San Juan special
The trophy trout waters of the San Juan River below Navajo Dam continue to delight anglers 47 years after the dam was completed.

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Pronghorn roundup
Project renews herd at Santa Ana Pueblo

Story and photos by Dan Williams

Pronghorn antelope No. 10, a yearling doe, appeared disoriented as she stumbled from a livestock trailer into her new home on Santa Ana Pueblo. Unlike the rest of the herd, she did not quickly flee from the view of the 50 or so Pueblo members who gathered to watch the release. Instead, No. 10 stood for a few long minutes, looking a bit dazed before moving off through the grass and junipers along the Rio Puerco.

“I’m not sure that one’s going to make it,” someone from the crowd whispered. “Coyotes,” whispered another.

It had been a rough day for the yearling and the other 26 pronghorns in the trailer. In the span of a few early morning hours, they had been

... continued on Page 14

Antelope moved to new homes
The New Mexico Department of Game and Fish conducted its first pronghorn antelope trapping and transplanting operation in 11 years Feb. 28-March 2 in northeastern New Mexico. Twenty-seven pronghorns were released on Santa Ana Pueblo, below, and 125 were sent to Coahuila, Mexico.

Please see Page 8.

Please see Page 8.
Commission adopts hunting rule changes

New Mexico big-game hunters will see significant rule changes for the 2009-2010 seasons that affect the way hunters apply and pay for licenses and permits.

The new rules, adopted Dec. 4 by the State Game Commission, are in the 2009-2010 Big-Game Rules Information Booklet, now available on the Department of Game and Fish Web site, www.wildlife.state.nm.us. A printed version of the booklet is available at more than 200 license vendors statewide, and at Department offices in Albuquerque, Santa Fe, Raton, Roswell and Las Cruces.

Rule changes and important dates include:

2009-2010 seasons
- Customer ID number: Beginning in 2009, everyone applying for a public-land license or permit, or purchasing a license via a private land authorization or the Valles Caldera must first obtain a Customer ID Number online at www.wildlife.state.nm.us or in person from any Department office. This number must be included on each application, or the application will be rejected.
- Application deadline: April 8 is the deadline to apply for public deer permits; and elk, pronghorn antelope, ibex, Barbary sheep, javelina, and bighorn sheep draw licenses. Online applications must be made before 5 p.m. mountain time on the deadline day.
- Full fee-up front: Everyone applying for a pronghorn, bighorn sheep, ibex, javelina or Barbary sheep draw license must pay the full license and application fee when applying. Online applicants will be charged for the full license fee, plus the nonrefundable application fee at the time of application. Unsuccessful applicants will receive refunds.
- New application fees: The new nonrefundable application fees are $9 for residents and $12 for nonresidents.
- Youth encouragement elk hunts: These hunts will be made available to youth hunters who applied for big-game hunts and were unsuccessful in the draw. The hunts will be made available on a first-come, first-served basis.
- New unit boundaries: Several Game Management Unit boundaries have changed, including: the combination of Units 44 and 45 and the creation of a new Unit 59; and boundary adjustments in units SB, 41, 45, 51, 52, 54 and 5B.
- No deer application fees for resident disabled veterans: New Mexico resident Disabled American Veteran applicants do not need to submit an application fee when applying for a free deer permit.

Governor appoints Kent Salazar to State Game Commission

Gov. Bill Richardson has appointed Kent Salazar, an avid hunter and outdoorsman and regional director of the National Wildlife Foundation, to the New Mexico State Game Commission.

“Kent Salazar is respected for his deep knowledge of conservation issues both in New Mexico and nationally. I am confident he will be an excellent addition to the Game Commission,” Gov. Richardson said.

Salazar runs an environmental consulting business in Albuquerque. Previously, he worked for the City of Albuquerque’s Environmental Health Department for 20 years and he also has worked as an environmental planner and coordinator for the Land of Enchantment Clean Cities Program.

Salazar has a Bachelors degree in biology from the University of New Mexico. He replaced Oscar Simpson of the New Mexico Wildlife Federation. He will finish out Simpson’s term, which expires Dec. 31, 2011.

The State Game Commission is composed of seven members who represent the state’s diverse interests in wildlife-associated recreation and conservation. Members are appointed by the governor and confirmed by the state Senate. Current members are Chairman Jim McClintic, Albuquerque; Vice-chairwoman Sandy Buffet, Santa Fe; M.H. “Dutch” Salmon, Silver City; Alfredo Montoya, Alcalde; Leo Sims, Hobbs; and Kent Salazar, Albuquerque.

The commission’s next meeting will be April 16 in Farmington. The commission’s 2009 meeting schedule will also include: May 28, Albuquerque; July 2, Chama; Aug. 20, Albuquerque; Sept. 24, Las Cruces; and Dec. 3, Hobbs.

Meeting agendas, briefings and contact information for commissioners is available on the Department Web site, www.wildlife.state.nm.us. Information also is available by calling (505) 476-8008.
Hunting ‘legend’ sentenced

Kirt Darner, a nationally known big-game hunter and outfitter, is sentenced to 25 weeks in jail for illegally hunting and possessing the heads of two trophy bighorn sheep. Darner, 69, pleaded guilty to the charges in June 2008. Further examination of the evidence led to the conclusion that they were stolen.

The investigation involved close cooperation among the 13th Judicial District Attorney’s Office, the Colorado Division of Wildlife and the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish.

Kirt Darner, a nationally known big-game hunter and guide, and his wife, Paula Darner, were co-owners of a 40-acre game park on the Lobo Canyon Ranch north of Montrose, Colorado. They were indicted on multiple charges related to the possession of two trophy bighorn sheep heads and the illegal transport of stolen live elk. The Darners were accused of illegally hunting the state-own elk from the Lobo Canyon Ranch to the Pachico Peaks ranch and game park in southeastern New Mexico in 2005. Kirt Darner was paid $5,000 for each elk.

Department of Game and Fish officers who executed a search warrant at the Darner property in 2005 discovered a desert bighorn sheep head and a Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep head inside a vehicle. Further examination of the heads determined that they were stolen from a Montrose, Colorado, taxidermy shop in 2000. The Colorado Division of Wildlife had offered a $5,000 reward for information about the sheep-head thefts. At the time they were stolen, the sheep heads were estimated to be worth more than $20,000 each. At a Colorado Division of Wildlife investigator testified that a former employee of Darner’s admitted to being paid to steal the sheep heads.

Previously, in Colorado, Darner was convicted of illegal possession of wildlife in 1994. In 1999 he was convicted of second-degree tampering with evidence and careless driving in an incident in which he was serving as an outfitter. Division of Wildlife officers observed Darner’s client shoot at an elk decoy in a game management unit for which the client didn’t have a license. In 2008, Darner pleaded guilty to making a false statement in order to purchase a license. He had applied for landowner vouchers with the Department of Wildlife, but did not own enough property to be eligible for the program.

The Darners currently live in Crawford, Colorado.

If you have information about a wildlife crime, please call Operation Game Thief toll-free, (800) 432-4263. You can remain anonymous and may be eligible for a reward in information leads to charges being filed.

