

The Road to the Cliff Dwellings

Watchable Wildlife Site No. 46

Scenic, paved New Mexico Highway 15 winds north of Silver City through forests, mesas, and mountains. It culminates 41 miles later at the site of ancient Mogollon Indian cliff dwellings, now designated as the Gila Cliff Dwellings National Monument and managed by the National Park Service..

An Ancient Civilization

Rock formations of volcanic origin rise up on either side of a steep canyon which is home to the cliff dwellings.. The canyon was about as deep in the days of the cliff dwellers as it is now. The site has a one-mile loop trail which ascends 175 feet above the canyon floor to seven naturally-formed caves, six of which contain prehistoric ruins. Perhaps as many as fifty people lived in the 40 rooms of the cliff dwellings from about AD 1280 to the early 1300s.

The stream which carved this canyon over countless years provided humans and wildlife with a dependable year-round water supply.

It still supports a rich plant community, including Douglas fir, ponderosa and pinon pine, Arizona walnut, Gambel oak, canyon grape, and yucca.

Wildlife Watching

Along the hour-long drive to the site, watch for mule deer and wild turkey near the Clinton Anderson Overlook. North of the settlement of Hot Springs, look for the sign for Little Creek Pond near the Heart Bar Ranch, owned by the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish. The pond affords varied birding opportunities. Beyond Little Creek Pond, watch for great blue herons and occasional beaver activity at the Scorpion Campgrounds by the Gila river.

Along the river, visitors often view red-tailed hawks, turkey vultures, American kestrels, and other raptors, spring through fall. You may be lucky enough to spot a Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep among the high rocks on the other side of the river, where in winter, visitors occasionally spot migrating bald eagles.

In the canyon by the cliff dwellings, enjoy good viewing of several species of jays, as well as Bell's vireo and Red-faced Warbler. Listen for the sprightly song of the canyon wren, a common resident of the canyon. Keep an eye out for mule deer and several species of squirrels, including the Abert or tassel-eared squirrel. The mountain king snake also lives in the area.

There are resident javelina, black bear, and mountain lion in the area, but these species, particularly the latter, are seldom seen by visitors.

Visitor Information

The cliff dwelling site opens to the public at 8am in summer (9am in winter), so start your driving tour by 6:30am or earlier for best wildlife viewing. Head north out of Silver City, take your time, and stop along the way. Most comfortable viewing temperatures are in spring and fall. Summer temperatures typically climb to the high nineties. Watch where you step: poison ivy and rattlesnakes both inhabit the area.

For more information about this site, contact the Gila Cliff Dwellings National Monument, (505) 536-9344, and the Wilderness District of the Gila National Forest, (505) 536-2250.