

Capulin Volcano National Monument

Watchable Wildlife Site 26

About 62,000 years ago, in what is now the Raton-Clayton Volcanic Field of northeast New Mexico, a young volcano spewed molten rock in a last, dramatic gasp of volcanism that had been going on sporadically for the past eight million years.

Today, the volcano spews no more. Will it again? No one knows for sure. Today it merely sleeps, suspended in time as a classic cinder cone, part of what is now Capulin Volcano National Monument.

Molten Rock and Fire

Volcanic eruptions occurred in three main episodes at Capulin, separated by long periods of inactivity. About eight million years ago, the earliest lava flow, called the Raton Phase, created the parent rock for what are now Johnson, Barella, Raton, and Oak Canyon Mesas.

The Clayton Phase, occurring two-to-three million years ago, altered existing landscape and created new regional landforms: Sierra Grande, Emery Peak, Mud Hill, Jose Butte, the Purvine Hills, and Robinson Peak, among others. After the eruption of Robinson Peak, there was a long period of inactivity, during which weathering and erosion changed the face of the land.

Occurring some 62,000 years ago, the Capulin Phase of volcanic activity is most recent. It created the Capulin Volcano, a symmetrical volcanic peak, consisting of material forcefully ejected from an opening at the top and piled steeply around it. Because its welling lava forced open a vent along its western base (rather than filling the cone and flowing over the rim), the cone was preserved intact and remains so today. As lava flowed, its surface cooled and hardened, while the interior stayed hot and fluid. As a result, ripple-like pressure ridges formed atop the flows that are visible from the rim looking south. Curious landforms, called 'squeeze-ups', occurred where flowing lava broke through surface crust. When these extrusions hardened, they formed abrupt mounds of basalt, many of which are evident today. The Capulin phase (and all volcanic activity to date) ended in a burst of activity, enlarging the Purvine Hills, creating Twin Mountain as an elongated cinder cone, and giving birth to a nearby, small replica of the large volcano, known as Baby Capulin.

Capulin Today

Today, the cinder cone rises above a sea of shortgrass prairie. In this Plains-Mesa Grassland terrain, more than 200 species of vegetation are present, including Gambel oak, mountain mahogany, chokecherry (the volcano's namesake), Ponderosa pine, and a wide variety of grasses and wildflowers.

Mammals, birds, reptiles, and other species now make their home at the sleeping volcano. By paying attention to time of year, as well as time of day, visitors have a very good chance of viewing many species of wildlife.

Birding

Several hummingbird species are found at Capulin. Hikers often glimpse delicate, hovering Black-chinned and Broad-tailed hummers -- common summer residents. Sometimes visitors are lucky enough to spot a feisty little Rufous or, less frequently, a tiny Calliope with its colorful throat 'slashes'. Even the rare Blue-throated Hummingbird has been spotted here as an occasional transient.

Warm-weather birding at Capulin means spotting both familiar and uncommon species: 'old friends' like the Western Meadowlark, Common Raven, Mourning Dove, Pine Siskin, Piñon and Scrub Jays, House Finch, Mountain Chickadee, and Common Nighthawk; other notable species, such as the melodious Solitary Vireo, Western Wood Peewee, House and Rock Wrens, and Northern Mockingbird; as well as other handsome birds like the Black-headed Grosbeak, Cassin's Kingbird, Pygmy Nuthatch, Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, Lesser Goldfinch, Red Crossbill, four woodpeckers (Northern flicker, Lewis', Hairy, and Downy), and the Chipping and Lark Sparrows. Three towhees frequent the area -- the Green-tailed and Canyon Towhees, as well as the distinctive Spotted Towhee.

At certain times of the year, raptors may be seen riding air currents above the cinder cone: large, majestic hawks, such as the Ferruginous, Swainson's, Red-tailed, and Northern Harrier; smaller, sleek falcons, like the ubiquitous American Kestrel, and the less common Merlin and Prairie Falcon; and the ever-present Turkey Vulture. In winter months, you may see migrating bald eagles, as well as resident golden eagles, soaring above. After dusk, owls cruise by on silent wings -- mostly the Great-horned variety, but sometimes the less common Long-eared or Saw-whet owls -- ever searching for prey.

Wildlife Watching

Wildlife viewing at Capulin is best in spring, summer, and early fall. Besides affording dramatic light for picture-taking, dawn and dusk seem to bring out the greatest numbers of wildlife.

Mule deer and wild turkey are common sights, around sunrise and sunset, on the grasslands near the visitor center and within the bowl of the crater. Deer frequently cross NM Highway 325 between Capulin Volcano and the town of Folsom.

