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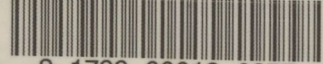
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Watching wildlife

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- where to look
- what to see
- when to go

Welcome to The Valley!

Welcome! Whether you've come to Colorado's magnificent San Luis Valley to explore the numerous historical sites, investigate the myriad geological features, try to observe a special wildlife species...or just visit Uncle Joe and Aunt Pearl, you couldn't have made a better choice. Before getting on with our main goal of helping you to find and enjoy the incredible variety of wildlife found here, we thought you might appreciate knowing a little more about the San Luis Valley, or "The Valley" as we call it.

Stretching 125 miles north to south and almost 60 miles east to west, it is one of the largest high mountain valleys in the world. While its floor averages 7,500 feet in elevation, the surrounding mountains, the Sangre de Cristos on the east and the San Juans on the west, reach up to over 14,000 ft. This makes for a wide range of wildlife habitat types which means you'll have an opportunity to see an amazing diversity of wildlife.

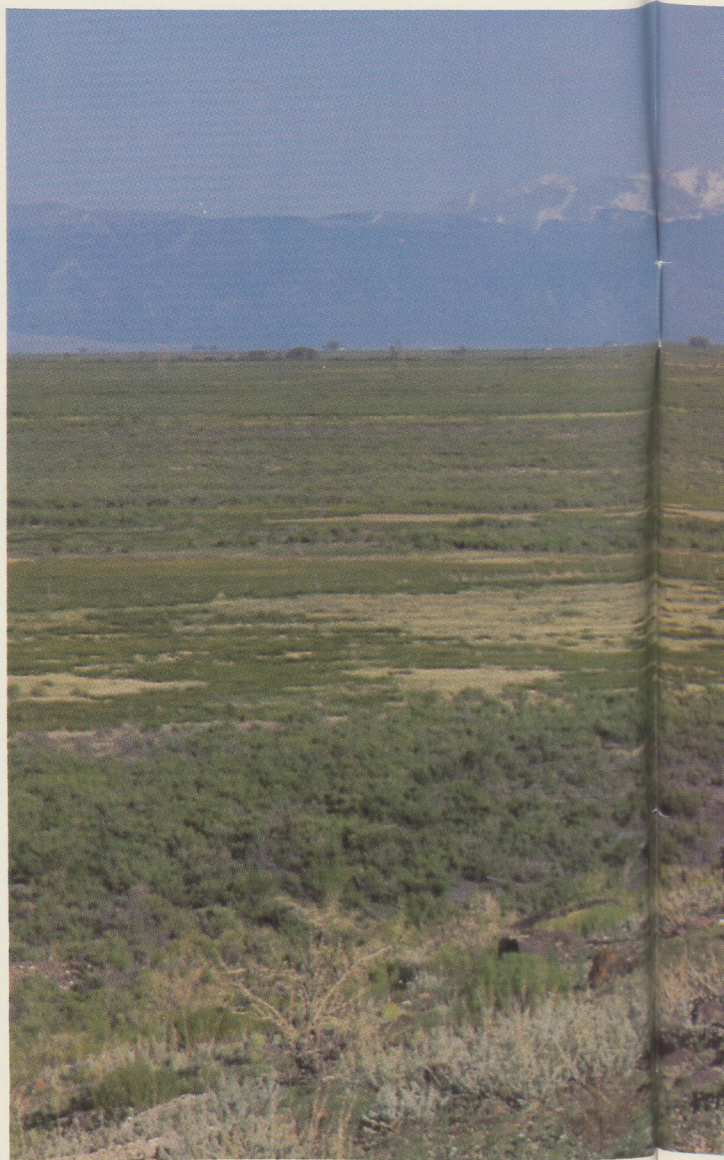
The climate varies as much as the topography. The average daily temperature varies 35 degrees, one of the greatest daily changes anywhere in North America. Winter temperatures frequently fall to -20 degrees (next winter see how often you hear "and the coldest spot in the country is Alamosa, Colorado!"). Summer highs can reach the 90s. But temperatures in the mountains can fall 20-30 degrees in minutes when a summer shower closes in. If you're hiking, even just for the afternoon, take warm clothes and rain gear.

The Valley's abundant wildlife has attracted men and women for centuries. Ute Indians travelled from their winter home sites in New Mexico to set up summer camps to hunt for deer, elk, and beaver. The Valley's harsh winters would force them south when the snow began to fall.

Coronado was the first European explorer to reach the Valley, coming over Half Moon Pass between Creede and La Garita in the early 1540s. According to one legend, he named the Sangre de Cristos one evening as a brilliant

Cover Photo

Mule deer are frequent visitors to the Great Sand Dunes National Monument. ©Wendy Shattil/Bob Rozinski



Located in south-central Colorado, the San Luis Valley contains a wide variety of species. Know

sunset cast a blood-red glow on the mountain peaks.

Spanish settlers quickly gained a foothold by establishing Colorado's first town, San Luis. French priests were not far behind, followed by German, Scandinavian, and English. Wildlife became an important part of Valley life.

It is because The Valley's floor has such minimal rainfall that the wetlands scattered throughout the

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alley contains a great diversity of wildlife habitats. It is one of the best places in Colorado to view wildlife and with a little effort, Knowing which species can be found in what habitat types will improve your luck.

Geoff Tischbein

floor offer viewing opportunities unequalled in any other part of Colorado. The latest concept in wildlife management is "biodiversity" which means nothing more than managing to maintain the natural diversity Mother Nature originally created. And you won't find a better place to experience biodiversity than exploring the wide variety of wildlife habitats in The Valley.

Since there are no caged animal parks here, only wild and free roaming animals that don't pose for the camera, wildlife viewing takes some effort on your part. But with a little bit of information, some patience and perseverance, you can expect to see wildlife in some of the most beautiful natural settings in Colorado.

Good Luck!

How to Watch for Wildlife

Like most other activities, watching wildlife is a skill that can be developed. While it might prove very frustrating at first, with practice and patience, the rewards can be outstanding. A few basic tips will help you get off to a good start.

Generally, most animals are more active during dusk and dawn. This is the time to see deer and elk feeding in meadows or to find many birds hopping around the trees and bushes. During the heat of the day most animals will find shelter and will be much more difficult to see.

Some animals are always difficult to find because they are nocturnal which means they are most active during the night. For example, even though we have many mountain lions, badgers and bears, your chances of seeing one are rare. Knowing this, you shouldn't go out during the day expecting to see certain animals and return feeling disappointed.

Knowing the characteristics and habits of the animals that interest you will improve your odds of seeing them. Just as you won't find marmots and picas on the Valley floor (They prefer the rocky, talus slopes higher in the mountains.), you won't find great blue herons or snowy egrets above timberline. (They prefer wetlands.). There are numerous excellent books on wildlife such as the Peterson's and Audubon guides. An hour of research could save you days of frustration!

Learning to recognize signs and reading clues left

by wildlife will help you understand animal behavior, which will lead to more success in spotting the animal you want to observe.

Look for obvious signs such as bird nests, mammal dens, woodpecker holes or areas where a deer or elk has recently bedded down. Scat (animal droppings) and tracks left in the soft ground provide helpful clues about the animals in an area.

