

Philmont Scout Ranch

Viewing Site #20

What is Philmont? Only the largest and best known Boy Scout camp in the world - located right here in northern New Mexico - 137,493 acres of mountains and mesas along the east face of the Sangre de Cristo Range.

Boy Scouts (aged 14-18), Explorers (young men and women, aged 14-20), scout leaders and other individuals often wait years for a chance to attend Philmont. Reservations are usually filled the first day they are offered. A waiting list of 7,000 individuals is not uncommon. Hikers and campers from all over North America and many foreign countries travel thousands of miles to participate in Philmont activities and explore its mountain wilderness, ranging in elevation from 6,600 feet at headquarters to 12,441 feet at the top of Baldy Mountain.

The Early Days

Philmont Scout Ranch came into being as the gift of Waite Phillips, wealthy benefactor and Oklahoma oilman who donated and dedicated the facility to the Boy Scouts of America in 1938.

During the 1920s, Phillips became interested in developing a ranch from the old Maxwell Land Grant and Railroad Company. He eventually amassed more than 300,000 acres of mountains and plains in a ranch he called Philmont (derived from his name and the Spanish monte or mountain). Philmont became a showplace working ranch. In 1927 Phillips built a large Spanish Mediterranean mansion for his family, calling it Villa Philmonte. He developed horse and hiking trail throughout the scenic back country with a series of outpost cabins.

To share its beauty with a deserving organization, Phillips offered 35,857 acres of his ranch to the Boy Scouts of America in 1938 to serve as a national wilderness camping area. This area was named Philturn Rocky Mountain Scout Camp (after Phillips' name and the term 'good turn').

Phillips added to his original gift in 1941 with his best camping land, the mansion, and the farming and ranching operations. The property, then totaling 127,395 acres, became known as Philmont Scout Ranch. In 1963 another parcel of the Maxwell Land Grant (the 10,098-acre Baldy Mountain mining area) was added to the ranch. Since Phillips didn't want ranch costs to be derived solely from camper fees, he included in his bequest the 23-story Philtower Building in Tulsa, Okla., as an endowment.

Since 1938, more than 625,000 Scouts, Explorers, leaders and others have participated in its backpacking program from mid-June to late August. Individuals are organized into groups, called expeditions, of eight to 10 Scouts or Explorers. With two or more adult leaders, an expedition treks throughout Philmont's high country for a span of 10 days.

Variety of Wildlife

At Philmont Scout Ranch, there's plenty of wildlife worth watching. Each April and October the staff conducts an extensive wildlife census. Ten teams simultaneously drive different back country routes, then compile and compare data.

Philmont also issues wildlife checklists to expedition leaders. Each group notes what wildlife species they see, and turns in the checklist when their stay is completed. This data is monitored annually.

There are two types of wildlife viewing at Philmont - roadside and back country. As a visitor, you can freely enjoy Philmont roadside viewing with success, providing you pay attention to time of day and best season for viewing. You're likely to see certain species only in winter or in summer.

The Philmont back country, however, is private property, accessible only to authorized visitors. (Philmont Scout Ranch does have programs open to individuals who are not Scouts; this is explained more fully later in this article.)

Roadside/Base Camp

WINTER

Bison

Bison have been part of Philmont since Phillips started a small herd in the 1930s. Today some 160 bison are permanent Philmont residents on a hilly, 4,500-acre enclosure. State Hwy. 21 forms the east border for about a mile. With luck and timing, visitors may view the bison easily from the road. Just as often, the bison keep to themselves toward the back of the enclosure.

The best time for bison viewing? "Winter is good, but actually, there is no best time," says Philmont's wildlife manager Bob Ricklefs. "It helps to be lucky."

If you see bison in the field, do not come too close to the fence. Bison are massive creatures that can weigh more than 2,000 pounds and stand six feet tall at the shoulder. Their poor eyesight causes them to view humans with distrust. If they wanted to, they

could easily plow through the roadside fence and keep right on going. To date, they haven't done so. Don't tempt them.

The bison have three separate pastures with earth-dam water ponds and a few natural springs. "Bison pretty much move themselves from one pasture to another. Once we get indications they're ready to move on to different feeding grounds, we just open the gate and let them go in their own good time, " Ricklefs explained.

