

CABALLO RESERVOIR
and
CABALLO LAKE STATE PARK

Watchable Wildlife Site 53

New Mexico's twin reservoirs of the southern Rio Grande -- Elephant Butte and Caballo - - are much alike. Both are stark yet scenic, have silt-filled water, and are well-stocked for fishing.

Yet only one of the two is widely known.

Elephant Butte Reservoir is regionally famous as a hot-spot for water sports and fishing. Boaters, water-skiers, anglers, wind-surfers -- everyone's heard of Elephant Butte.

If Caballo Reservoir is mentioned, many people reply, "Huh?" Or, if they have heard of Caballo, they're not sure of its location: "Isn't that somewhere north of Elephant Butte? Or east, perhaps? Or am I thinking of the Bosque?"

For the record, Caballo Reservoir is located approximately 12 miles south of Elephant Butte Reservoir along the Rio Grande. Where Elephant Butte Reservoir is broad and vast, typically thronged with people at play, Caballo Reservoir is narrow and quiet, flanked by bare, dun-colored mountains and miles of screw-bean mesquite. Caballo's earthen dam, 96 feet high and 4,558 feet long, was constructed in 1936 for flood control and to regulate water released by power generation from the north. This shallow reservoir, about 25 feet at its deepest point, has a total storage capacity of 343,000 acre-feet and surface area of more than 11,500 acres. The land surrounding Caballo Reservoir is now Caballo Lake State Park, encompassing 5,326 acres and managed by New Mexico Park and Recreation Division.

MIGRATING BALD EAGLES

Caballo Reservoir maintains a low profile -- but that's only with human beings. Migrating bald eagles, on the other hand, are very familiar with Caballo. So are cormorants and white pelicans, migrating waterfowl, and many other birds. They've relied on this reservoir as a winter sanctuary for decades.

Some 40 or so bald eagles spend the winter at Caballo Reservoir annually. By the end of October, as swallows come back to Capistrano, bald eagles return to Caballo (as well as to nearby Bosque Del Apache National Wildlife Refuge and Elephant Butte Reservoir). Migrating eagles congregate here from October through February. This makes for good eagle-watching at Caballo and Elephant Butte Reservoirs by car, foot, or boat. Watch for

eagles roosting on dead snags. Observe them fishing out over the water. There are several access points around the lake from which to approach roosting sites and fishing areas frequented by eagles.

Wintering eagles are best seen in December and January when they typically perch on partially-submerged dead trees along the reservoir edge. From their perches, eagles scout for prey (mostly fish) which they swoop down to snatch dramatically, then return to their perches to feed. These dead-snag perches provide a safe resting place from which bald eagles soak up the sun, thereby conserving energy which is especially important during cool winter months. Because fluctuating water levels have damaged many of the old snags, research biologists in recent years have erected artificial perches along the shoreline.

In an exceptionally rare occurrence for New Mexico, a pair of bald eagles began nesting on private land near Caballo and have produced young for the past three years. However, most Caballo eagles start flying north by the time of the vernal equinox. Once cactus blooms at the two campground gardens -- ocotillo, prickly pear cactus, yucca, century plant, and cow tongue -- you'll see no more bald eagles at Caballo until the following fall.

OTHER WILD RESIDENTS

Birds other than migrating bald eagles also gather at Caballo Reservoir. There's good-to-excellent winter viewing of olivaceous and double-crested cormorant, common merganser, great blue heron, sandhill crane, mallard, gadwall, wigeon, ring-billed gull, and occasional migrating Canada geese. Increasing numbers of white pelicans have also visited the lake in recent years.

Commonly viewed terrestrial birds include Gambel's quail, northern harrier, mourning dove, northern flicker, Steller's jay, scrub jay, Brewer's sparrow, and dark-eyed junco. Wildlife-watching at Caballo includes mammals too: raccoon, muskrat, beaver, coyote, kit fox, and badger. Within the lake itself, white and black bass, bluegill, black crappie, yellow perch, and walleye are found.

Just below Caballo Dam -- a brief but beautiful stretch of river, shaded by ancient cottonwoods -- the Rio Grande looks the way it did a hundred years ago. It's one of the best examples of riverine riparian woodland left in the state, a lovely spot to explore by canoe or kayak.

BIRDING AT PERCHA

A short distance south of Caballo lies Percha State Park, a small riverside park beside a spillway. Although definitely a 'developed' site (picnic tables and various amenities), it also has many cottonwood, salt cedar, and Russian olive trees; the area is known as a birding site for both common and uncommon species. Watch for vermilion flycatcher, pyrrhuloxia, ladder-backed woodpecker, black phoebe, Bewick's wren, phainopepla, ash-

throated flycatcher, bridled titmouse, white-winged dove, greater roadrunner, and occasional Eastern migrants such as the Eastern bluebird.

DIRECTIONS

About 16 miles south of Truth or Consequences on I-25, take Exit 59. Follow signs to either Caballo Lake State Park on left or Percha State Park on right, less than two miles in either direction. The west shore of Caballo is all paved access, while east side access is rough dirt road. Caballo Lake State Park has two well-developed campgrounds for day or overnight use; Percha is day use only. Caballo Lake State Park is open 365 days a year, 24-hour access, day use and overnight fees apply. Office opens 7:30am daily; (505) 743-3942.