Department offers cougar ID course

The Department of Game and Fish is offering an online Cougar Education and Identification Course and an accompanying quiz to encourage hunters, guides and landowners to help ensure that cougar hunting is an activity they can continue to enjoy.

The online course focuses on how to distinguish male, female and sub-adult cougars, and also includes information about hunting rules, human-cougar issues, and state management objectives. The course and accompanying online exam was developed by a Colorado-based group called Wildlife without Wasteful Rules, which requires all cougar hunters to have passed the course as well as taken the online exam.

Contact the Department of Game and Fish toll-free, (877) 950-5466 or visit www.wildlife.state.nm.us to learn about management goals, the number of cougars allowed to be harvested, and the female subharvest limit before hunting in any Game Management Unit or Zone.


Southwest Environmental Center: Works to reverse the accelerating loss of species worldwide by protecting and restoring native wildlife and their habitats in the Southwestern borderlands, through grassroots advocacy, public education and on-the-ground restoration projects. (575) 522-5552, www.wildmesquite.org.

Southwest Consolidated Sportsmen: An organization representing at least 15 sporting and conservation groups of diverse interests. The group’s three primary objectives are to “disseminate wildlife and habitat information, participate in habitat maintenance projects, and review and comment on proposals involving wildlife habitat.” (575) 526-5056.

Trost Unlimited, New Mexico: Dedicated to the restoration, protection and conservation of all coldwater fisheries, their tributaries and watersheds and the fish that inhabit them. (505) 470-4879, www.nmfw.org.

New Mexico Wildlife Federation: Founded by Aldo Leopold in 1914, the organization is a strong lobbyist in the New Mexico Legislature, “dedicated to protecting New Mexico’s wildlife, habitat and outdoor way of life.” (505) 299-5464, www.wildlife.state.nm.us.

Audubon New Mexico: Devoted to the protection, preservation and enjoyment of the environment, with a particular emphasis on birds. The organization is state-wide, with headquarters at the Randall Davey Audubon Center in Santa Fe. (505) 983-4669, http://nm.audubon.org.

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Heron lakers challenge anglers

By Ross Morgan

Somewhere in the cool depths of Heron Lake lurks the fish of Don Wolffrey’s dreams—a lake trout worthy of the record books.

No, he’s not shooting for a world record. Beating the 72-pounder caught in Canada in 1995 would be quite a stretch at Heron. Seeing one of his clients beat the New Mexico record of 31 pounds, 6 ounces, however, would suit Wolffrey just fine.

“We’re hoping this will be another good year,” said Wolffrey, who has guided anglers at Heron Lake since 1997. “You never know about lakers. Some days you get into them, other days you don’t. Some days you catch 22- to 23-inchers, other days you catch 25-pounders.”

Heron is the only lake in New Mexico that supports a lake trout fishery. Lake trout initially were stocked as fry in 1976 and then again as fingerlings in 1987. The lake is capable of sustaining natural reproduction, which makes it such a great lake trout fishery. At Heron, lake trout are managed as a unique, trophy angling opportunity, with a harvest limit of two fish a day.

Lake trout (Salvelinus namaycush) are the largest representatives of a group of fish known as char and are closely related to Dolly Varden, brook trout, and Arctic char. The slow-growing fish are also called Great Lakes trout, mackinaw, lake char, loulaid, toguis and grey trout. They thrive in deep, cold, oxygen-rich waters and often are found at depths of 60 to 200 feet, and occasionally in shallower waters. They vary from light green, grey, dark green, or almost black with light spots and worm-like markings on their back and sides. Their tail is deeply forked with 10-11 rays in their anal fin.

Lake trout often are described as planktivory, small fish that feed mostly on plankton; or piscivorous, larger fish that feed mostly on other fish.

Heron Lake holds the state record for and Fish public information officer for the Southwest Area. He can be reached in Albuquerque at (505) 222-4707 or ross.morgan@state.nm.us.

Head southwest for fishing smorgasboard

By LuAnn Tafoya

Looking for some variety in your fishing outings this year? Head for southwestern New Mexico, where in the span of a few days, anglers have opportunities to catch bass, catfish, walleye, trout and 40-inch tiger muskie.

“Where else can you catch and release a tiger muskie one day and bag a Gila trout the next?” said Joey Vega, Southwest Area fisheries biologist for the Department of Game and Fish. He and warmwater fisheries biologist Casey Harthorn offered the following forecasts for the state’s southwestern waters:

**Elephant Butte Lake**

“Good water levels produced a good spawn resulting in high-quality and quantity of largemouth bass,” Harthorn said. “You should be able to catch legal-size (14-inch minimum) fish.” Smallmouth bass numbers have increased, but expect smaller fish this year. Striped bass fishing will be slow, but chances of catching a heavy fish should increase. Average weights should be around 20 pounds. While bass fishing will be good, but fish will be smaller because of a slow spawn.

If you catch a walleye, you’ll have a good possibility of catching one over 14 inches this year. Walleye numbers are about the same as last year.

If you’re looking for channel catfish, focus on areas south of Long Point. Blue catfish will be found on the north end of the lake.

**Caballo Lake**

Walleye fishing should be excellent this spring, Vega said, with the peak chances of catching fish over 14 inches coming between March and May. He recommends trolling deep waters in the summer.

White bass fishing should be about the same as last year, with smaller fish but more of them. Catfish angling also looks promising for fish around 10 inches.

**Silver City area**

As the water starts to warm, the catfish and bass start biting at Lake Roberts. Largemouth bass fishing should start picking up after April 1. It’s always best fishing from boats at Lake Roberts. Bank anglers often find themselves fighting the cattails along the shoreline.

Bear Canyon Lake is another good bet for catfish, bass and small bluegills.

Fishing should be good again this year at Bill Evans Lake, home of the state record largemouth bass. You’ll also find good populations of bluegills in the lake, some average-sized catfish and trout from winter stockings.

**Quemado Lake**

TROUT fishing almost always is good at Quemado Lake, but it is best from September to May, so hit it in early spring. When the temperatures rise, try for one of the monster (up to 40-inch) tiger muskies the Department put in the lake to clean out the goldfish. June and July are the best months for the mussels, which are restricted to catch-and-release for now.

**Gila country**

The Forks area of the Gila River and Sapillo Creek should offer average fishing for Gila trout. There also are special waters available for anglers who want to catch and release a Gila trout. Special regulations apply and permits are required. You can get a free permit and learn about Gila trout waters and fishing rules at www.wildlife.state.nm.us.

Ross Morgan is the Department of Game and Fish public information officer for the Northwest Area. He can be reached in Albuquerque at (505) 222-4707 or ross.morgan@state.nm.us.

Free Fishing Day is June 6

This year there will be three fishing clinics on Free Fishing Day, June 6, in the Southwest Area. Clinics are great opportunities for youngsters to learn all about fishing. Locations include Alumni Pond on the New Mexico State University campus in Las Cruces, Lake Roberts, and Ralph Wolfley’s pond in Tularosa. Fishing licenses are not required on this day and clinics provide stations where kids can learn about the biology of the fish, identification, bait and tackle, knots, casting, rules and regulations, and conservation. For more information about the clinics or fishing in the Southwest Area, please call the Las Cruces office at 575-532-2100.

