

Bosque del Apache

National Wildlife Refuge

Marsh Overlook Trail



Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge lies along 9 miles of the Rio Grande in the desert of south-central New Mexico. The refuge is home for thousands of ducks, geese, sandhill cranes, wading birds and much more. This trail is a window to the natural world and an opportunity for replenishment.

Marsh Overlook Trail

Peer through willows, cattails, and phragmites at the deep water wetland circled by the Marsh Overlook Trail. This 1.5-mile loop trail is usually open for hiking but is seasonally closed to protect wildlife from disturbance. The trail includes a quarter-mile (round trip) spur trail to an overlook on a bluff. The Marsh Overlook Trail is easily accessible for wheelchairs, with the exception of the spur trail.

Resident waterfowl, including Canada geese, double-crested and neotropical cormorants, cinnamon teal, mallards, gadwall, and American coots, swim beneath secretive marsh wrens and least bitterns swaying on reeds above. Red-winged blackbirds scold their neighbors while graceful American avocets sweep the shallows for insect larvae with their unique bills.

From the overlook you may notice a mule deer or coyote pausing for a drink of water or a muskrat swimming. The distant dark mesa across the Rio Grande was once home to Piro Indians.

For your safety and to best protect this fragile habitat, please stay on the trail. Insect repellent is recommended. Watch for rattlesnakes. **This 1.5-mile loop is a moderate trail.**

Wildlife Watching Tips

Dawn and dusk are the best times to see wildlife.

This is a warm climate, so little is moving on hot summer afternoons or on windy days.

Observe from the sidelines. Leave "abandoned" young animals alone. A parent is probably close by waiting for you to leave. Don't offer snacks; your lunch could disrupt wild digestive systems.

Cars make good observation blinds. Drive slowly, stopping to scan places wildlife might hide. Use binoculars or a long lens for a closer look.

Try sitting quietly in one good location. Let wildlife get used to your presence. Many animals that have hidden will reappear once they think you are gone. Walk quietly in designated areas, being aware of sounds and smells. Often you will hear more than you will see.

Teach children quiet observation. Other wildlife watchers will appreciate your consideration.

Look for animal signs. Tracks, scat, feathers, and nests left behind often tell interesting stories.



Natural Marsh

1

The Marsh Overlook Trail circles an old Rio Grande oxbow, since separated from the river. The marsh is part of a complex of more than 35 units managed to produce wetland food plants and cover for waterbirds.

Blackbirds

2

The most common bird in this marsh is the red-winged blackbird. The males flash red and yellow "epaulets" and sing at other males to announce control of their territory. The brown, streaked females incubate 3-5 eggs in a loosely woven cup of cattail leaves and grasses. Common and great-tailed grackles and yellow-headed and Brewer's blackbirds also use this marsh.

Native Plants

3

The tall, plumed plant you see is phragmites, frequently called carrizo, which was used in colonial times as a roofing material. Cottony fibers from phragmites, cattails, and milkweed are often woven into yellow warbler and black-chinned hummingbird nests. Seep willow, coyote willow, and black willow edge the marsh. Flowers like wild zinnia, evening primrose, and indigobush bloom throughout the hiking season on this trail. Willow and smartweed decorate the wetlands throughout the year.

Desert/Marsh

4

The northern tip of the Chihuahuan Desert borders the marsh. Water changes everything: The plants no longer need to conserve every drop of moisture so leaves can be large, and birds and mammals become more abundant. In 1943, a major flood forced the Santa Fe Railroad to move its track into the foothills of the Chupadera Mountains, out of the floodplain of the Rio Grande.

Overlook Trail

5

The Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge contains 57,191 acres of desert uplands, managed and unmanaged wetlands, and riparian woodlands. The refuge provides biologically diverse habitat with food, shelter, water, and space for a variety of mammals including raccoons, ringtails, bobcats, cougar, porcupines, bats, foxes, rock squirrels, weasels, skunks, and badgers.

