

Jicarilla Lakes Loop

Watchable Wildlife Site #5

In an out-of-the-way corner of northwest New Mexico, several small lakes reflect the sky. These bodies of water range from mere ponds to New Mexico's largest, natural freshwater wetland, 1,300-acre Stinking Lake (also known as Burford Lake). The lakes are located amid a picturesque setting of low hills studded with Ponderosa pine and Gambel oak, grasslands thick with sage and pinon pine, with blue mountains rising on the distant horizon.

LOOP TOUR AND LAKES

Watchable Wildlife Site No. 5 is a driving loop tour of 52 miles through forested hills past wetlands managed by the Jicarilla Apache Tribe. Traveling west from Dulce, turn left (south) onto Highway J-8 at the Conoco station at the edge of town. Continue south 17 miles (passing Mundo Lake on your right, the turn-off to Enbom and Horse Lakes on your left) to west shore of Stone Lake. The shelter structures on the perimeter of Stone Lake are private property of the Jicarilla Apache Tribe; please, no trespassing. Drive south past Stone Lake on Highway J-8; continue seven miles on a gravel road over sagebrush flats to the largest body of water on the tour, Stinking Lake.

Stinking Lake takes its name from the rich, biological reek of its abundant algae, as well as from small sulfuric springs along its south shore. For the Jicarilla Apache, Stinking Lake has always been Stinking lake from time immemorial. However, in the early 20th Century, the U. S. Geological Service decided the lake needed a more 'appropriate' appellation and renamed it Burford. Today, the original name of Stinking Lake is replacing Burford Lake on updated maps.

In years of abundant moisture, Stinking Lake is the largest natural lake in New Mexico. However, it is believed to be cyclic, and during some years, it's completely dry. Abundant winter snowfall can increase the size of the lake to two square miles of shallow water, never more than ten feet at its deepest point.

WILDLIFE VIEWING

At most of the ponds but especially at Stinking Lake, visitors can expect excellent viewing of Canada geese and other waterfowl. Best times to view are during fall migration, October and November, with fairly good viewing in April. October is especially beautiful in this area when the Gambel oaks change to flaming scarlet against the green of pine and sage.

In spring, abundant numbers of migrating gadwalls, mallards, and other species stop to feed and rest at Stinking Lake before continuing north. The lake is the largest breeding

area for waterfowl in the state. It's also summer home to numerous pied-billed and eared grebes, with up to 2,000 grebe nests there annually.

May through September, watch for waterbird species like the black-crowned night heron and white-faced ibis, both of which have experienced population increases at the lake in recent years. Marsh wren numbers are also increasing, and the local population of yellow-headed blackbirds continues in abundance.

Note: Wildlife watchers are invited to observe Stinking Lake's nesting birds from their vehicles, but the marsh itself is closed to public access. Any activity other than wildlife viewing in or near a vehicle requires a tribal permit.

December through February, while the lake is usually frozen over, keep an eye out for migrating bald eagles. Golden eagles are also seen here year-round. Elk, mule deer, coyote, wild turkey, and long-tailed weasel are occasionally seen. A sharp-eyed viewer may even spot a black bear or Peregrine falcon.

ANNUAL SURVEYS

For the past nine years, the Jicarilla Tribe has permitted Share With Wildlife to conduct annual nesting surveys of Stinking Lake, under the direction of New Mexico Department of Game and Fish contractor Dale Stahlecker. Share with Wildlife programs are educational and wildlife research projects partially or fully funded by state income tax check-offs and/or direct donations. Intensive studies of ducks and geese were also begun in 1991 by Jicarilla Game and Fish. With the help of a matching grant from the North American Wetlands Conservation Council, the Jicarilla Apache have been able to protect grassland nesting areas, manage bulrush areas, and build nest structures on tribal wetlands.

After viewing the birdlife at Stinking Lake, complete the loop tour by backtracking to Stone Lake and junction of J-8 and J-15. Turn left (west) onto J-15 and drive seven miles to NM Highway 537, turning right. At one mile, you'll pass the turn-off to La Jara Lake. Continue on NM 537 to the junction with US 64. Continue north on US 64, past the small, developed fishing area of Dulce Lake, nine miles back to Dulce. No facilities along route. Stinking Lake and nearby wetlands are managed by Jicarilla Game and Fish, (505)759-3255.