

# San Antonio Mountain

## Watchable Wildlife Site #14

San Antonio Mountain in northern New Mexico is home to one of the state's largest elk herds. Groups of 200 or more of the 1,700 elk that winter on the mountain can often be seen on lower slopes, January through March.

Rising 10,908 feet above surrounding sagebrush flats, impressive San Antonio Mountain is the largest "free-standing" mountain (not part of any mountain chain) in the continental United States. The mountain's rounded volcanic dome, nearly four miles across at the base, is a landmark that's easily spotted from many locations in northern New Mexico and southern Colorado.

### Watching For Elk

Although the mountain provides crucial habitat for wintering elk, visitors may not be able to spot any elk there -- at first. That's because human eyes need a little time in which to adjust to the mountain's vast scale. Wait, be patient, and keep watching. After a while, you should be able to spot groups of elk with a binoculars or spotting scope. Scope out snow-covered areas first for best results, since elk are particularly visible against a white backdrop.

In winter, elk descend from higher elevations and deep snow to feed on dried grasses on the open slopes and Gambel oak in the mountain's brushy draws. The San Antonio elk herd makes its ambling way, over time, toward Tres Piedras and east across NM Highway 285 toward Cerro de la Olla (Pot Mountain), a hill on the eastern horizon.

### Reintroducing Elk

Native elk lived at San Antonio Mountain until the late Nineteenth Century. During that time, hunting pressure by commercial meat hunters supplying frontier forts eliminated elk throughout New Mexico by the early Twentieth Century.

The San Antonio elk are descended from the reintroduced "imports" from Wyoming. Fourteen elk were reintroduced on the Tres Piedras Ranger District of the Carson National Forest during 1938-1939. Together with similar releases in southern Colorado, these small bands have merged and multiplied into the large herd existent today.

The Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation (RMEF) has contributed funding for habitat maintenance at San Antonio Mountain, including improving water sources and conducting controlled burns to regenerate oak brush. Gambel oak readily resprouts after a fire; the new growth is more productive, nutritious, and palatable to elk.

## **Viewing Other Wildlife**

November through March, the mountain provides excellent viewing for elk, mule deer, pronghorn, and other species.

Antelope flourish on the sagebrush flats surrounding the mountain, often visible near the highway year-round, although herds are usually larger during winter. It's the only place in north central New Mexico where antelope can be seen in such numbers.

Sandhill cranes and waterfowl often migrate over the area, occasionally stopping at nearby Stewart Meadows as they follow the Rio Grande. Along the southern perimeter of the mountain, the Stewart Meadows wetlands attracts such bird species as mallard, American wigeon, Northern pintail, sandhill crane, common yellowthroat, and sora during fall migration; a few species remain year-round.

Other wildlife viewing includes mountain bluebirds (early spring through fall), rough-legged hawks (winter), and golden eagles (year-round). Look for white-tailed jackrabbits in the big sage areas.

## **Directions**

Wildlife viewing at San Antonio Mountain is from a series of roadside pullouts only; binoculars or spotting scopes are recommended for best viewing. Because the mountain is an important winter wildlife area, it is closed to public access, including foot traffic, horseback, or snowmobile. Snowmobiles are also prohibited off established roads on both sides of U. S. Highway 285, north of the intersection of U. S. Highway 64.

From the flashing yellow light at Tres Piedras, go 11 miles north on U. S. Highway 285 to Forest Road 87 and the small brown sign for Stewart Meadows Waterfowl Area. Turn left and continue on gravel road 8 miles to the meadows, down the hill to your right. Back on the highway, travel north 19 more miles to the first San Antonio Mountain sign. Since the mountain looms before you -- the largest physical feature around for many miles -- it's impossible to miss.

## **For More Information**

San Antonio Mountain is cooperatively managed by the Bureau of Land Management (505) 758-8851; USDA Forest Service (505) 758-8678; New Mexico Dept. of Game and Fish (505) 445-2311; and the New Mexico State Land Office (505) 827-5033. The New Mexico State Highway and Transportation Department maintains the parking pullout areas.