There is nothing that will enhance your wildlife watching more than a good pair of binoculars. Most wildlife species will not let you approach very close, but binoculars will help compensate for this. For example, using a 7x35 pair of binoculars means that at 100 feet you can actually see the animal as if you were only 14 feet away! This not only allows you a much better "look," but puts far less stress on the animal, a very important consideration.

Often you will see more wildlife by simply sitting down and waiting...let the wildlife get used to your presence. Incidentally, cars make excellent blinds and many animals will tolerate the presence of a car if you remain in it.

To enjoy watching wildlife you should be comfortable. Mountain weather can change dramatically so dress appropriately (drab colors are less conspicuous) and wear proper footwear.

Keep in mind the art of wildlife watching takes a little practice with patient observation and listening. It is rewarding to slow down - look and listen - even relax. Do this and you will discover that nature is an exciting teacher.

Wildlife Etiquette

*** Observe animals from a distance *THEY* consider safe. Get "closer" by using binoculars, spotting scopes and telephoto camera lenses.**

*** You are probably too close if most of the animals are looking at you with heads up and ears pointed toward you; are nervous; or are "jumpy" when you move or make a noise. If you see these signs, sit quietly or move slowly away until their behavior changes.**

*** Move slowly and casually, not directly at the wildlife. Allow them to keep you in view, don't sneak up and surprise them. Most wildlife rely on their eyesight and sense of smell to keep them from danger.**

*** Never chase the wildlife. Don't follow them or harass them in any way. Keep pets in your vehicle.**

*** Using the animals' behavior as a guide, limit the time you spend with the animals, just as you would when visiting any friend's home.**

*** Please respect the space of others who may be viewing the same wildlife. If you approach too closely, you will ruin everyone's opportunity for natural, relaxed photographs and observation.**



The Rocky Mountain elk can be found throughout the San Luis Valley. They prefer the lower meadows in winter and the alpine areas in the summer.

©Claude Steelman/WILDSHOTS



Since the San Luis Valley receives about 7 inches of rain yearly, much of the wildlife is concentrated around the wetlands. These are particularly good places to see a wide variety of waterbirds.

©Sherm Spoelstra

A Wetlands Paradise

Among the most fascinating features of the San Luis Valley are the extensive wetlands that dot the Valley floor, an area that generally receives about 7 inches of rain yearly. This phenomenon is created by the natural springs, artesian wells, and meandering rivers that are fed by the annual winter snowpack. Since, for the most part, the Valley is so dry, these wetlands see concentrations of wildlife which provide some of the best viewing opportunities for water birds in the state.

A key component of this ecosystem is the cotton-

wood-willow plant community that grows along the streams and rivers. Over 75 percent of the bird species in Colorado use cottonwoods at some point during the year, making it the most heavily used ecosystem in the state.

Surrounding these wetlands are vast flats of greasewood and rabbitbrush (often mistaken for sagebrush). While you may occasionally see a jackrabbit or two, your best bet for wildlife is to look overhead where marsh hawks, red-tailed hawks, golden eagles, and turkey vultures can be seen patiently searching for prey. Be on the lookout for prong-

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horn, particularly along Hwy. 150 to the Great Sand Dunes National Monument. In the winter, deer and elk move down from their summer ranges into these flats to feed.

If you come over LaVeta Pass on U.S. Hwy. 160 or go to La Jara Reservoir, you will be in the spruce-fir-aspen zone. The dense vegetation can make wildlife viewing challenging but with patience you might be able to find deer, elk, pine marten, blue grouse, goshawks, and numerous songbirds.

VIEWING OPPORTUNITIES

Alamosa National Wildlife Refuge

Featured wildlife: In the spring and fall look for sandhill cranes; in the early spring large concentrations of bald eagles can be seen; look for nesting ducks, geese, white-faced ibis, snowy egrets and other waterbirds in the spring and summer.

Location: Drive three miles east of Alamosa on U.S. Hwy. 160, then south on El Rancho Lane two miles to the refuge.

Viewing information: Best viewing is from a 2.5 mile trail along the Rio Grande and a road on the east side of refuge that goes to a bluff overlook for a panorama of wetland marshes, ponds and riparian areas. Other than the corridor along the river walk area and the bluff overlook, the refuge is closed to public access to provide undisturbed wildlife habitat. One-third of the refuge is open to water-



It would be difficult to mistake the 5-foot-tall great blue heron frequently seen in rivers and lakes. ©Ray Richardson

fowl and upland game hunting during designated seasons. Brochures and a species list are available at the Visitor's Center.

Facilities: The Visitor's Center, open weekdays 7:30 a.m. to 4:00 p.m., has displays, restrooms, and parking. There is a 2.5 mile walking trail along the Rio Grande for excellent viewing.

Administering agency: U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (719) 589-4021.

Alamosa River Canyon

Featured wildlife: Watch for bighorn sheep between the Cat Creek turnoff and the mouth of the Alamosa canyon. Deer and elk are found in the area year-round. Coyotes, mountain lion and bear are in the area, but seldom seen.

Location: Drive 15 miles south of Monte Vista on Hwy. 15 and turn west on Forest Road 250.



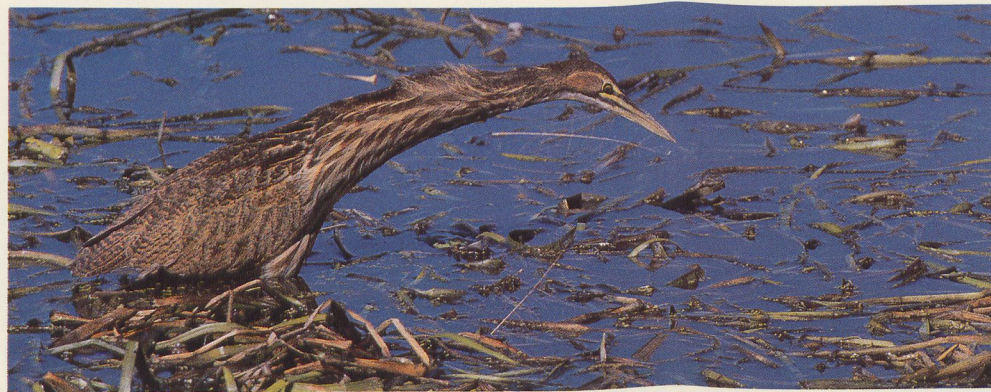
The American coot is easily identified by its blueish bill. It is common on lakes.

©Wendy Shattil/Bob Rozinski



Bald eagles are rarely seen in the summer but The Valley is an important wintering area. ©Sherm Spoelstra

Viewing information: One can view wildlife from a vehicle. Please get permission to use private land. Al-



The American bittern is not easy to see as it often blends in with the surrounding vegetation. Look for it hunting on the edges of lakes and ponds. ©Bill Bevington

though the Alamosa River is a beautiful stream, the water is polluted from historic mining operations and will not sustain fish. Many songbirds live in the riparian zone next to the river.

Facilities: Alamosa and Stunner Forest Service campgrounds.