Today's herd increases with little human intervention, although new bulls, and occasionally cows, are introduced to expand the gene pool. In winter Philmont feeds them supplemental protein blocks and hay.

Mule Deer, Pronghorn, Elk, Eagle

Between November and March, generally only at dawn and dusk, visitors have a good chance of spotting approximately 150 mule deer that frequent the roadside hay fields at Philmont.

About 60 pronghorn antelope also live on grasslands near the bison enclosure. As with bison, pronghorn viewing is a hit-or-miss proposition. In the right place at the right time, viewing can be great, winter or summer. At other times, there isn't a pronghorn to be seen.

A group of 15 to 20 elk have been seen with increasing frequency, along the highway south of the ranch to Rayado. The best viewing is in winter at dawn and dusk.

Winter is also the best time to spot migrating bald eagles, far above the highway, roughly paralleling the mountains, as they head south.

Roadside/Base Camp

SUMMER

Summer roadside wildlife viewing at Philmont tends more toward the scenic rather than toward actual animals. In other words, wildlife tends to be inconspicuous. Summer is still a great season to visit. The Philmont Base Camp (including administration, training, and camping headquarters) is full of campers, situated on a picturesque, green oasis between prairie to the east and mountains to the west.

Small Mammals

The golden-mantled ground squirrel (called 'mini bear' at Philmont) is usually boldly in evidence at base camp, searching for food, which tends to include (not surprisingly) freeze-dried back-packing items. This little rodent looks much like a chipmunk (also found here), only slightly larger, with striped flanks but no stripe on its face.

You may see the dotted white stripes of a 13-lined ground squirrel as it scampers into the brush. Night brings out both striped and spotted skunks, as well as 11 different kinds of bats. Tassel-eared squirrels live in ponderosa pines.

Reptiles

The western coachwhip snake, olive-brown to pinkish-red, the coachwhip can move with astonishing speed to escape predators or hunt for food. Coachwhips are often seen in the bus turn-around areas.

The western hognose snake may be found in sandy locations below 8,000 feet. It is identified by its short, thick body and dark blotches on its brown-gray back. Its keen sense of smell and upturned nose help it uncover buried food, such as other reptiles' eggs.

Western (prairie) rattlesnakes are also common. They are small to medium in size, venomous, with large triangular heads and gray-brown bodies. Keep an eye out for whiptail and prairie lizards and possibly a yellow mud turtle, bullfrog, or western chorus frog in a meadow.

Birds

Roadside and at base camp, visitors may view bird species such as the lark sparrow, northern flicker (red-shafted), and the melodious western meadowlark and black-headed grosbeak. Look for Brewer's blackbird with its yellow eyes and the metallic, black-green coloring of the male. Loud chattering announces the Bullock's oriole, especially along stream banks at base camp.

Common ravens and black-billed magpies are adaptable, ubiquitous camp residents, feeding on just about anything. You may see swallows, including the violet-green, barn and cliff species. Black-chinned, rufous, and broad-tailed hummingbirds dart about in buzzing flight. During the day, red-tailed hawks, turkey vultures and American kestrels soar above. At the onset of evening, common nighthawks and great horned owls venture out to feed.

Back Country Philmont

YEAR ROUND

Each summer more than 18,000 backpackers travel the Philmont back country. The land survives this staggering number because of careful management. Philmont's administration has established specific land use techniques to best serve Scouts, wildlife and habitat. (Note: Back country Philmont is available only to registered participants.)

Mammals

Elk are the largest mammals at Philmont. Residents of mountain meadows and timbered slopes, elk can weigh 400 to 800 pounds at maturity. Bucks grow antlers each year that reach five to six feet in spread.

Mule deer inhabit mountains and foothills. Bucks grow antlers that are covered in velvet each summer, as elk do too. The velvet hides a network of blood vessels that bring nutrients to the antlers.

The back country supports a number of rodent species, most of which are only rarely seen. Particularly interesting is the prairie vole, a small mouse found in only two places in New Mexico: Philmont and Wagon Mound.

