and when unforeseen events or conditions create a hazardous situation. The author has done his best to provide the reader with accurate information about backcountry travel, as well as to point out some of its potential hazards. It is the responsibility of the users of this guide to learn the necessary skills for safe backcountry travel, and to exercise caution in potentially hazardous areas. The author and publisher disclaim any liability for injury or other damage caused by backcountry traveling, mountain biking, or performing any other activity described in this book.