Administering agency: U.S. Forest Service (719) 852-5941).

Blanca Wetlands

Featured wildlife: A variety of waterfowl and other water birds can be seen nesting in spring and summer.

Location: Drive 7 miles north of Alamosa on Hwy 17; turn east on Two Mile Road S.

Viewing information: A special year-round watchable wildlife viewing site has been developed.

Facilities: Parking and handicapped-accessible restrooms. Handicapped access to the viewing site is planned for construction in the spring of 1993.

Administering agency: Bureau of Land Management (719) 589-4975.

Great Sand Dunes National Monument

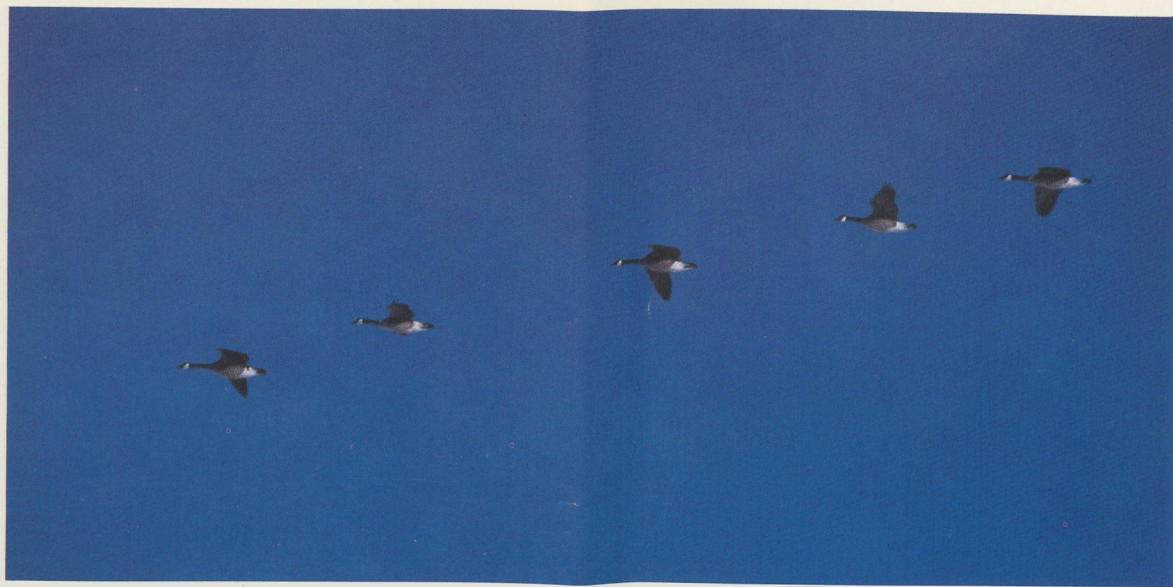
Featured wildlife: Watch for mule deer, chipmunks, golden-mantled ground squirrels, cottontail rabbits, turkey vultures, songbirds, and kangaroo rats (at night).

Location: Drive east of Alamosa on U.S. Hwy. 160 for 16 miles; turn left on Hwy. 150 and go 21 miles to the Monument gate. Access is by motorized vehicle.

Viewing information:

Several miles of hiking trails on the perimeter of the dunes. Climbing the dunes is encouraged and part of the experience of visiting this beautiful monument. Information, maps and wildlife species lists are available at the visitor center.

Facilities: The National Park Service administers the Monument and provides an 88-unit campground, amphitheater, visitor center, picnic area, and



Canada geese can be seen throughout the year either flying overhead or grazing in grain fields in the early morning and late evening.

Geoff Tischbein

park ranger presentations. An entrance fee is required. Fees are subject to change. No hunting is allowed and pets must be on a leash.

Administering agency: National Park Service (719)378-2312.

Fort Garland Area

Featured wildlife: During winter months look for deer and elk along U.S. Hwy. 160 and Hwy. 159.

Location: Up to 5 miles east and 12 miles south of Fort Garland.

Viewing information: There are good drive-by viewing possibilities all winter. The rest area east of Fort Garland is a good bet.

La Jara Creek State Wildlife Area

Featured wildlife: In the summer look for coyotes, marmots, deer, rabbits, hawks and eagles. In the winter look for deer, elk, and bighorn sheep.

Location: Drive 19 miles south of Monte Vista on Hwy. 15 and turn west on the road to La Jara Reservoir. Go about one mile then drive south (left), not to reservoir. Passenger cars are not recommended.

Description: La Jara Creek bisects the area. Riparian and foothills with grass and browse.

Viewing information: The area is closed to vehicle use December 1 through April 30.

Facilities: Parking; overnight camping is available nearby.

Administering agency: Colorado Division of Wild-



Although the coyote is quite common throughout the valley it is very secretive and rarely seen.

©Ray Richardson



Over 18,000 greater sandhill cranes stop over in The Valley every spring and fall during their migration. They can be seen doing their mating dance in the spring. ©Wendy Shatill\Bob Rozinski

life (719) 852-4783.

Hot Creek State Wildlife Area

Featured wildlife: In the summer coyotes, prairie dogs, eagles, geese, hawks, rabbits, songbirds are common. Beaver, muskrat, and waterfowl live in the wetland areas.

Location: Drive 20 miles south of Monte Vista on Hwy. 15 or go west on Hwy. 15 from La Jara to Capulin. Go west 2.5 miles to the Hot Creek turnoff and proceed on gravel road into the area. Not recommended for winter



The American avocet is easy to identify by its beautiful plumage and curved bill. ©Wendy Shatill\Bob Rozinski

visits. Passenger cars are not recommended.

Viewing information: Hot Creek flows at 54 degrees year-round and thus attracts aquatic wildlife. The wetlands provide seasonal habitat for many songbirds and small animals. The area also winters deer and elk.

Facilities: Camping is allowed. Please pack your trash out.

Administering agency: Colorado Division of Wildlife (719) 852-4783.

Lower Rio Grande Corridor

Featured wildlife: Waterfowl, raptors, variety of other birds and deer can be seen throughout the year.

Location: Drive south of Alamosa on Hwy. 285 to Antonito. Turn east on 8th (County Rd. G) for 13 miles. Travel on BLM land is limited to existing roads and trails. Areas off paved or graveled roads are not recommended for passenger cars. Please get permission to use private lands.

Facilities: None

Viewing information: Wildlife can be seen by using existing roads and trails along the canyon rim.

Administering agency: Bureau of Land Management (719) 589-4975.

Monte Vista National Wildlife Refuge

Featured wildlife: In the spring and fall there are large concentrations of sandhill, whooping cranes, and migrating waterfowl. Look for nesting ducks, geese, ibis, herons, egrets and pheasants in the spring and summer; bald eagles and rough-legged hawks in the winter.

Location: Drive 6 miles south of Monte Vista on Hwy. 15.

Facilities: There is a self-guided vehicle tour, restrooms and parking. A visitor contact station at the refuge headquarters may be open and is operated by volunteers during high-public-use weekends in spring and fall.