Ledge Nests

9

Loud songs greet visitors of the Marsh Overlook Trail as rock wrens perch on conspicuous stones to scold intruders. They hide their nests in small crevices, but sometimes place objects like stones and bones in a path leading to the rim of the nest. Colonial cliff swallows build nests of mud pellets, and barn swallows often nest in the same colony. They build cup-shaped adobe nests with mortar consisting of mud and dry grasses. Watch for pellets of barn owls near these steep sandstone banks.

Marsh Overlook

6

Directly below you, the marsh teems with life as mosquito larvae prey on zooplankton and in turn are picked out of the shallows by black-necked stilts. Bullfrog tongues flick out to catch dragonflies. Great blue herons spear fish and frogs. Nighthawks, poorwills, and barn owls hunt after dark, while coyotes, red-tailed hawks, and northern harriers capture rodents by day. (In the distance, the refuge headquarters houses those at the very top of the food chain: humans.)

Snowy Egrets

10

The showy, snowy egret's elegant plumes were the cause of their rapid decline in population, almost to extinction. Fashionable ladies of the late 19th century wanted to wear egret feathers on their hats. Today we can all enjoy their beauty, thanks in part to the more than 500 national wildlife refuges across the country.

Tracks

7

Watch for tracks and scat of mule deer, coyotes, cottontails, and jackrabbits in the sandy river alluvium of the road. Serpentine trails are made by snakes. Bird tracks are left by foraging greater roadrunners, Gambel's quail, and sparrows. Small rodents, lizards, and even insects leave signs of their daily "running around."

Secretive Birds

11

The marsh is home to many secretive birds. Stand quietly and listen for a descending "wak-wak-wak-wak-wak." Virginia rails sneak through the dense vegetation. Smartweed is the principal food of the sora, another common but seldom seen rail. Least and American bitterns nest in marshes on the refuge. When alarmed, they point beaks to sky and "freeze." The tan and brown streaking on their chests matches the surrounding cattails, making them all but invisible. The tiny marsh wrens bubble a merry song from just out of sight in the phragmites. When approached, pied-billed grebes sink, silent as submarines.

Whitewash

8

Along the sandstone faces are many ledges used by raptors as hunting lookouts. As a bird takes off, it often lightens its load by defecating. The telltale "whitewash" exposes these perches. It can also be seen beneath raptor nesting sites, since the young instinctively back to the edge of the nest to defecate.

Muskrats

12

Muskrat lodges dot the marshes throughout the refuge. They are built of aquatic plants and stand about three feet above the water. Beavers on the refuge do not build stick lodges, but instead live in holes in the banks of canals. Muskrats are much smaller than beavers and have tails flattened vertically. Their diet is mostly plants, although occasionally they eat a small fish.

Waterfowl Migration

13

Snow geese and sandhill cranes migrate to Bosque del Apache NWR from as far as Siberia! Many species of ducks also winter here, including northern pintails, buffleheads, northern shovelers, mallards, gadwall, teal, and hooded mergansers. As the food supply dwindles, many continue south to Mexico. Shorebirds stop to rest and feed during spring and fall migration. A bird checklist is available at the Visitor Center.

Drainage Canal

14

The canal to your right is the drainage canal for the refuge. Irrigation water for corn crops that feed wintering snow geese and sandhill cranes, and water that creates the many other marshes and ponds for wintering and breeding waterfowl all drains into this canal, where it is returned to the Rio Grande and other uses downstream.

Mosquitoes

15

By now you have discovered the reason flycatchers, swallows, bullfrogs, and bats are so appreciated by human visitors to the marsh; they consume innumerable insects every day.

This brochure is published by Friends of the Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge, a non-profit group dedicated to:

- Supporting the Refuge's efforts in creating quality wildlife habitat
- Supporting the Refuge's environmental education and scientific projects
- Enhancing the public's understanding and enjoyment of the Refuge

We hope you have enjoyed your experience at the Bosque del Apache NWR!



Great Blue Heron
Photograph by Paul & Shirley Berquist

