

CLAYTON AREA

Watchable Wildlife Sites 30 and 31

One hundred million years ago, "wildlife watching" in the Clayton area would have been spectacular: brontosaurus feeding on aquatic plants near the shore of a vast inland sea. . . tri-horned triceratops foraging on terrestrial vegetation. . . enormous pterodactyls soaring overhead. However, no human beings had yet evolved to watch them.

Today, wildlife species in the Clayton area are quite different. They're species like pronghorn and mule deer, Swainson's Hawk and the Lark Bunting: less fearsome, more familiar, but satisfying to watch just the same.

WILDLIFE OF YESTERDAY

Eight prehistoric species once inhabited the land, seas, or skies in what is now Clayton, New Mexico. More than 500 preserved dinosaur tracks (or "traces" as they are also known) can be seen today at Clayton Lake State Park. The tracks were first discovered at the park in 1982. A majority of the Clayton traces depict three-toed tracks like giant birds, of which certain dinosaurs may actually be ancestors.

Most of the Clayton tracks are found in hard stone and have become popular visitor attractions. However, some of the other dinosaur tracks are fragile, rare, and off-limits to visitors. To view the tracks, hike the half-mile trail which crosses the dam at the State Park. Best viewing times are early morning or late afternoon, when shadows and golden light show off the tracks to best advantage.

WILDLIFE WATCHING TODAY

Pterodactyls no longer swoop about the skies of Clayton, but other winged species do. You have an excellent chance of spotting a Golden Eagle wheeling overhead almost any time of year; and between October 15- March 30, your chance of observing migrating bald eagles at Clayton Lake State Park is very good.

November through March is the best time to observe all wildlife species at Clayton Lake State Park, located 12 miles north of Clayton off N.M. Highway 370. Once at the lake,

take the left fork of the gravel road to Chicano Point to best look for waterfowl, primarily Canada and Snow Geese, Gadwall, Northern Pintail, Lesser Scaup, Bufflehead, Canvasback, and Redhead.

Pronghorn abound in the Clayton area. Watch for pronghorn along the road to the State Park, with best viewing from dawn to 11 a.m. and again from 4 p.m. to dusk, year-round. There is also excellent year-round, early-morning view of mule deer, with best viewing November through March.

THE DUST BOWL

Headquartered in Clayton, the Kiowa National Grassland is a 136,000-acre prairie preserve administered by the USDA Forest Service. One section is at Clayton, and the other north of Roy.

In the 1930s, the Dust Bowl wreaked havoc in this region, caused a mass exodus of dryland farmers and ranchers. Today the northeast prairies are returning to a healthier state. These vast grasslands now support populations of pronghorn, wild turkey, mule deer, and other species.

PERICO CREEK

Unit 33 of the Kiowa Grassland is a good example of an improving riparian site, recovering from erosion of the Dust Bowl era. From Clayton, go seven miles south on N.M. Highway 402 (Nara Visa Highway). Turn left (east) onto an unmarked road and continue five miles, watching for a tiny brown sign marked "Unit 33." Follow a sandy track onto the site, heading toward a windmill with parking at left. On foot, look north for a dark line of vegetation on the horizon which is Perico Creek. Walk a half mile toward the creek. Step carefully over a low electrified fence.

At Perico Creek, there can be occasional-to-good summer viewing of Swainson's Hawk, Red-tailed Hawk, American Kestrel, Long-billed Curlew, Northern Bobwhite, Scaled Quail, Mourning Dove, Western and Eastern Meadowlark, Loggerhead Shrike, Lark Bunting, and Turkey Vulture from mid-April through September. Early morning or late evenings, look for pronghorn, mule deer, raccoon, and gray fox year-round. Between May 1 and October 15, keep an eye out for rattlesnakes.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Clayton Lake State Park is managed by New Mexico Park & Recreation Division, (505) 374-8808. The Kiowa National Grassland is managed by the USDA Forest Service, (505) 374-9652.