Viewing information: Brochure and species list are available. Except for a 2.5-mile auto tour, the refuge is closed to public access to provide undisturbed wildlife habitat. One-third of the refuge is open to waterfowl and upland game hunting during designated seasons. In late March the refuge is central to activities of the annual Crane Festival held to celebrate the arrival of 20,000 greater sandhill cranes that gather before migrating north to their nesting grounds in Idaho.

Administering agency: U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (719) 589-4021.

Rio Grande State Wildlife Area

Featured wildlife: In summer one can expect to see a variety of waterfowl and waterbirds such as mallards, gadwalls, coots, geese, great blue herons and black-crowned night herons. In winter the warm artesian water attracts thousands of waterfowl. Bald eagles winter along the river and are frequently seen perched in the tall cottonwood trees. Deer, coyotes, cottontails, and pheasants are common.

Location: Drive east on U.S. Hwy. 160 in Monte Vista and turn left onto Sherman Avenue. Continue east on Sherman to Home Lake Road where the property begins. The eastern portion of the property is reached by going six miles east of Monte Vista on U.S. Hwy. 160, turn left and go north two miles on County Road 371 to the property.

Facilities: There are six parking areas. Two have toilet facilities. Camping is permitted at the parking areas. The area is closed to all use February 15 through July 15 to avoid interference with nesting birds. Motorized traffic is

prohibited in the area.

Administering agency: Colorado Division of Wildlife (719) 852-4783.

Sego Springs State Wildlife Area

Featured wildlife: Ducks, geese, wading birds, coyotes, eagles, and hawks.

Location: Drive three miles east of Manassa on State Hwy 142, then .5 mile north on dirt access road.

Viewing information: Public use is prohibited from February 15 through July 15. Hunting is allowed in season.

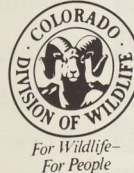
Facilities: none

Administering agency: Colorado Division of Wildlife (719) 852-4783.



Its black mask makes the raccoon unmistakable though it is rarely seen since it prowls at night. ©Kevin Ellis

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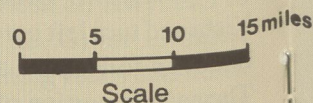


watching wildlife

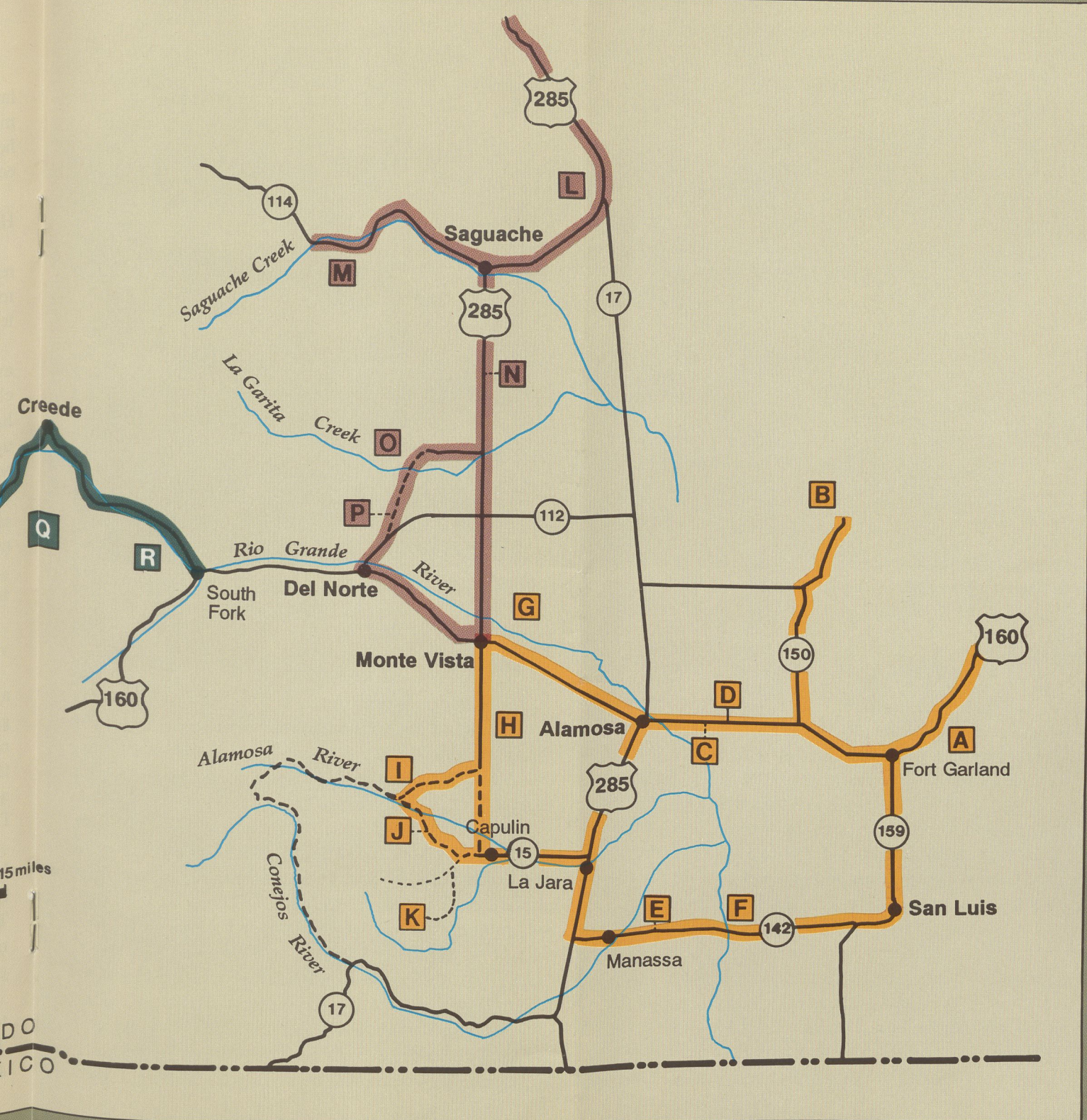
in the colorado
san luis
valley

KEY TO VIEWING OPPORTUNITIES

- A** Fort Garland area
- B** Great Sand Dunes National Monument
- C** Alamosa National Wildlife Refuge
- D** Blanca Wildlife Habitat Area
(Blanca Wetlands)
- E** Sego Springs State Wildlife Area
- F** Lower Rio Grande Corridor
- G** Rio Grande State Wildlife Area
- H** Monte Vista National Wildlife Refuge
- I** Alamosa River Canyon
- J** Hot Creek State Wildlife Area
- K** La Jara Reservoir
(La Jara Creek State Wildlife Area)
- L** Villa Grove
- M** Highway 114 & Trickle Mountain
- N** Russell Lakes State Wildlife Area
- O** La Garita Creek
- P** Natural Arch
- Q** Highway Section 149
- R** Collier State Wildlife Area
- S** Brown Lakes State Wildlife Area



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The northern zone of the Valley includes habitats from the Valley Floor to the alpine. The Natural Arch is north of Del Norte. Look for bighorn sheep, antelope, deer and elk.