LuAnn Tafoya is the Department of Game and Fish public information officer for the Southwest Area. She can be reached in Las Cruces at (575) 532-2106 or luann.tafoya@state.nm.us.
Fishing outlook good for northeastern waters

By Eric Frey

Whether you’re after trout, walleye or bass, northeastern New Mexico has plenty of opportunities for some nice catches this year, thanks to an ample snowpack and increased trout stockings by the Department of Game and Fish.

Here’s a quick look at some popular northeastern waters and what anglers can expect this year:

**Conchas Lake:** Water levels continue to be below normal, but most fish populations are stable. The lake should be excellent for channel catfish and white bass fishing this year. Fish surveys indicate largemouth and smallmouth populations are stable with a few largemouth bass over five pounds caught last spring. Walleye numbers decreased slightly, but on average the fish are larger. Early April to mid-May are the best times to fish for walleye.

**Ute Lake:** Water levels at Ute Lake remain stable and the white bass population is the highest it has been in several years, and May and June will be excellent times to fish for them. The channel catfish population is stable and fishing should remain good through 2009. Largemouth bass numbers are down, but anglers can expect a slightly larger fish this year. Smallmouth bass have increased in number and fishing should be great spring through summer.

**Eagle Nest Lake:** The population of rainbow trout has remained stable and the lake should offer great fishing this year, especially right after the ice melts. The kokanee salmon population has increased, so summer trolling should be good this year. Yellow perch numbers remain high and spring fishing should be exceptional for the small but tasty fish.

**Pecos River:** Stream flows should remain good through 2009. The Pecos River has a high number of wild brown trout and the Department of Game and Fish will stock about 50,000 rainbow trout in the Pecos Canyon this year.

Cimarron River: The river continues to hold lots of brown trout, and anglers can expect to catch larger fish this year. The Department plans to stock about 2,500 catchable-sized rainbow trout in the river, making angling prospects even brighter.

For more information about fishing opportunities in northeastern New Mexico that offer ample opportunities for kids to catch fish, Sumner Lake and Bosque Redondo near Fort Sumner offer great opportunities for bluegills and green sunfish. Bottomless Lakes and Lake Van near Roswell have great rainbow trout fishing during the winter. Carlsbad Municipal, Bataan, Green Meadow, Eunice and Jal lakes offer rainbow trout fishing and some sunfish. Many of these same waters are stocked with channel catfish during the summer. Spring River Park (Roswell kid’s pond) and Harry McAdams Park in Hobbs are for kids only.

If you’re looking for a challenge and maybe a good laugh or two, consider taking your young son or daughter fishing this spring. Even better, how about your grandparents? You can teach them the art of fishing and give them something that they will enjoy for the rest of their lives. Give them an excuse to get off the couch and away from the video games and wet-a-line and maybe catch a fish or two.

Mark Madsen is the Department of Game and Fish fisheries biologist for northeastern New Mexico. For more information about fishing opportunities in northeastern New Mexico call the Northeast Area office of the Department of Game and Fish in Raton, (575) 445-2311.

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Casting practice on dry land is a good idea before youngsters hit the water for the first time.

By Mark Madsen

One of life’s greatest adventures is teaching a kid to fish. All you need is a little practice, a little bait … and a lot of patience.

Teaching a kid to fish is really quite simple. Start by teaching the fundamentals of casting, usually with a ‘Snoopy’ or in today’s world, a ‘Spongebob’ or ‘Transformers’ rod-and-reel combo. Remember to wear protective headgear and eye protection as simple as possible. Using a bobber, you’ll be busy for hours along with other educational stations. The clinics are open to all kids and include basic instructions for casting, knot tying, fish anatomy and identification, as well as来自 other sponsors, conducts free fishing clinics throughout the state several times a year. The clinics are open to all kids and include basic instructions for casting, knot tying, fish anatomy and identification, as well as information about fishing opportunities in northeastern New Mexico.

There are many good kid-friendly fishing spots in southeastern New Mexico that offer ample opportunities for kids to catch fish. Summer Lake and Bosque Redondo near Fort Sumner offer great opportunities for bluegills and green sunfish. Bottomless Lakes and Lake Van near Roswell have great rainbow trout fishing during the winter. Carlsbad Municipal, Bataan, Green Meadow, Eunice and Jal lakes offer rainbow trout fishing and some sunfish. Many of these same waters are stocked with channel catfish during the summer. Spring River Park (Roswell kid’s pond) and Harry McAdams Park in Hobbs are for kids only.

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Casting practice on dry land is a good idea before youngsters hit the water for the first time.
Big bass thrive in small Bill Evans Lake

By Dan Williams

Sitting pretty 300 feet above the Gila River, little Bill Evans Lake doesn’t appear to hold much angling excitement beyond a few bluegills, catfish or a largemouth bass or two. But as many southwest New Mexico anglers have discovered, big things sometimes come in small packages.

Bill Evans Lake is credited for producing two state-record bass -- largemouth and white -- since the lake was impounded in the late 1960s. Steve Estrada’s 15-pound, 13-ounce largemouth has topped the record book since 1995. Jack Alexander’s 4-pound, 13-ounce white bass stands as a state record -- and a mystery. There are no known stockings of white bass in the lake and no white bass have ever turned up in electroshocking surveys.

Casey Harthorn, warmwater fisheries biologist for the Department of Game and Fish, said for its size, Bill Evans Lake has a lot going for it in terms of growing big bass.

“It has a very good exchange of high-quality, oxygen-rich water and a lot of nutrients from vegetation,” Harthorn said. “We also dump a lot of trout in it every year -- good food for the bass.” In 2008, the Department stocked 14,582 catchable-sized and 12,529 fingerling rainbow trout in the lake.

Bill Evans Lake was stocked with Florida-strain and northern largemouth bass, but the Department stopped stocking bass when the populations became self-sustaining. The lake also has good populations of bluegills and channel catfish.

The 62-acre lake was constructed in the late 1960s by Phelps Dodge Corp. as a water source for its Tyrone mine and milling operations. Four vertical turbine pumps, each capable of pumping 4,500 gallons per minute, fill the lake from the Gila River 300 feet below. According to a spokesman for Freeport-McMoRan Copper & Gold Inc., which acquired Phelps Dodge in 2006, the lake was named after a Phoenix attorney who was instrumental in the development of water resources for the corporation.

The State Game Commission bought the lake, water rights and 300 acres of property in 1972 as a state Wildlife Management Area. Phelps Dodge agreed to provide dam maintenance and keep the lake filled in exchange for using the water for its Tyrone operations.

The 62-acre lake is a popular fishing and birding destination that attracts visitors from throughout the state. Its population of large bass lures serious anglers, while opportunities to catch bluegills and trout appeals to families.

“It’s an easy lake to fish,” Harthorn said. “Almost 100 percent of the shoreline is accessible for angling, and it would be an excellent float-tube lake. Boats are allowed, but can’t have more power than an electric trolling motor.” The lake is kind to kids, who can cast without getting snagged because there are few bushes or trees along the shoreline. Harthorn suggested rigging kids up with a bobber, hook and small worm -- always a good bet for the lake’s plentiful and feisty bluegills.