Watch for pronghorn on the grasslands along NM Highway 64/87, west toward Raton or east to Clayton.

Other wild residents, best viewed by day, include the rock squirrel, long-tailed weasel, black-tailed jackrabbit, desert and eastern cottontail, least and Colorado chipmunks, Botta's pocket gopher, and spotted and 13-lined ground squirrel. While you probably won't spot the Mexican vole -- an inconspicuous, furry little animal with sharp incisors and a stubby tail -- you may spot its highly visible 'runways' through the grasses.

Seldom Seen Species

Large predators are common in the area but not often viewed, because of their secretive nature: mountain lion and bobcat, coyote, red and gray fox. Black bear with cubs have been seen traveling through the park, seeking new territories or food sources.

Night at Capulin means a starlit world of activity by nocturnal wildlife: skunks (hog-nosed, Western spotted, and striped), mice (nine varieties), kangaroo rats (Ord's and banner-tailed), badger, porcupine, woodrats (Mexican, white-throated, and Southern Plains), bats (pallid, big brown, small-footed, little brown, fringed, and hoary), raccoon, and uncommon, intriguing species like the ringtail and tiny desert shrew.

Reptiles and Amphibians

You may see lizards as you hike the area, including such species as the red-lipped eastern fence lizard, lesser earless lizard, northern sagebrush lizard, and Great Plains skink. On the mountainside, you may spot a mountain short-horned lizard feeding on ants. Amphibian residents include the Great Plains toad and western chorus frog.

Four snakes inhabit the area. The western hognose snake has a sharply upturned snout that helps it dig out toads, its predominant food. The hognose plays dead when provoked or threatened. An aggressive daytime predator, the coachwhip snake feeds on other snakes, lizards, amphibians, rodents, and birds. Also diurnal, the bullsnake helps keep mice, vole, and gopher populations under control; contrary to popular folklore, bullsnakes do not eat rattlesnakes. Be alert for prairie rattlesnakes, although you probably won't see any. Visitors don't usually encounter them unless they venture off trails into the rocks and high grass. Once in a while, however, hikers will run into rattlesnakes that come out to sun themselves along the crater rim trail.

Wildflowers

Last year, Capulin Volcano National Monument initiated a program to inform visitors about blooming wildflowers -- species to look for and trails for best viewing. Currently, staffers update flower lists prior to each weekend. Species are listed for all three trails with information available at the visitor center desk. Wildflower viewing is best May through September.

Hiking Trails

Of three hiking trails traversing the monument, the Crater Rim Trail is best known and most frequented. One mile in length, this loop trail allows visitors to hike the circumference of the crater rim to survey endless views of surrounding prairie and vestiges of area volcanism. From the trail's highest point, 8,182 feet above sea level, four states may be viewed. Those who know where to look may spot landmarks along the Cimarron Cutoff and Granada to Ft. Union branches of the Old Santa Fe Trail, as well as portions of the historic Goodnight and Loving cattle trails.

The Crater Vent Trail, two-tenths of a mile long, leads from the rim parking area and concludes at the crater vent where ash and cinders were once hurled high into the air, resulting in the Capulin cinder cone. The view from the crater vent, looking back, is spectacular.

The new, mile-long Lava Flow Trail first opened for the public in June 1996. The trail is accessed via two trailheads (one by the visitor center parking lot, the other south of the picnic area), guiding visitors to what is now called the Second Lava Flow at Capulin Volcano. Scenic views along this trail include the flattened, Frisbee-shaped peak of Sierra Grande (America's most broadly-based mountain) and volcanic fields southwest of Capulin.

Amenities, Hours, Directions

As well as featuring geological and historical displays, the Capulin visitor center showcases a new Santa Fe Trail exhibit, this year commemorating the 175th anniversary of the opening of the trail. Visitor center and crater road are open from 7:30am-6:30pm, Memorial Day through Labor Day. During the summer months, the crater road stays open later on Saturdays (usually until 10pm) for visitors to view sunsets from the crater rim and to participate in a star-gazing program. The rest of the year, the visitor center and crater road are open 8am to 4pm. Picnicking is permitted at the designated picnic area

about 1/10 mile from the visitor center. A short, paved, handicapped-accessible nature trail is also adjacent to the visitor center.

Capulin Volcano National Monument lies within a triangle formed by the towns of Folsom, Des Moines, and Capulin, about 30 miles east of Raton. The entrance to the monument lies three miles north of the junction of US Highway 64/87 and NM Highway 325. For more information, contact Capulin Volcano National Monument at (505) 278-2201.