

Sugarite Canyon State Park

Watchable Wildlife Viewing Site # 17

"Land of Many Birds"

The first thought that crosses your mind on your first visit to Sugarite Canyon State Park is, "This land looks old."

Really old. Wooded, square-topped buttes topped by rocky outcrops. Volcanic cliffs with stone palisades rising above a gently sloped canyon. Small lakes, murmuring creeks. Ponderosa pine, Gambel oak, and thorny wild locust trees everywhere. Old indeed.

The place has a dinosaur-era feel to it, like the land hasn't changed since time out of mind.

And, for the most part, you're right. It's scarcely changed at all.

Where Dinosaurs Roamed

The name Sugarite is an Anglo modification of the Comanche word "chicorica," the name of the creek that flows through the canyon. In the Comanche tongue, chicorica means "land of many birds."

This area around Raton, New Mexico, is the site of the only known footprint of Tyrannosaurus Rex yet discovered in the world. T-Rex roamed the perimeters of vast mudflat swamps in this region during the Cretaceous Era, 65 to 135 million years ago. A plaster reproduction of this three-foot-long footprint can be seen in the visitors center.

Leaves, roots, tree trunks, moss, and other carbon-based materials eventually accumulated in the swamps. Eroding sand, mud, and rocks from nearby mountains gradually buried this decomposing muck -- year after year, eon after eon. With the passage of time, internal heat, and pressure from sediment above, the muck compressed and became coal. Millions of years later, this coal would be extracted by swarming homo sapiens during a brief coal boom at a settlement they called Raton.

Today, Sugarite still looks like dinosaur country. Eons ago, that rustling in the foliage would probably be T-Rex himself. Today, it's likely to be a black bear instead.

Bear, Bobcat, Beaver

Don't look for unusual or endangered species at Sugarite. There aren't any. There are, however, plenty of familiar species native to northeast New Mexico's butte country -- the transition zone between prairie and mountain.

Black bear are familiar residents, encountered frequently throughout the park. Bobcat (common enough, though seldom seen) are sometimes glimpsed near the trailhead at Soda Pocket Campground and in other areas. Beaver are sometimes seen at Lake Maloya, one of three small water impoundments at the park, though muskrats are far more common. Watch for them in summer near the mouth of the two streams (Segerstrom and Chicorica) that feed the lake.

Elusive Game Species

Seldom-seen park wildlife includes mountain lion and elk. With an increasing New Mexico lion population, feline-human encounters are bound to become more frequent. But for now, the silent, dun-colored shape of a mountain lion crossing the road is an unusual occurrence at Sugarite. One favorite "lion-crossing" area is just above Lake Alice Campground. Lions have also been seen bear the Soda Pocket Campground turnoff and occasionally around the visitors center.

Occasionally, elk will amble down from the heights to graze around Lake Maloya and Soda Pocket Campground. A few have turned up behind the visitors center. Although elk are proliferating throughout northeast New Mexico, they aren't often seen at Sugarite. The vegetation is simply too dense for good elk habitat.

Mule deer are fat and sassy at Sugarite -- in fact, they're doing better in this area than they are in the rest of the state. The brushy vegetation that doesn't suit elk does suit the mule deer, to a T.

Furry and Familiar

The strikingly handsome Abert squirrel can be seen just about anywhere in the park where there are stands of Ponderosa pine. Good areas to look are around Lake Maloya and along the park's Ponderosa Ridge Hiking Trail.

Gray fox are seen in all seasons, mostly in the vicinity of the visitors center. Coyotes are also common, but usually stay atop the mesas.

Well camouflaged against their surroundings, cottontail rabbits can be viewed year-round at Soda Pocket Campground and on the west side of Lake Maloya. Still more wildlife species call this area home: raccoon, porcupine, short-tailed weasel, Douglas' and rock squirrels, least chipmunk, striped skunk, and little brown bat.

Turkey and Grouse

Easily the most notable bird at Sugarite is the handsome Merriam's wild turkey. Wild turkey are found throughout the park, feeding on Gambel oak acorns, berries, insects, and grasshoppers. They like to roost in the Ponderosa pines by night, so this is a good area to spot them at dawn and dusk. Turkey are best viewed in late March and early April, when

the male is feeling feisty, ready to gobble and display his glorious tail feathers at the drop of a hat (or even the slamming of a car door).

Sharp-tailed grouse were recently transplanted onto the Colorado side of Sugarite Canyon by the Colorado Division of Wildlife. If the transplant is successful, the New Mexico side may see this species making inroads as well.

Seasonal Raptors and Waterfowl

Spring and fall are the best times to see certain species at Sugarite, specifically migrating waterfowl, ospreys and bald eagles. Between December and March, Sugarite's small lakes freeze over, effectively precluding any visits by migrant birds. during migration times, watch for mallard, Canada geese, American coot and Western grebe.

Birdlife at Sugarite

Spring heralds the arrival of the melodious evening grosbeak in the pine woods at Lake Maloya. Although they're only passing through, their close relative, the black-headed grosbeak, stays for the entire season. Other part-time and full-time feathered residents include the belted kingfisher, spotted sandpiper, great horned owl, Cooper's hawk, barn swallow, downy and hairy woodpecker, Northern flicker, rufous hummingbird (seasonal migrant arriving after July 4), broad-tailed hummingbird, spotted towhee, Western tanager, house finch, gray-headed junco, black-capped and mountain chickadee, Steller's jay, Western scrub-jay, house and canyon wrens, and common raven.

Trails, Fishing, and Camping

There are several miles of back-country trails (accessible by foot or horseback), one nature trail, and a historic trail through the Sugarite coal camp. Park officials plan to construct a 1/8-mile handicapped-accessible nature trail with a boardwalk behind the visitor's center next year.

Horse corrals were recently installed near the Soda Pocket trailhead for riders wishing to view the countryside from a loftier point of view.

Sugarite Canyon State Park is a popular fishing and three-season recreation area. Fishing is available from the shore or at the courtesy boat dock or fishing pier. Only boats with electric trolling motors or sails are permitted on Lake Maloya; no gasoline motors or swimming allowed, because Lake Maloya and the other impoundments are the source of Raton's water supply.

Bob Dye, long-time Sugarite park manager, says, "Someday, I hope to see Sugarite as a leader in interpretation and education in our natural and historical resources. I would like to see a multi-use room built for classes, meetings, and the like. I'd like to see additional land purchased around the park to create a good buffer zone, and to add to the acreage of public land available in the area."

How to Get There

Visit Sugarite midweek for best wildlife viewing. Expect crowds on weekends and holidays. At Raton, take I-25 exit 452 to NM 72. Travel east about seven miles to the junction of NM 526. Take the left fork which goes uphill. Continue on to the visitor's center and beyond to access the lakes. Day-use fee area. Call Sugarite Canyon State Park, New Mexico Park and Recreation Division, (505) 445-5607 for details.