Early spring, when the water temperature reaches about 56 degrees, is the best time to try for large, spawning bass, Harthorn said. Techniques vary, but a favorite method is to walk the shoreline casting a crankbait at fish you often can see in the clear water. As the water warms, the bass move out where it’s deeper. That’s the time to switch tactics and use something like a rubber grub from a small boat or float tube.

Trout are stocked in the lake from October through March the water is cool. Spinners, lures, bait and flies are all effective at times. Watch the stocking report on the Department Web site, www.wildlife.state.nm.us, and try to fish the week after a stocking.

The Bill Evans Lake Wildlife Area is open for wildlife watching, hiking and primitive camping in designated areas. An area along Mangas Creek just south of the lake is popular with birders year-round, but especially during spring and fall migrations.

In 2008, the area was opened to wildlife-associated recreation other than fishing through the Department’s Gaining Access Into Nature, or GAIN, program. All visitors of the area ages 18 or older must have either a year-round or five-day GAIN permit, and a Habitat Management and Access Validation. Costs for the permits, including the validation, are $19 for a full year, $8 for five days. Licensed anglers do not need GAIN permits while fishing, but need permits for other activities.

For more information about the Bill Evans Wildlife Area and GAIN opportunities statewide, please visit the Department Web site, www.wildlife.state.nm.us.
Desert bighorns rebound in N.M.

Downlisting highlights years of restoration for native NM species

By Dan Williams

Desert bighorn sheep, once one of New Mexico’s most imperiled native species, became a wildlife success story in 2008 when the State Game Commission removed the animals from the state endangered species list, reclassifying them as “threatened.”

“It’s not often that you can take a species on the brink and help restore it to the point of downlisting,” said Eric Rominger, a bighorn biologist with the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish. “All the time and effort by many individuals, organizations and agencies finally paid off.”

Downlisting desert bighorns from endangered to threatened under the State Wildlife Conservation Act opens more avenues for future transplants and potential new hunting opportunities. As statewide populations continue to increase, the Department is considering more bighorn hunting licenses so hunters can benefit from the restoration success.

New Mexico currently offers one desert bighorn license in the annual public drawing. A second license is sold at auction or by raffle to raise money for the state’s desert bighorn program. The auction conducted by the Wild Sheep Foundation has raised as much as $210,000 in one year.

The road to success for the desert bighorns has had its share of potholes. Disease, parasites and predators took their toll over the years. The sharp decline in desert bighorn numbers in the early 1900s likely was due in part to diseases contracted from domestic sheep. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, the San Andres Mountain herd was reduced from about 225 to 25 sheep by an infestation of scabies mites. But the biggest threat over the years came from the top predators in rocky, desert regions.

“Cougars can have a big impact on prey species, especially when the prey species population is small,” Department bighorn biologist Elise Goldstein said. “During the 1990s, we documented that 85 percent of known-caused mortality of radio-collared bighorns was from cougar predation.”

After years of little success restoring bighorns with transplants from the Red Rock Wildlife Area captive breeding facility, the Department began a cougar removal program in bighorn ranges in the fall of 2001. At the time, the statewide wild desert bighorn population had dwindled to fewer than 170 sheep.

“As soon as we began cougar removal, the numbers shot up,” Rominger said. “By 2008, we had more than 400 desert bighorns in six mountain ranges.”

Fossil records, Mimbres pottery and other evidence indicate desert bighorn sheep once inhabited the Desert Southwest in significant numbers. Populations declined severely in the early 1900s and by the 1940s only two herds remained — in the San Andres and Big Hatchet Mountains. Desert bighorns were placed on the state endangered species list in 1980, when the wild population had dropped to about 69 sheep.

The Department of Game and Fish began a captive breeding program at Red Rock Wildlife Area in 1972 to raise more bighorns and repopulate wild herds. Since then, 335 sheep have been transplanted out of the facility into the wild. Another 74 bighorns have been transplanted from Refuge in Arizona.

Biologists credit the cougar removal program for helping the transplanted sheep thrive in expanded ranges. Department research indicates that the program reduced overall bighorn mortality by 56 percent, and cougar predation mortality by 71 percent. Since 2001, an average of 3.3 cougars was removed from each bighorn range annually. The cougars removed from less than 1 percent of New Mexico’s cougar habitat accounted for less than 1 percent of the statewide cougar population.

Department biologists are optimistic that future transplants and continued cougar control will allow desert bighorn herds to continue growing and possibly encourage expansion into other suitable mountain ranges.

“Now that we’ve achieved downlisting, our next objective is delisting,” Goldstein said.
San Juan’s trophy trout waters challenge anglers, biologists

By Karl Moffatt

Wading around the corner of a willow-choked island at Baetis Bend on the San Juan River, I encountered a well-appointed but clearly disappointed fly fisherman.

“This river has gone to hell,” he complained.

I wondered what the problem was as I looked over the water he was deserting. After all, it was a gorgeous, late-fall day, trout were rising and he’d had this whole stretch of New Mexico’s premier trout stream all to himself.

He complained about low water flows in recent years that he believed had killed off insects that the river’s trout feed upon.

He lamented the loss of the good old days, back when water released from Navajo Dam ran much higher, scouring silt and sediment from the river bottom, producing conditions in which insects thrived, making fishing here a breeze.

He concluded that the river and the fishing had suffered and mumbled bitterly as he shuffled off around the bend.

But within minutes I was into a classic San Juan rainbow, 18 inches of fight, straining against my line, sailing through the air and making my day.

Clearly, although some of what the disgruntled angler said may be true, the river’s trout population continues to thrive and most anglers are highly satisfied with the fishing.

That’s according to a recently released study of the river by the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish.

“Despite the circumstances, this is still a very healthy and productive fishery,” said Marc Wethington, the department’s fisheries biologist on the San Juan and key contributor to the report.

This year’s annual electroshocking survey revealed great numbers of vigorous trout in New Mexico’s top trophy water.

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At the back of the boat, a gas-powered, electric generator chugged away, providing current to a probe immersed in the water at the bow. Strands of wire dangled from the stern to complete the circuit and provide a “stun-zone” under and around the boat.

As we floated downstream, dozens of fish darted about, running from the shock while others, caught in the current, floated unharmed to the surface.

The fish were caught in nets and then poured into a holding tank to await inspection.

The largest trout caught was a 24-inch rainbow. The average size was 17 inches from stretches including the Cable Hole and Upper Flats, as well the stretch downstream between Jack’s Hole and ET Rock, Wethington said.

The river’s brown trout are also increasing, with browns accounting for 65 percent of all fish caught during the electroshocking trip from Texas Hole downstream, Wethington said.

Electroshocking catch rates on the river have steadily increased in recent years, with the Texas Hole giving up the most fish last year, according to data compiled in the Department’s report. And while the data indicated that the river’s trout population is very healthy, it failed to capture the stunning number, sheer size and beauty of San Juan trout seen during electroshocking expeditions.