©Wendy Shattil/Bob Rozinski

The Foothills Offer Many Opportunities

From the north on U.S. Hwy. 285 you come into The Valley over Poncha Pass. The top of the pass is a ponderosa pine ecosystem that gives way to sagebrush as you descend to lower elevations. The valley floor here is irrigated pasture. Antelope are found between the valley floor and the foothills. Watch for them on both sides of the road year-round. From Villa Grove to Saguache ("Saw watch") is semi-arid grass and sagebrush. You may also see hawks, coyotes, eagles, prairie dogs and deer.

About 14 miles west of Saguache on Hwy. 114 you can often see numerous bighorn sheep. The valley along Saguache Creek is all lush ranch land. Bighorn sheep live on the cliff areas across the creek, along the south facing Trickle Mountain area. There are dirt roads on the north side of this area that offer other opportunities to see deer, elk and antelope. Contact the U.S. Forest Service on the west edge

of Saguache for information.

At first appearance the vegetation seems scarce, but the short shrubs, forbs and grasses provide abundant forage. Animals come down onto the private ranches and forage, especially in the winter months.

Just six miles south of Saguache on Hwy. 285 is the Russell Lakes State Wildlife Area. This is a major water bird nesting area. To protect nesting birds, it is closed to the public from February 15 to July 15. There is one parking area right off the highway and another a mile east. Signs will direct you.

There are several small lakes, ponds, and wetland areas. You can find a wide variety of birds including avocets, marsh wrens, egrets, white-faced ibis, a variety of grebes, thousands of waterfowl and Canada geese, black-crowned night herons, and many migrating shore birds.

Continuing south on Hwy. 285 turn west to the small village of La Garita. At pavements end take a good gravel road to the left that takes you past the Bureau of Land Management Riparian Area on La Garita Creek where you can see songbirds as well as small animals and mule deer. This foothill area is prime winter range for deer and elk.

After passing La Garita Creek turn west on Forest Service Road 660 to the Natural Arch. You can climb to the arch and enjoy the beautiful view through its large window.

This area has spectacular rock cliffs which just recently have been discovered by rock climbers. The valleys are grass and shrub-type and pinon-juniper covers the foothills. Watch for soaring golden eagles and other raptors near cliff areas. There are four-wheel drive roads throughout the area.

Bighorn sheep were released in this area in the 1980s and they are here year-round. Watch the base and tops of cliff areas. This area is not passable to wheeled vehicles during the winter months. Get the latest access information from the Forest Service office in Del Norte.

VIEWING OPPORTUNITIES

Natural Arch

Featured wildlife: Bighorn sheep, deer, antelope, golden eagle, raptors and songbirds can be seen all summer.



The red-winged blackbird is quite common and can be seen around lakes and ponds.

©Ray Richardson



The snowy egret is a medium size bird that can be seen near wetlands.

©Ray Richardson

Elk are in the area during winter months.

Location: Drive north of Del Norte on Hwy. 112 and turn left on first road past the Rio Grande bridge. Take Forest Road 660 to Old Womans Creek, approximately 12 miles. This is a gravel road and access can be difficult when roads are wet or snowpacked. Vehicle access, except for snowmobile, can be restricted during winter months. Check with the Forest Service office in Del Norte. Watch for deer and antelope. Turn left and follow Forest Road 569 1.5 miles to Natural Arch.

Description: The area is characterized by rolling hills of pinyon-juniper with mixed grass and browse openings. There are tall monolithic rock formations favored by technical rock climbers.

Viewing information: Short hikes to other vantage points provide additional wildlife viewing opportunities. Elk winter in the area, but roads can be impassable in winter months. The Forest Service has a pamphlet with informa-



One of the more prominent birds in Colorado is the black-billed magpie. ©Ray Richardson

tion about this area.

Facilities: Picnic area

Information: U.S. Forest Service
P. O. Box 40
Del Norte, CO 81132
Phone (719) 657-3321.



Easily identified by the white collar, killdeer are often found around water and will scurry ahead of hikers attempting to draw them from their nest. ©Sherm Spoelstra

Highway 114/Trickle Mountain

Featured wildlife: During the fall through spring, look for bighorn sheep, deer, elk, antelope, coyotes and marmots along this stretch of highway.

Location: Drive west of Saguache on Hwy. 114 for about 14 miles.

Viewing information: Binoculars and spotting scopes are very helpful. Bighorns are normally on the north side of the highway on the cliffs across the creek. Several dirt roads and loop drives offer additional viewing opportunities on more than 44,000 acres of BLM on Trickle Mountain. For more viewing information contact either the Forest Service or the BLM.

Description: The habitat is high mountain meadow with mountain sides of pinyon pine, juniper, various short grasses and browse.

Facilities: None

Information:

Bureau of Land Management	U.S. Forest Service
1921 State St.	P.O. Box 7
Alamosa, CO 81101	Saguache, CO 81149
Phone (719) 589-4975	Phone (719)655-2547

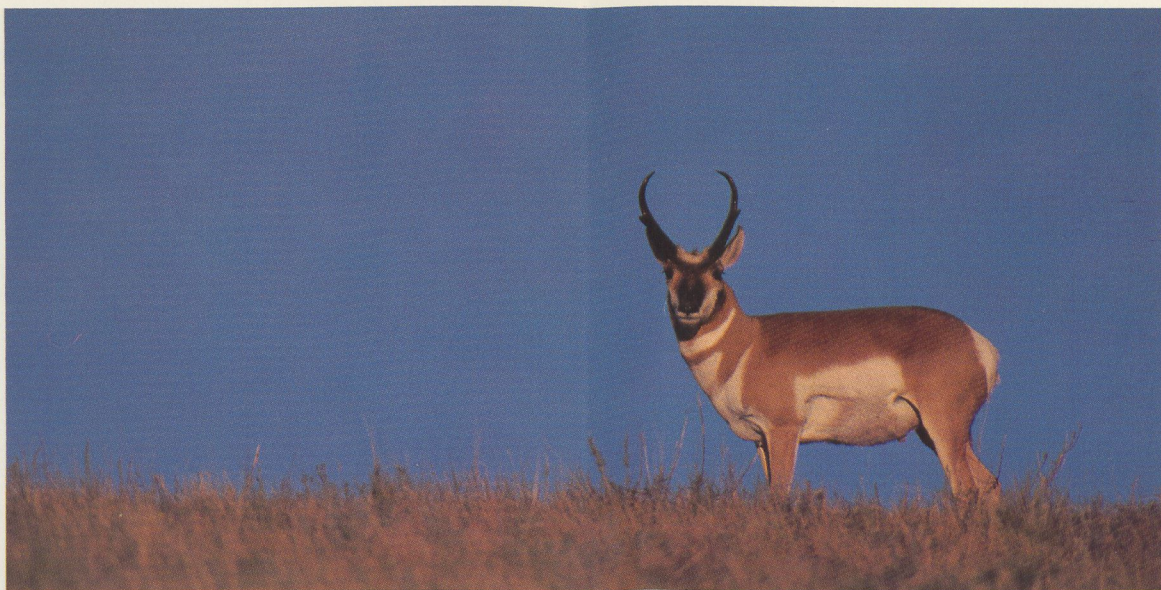
La Garita Creek

Featured wildlife: Deer, antelope, prairie dogs, yellow-bellied marmots, porcupines, beaver, muskrat, shore birds, raptors, waterfowl, raptors and other birds.

