

# La Joya Refuge

## Watchable Wildlife Site No. 49

From time out of mind, migrating waterfowl and shorebirds have found water -- and welcome refuge -- at the wetlands which today we call La Joya.

### **A REFUGE JEWEL**

Early area ranchers discovered a seepage at the base of sand dunes near the Rio Grande, resulting in a 30-acre natural wetlands. They named it Geronimo Springs. In 1948, the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish began purchasing parcels of land in and around Geronimo Springs, which is located between Belen and Socorro. By 1957, the department had created a jewel of a refuge -- aptly living up to its name, La Joya -- of more than 3,500 acres.

Today, La Joya Refuge consists of six interconnected ponds, divided by levee access roads. Besides the dammed waters of Geronimo Springs, the refuge is fed by diverted waters from the nearby Rio Grande. Although the refuge is adjacent to Interstate 25, it's located down a steep embankment, maintaining its state of peaceful seclusion, far removed from highway noise.

### **WILDLIFE WATCHING AT LA JOYA**

#### **Waterfowl:**

Ducks are the number one species to view at La Joya. Duck numbers are up here from previous years, a general trend resulting from last spring's fortuitous, bumper crop of ducklings in the prairie pothole regions of the far north.

La Joya is a stopping-off place for a variety of puddle ducks, such as blue-winged and green-winged teal, American wigeon, gadwall, mallard, Northern shoveler, and pintail. Ruddy duck, bufflehead, lesser scaup, redhead, and canvasback are examples of diving ducks to be found here. If you're lucky, you may even spot a wood duck.

Canada geese also like to frequent La Joya on their seasonal migrations. Viewing of migratory waterfowl is excellent at La Joya, February through August.

NOTE: wildlife watchers are discouraged from visiting September through mid-January because of the waterfowl hunting season.

#### **Shorebirds and Birds of the Marsh:**

Shorebird viewing at La Joya is at its best in spring, from late March through April 30, when water levels begin receding and mudflats are exposed. Another good time to look for shorebirds here is in late August, so long as water levels haven't started to rise.

Look for sandpiper, sora, green-backed heron, black-necked stilt, American avocet, kildeer, Wilson's phalarope, and other species. You may also glimpse white pelicans here, early winter through late spring.

### **Desert Bird Life:**

Because La Joya is roughly classified as a "desert oasis," wildlife watchers here are able to view Chihuahuan desert bird species, as well as the typical marsh species, such as pied-billed grebe, double crested cormorant, and Virginia rail.

Desert bird species commonly seen at La Joya include pyrrhuloxia, shrike, black throated sparrow, vermilion and willow flycatcher.

### **Other Species:**

La Joya offers good year-round viewing of Gambel's quail, ring-necked pheasant, raccoon, and coyote. Swainson's hawks and American kestrels are seen here spring and fall. Rio Grande wild turkey are found on the peripheries of the refuge, and sandhill cranes are often seen near the river.

### **DIKE RENOVATION UNDERWAY**

Upgrading La Joya's dike system is a continuous project. Recent renovations now allow refuge managers to more effectively control water levels in the refuge. Upgrading the levee system has already brought about resultant improvements in habitat.

When migrating waterfowl arrive at La Joya -- seeking water, food, and shelter -- refuge managers can more easily arrange to have all three components waiting for them. The water and shelter are available at the refuge; food is available at the nearby Bernardo farms, managed by the Game Department for waterfowl forage.

Later, when spring shorebirds arrive -- birds that prefer shallower water depths but greater expanses of mud flats -- refuge managers are able to regulate water levels to arrange this as well.

At its present stage of renovation, not all of La Joya's dikes can be regulated for water flow. Plans for the near future include rebuilding the dike around the pond at the north end of the refuge so its water levels can be managed.

### **GETTING TO LA JOYA**

South of Belen or north of Socorro, take Exit #169 off Interstate 25. Take the gravel road to cattleguard. Continue on a half mile beyond the cattleguard; take the left fork to an old stone house (now, thanks to vandals, just a burned-out hull). Use care at a sandy arroyo crossing along the way. The shell of the old house sits on an overlook. Do not attempt any other roads; without a doubt, you'll become mired in sand. Park at the old house and walk the quarter mile downhill to the water. La Joya Refuge is managed by New Mexico Department of Game and Fish, (505) 841-8881