The survey included fish in the San Juan River’s upper four miles of quality water. Anglers are restricted to catch-and-release in the first quarter mile below Navajo Dam. The remaining quality water mileage is ruled by the same tackle restrictions, with a bag limit of one trout a day, over 20 inches. Anglers are required to stop fishing upon taking a fish.
The San Juan River also supports a healthy population of naturally reproducing brown trout, Wethington says. On average, anglers reel in at least one rainbow trout measuring 16 to 18 inches in the quality waters. An estimated 60,000 fingerling rainbow trout are planted annually, and many grow to become some of the San Juan's good-looking, hard-fighting, world-renowned trout. Another 46,000 pan-sized rainbow trout are stocked in the lower stretches of the river, where they can be regularly found inhabiting the same waters as rainbows. Slightly more than 5 percent said they caught fish exceeding 20 inches in length.

The San Juan is regularly stocked, which accounts for the estimated 70,000 fish in its quality waters. An estimated 60,000 fingerling rainbow trout are planted annually, and many grow to become some of the San Juan's good-looking, hard-fighting, world-renowned trout. On average, anglers reel in at least one rainbow trout measuring 16 to 18 inches in the quality section, Wethington says.

The vast majority of anglers interviewed -- 92 percent -- indicated they were highly satisfied with their fishing experience on the San Juan, with an average catch of one fish per hour. The San Juan River has steadily climbed over the years to the point that angling pressure is three times heavier now than during the mid-1980s, when the river was at its best. The Department has managed the quality section for trophy trout since the early 1970s.

Angler interviews and other data revealed a number of trends. For instance, the popularity of the San Juan River has steadily climbed over the years to the point that angling pressure is three times heavier now than during the mid-1980s, when the river was at its best. The Department has managed the quality section for trophy trout since the early 1970s.

The Department of Game and Fish is working with guides and anglers to address overcrowding and water flow below Navajo Dam. Water releases from Navajo Dam are controlled by the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, which specifies a minimum flow of 250 cubic feet per second (cfs), and a maximum flow of 5,000 cfs to mimic the natural flood cycle of the river.

The bureau tries to maintain a consistent flow of about 500 cfs throughout the year, but it can fluctuate depending on storage capacity and other conditions. For instance, the federal agency did not make high springtime releases in 2002, 2003 and 2004 due to low storage in Navajo Lake. The Department of Game and Fish report notes that flows fell below 500 cfs in the years between 2000 and 2007 about 30 percent of the time and below 250 cfs about 5 percent of the time. It also notes that in the years between 1963 and 1999, flows fell below 500 cfs only about 20 percent of the time and below 250 cfs an estimated 2 percent of the time. To see more detailed monthly flow data for the dam go to the United States Geological Services Web site at http://waterdata.usgs.gov/nm/nwis/monthly/ and select San Juan County.

"We'd all love to see 700 or 800 cfs minimum flows, but the reality is I don't see that happening," Wethington said. "The reality is we expect to see even lower flows as water development continues."

Most water stored in the dam is owned by the Navajo Nation and is expected to be siphoned off in future years to satisfy the growing demand for agricultural, municipal and other developments, he said.

Wethington noted that anglers are enjoying a fishery built on borrowed water and that advocates face an uphill battle in altering the rules governing the dam and its water.

To make the most of available aquatic habitat on the river in times of low flows, the Department of Game and Fish has geared its efforts toward installing in-stream, habitat improvements designed to help transport silt and sediment farther downstream while also providing trout better cover.

"We'd like to see the water flows maintained at about 700 cfs in future years to satisfy the growing demand for agricultural, municipal and other developments, he said."

The Department report also addresses concerns about the river's health due to low water flows and silt and sedimentation that some claim is caused by oil and gas development in the area.

The report notes that a United States Geological Survey study of the oil and gas industries' impact in the area indicates that 87 percent of the silt and sediment accumulating in the river is from naturally occurring runoff. Another study by the New Mexico Environment Department determined that much of the silt and sedimentation in the river below Navajo Dam was naturally occurring and hadn't negatively affected the river's insect populations.

Nonetheless, the Department report says continued oil and gas development, combined with lower flows could potentially harm the fishery and emphasizes the Department's willingness to work with all stakeholders to minimize those effects.

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The good news is that the San Juan River is the only fishery in the state protected by a minimum flow requirement, and that bodes well for its future, Wethington said.

Karl F. Moffatt of Santa Fe is a veteran, award-winning New Mexico journalist and an avid outdoorsman. Much of his outdoor-writing and photography can be seen on his blog at www.outdoorsnewmexico.com.
State Parks are havens for birds, birders

By Marti Niman
New Mexico State Parks

The stillness explodes in a rush and flutter as a huge creature lifts into the air above, soundless after it is airborne with a slow, singular wing beat. It is obviously a great blue heron, unmistakable with its arched neck and long beak that recalls pterodactyls of old.

But what about all those other shapes skittering across the water surface in a panic of escape? Not to mention the tiny brown fuzz-balls that hop branch-to-branch or the invisible squawk and trill that emantes from a thickset of green.

Enter the birdwatchers, festooned with scopes and binoculars -- nose-deep in field guides -- to sort out the riffraff of feathered fauna. Many more people are joining their ranks, and some of the best places to begin birding are in New Mexico's state parks.

"Percha Dam and Caballo Lake are good year-round and are easy to get to with parking and camping close to the river so you don't have to go sit in a blind," said David Griffin, president of the Mesilla Valley Audubon Society in Las Cruces. "Percha is probably the best place on the Rio Grande, with more than 70 species such as sparrows, warblers, flycatchers, herons and bald eagles as well as waterfowl."

Ken Stinnett, a member of the Mesilla Valley Audubon Society and a volunteer at the new Mesilla Valley Bosque State Park, said the Rio Grande is probably the number one flyway for birds coming up the land for migration from South America, and a huge flyway dispersal area both east and west of the river.

"Percha Villa, Rockhound and City of Rocks state parks are special in their own right, especially Spring Canyon which is part of Rockhound," Stinnett said. "Spring Canyon is a great birding place that often has water in the canyon and many montane species such as nuthatches, jays, juncoes, sage thrashers and pyrrhuloxias."

Stinnett noted that several mountain ranges run parallel to the river and provide a major raptor flyway along the San Andreas Mountains north to the Manzano Mountains, where numerous raptors pass through at higher elevations. Manzano Mountains State Park offers a perch for birders to survey the skies from the comfort of a camper or tent. Down in the valley and in the thick of Albuquerque's urban jungle, Rio Grande Nature Center State Park nests amid the bosque canopy.

Williamson rattles off a nearly infinite list of birds commonly seen at the Nature Center, including downy woodpeckers, white-breasted nuthatches, chickadees, Bewick's wrens, eastern bluebirds red-tailed and Cooper's hawks.

People come from "back east" just to see New Mexico's state bird, the roadrunner, and there are migratory shorebirds such as yellowlegs, snipes and cranes all winter long. Lots of baby mallards and wood ducks appear around the first of April and May. Hummingbird species are dominated by black-chinned but include three others: broad-tailed, rufous and the tiny, feisty calliope.

One of the highlights at the Nature Center is an ash-throated flycatcher nest with a camera secreted inside so visitors can watch the female feed her babies on the monitor inside the Discovery Room.