Location: From Del Norte, go three miles northeast on Hwy. 112 to County Road 41G. Turn left and proceed eight miles. The viewing area is just past the creek on the west side of County Road 41G, ten miles north of Del Norte. Access from Hwy. 112 is on gravel road.

Description: The La Garita Creek Riparian Management Area encompasses about 760 acres of BLM land. The viewing area sits above the creek and offers a great view of the meadows and stream.

Viewing information: Walk or horseback only from designated parking areas. Other trails



The pronghorn is the fastest North American mammal and can reach speeds of 60 mph. Look for them in the foothills around Villa Grove, south of Capulin and the Natural Arch. ©Sherm Spoelstra

are available for 4-wheel-drive outside of the meadow area.

Facilities: Parking only. No rock climbing on the bluffs adjacent to the creek.

Information:

Bureau of Land Management
1921 State St.
Alamosa, CO 81101
(719) 589-4975.

Russell Lakes State Wildlife Area

Featured wildlife: This area is a nesting and migratory bird resting area for waterfowl and shore birds. Mallard, gadwall, shoveler, Canada geese, egret, avocet, white-faced ibis and many small wading birds nest here. Other birds such as the greater sandhill crane stop to rest on their seasonal migrations

Description: Drive 9 miles south of Saguache on U.S. Hwy 285 to County Road R and turn east for one mile.

Location: The Russell Lakes State Wildlife area has 5,040 acres of ponds, marshes and grassland-greasewood.

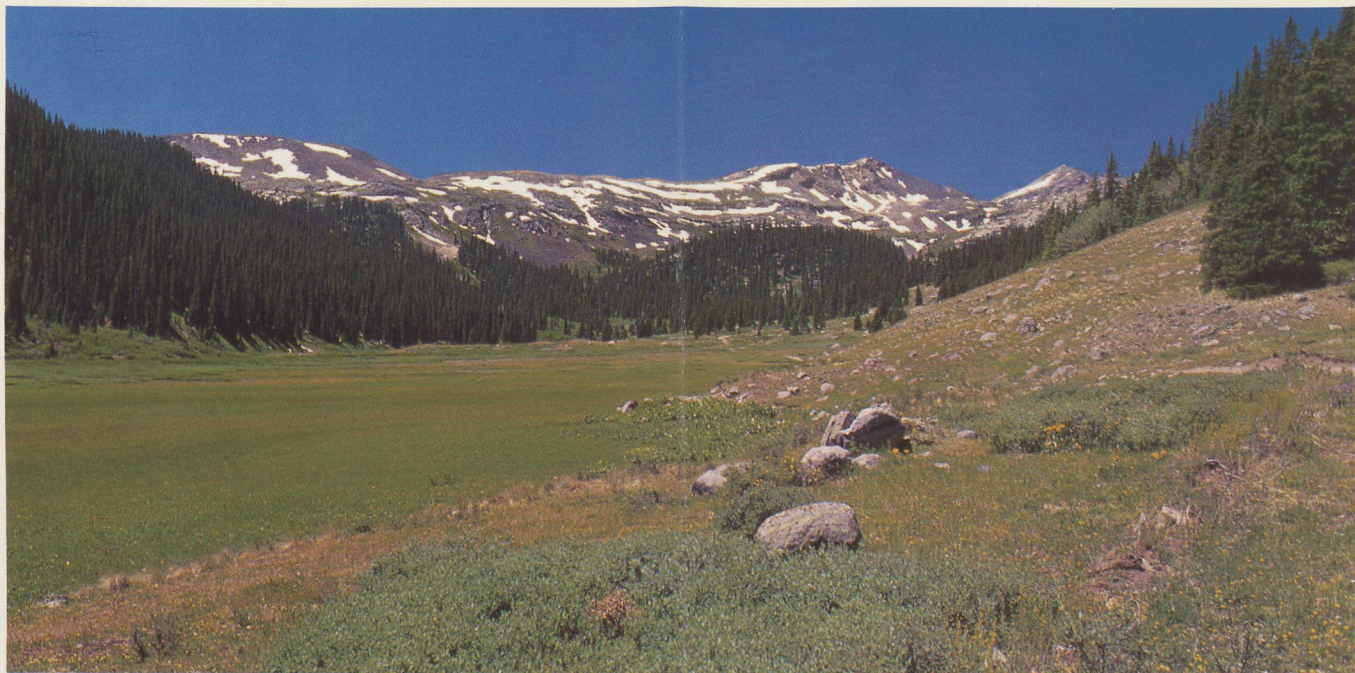
Viewing information: The best viewing opportunities are in the summer after July 15. Public use is prohibited during the nesting season from February 15 through July 15. Hunting is allowed during waterfowl seasons.

Facilities: There are four parking areas. Overnight self-contained camping is allowed. One parking lot on Hwy. 285 at County Road P is open year around, with good viewing opportunities—no access out of the parking lot February 15 to July 15. No motorized traffic is allowed off designated roads.

Administering agency: Colorado Division of Wildlife (719) 852-4783.



The golden-mantled ground squirrel, often mistaken for the chipmunk, lacks the eye stripe and is larger. ©Kevin Ellis



The upper Rio Grande includes some of the most beautiful alpine meadows in Colorado. Many of them, such as Stony Pass pictured here, are only accessible by four-wheel-drive roads or hiking trails.

Geoff Tischbein

From Alpine Meadows to Mountain Peaks

The Rio Grande begins on the Continental Divide about 50 miles upriver from Creede. From its headwaters



The yellow-bellied marmot is frequently seen along mountain roadsides during the spring through fall.

©Kevin Ellis

down 1,800 miles to its confluence with the Gulf of Mexico the Rio Grande and its tributaries provides riparian and wetland habitat to thousands of species of wildlife.

As you travel west of Del Norte on U.S. Hwy. 160 you will see farm and ranch land. The area between the low foothills and the higher mountains is big game winter range. In the summer, one is more likely to see mule deer, coyotes, marmots, prairie dogs, rabbits and squirrels. Elk live in the higher country and migrate each fall to the meadows in these lower areas.

State Hwy. 149, heading northwest from South Fork, is called the "Silver Thread," a National Scenic Byway. The Collier State Wildlife Area is five miles north of South Fork and is a Gold Medal fishing area. It is also a gathering place for elk each fall as they come out of the high country from the southwest and migrate to winter ranges north of South Fork and Del Norte. November through December is a good time to see large herds of elk.

Elk were transplanted from Yellowstone National

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Park to this area in the early 1900s. This area is now one of the top elk hunting areas in Colorado.

Bighorn sheep were the most abundant big game animal in the mid 1800s. Early pioneers killed bighorns for food. Disease most likely finished off remnant herds. The Division of Wildlife has made several transplants that can be observed near Hwy. 149 for a good part of the year. Watch the cliff areas at Blue Creek, Cottonwood Cove, Forest Road 600 at Wagonwheel Gap, 13 miles above Creede at Seepage Creek and the cliffs near mile marker 34.

