

# Elena Gallegos

## Watchable Wildlife Site No. 35

Albuquerque, New Mexico, has changed drastically over 300 years. Once a dusty, adobe outpost of Spanish Colonialism, now it teems with humanity: more than 350,000 individuals who fight rush hour traffic, jostle amid an ever burgeoning population, and face increasing urban sprawl.

But one thing about Albuquerque hasn't changed with the centuries: the natural, wild beauty of Elena Gallegos, more formally known as Elena Gallegos Picnic Area/Albert G. Simms Park.

Crowded closely by Suburbia, this 640-acre plot of pinon-juniper-grassland wilderness on Albuquerque's north side still looks much the way it did in 1697.

### A GIFT OF LOVE

What's kept Elena Gallegos intact and untouched? Nothing more -- or less -- than a presumed love story that began as a result of the Pueblo Revolt of 1680-1692. (True, the evidence is murky on this point. However, read on and decide for yourself.)

For his service to reclaim Colonial lands from the Pueblo Peoples in the Reconquest of New Mexico, a militia captain of middle years, Diego Montoya, was awarded an invaluable gift by the governor of provincial New Mexico: a vast Spanish Land Grant that spanned Sandia Crest to the Rio Grande, and what is now Montgomery St. to the boundary of Sandia Pueblo.

During the Reconquest, a small girl named Elena Gallegos, and her family, fled what would later become Albuquerque for the safety of El Paso to the south. After some years, the Gallegos family returned to Albuquerque as Elena entered her teens. At 19, she married a young, tattooed man, French-born local resident Jacques Grolet. (The tattoos were the result of an ill-fated La Salle Expedition to the far-off Mississippi River. Jacques was one of the expedition's two survivors. Never coming close to the elusive river, the expedition's leader blundered into what is now Texas. He was soon murdered by his own men, who, in turn, were killed by local Indians. The natives spared only young Jacques and a fellow cabin boy, tattooing the youngsters with permanent mementos of the experience. Eventually rescued, Jacques ended up back in New Mexico, where he later married Elena.)

Distantly related by marriage, Elena (and undoubtedly her husband Jacques as well) renewed acquaintance with Diego Montoya, neighbor and new owner of the Spanish

Land Grant in the Sandia foothills. A few years later, Jacques died, leaving Elena a widow with a young son. History draws a discreet curtain at this point, but more than one historian has speculated that 'something started going on between Elena and Diego', enough for him to leave her title to the Spanish Land Grant of 35,084 acres when he died, probably in 1716. In that era, it was remarkable that this land -- and what a piece of land -- was left to a mere woman while male heirs were still alive. This mute statement of his devotion, despite the existence of Diego's five living children, meant the land came into Elena's possession.

## **A TREASURE PRESERVED**

As the decades passed, and the centuries, unpaid back taxes accumulated, and the land eventually left the possession of Elena's descendants. A portion of the land grant came into the hands of one Albert G. Simms in the 1930s. Having no heirs, Mr. Simms later donated 15,000 acres to Albuquerque Academy, a private secondary school. In the early 1980s, the City of Albuquerque purchased 7,640 of Mr. Simm's portion of the grant from the school and entered into a land exchange with the U. S. Forest Service (USFS) who still manages much of the original grant as the Sandia Wilderness. Certain USFS lands were exchanged for surplus Federal lands and given to Albuquerque Open Space Division.

The 640-acre Elena Gallegos Picnic Area/Albert G. Simms Park was created in 1984. Surplus parcels of land were sold and the proceeds kept in a permanent fund; Albuquerque Open Space Division continues to operate, in part, off the interest from this fund. The Division aims to 'acquire and protect the natural character of the land, manage it to conserve natural and cultural resources, provide opportunities for low-impact recreation, and define the edges of the urban environment.' It reaches, and exceeds, the latter goal at Elena Gallegos superbly.

Today, a visit to Elena Gallegos offers the same expansive vista of rocky cliffs, forested slopes, and pinon-juniper foothills that greeted Diego Montoya when he first explored his new possession. The pinon pine, one-seed juniper, cane cholla, and prickly pear cactus of the place still nurture wildlife populations today that are little changed from Elena Gallegos' time.

## **WILDLIFE WATCHING**

Elena Gallegos is a prime place from which to spot 'regular critters'. Nothing exotic or rare here, just good examples of wildlife species typical of the Upper Sonoran desert. However, park officials urge visitors to report any sightings of unusual wildlife species to

(505) 873-6620. Park officials list 199 bird, 34 mammal, and 23 'herp' species (snakes and lizards) native to the area.