"The nest box is outside the window so you can watch the babies being fed both from the window and inside the nest on the camera," Williamson said.

Rio Grande Nature Center State Park is a haven for visitors and volunteers alike to hone their bird observation skills. It was there that Rob Yaksich, instructional coordinator for State Parks, refined his erudite seminar entitled "Field Guide to Duck Butts."

"I get a mish-mash of birders in my programs that include a lot of beginners and duck butt groupies," said Yaksich. "Many have come to them several times during the last few years and say they learn something new every time."

What they learn is how to identify ducks from the rear -- basically figuring out if it's a wet butt or a dry butt by its profile.

"Looking across a pond, you see a duck back that is flat and parallel to the surface with a tail that sticks up nice and high so you can clearly see it," Yaksich said. "That's a dry butt or a dabbler, a grouping of ducks that feed at or under the water's surface. A little north of the dry butt, another back is clearly arched toward the water and it's hard to see the tail -- that is a wet butt or diver."

Wet butts include the heavy-bodied canvasbacks that can dive 20 to 30 feet under the water, and the fish-eating mergansers or other divers that feed on aquatic invertebrates in soil or plant material, Yaksich said. Divers

Great blue heron

"The Nature Center has lots of habitats so we're not stuck with just birds in the woods or just waterfowl -- we have it all," said volunteer Sondra Williamson. "We hold bird walks on weekends with a mix of experienced and beginning birders, and we have interesting nesting birds, migrating birds any time of year."

Williamson noted that several state parks are special in their own right, "Pancho Villa, Rockhound and City of Rocks. "People come from "back east" just to see New Mexico's state bird, the roadrunner, and there are migratory shorebirds such as yellowlegs, snipes and cranes all winter long. Lots of baby mallards and wood ducks appear around the first of April and May. Hummingbird species are dominated by black-chinned but include three others: broad-tailed, rufous and the tiny, feisty calliope.

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New Mexico’s parks offer unique and diverse habitats throughout the state. “Birds are everywhere,” said Sicily Lederman, interpretive ranger at Heron and El Vado Lake state parks near Chama. “They’re there for you; it’s not like you have to sit and wait for them. They’re there for you; it’s not like you have to sit and wait for them.”

Although parks along the Rio Grande offer abundant opportunities to see a wide diversity of birds, birding opportunities are excellent throughout the state.

“Birds are everywhere,” said Sicily Lederman, interpretive ranger at Heron and El Vado Lake state parks near Chama. “They’re there for you; it’s not like you have to sit and wait for 50 minutes to see them.”

Heron Lake hosts the annual Osprey Festival in July, when nesting pairs and chicks are clearly visible from the road and other accessible vantage points. Heron Lake also boasts eagles in flight, cormorants and belted kingfishers.

Many birders get their start with what Williamson calls a “light bulb moment” — an encounter with a wild feathered thing that forever alters the way the person looks at the world.

“I grew up in Kansas and went to church camp one year. I saw this spectacular black and white duck, so I went back every day for four days until it was gone,” he said. “I went to the library, got a field guide and found out it was a bufflehead.”

Griffin said he got started as a kid in Ohio, looking at hawks and falcons. One day a scarlet tanager caught his eye with its brilliant scarlet and black coloring and got him hooked.

Williamson recalls that his mom sent him out of the house one day when he was aggravating her, so he headed for the nearby golf course in Raton.

“I saw this spectacular black and white duck, so I went back every day for four days until it was gone,” he said. “I went to the library, got a field guide and found out it was a bufflehead.”

Sending kids out of the house may seem an invitation to trouble, but with the right guidance it can launch a lifelong career or passion in young people that could change their lives.

“We have mentored lots of young people and several are continuing their studies,” Williamson said. “One who got started here is going to Stanford to be an ecologist. These kids are good friends with older birders. Most young people stay with their peers but that’s not true of these kids; the interest is what counts and we’ve really influenced a lot of kids.”

Williamson seems to have a magic touch with young people. Her 17-year-old grandson is involved in a rosy-finch project in the Cibola National Forest and plans to be an ornithologist — no ifs and or buts, she adds.

Many bird-watchers develop favorite species that are not necessarily exotic or spectacular birds; rather there is something in their behavior that birders find compelling. Yaksich favors ravens and jays because of their intelligence and quirky, bold behavior. Mockingbirds, with their beautiful song are a magnet for Weston because they are fighters; he has seen chase off bats. Yaksich picks no favorites but enjoys them all, learning patience and how to be observant from birds themselves.

Although he is not a hunter, Yaksich subscribes to another aesthetic – one that helps support habitat for all kinds of wild creatures.

“I buy duck stamps every year, and for non-hunters it’s a wonderful way to support waterfowl habitat,” he said. “It’s a competition that can make a wildlife artist’s career and 98 percent of the proceeds goes to conservation. I support duck hunters, without them there would be no refuges.”

Birders recommend getting a good pair of binoculars with a power of 7 x 35 or 7 x 42 and a good field guide, and then connecting with a local Audubon chapter. Many chapters have birding “academies” and novice birders can participate in activities and are not required to be members.

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State Parks offers a number of bird-focused special events, such as the Nature Center’s Winter Bird and Bat Festival, Percha Dam’s Migration Sensation and the Osprey Fest at Heron Lake (See Page 13 for a partial schedule of events). Whether novice or expert, New Mexico’s parks offer unique and diverse habitats that allow birders to immerse themselves in the magic and mystery of birds.
Partnerships aid habitat projects

Selden Canyon land purchase protects fragile riparian forest

By Marti Niman
New Mexico State Parks

New Mexico State Parks, The Trust for Public Land, and the World Wildlife Fund announced in January 2009 the permanent protection of 783 acres of land along a critical stretch of the Rio Grande in Selden Canyon, near Las Cruces. The property, part of the Broad Canyon Ranch, is 15 miles north of the city of Las Cruces and contains two of New Mexico’s most rare and threatened habitats: wetlands and riparian forest.

The acquisition includes a 30-acre wetland known as Swan Pond and approximately one mile of riparian forest along the Rio Grande. The property also has access to grazing leases on an additional 4,830 acres of Chihuahuan Desert grasslands owned by the Bureau of Land Management and the New Mexico State Land Office, which will be leased and managed for wildlife habitat and recreation by State Parks.

“The dedicated support and cooperation of Gov. Bill Richardson and the Legislature, nonprofit groups, federal agencies and private landowners have made it possible to purchase this critical riparian habitat for both wildlife and outdoor recreation,” said Joanna Prukop, Energy, Minerals and Natural Resources cabinet secretary.

The new property will advance State Parks’ long-range vision to establish more conservation reserves along the lower Rio Grande for river ecosystem restoration, education and recreation opportunities and improved river access. The property will be another important link along this stretch of the river owned by State Parks that currently includes Elephant Butte Lake, Caballo Lake, Percha Dam and Leasburg Dam state parks, and the new Mesilla Valley Bosque State Park.