The Rio Grande provides excellent habitat for rainbow and brown trout. Much of the bottom land is private. Please get permission before using. A variety of songbirds such as yellow warblers, broad-tailed and rufous hummingbirds, western tanagers, mountain bluebirds, meadow larks and many more can be seen along the river.

In the summer, golden eagles and red-tailed hawks are seen catching the updraft currents near cliffs. Come winter, bald eagles occasionally fly up and down the river corridor. The American rough-legged hawk is the most common soaring hawk seen during the winter months.

Around Creede the valley floor broadens. Now there are many subdivisions and developments, but in the 1870s one would have heard the rumble of wagons and the yelling of teamsters as they carried people and mining equipment all the way up the Rio Grande over Stony Pass and down to Silverton. Creede didn't exist yet, but those early day travelers did stop at Antelope Springs, where Seepage Creek is today. Just south of this area is Antelope Park, a place where the Rio Grande valley is flat and broad. As late as 1875 there was a herd of antelope in this area. Exploring miners lived off the land and between the sustenance hunting and severe winters, the antelope disappeared from the Upper Rio Grande. They have not been reintroduced because they would not cope well with fences and modern development.

As Hwy. 149 leaves the valley floor it turns north toward Spring Creek Pass on the Conti-

ental Divide. This is an area to slow down, take side roads that are passable and watch for the Upper Rio Grande's newest wildlife addition. The first moose were transplanted from Northern Colorado and Utah in 1992. They prefer the lush willow bottoms found along most of the small streams in this area. They are usually seen as solitary individuals or in the winter in small groups.

This area is also home to blue grouse, snowshoe hare, marmot, weasels, beaver, squirrels, porcupine, and pine marten.

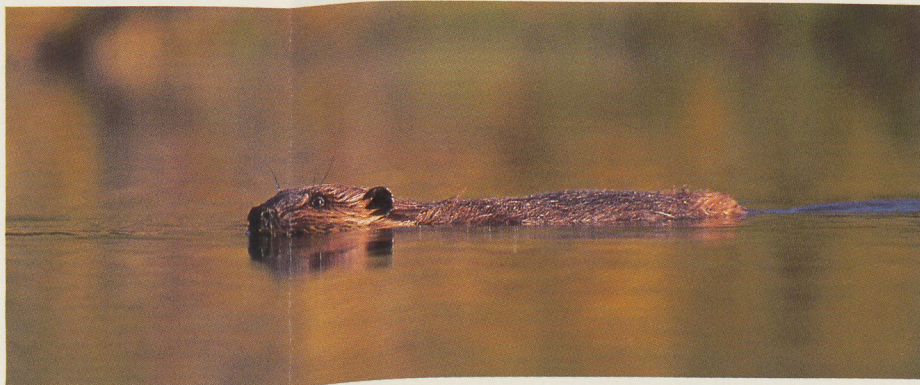
Elk can also occasionally be seen throughout the year. In the summer you will find elk above 10,000 feet in elevation. They prefer areas of solitude, usually roadless or areas seldom visited by people. They spend most of the daylight hours in spruce-fir timbered mountainsides. They feed early morning and late evening in small openings and above timberline. In the late summer you can listen to their "bugling." This is the time of the year bulls challenge each other and gather their harems for the breeding season.

VIEWING OPPORTUNITIES

Brown Lakes State Wildlife Area

Location: Drive west of Creede on Hwy. 149 approximately 24 miles and turn left on Forest Road 516. In about a mile you will come to Brown Lakes.

Description: This is a 160-acre lakes and wetland wildlife area. The primary use of the lakes is for fishing. There are wetlands at the upper ends of each lake that



Keep your eyes focused on mountain ponds in the late afternoon and you might be able to see beavers working on their dams.

© D. Robert Franz



The Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep is one of the most magnificent animals in Colorado. Look for them on Highway 114 west of Saguache, the Alamosa Canyon, and near the Natural Arch.

© D. Robert Franz

provide nesting habitat for waterfowl. There are abundant willows that might provide moose habitat in future years.

Viewing information: One can see black-crowned night herons, mallards, gadwalls, coots, and geese on the lakes and associated wetlands. Deer, elk, prairie dogs, marmots and songbirds may be seen in the area and beaver maintain their dams on South Clear Creek below the lakes.

Facilities: There are several parking areas and restrooms. No overnight camping is allowed.

Administering agency: Colorado Division of Wildlife (719) 852-4783.

Coller SWA

Featured wildlife: In the summer look for prairie dogs, marmots and songbirds. In November and December this is a good place to watch herds of elk.

Location: Go five miles north of South Fork on Hwy. 149 to the area.

Description: The Coller State Wildlife area is composed of 733 acres. The Rio Grande flows through the property and offers more than three miles of Gold Medal

quality trout fishing. The area is a ponderosa pine, cottonwood, willow, aspen and grassland riparian habitat.

Viewing information: View migrating elk in large herds usually in November and December. Drive by viewing on Highway 149.

Facilities: There are several parking areas and restrooms. Overnight camping is not allowed.

Administering agency: Colorado Division of Wildlife (719) 852-4783.

Highway 149

Featured wildlife: Watch for bighorn sheep near Blue Creek, Pooltable Road and north of Seepage Creek and above the Park Corrals. Large herds of elk can be seen along the Rio Grande and Long Ridge throughout the winter. Other wildlife includes deer, coyotes, bear, marmot, Abert's squirrel. In summer many songbirds are along the river. Moose may be seen in the area around North Clear Creek Falls. A brochure "The Moose of Southwest Colorado" describes details about moose and viewing opportunities in this area.

Location: Hwy. 149 from South Fork to Spring Creek Pass

Description: This section of highway is designated as a National Scenic Byway called "The Silver Thread." The highway parallels the Rio Grande for about 40 miles. The canyon from South Fork to Wagonwheel Gap is a cottonwood, alder and willow riparian area. Ponderosa pine will be found on south-facing slopes and Douglas fir on the north-facing slopes. Both slopes have grass and some browse understory. The valley floor is grassland with several subdivisions and ranches. The highway turns north away from the river 20 miles west of Creede and climbs through aspen groves and mountain parks to the Continental Divide at Spring Creek Pass.

Viewing information: From fall through spring deer, moose, elk and bighorn sheep can be seen along the highway early morning and late evening. A vehicle is a good blind for viewing and photography and can serve as an excellent blind as long as you remain in it. Most tributaries of the Rio Grande have beaver dams. Watch the ranch lands for coyotes chasing meadow mice. "The Silver Thread Wildlife Viewing Guide" is available at the Creed/Mineral County Chamber of Commerce (719-658-2374).

Facilities: Campgrounds and community services in South Fork, Creede and Lake City.

Information:

U.S. Forest Service
Creede Chamber
South Fork Chamber



Golden eagles can be seen soaring overhead anytime of year. Look for nests in big trees or on cliffs. Geoff Tischbein



In 1992 the Colorado Division of Wildlife released moose west of Creede. Look for them in the willow bottoms along Highway 149.