In stands of ponderosa pine look for the feisty, secretive badger, the unmistakable Abert's (tassel-eared) squirrel, the Colorado chipmunk and the least chipmunk. Pikas live above timber line and store food for the long winter.

Weasels live in foothills and mountains. The long-tailed weasel, with brown feet, is commonly seen. The less-common ermine, with white feet, is the smallest carnivore at the ranch. In summer, both species are brown above, yellow-white on the belly, and have black-tipped tails. In winter the fur of the ermine turns white, retaining the black tip of the tail. Both species are voracious predators, able to eat half their body weight in a 24-hour period.

Mountain cottontails are frequently seen in the underbrush from dusk until late morning. Other back country mammals include the black-tailed jackrabbit, coyote, red fox, porcupine and bobcat.

Mountain lion numbers are up as well. "There's lots of lion sign at Philmont," said Ricklefs. "We frequently see sign of their kills, usually deer."

Bears of Philmont

Fortunately 1996 was a good year for both bears and campers. Ricklefs is happy to report, "We had a good acorn crop this year, despite the drought. The bears had plenty to eat."

The black bears are part of an extensive, five-year study conducted by Maurice Hornocker's Wildlife Research Institute for the Department of Game and Fish and Philmont Scout Ranch. Each year, the department and Philmont employees conduct a census of the black bear population during hibernation. The bears are measured and weighed. Each March, biologists and trained Philmont staffers venture into the bear dens, change the collar batteries of adult bears, and place new collars on maturing bears. Philmont employs two full-time summer staffers to track bear movement and activity.

Reptiles

The Western smooth green snake lives in grassy high country, where it blends easily with vegetation. It's found at Philmont at elevations up to 9,500 feet. These small, streamlined creatures live on insects, spiders, and caterpillars.

Look also for mountain short-horned lizards and chorus frogs around the high-elevation ponds.

Birds

Summer birding in the back country is typical of southern Rocky Mountain species: band-tailed pigeon, western tanager, spotted towhee, mountain and western bluebirds, dipper, Clark's nutcracker, gray and Steller's jays, western kingbird, and white-breasted, red-breasted and pygmy nuthatches.

Another handsome avian resident is the Lewis' woodpecker, with its red face, pink belly, white collar and green-black wings and back. It lives in open areas, feeding on beetles, grasshoppers and crickets, and prefers to nest in large cottonwoods.

Large birds may be seen. The Merriam's wild turkey population continues to increase. Turkey vultures and golden eagles are frequently spotted, soaring overhead. Even rare peregrine falcons have been spotted here, migrating, in recent years.

Philmont Today

In July 1996, Philmont Base Camp narrowly escaped devastation when a tornado severely damaged the nearby village of Cimarron. Despite pervasive spring drought and the tornado, about 18,500 hikers trekked the Philmont trails last summer.

Although its primary purpose is to train Scout leaders, the Philmont Training Center offers active educational summer programs to family members and others. The center is also open September through May to accommodate conferences and family programs. For details, write the Philmont Training Center, Cimarron, NM 87714.

Besides summer Expedition programs, Philmont offers Cavalcades (extended horseback outings), Mountain Men and Mountain Women (a provisional six-day experience), and Rayado Men and Rayado Women (an extended expedition for Scouts and Explorers with high backpacking skill, aged 15-1/2 to 20).

The Villa Philmonte mansion, restored to the period when Phillips owned the ranch, is open in summer for daily guided tours. Visitors should also plan to visit the Philmont Museum/Seton Memorial Library (featuring books, personal art and natural history collections of the world-famous author, artist naturalist and first Chief Scout of Boy Scouts of America, Ernest Thompson Seton). Daily tours at the Kit Carson Museum feature staff in historic costumes.

Directions

From the town of Cimarron, turn south onto NM Hwy. 21 and continue for two miles. Viewing begins with the bison enclosure on the west side of the road. For more information about the Philmont Scout Ranch, call (505) 376-2281.

Jane Susan MacCarter wrote the New Mexico Wildlife Viewing Guide, available for \$8.95 from bookstores and the Department of Game and Fish, and she contributes detailed site accounts for our magazine.