Conservation of Broad Canyon Ranch also will contribute to landscape-level protection efforts along the 11-mile Selden Canyon on the Rio Grande. The ranch connects public federal lands in the Sierra de Las Uvas and Robledo Mountains with the Rio Grande and the large Chihuahuan Desert Rangeland Research Center ranch owned by New Mexico State University, which provides connections to the Dona Ana Mountains, the Jornada Experimental Range, and the San Andres National Wildlife Refuge.

The national land conservation organization The Trust for Public Land acquired the ranch in November 2008 and conveyed it to State Parks. The Trust for Public Land worked with the landowners, ranchers Joe and Karen Gray, on the purchase during much of the past year as part of TPL’s Rio Grande Protection Program. The Grays had owned the property since the 1960s.

“We are very pleased to have helped protect this important ranch for future generations of New Mexico and to have been a part of a successful coalition that included State Parks and many, many partners,” said Jenny Parks, Trust for Public Land state director. “The protection of Broad Canyon Ranch was possible only by putting together a creative combination of state, federal and private funds.”

Bottomless Lakes Lakes restoration work under way

New Mexico State Parks and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers have started construction on the first phase of a $2 million, 40-acre wetland restoration project at Bottomless Lakes State Park.

The project will revitalize a previously degraded wetland in the park, prevent flooding of historic structures and facilitate spring flow from Lea Lake to the restored wetland and the adjacent Pecos River.

“This is a fantastic partnership project that will dramatically improve the park and the lower Pecos River, and be a new community asset for the Roswell area,” said State Parks Director Dave Simon.

“The Corps is extremely pleased to participate with the state in restoring over 40 acres of wetland habitat in New Mexico,” said Patricia Phillips, project manager with the Corps.

The primary impetus for the project is to improve ecosystem health by diversifying wetlands hydrology by removing salt cedars and other invasive species, creating additional open water areas and planting native wetland species such as baccharis – shrubs commonly called brooms – salt grass and bullrush.

The project also will prevent flooding of historic structures such as the Lea Lake pavilion and tower which were constructed by the Civilian Conservation Corps in the 1930s. Significantly increased flow into Lea Lake from subsurface artesian springs has caused flooding in the park over the past several years, creating both the need and the opportunity for this multi-faceted project.

“This project will create exciting new recreational activities at the park such as bird watching and wildlife viewing,” Park Manager Steve Patterson said. “It also will serve area schools as an outdoor classroom for science-based learning activities.”

The aquatic ecosystem enhancement will benefit numerous plant and animal species, including the endangered Pecos sunfish and Pecos pupfish, as well as numerous dragonflies, birds and other wildlife. Interpretive facilities also are planned in the second phase of the project, including a loop trail with wildlife viewing blinds, a boardwalk and a parking area.

Funding for the project is through a federal-state cost sharing program with 65 percent federal and 35 percent state funding sources. Construction of the first phase is expected to be completed in fall 2009. The project contractor is Cardiola Construction of Ruidoso, selected by the Corps of Engineers in a competitive bidding process.

The lower Rio Grande is a key ecological corridor for the northern Chihuahuan Desert, one of the world’s most biologically significant deserts. It is a priority area for the conservation efforts of the World Wildlife Fund, which has been working with partners Elephant Butte Irrigation District and the U.S. International Boundary and Water Commission on a large restoration initiative known as the Rio Grande-Canalization Collaborative Project.

The partners hope to better integrate flood control, irrigation deliveries and habitat conservation restoration along a 105-mile reach of the river from Caballo Reservoir to American Dam, Texas, including Selden Canyon.

“Selden Canyon is a focus area for the World Wildlife Fund because it provides a wonderful mosaic of native river habitat including wetlands, meadows and riparian forest,” said Beth Bardwell, manager of the group’s Las Cruces Chihuahuan Desert Program office. “It also has its share of exotic vegetation like salt cedar which we want to control. Selden Canyon Ranch will provide great opportunities for recreationists as well as multiple benefits for wildlife.”

The total purchase price of the acquisition was $1.65 million. Key components of the funding included: $400,000 from the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation and The Nature Conservancy; and $1.25 million through New Mexico State Parks that was a combination of state and federal funds, including $500,000 from the State of New Mexico’s Land and Water Conservation Fund.

New Mexico State Parks’ long-range vision to establish more conservation reserves along the lower Rio Grande for river ecosystem restoration, education and recreation opportunities and improved river access.

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The lower Rio Grande is a key ecological corridor for the northern Chihuahuan Desert, one of the world’s most biologically significant deserts. It is a priority area for the conservation efforts of the World Wildlife Fund, which has been working with partners Elephant Butte Irrigation District and the U.S. International Boundary and Water Commission on a large restoration initiative known as the Rio Grande-Canalization Collaborative Project.

The partners hope to better integrate flood control, irrigation deliveries and habitat conservation restoration along a 105-mile reach of the river from Caballo Reservoir to American Dam, Texas, including Selden Canyon.

“Selden Canyon is a focus area for the World Wildlife Fund because it provides a wonderful mosaic of native river habitat including wetlands, meadows and riparian forest,” said Beth Bardwell, manager of the group’s Las Cruces Chihuahuan Desert Program office. “It also has its share of exotic vegetation like salt cedar which we want to control. Selden Canyon Ranch will provide great opportunities for recreationists as well as multiple benefits for wildlife.”

The total purchase price of the acquisition was $1.65 million. Key components of the funding included: $400,000 from the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation and The Nature Conservancy; and $1.25 million through New Mexico State Parks that was a combination of state and federal funds, including $500,000 from the State of New Mexico’s Land and Water Conservation Fund.

The federal funds came through the Land and Water Conservation Fund, which has been supported by the New Mexico congressional delegation, including U.S. Sen. Jeff Bingaman. Additional funding came from capital outlay appropriations provided by State Sen. Mary Jane Garcia (D-Dona Ana) and State Rep. Jeff Steinborn (D-Dona Ana).
State Parks ‘signature’ events 2009

From children’s fishing clinics and nature walks to herb festivals, concerts and even a motorcycle parade, there’s an event for almost everyone at a New Mexico state park in 2009. Here are some of the parks special ‘signature’ events:

April 18 – Rockhound Desert Alive: Native plant walks, silent auction, unusual arthropods and butterfly walk.

April 25 – Storrie Lake Kite Festival: Native storytelling, live raptors, kite constructing exhibit and school presentations.

May 2 – Brantley Lake Fishing Clinic.

May 2-3 – Leasburg Dam Challenge: Families and campers sharpen their archery and bow hunting skills with targets on groomed trails and open meadows.

May 7-10 – Living Desert Zoo and Gardens Annual Mescal Roast: Mescalero Apache interpretive and ceremonial event with mescal pit blessing, Native American arts and crafts show, interpretive round table, Apache feast, war dances and Dance of the Mountain Spirits. The event concludes with the mescal pit opening and tasting ceremony.

May 9 – Cimarron Canyon Annual Children’s Fishing Derby.

May 9 – Rio Grande Nature Center Herbs and Native Plants Walk: Find out about a variety of herbs and Native plants of the bosque and surrounding areas.

May 16 – Navajo Lake CAST (Catch a Special Thrill): A day of fishing on the lake for disadvantaged and disabled kids, who will receive tackle, T-shirts, awards and a free barbecue.