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SLV Information Center
1st and Jefferson
Monte Vista, CO 81144
(800) 835-7254

San Luis Chamber
325 Main St.
San Luis, CO 81152
(719) 672-3355

Saguache Chamber
501 4th
Saguache, CO 81149
(719) 655-2805, 2232

Del Norte Chamber
1160 Grande Ave.
Del Norte, CO 81132
(719) 657-2845

Fort Garland Welcome
Center
Ft. Garland, CO 81133
(719) 379-3512

Creede Chamber
Main Street
Creede, CO 81130
(800) 327-2102

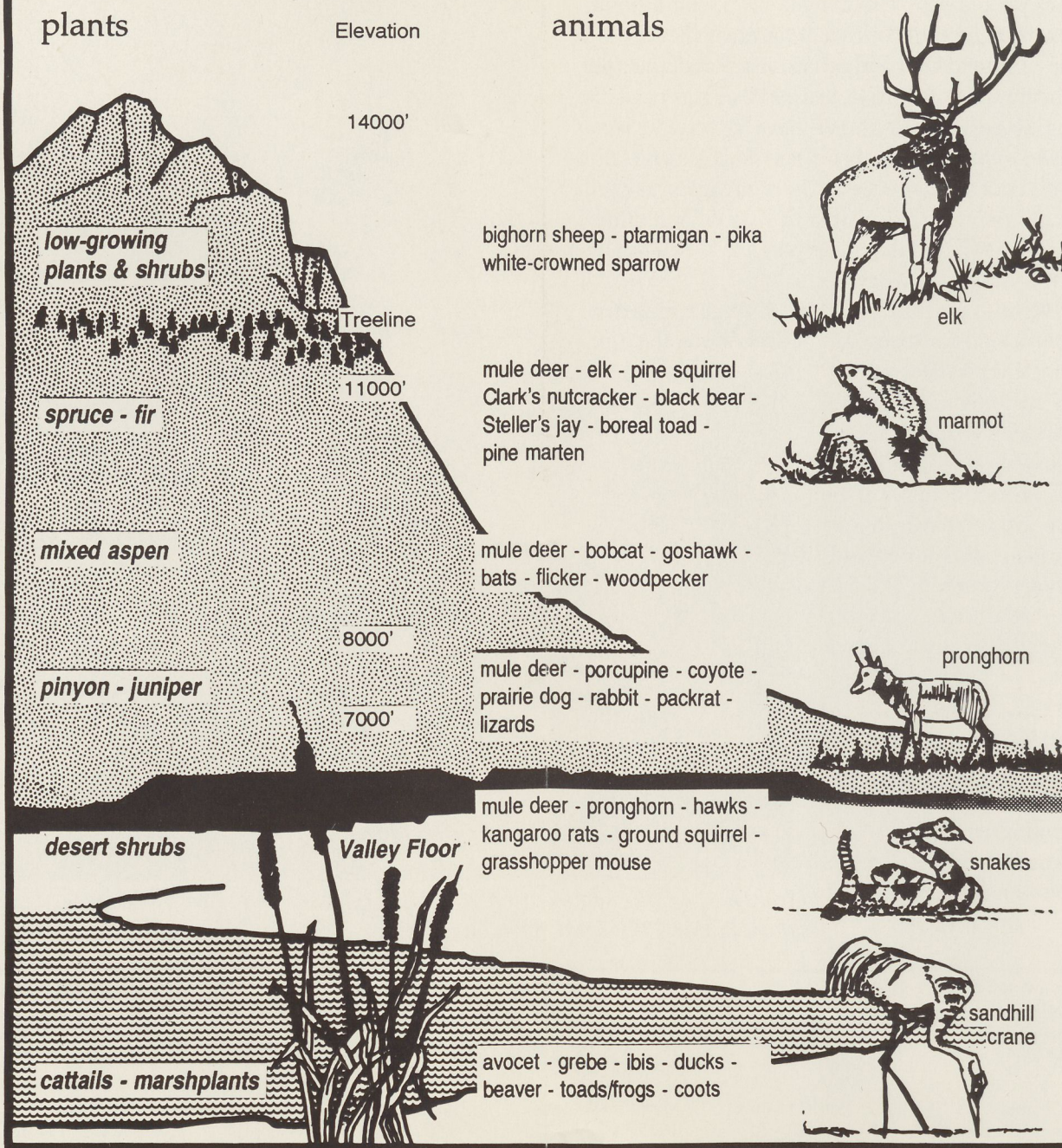
South Fork Chamber
P.O. Box 116
South Fork, CO 81154
(719) 873-5512

Monte Vista Chamber
1035 Park Ave.
Monte Vista, CO 81144
(719) 852-2731

Antonito Chamber
P.O. Box 427
Antonito, CO 81120
(719) 376-5443

Alamosa Chamber
Cole Park
Alamosa, CO 81101
(719) 589-3681

LIFE ZONES



Claudette Anderson

AGENCIES

Colorado Division of Wildlife

0722 S. 1E.

Monte Vista, CO 81144 (719) 852-4783



The Colorado Division of Wildlife perpetuates the wildlife resources of Colorado and provides people the opportunity to use and enjoy them. District wildlife managers work out of the Monte Vista area office.

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

Alamosa/Monte Vista

National Wildlife Refuges

8393 El Rancho Lane

P.O. Box 1148

Alamosa, CO 81101 (719) 589-4021



The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the federal agency within the San Luis Valley responsible for management the Alamosa and Monte Vista national wildlife refuges and it assists private landowners improve water bird habitat. Its objective is to provide biological diversity and healthy habitats that benefit threatened and endangered species, waterbirds and other migratory birds. Refuge Managers supervise the operations.

U.S. Forest Service

Rio Grande National Forest

1803 W. U.S. Hwy 160

Monte Vista, CO 81144 (719)852-5941



The U.S. Forest Service protects and manages lands for a variety of uses that include maintaining continuous supplies of renewable resources such as water, forage, wildlife, wood, and non-renewable resources such as gas and minerals. The Forest Service provides many services for the recreationist such as maps, campgrounds, trails, and roads. The district ranger supervises operations in any local area. There are district offices in LaJara, Del Norte, Saguache and Creede.

Bureau of Land Management

1921 State Street

Alamosa, CO 81101 (719) 589-4975



The Bureau of Land Management administers 520,000 acres of public lands within the Valley. These lands are managed for a variety of uses and values including



The chipmunk is found throughout Colorado. Notice the prominent eye stripe.

©Kevin Ellis

recreation, livestock forage, water, mineral production, cultural resources and fish and wildlife habitat. In addition to wildlife viewing, BLM lands offer opportunities for a variety of other recreational activities. Contact the area manager in Alamosa for further details.

National Park Service

Great Sand Dunes

National Monument

11500 Hwy 150

Mosca, CO 81146 (719) 378-2312



The National Park Service protects the scenery, natural, historic objects and the wildlife for people to enjoy. You are likely to meet a park ranger when you visit a national park or monument.

San Luis Valley Tourism Council

2830 W. Hwy. 160

Monte Vista, CO 81144 (719) 852-5921



This council helps visitors connect with businesses who offer needed services. Local chamber of commerces are members of this council. This is an excellent source of information about local conditions and opportunities.

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