

Ft. Bayard

Watchable Wildlife Site #48

Founded in 1866 as a cavalry fort and center of operations against the famous Apache Geronimo, Ft. Bayard was -- and still is -- strategically located within New Mexico.

A Strategic Site

Nearly 130 years ago, the fort was considered well-situated because it straddled an Apache war trail. Today, as a Watchable Wildlife site, Ft. Bayard is strategically located because of its interesting mix of desert and forest wildlife, inhabiting an ordinary-looking pinon-juniper woodlands at the edge of a small deciduous area.

As a viewing site, Ft. Bayard is also a good example of Upper Sonoran life zone vegetation. Just north of the old fort complex -- where tree-shaded, quiet streets end and native vegetation begins -- pinon, juniper, and grasslands abound on the rolling hills, gradually giving way to Ponderosa pine and Gambel oak as the property gains elevation.

Fort Bayard remained an active army post until 1900, when it was converted to a tuberculosis sanatorium. In 1920, the Veterans Administration assumed management of the old fort, and since 1955, Ft. Bayard has been managed by various agencies, chiefly as a hospital for the chronically ill.

Wildlife Viewing

Although one may not think so at first glance, Ft. Bayard is a consistently good locale for spotting elk. There's excellent elk-watching even from the gravel road that winds about the property. Best viewing is just before dawn or just after sunset year-round, with an even greater likelihood during winter and spring. One of the best times to watch for elk is when the yuccas put out their flower stalks each May; the elk eat them like asparagus.

Keep an eye out for Coue's (pronounced "cows") white-tailed deer -- a small race of white-tailed deer not commonly seen in New Mexico, but resident at Ft. Bayard, especially in the deciduous tree areas of the hospital grounds.

By land or by air, there are many wildlife species to watch for at Ft. Bayard. On the ground, be on the lookout for coyotes, mule deer, black-tailed jackrabbits, wild turkey, Montezuma quail, many lizard species, and tarantulas. Scan the skies for red-tailed and Cooper's hawks, band-tailed pigeons, great horned and long-eared owls, western and Cassin's kingbirds, and black-head and blue grosbeaks, April-September. Once in awhile, you may also see black bear, porcupine, javelina, badger, or bobcat.

Hiking Trails

About three miles past Ft. Bayard's hospital complex, turn left at National Recreation Trails Road. The road shortly leads to a parking lot and trailhead for five hiking trails, including the Cameron Creek Trail, along which wildlife is commonly seen.

Directions

Go 6.5 miles east of Silver City on highway US180. Turn left at the Ft. Bayard/Central intersection and continue a half mile to the main gate of the facility. As you enter the grounds, watch for a series of small brown FR536 signs, posted at frequent intervals here and there on the old buildings. Follow the signs past the buildings and continue on gravel road for three miles. Cross a cattle guard, pass the Forest Service Administrative Area and Rec Site on your right, and turn left at the National Recreation Trails Road. Go a quarter mile to the parking lot and trailhead.

For More Information

Ft. Bayard's watershed lands are managed by the USDA Forest Service through the Silver City Ranger District, (505) 538-2771; wildlife refuge lands by the New Mexico Dept. of Game and Fish; the national cemetery area by the U. S. Army; and the hospital and old fort buildings by the Veterans Administration and State of New Mexico.