

El Malpais

National Monument and National Conservation Area

Watchable Wildlife Site #9

In west-central New Mexico, there's a special place where only intrepid visitors dare venture. It's a ruggedly beautiful area of extinct volcanoes, razor-sharp rocks, sandstone arches, miles of ancient lava, cliffs and caves, canyons and craters. For the unwary, this beauty can be deadly, since it also comes with scarce water, searing summer heat, and wildlife such as rattlesnakes. The harsh terrain keeps all but the hardest visitors at bay. Because of this, El Malpais, The Bad Land, continues to keep many secrets.

El Malpais is actually two parcels of land. On New Year's Eve 1987, Congress established the 263,000-acre El Malpais National Conservation Area (NCA, managed by the Bureau of Land Management) and the 115,000-acre National Monument (NM, managed by the National Park Service), creating a joint agency entity near Grants, New Mexico.

El Malpais is one of the best examples of 'recent' volcanic activity in the continental United States. The site is bounded by sandstone bluffs to the east, cinder cones to the west, dry plains to the south, and I-40 to the north.

For Easy Visitor Access

For visitors who prefer to stay close to their vehicles, El Malpais has several easy access points from which its beauty may be viewed.

First, stop at the El Malpais Ranger Station and Visitors Center, nine miles south of I-40 on NM Highway 117. Restrooms, picnic tables, and water are available.

Two miles beyond, at Sandstone Bluffs Overlook, stop to catch a glimpse of the endless panorama of lava fields. A wayside exhibit and picnic tables are available, although no camping is permitted.

An easily-viewed but dramatic land formation is La Ventana Natural Arch, seven miles beyond the overlook. Wind, water, ice, and time have sculpted it from surrounding sandstone. A quarter-mile trail leads from the parking area to the base of the arch. No camping is allowed; restroom facilities are near the parking area.

A designated spot for camping can be found at The Narrows, about four miles past La Ventana Arch. Long ago at the Narrows, flowing lava nearly reached the cliffs. Today, a narrow corridor of travel (NM Highway 117) barely fits between cliffs and lava. A pull-

out at the south end of The Narrows is designated for camping. A short hiking trail leads to Narrows Rim. Views from the precipice are breathtaking.

Back Country Trekking

For visitors well equipped and ready to leave vehicles behind, El Malpais invites exploration. Thickly forested, remote Brazo Canyon opens up unexpectedly in the middle of sandstone country. A dirt road, suitable for four-wheeling or mountain biking, runs through it. NOTE: dirt roads become impassable at El Malpais when wet. No off road vehicle travel is allowed.

El Malpais is also home to caves and craters. There's Junction, Four Windows, and Big Skylight Caves, and many others, some still undiscovered. The El Calderon area is an interesting landscape of sinkholes, aspen groves, and lava trenches. A notable site is Braided Cave, a three-quarter-mile, intact lava tube. El Malpais has many such lava tubes, some extending as far as 17 miles.

Warning: strange objects you may come across aren't necessarily Paleo-Indian relics. At one time, McCarty's Crater in the southeast portion of El Malpais was used as a military bombing range. There may still be unexploded devices in the area. DO NOT handle anything that resembles military explosives. Be sure to report their location to authorities.

Designated Wilderness Areas

For the hardest travelers, El Malpais has three designated wilderness areas that are closed to motorized and mechanized equipment, including mountain bikes. Only hiking and horseback riding are permitted here, and trails are for foot traffic only. As a hiker, it is suggested you wear only the sturdiest of boots -- no running shoes -- because of the sharp lava rock. Take plenty of water. You are also asked to first stop at the visitors center to fill out a no-cost, back-country permit. It might make a critical difference having someone who knows where you're headed and when you expect to return.

The West Malpais Wilderness (40,000 acres) is a 600,000-year-old eroded basalt lava flow. Here, most hikers head for a spot called Hole-in-the-Wall -- no, not the one of 'Butch and Sundance' fame but a place that's equally interesting. This Hole-in-the-Wall is a beautiful, green island of ponderosa pine parkland, set in a sea of black lava.

The Narrows pull-off parking area makes a good jumping-off point for access to the Cebolla Wilderness. The Cebolla Wilderness includes 62,800 acres of rimrock country east of NM Highway 117. There are sandstone mesas and canyons covered by juniper, piñon, and ponderosa pine. Sheer cliffs provide good nesting habitat for raptors. You may

also come across 11,000-year-old Paleo-Indian campsites, as well as the remains of early 1900's homesteads -- a hard existence for both in any time period.

Chain of Craters Wilderness Study Area is studded with cinder cones, large and small. Half a million years ago, these cinder cones were small volcanoes that blanketed the region with lava. Today they lie along what is now the Continental Divide.

The Zuni-Acoma Trail crosses 7.5 miles over four major lava flows. It can be accessed from either NM Highway 117 or NM Highway 53. This is a strenuous six-to-seven hour hike. Be sure to take plenty of water!

Wildlife Viewing

Be careful where you step at El Malpais. Prairie rattlesnakes, scorpions, black widow and brown recluse spiders all make their home here. Be watchful of shaded areas under rocks, logs, or bushes. Animals like these cooler areas as much as you do. Don't put your hands or feet anywhere you can't see first.

El Malpais is home to larger wildlife too. At its rimrock lands, watch for such species as golden eagle, red-tailed hawk, prairie falcon, great-horned owl, bear, deer, coyote, mountain lion, and bobcat. Antelope abound in the Hole-in-the-Wall locale. West Malpais and Chain of Craters Wilderness Areas are good places to spot elk and mule deer.

Lava flows are unique habitats where diverse species may coexist. Here, you may glimpse animals and reptiles that are almost black in color. This so-called 'melanistic adaptation' occurs so animals may blend more readily against the black of the lava.

During 1993-1995, the Cebolla Wilderness was home to a bison herd of some 25 animals. They'd been transplanted there by New Mexico Game and Fish from the resident bison herd at nearby Ft. Wingate. Within two years, El Malpais herd numbers increased to 38. However, the new herd showed a distinct preference for 'roaming.' Nearly all of the animals wandered onto private lands and stayed there. It was later decided to round up the bison and return them to Ft. Wingate. Despite some casualties in the process, most of the bison have been safely relocated.

Directions

Two State Highways -- NM 53 on the west side, NM 117 on the east -- provide access to El Malpais. Visitor Center personnel can provide detailed information and maps.

The El Malpais Information Center has just relocated from its long-standing location at Santa Fe Avenue in Grants to a new facility off NM 53, about 23 miles south of Grants. Hours are 8:30am to 4:30pm, seven days a week.

For more information, contact:

El Malpais National Monument

Administration, (505) 285-4641

Information Center, (505) 783-4774

El Malpais National Conservation Area, (505) 285-5406