Mammals, such as mule deer (hike the park's Domingo Baca Trail to see these) and coyote (definitely around though seldom seen), black-tailed jackrabbit and cottontail, Colorado chipmunk and rock squirrel, are all common. With luck, more reclusive species may also be seen, including badger, bobcat, gray fox, porcupine, striped and spotted skunk.

By night, four species of bats (big brown, little brown, long-eared, and small-footed) and three owl species (great horned, barn, and screech) bisect the night skies as they feed on the wing. In the upper foothills, mountain lion and black bear seek prey or forage.

During boom-and-bust fluctuations of the park's abundant rodent population (10 species of woodrats and deer mice), plague outbreaks can -- and have -- occurred. The park was closed briefly in 1993 and 1994 due to an unusually high number of plague cases among rodent populations. This plague is the notorious bubonic variety that is easily transmissible to humans. Since 1994, wildlife plague numbers have diminished at the park. Park official Wendy Brunnemann explains, "We're not sure if there are just more predators now, if they're controlling the rodent population more effectively, if the rodent population is just healthier and less apt to get sick, or if the incidences of plague are simply fewer. Whatever it is, numbers are way down."

## **BIRDING**

Elena Gallegos is home to many familiar raptor species. Year-round residents include Cooper's and sharp-shinned hawks, prairie falcon, American kestrel, and red-tailed hawk. Visits by rough-legged hawk, merlin, and golden eagle, though uncommon, have occurred recently.

A popular spot with birders, the park is rich with other year-round avian residents: Northern flicker, ladder-backed woodpecker, Gambel's and scaled quail, greater roadrunner, Brewer's blackbird, Western meadowlark, mountain and Western bluebird, mourning and rock dove, spotted towhee, pinon and scrub jay, raven, common bushtit, plain titmouse, and three wren species (Bewick's, canyon, and rock).

Summer brings even more species: black-throated gray warbler, black-headed and blue grosbeak, swallow (barn, cliff, rough-winged), common nighthawk, horned lark, five flycatcher species, blue-gray gnatcatcher, Scott's and Bullock's oriole, black-chinned and broad-tailed hummingbirds, gray and solitary vireo, and turkey vulture. When summer birds leave in the fall, northern visitors, like the Townsend's solitaire, Ferruginous hawk, and common crow, take their place.

## **RATTLESNAKES AND OTHER HERPS**

"Rattlesnakes are our biggest dilemma," Wendy Brunnemann says of the Western diamondbacks, blacktail rattlesnakes, and prairie rattlesnakes that live at Elena Gallegos. "We have many snakes, and the public is generally fearful of any snake, regarding them as something to be exterminated -- which we do not do but remove them to less traveled areas. Our Visitors Services Section has put a great deal of effort into public education about rattlesnakes and other wildlife. We put on many interpretive programs -- mainly for children, but for adults as well. Last year, we educated more than a thousand kids on environmental subjects, including coexisting with rattlesnakes. We give free summer programs to the community in our Fireside Chat Series, held at 7pm every Saturday evening in June, July, and August. And, always, one of these programs is dedicated strictly to rattlesnakes."

In summer, lizards are common and easily spotted, including such species as tree, side-blotched, mountain short-horned, Eastern fence, and collared. Also watch for many-lined and Great Plains skinks, as well as the little striped and plateau whiptails. Near the pond, just north of the parking area, look for toads (Plains spadefoot, New Mexico spadefoot, red-spotted, and Woodhouse's), and tiger salamanders in warm months.

## **AMENITIES AND DIRECTIONS**

Elena Gallegos has a network of trails for both the casual hiker and the most dedicated hardbody. Most trails in the park are also available for horseback and mountain biking, but no motorized vehicles are permitted. A permanent structure at the park is the wildlife blind at the pond -- a must-see feature at Elena Gallegos.

Amenities include picnic areas, restrooms, and wilderness trailhead parking. Albuquerque Open Space Division offers nature hikes and public programs throughout the year. Fees are \$1 per car weekdays, \$2 per car weekends and holidays. Hours are 7am-7pm in winter, 7am-9pm in summer.

Directions: Coming from the north, take the Tramway Road Exit (234) off I-25. The road gradually climbs 7.5 miles, eventually paralleling the mountains. Pass one stopsign and six stoplights. About a half mile beyond San Rafael Street (the sixth stoplight), turn left at the sign for the park. From downtown Albuquerque, travel north on Tramway from Montgomery; 0.8 mile to the entrance on right. For more information, contact the Albuquerque Open Space Division, (505) 873-6620.