May 22-24 – Rockhound Third Annual Bluegrass Concert: Five bluegrass bands live on stage.

May 25 – Vietnam Veterans Memorial Day Celebration: Honor those who have died in our nation’s service with ceremonies, songs and Ride for the Wall motorcycle parade.


June 5 – Coyote Creek/Morphy Lake Kids Fishing Clinic with the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish.

June 6-7 – Clayton Lake Trout Derby: Cash prizes offered for the largest fish in children’s and adult categories; door prizes, hot dog eating contest, horseshoe tournament and sand digs.


June 20 – Santa Rosa Lake Kid’s Fishing Clinic: Learn the basics of fishing, including knot tying, how to cast, bait selection and aquatic education for kids and adults.

June 27 – Sugartie Canyon Butterfly Festival: Join butterfly expert Steve Cary to learn the art of stalking these amazing creatures during the annual butterfly count, and enjoy a ranger program on the incredible journey of monarch butterflies, pollinator secrets, native plant butterfly gardening and butterfly face-painting.

July 4 – Conchas Lake Fireworks on the Water.

July 12 – Hyde Memorial Corvette Show: Old Santa Fe Trail Corvettes Club takes a run up to Hyde Park Lodge with more than 150 classic and new Corvette cars.

July 10-12 – Heron Lake Osprey Festival: See these magnificent raptors up close and personal. This event raises awareness about preserving natural habitat for birds and other wildlife while offering boat rides, live raptors, a fabulous feast and more.

July 18 – Summer Lake Youth Daze: Paddleboard races, egg toss, relay races, fish painting, cookout and interpretive programs for young people.

Sept. 5-7 – Bottomless Lakes Bubble Fest: Designed for scuba divers and their families, events include a dive poker contest, underwater games, snorkeling, swimming, beach volleyball, nature hikes, ranger talks and more. Reservations for camping are recommended.

Sept. 19-27 – Eagle Nest 16th Annual Eagle Nest Fish Fest.

Sept. 24-27 – City of Rocks Fall Star Party.

Aug. 8 – Rio Grande Nature Center Summer Wings: Hummingbirds, dragonflies and other winged creatures of the bosque are featured in this full-day event. Speakers, slide shows, guided bird and nature walks, live raptors and hummingbirds, kid’s crafts, bird identification and demonstrations.

Aug. 22-23 – Oliver Lee Memorial Dog Days of Summer: Native plants, constellations and planets are featured.

Sept 12-13 – Elephant Butte Lake Balloon Regatta.

Sept. 26 – Fenton Lake National Hunting and Fishing Day with the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish: Archery clinics, fishing clinics, aquatic education and more.

Oct. 2 – Caballo Lake/Percha Dam Migration Sensation: Birding, raptors, falconers and more are featured in this park on the Rio Grande corridor and flyway, recognized as an Important Bird Area by the Audubon Society.

Dec. 19 – Sugartie Canyon State Park Christmas on the Chicharicara: Annual tradition includes more than 2,000 farolitos lighting the River Walk Trail, a visit by Santa and music, hot chocolate, red chile and a telescope.

Dec. 19 – Villanueva Las Luces de Villanueva: Walk along a pathway lined with farolitos and visit campground shelters decorated for Christmas while enjoying hot chocolate and cookies.

All events are subject to change or cancellation. Please call the park, 1-888-NMPARKS (667-2757) or visit www.nmparks.com for current information.
chased by a helicopter, herded into a trap, manhandled, poked, prodded, clipped, collared, tranquilized and trailered. A journey that began on the flat prairie grasslands of northeastern New Mexico ended 200 miles away in the rolling hills of Santa Ana Pueblo.

“They’re tough little boogers,” said Darrel Weybright, big-game project manager for the Department of Game and Fish. He and Department Pilot Tom Sansom coordinated the Feb. 28-March 2 operation in which 152 antelope were captured and relocated to Santa Ana and three wildlife areas in Coahuila, Mexico. “We were especially happy to hear they all made it to Santa Ana,” Weybright said.

Despite the stressful capture and unfamiliar environment, the Santa Ana pronghorns couldn’t have landed among a more appreciative crowd. The native animals became the first of their kind to reside on the pueblo in more than 40 years.

“On another day there easily could have been another couple hundred antelope in the same area.”

“The pueblo is excited about this,” said Glenn Harper, Range and Wildlife Division manager for the pueblo. “Antelope are a very important component of pueblo spirituality. They are revered through dances and prayer.” He said antelope populations that historically inhabited pueblo lands had gradually vanished as highways and development of Rio Rancho fragmented suitable habitat.

The pueblo had hoped to transplant 60 pronghorns onto their land west of Bernalillo, half in the low country along the river, the other half atop the mesa. Harper said he hopes the Department will try again next year to complete the effort that was two years in the making. A $200,000 federal Tribal Wildlife Grant allowed the pueblo to undertake special habitat projects and put about $10,000 into the trap operation costs.

“Anything less than 5 percent is excellent,” said Kerry Mower, the Department’s wildlife health specialist. He said stress and injury can cause mortality rates as high as 10 percent before the animals are released. After that, they can suffer capture myopathy, a disease of the muscle tissue caused by very hard exertion for long periods.

Weybright said that as unpredictable as trapping and transplanting wild animals can be, the pronghorn operation went fairly smoothly. Only seven antelope died while they were being captured and transported to Santa Ana and Mexico -- far below mortality rates experienced in earlier operations.

Mower and three veterinarians were on hand during the capture to help the antelope survive their journey. Before they were loaded in trailers, each antelope had its horns clipped for safety and was given shots to fend off parasites and pneumonia. They also received vitamin supplements, ear tags and a tranquilizer for the road. Some were fitted with radio collars so they could be tracked in their new habitats.

Wildlife ranches in Mexico paid approximately $40,000 or their share of the estimated $70,000 project. Santa Ana Pueblo paid $10,000 and the Department of Game and Fish covered the remainder in employee salaries and equipment. In exchange, Mexico agreed to send 10 desert bighorn rams to supplement the gene pool at the Red Rock Wildlife Area near Lordsburg.

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Weybright said he hoped to capture and move almost 500 antelope -- 300 to Mexico, 60 to Santa Ana, and at least 100 to release sites in New Mexico. Mexico ended up with two ranches getting 45 antelope each, and another ranch getting 35. Three animals died in Mexico after they crossed the border.

“On another day there easily could have been another couple hundred antelope in the same area.”

Pronghorn antelope prefer not to jump over fences and other obstacles, but when pressed, they can jump quite high. Above, trapped pronghorns attempt to jump over an 8-foot-high, tarp-covered fence.
weren't able to capture as many animals as we wanted, but these traps are so unpredictable,” Weybright said. “We had an excellent crew, the weather was good and we captured pretty much everything that was available to us those days. On another day there easily could have been another couple hundred pronghorn in the same area.”

If all goes well, he said the Department will try again next winter.

“We already have some ideas about improving the trap,” Weybright said. “We get better at this every time we do it.”

This year’s trapping operation was the Department’s first in about 11 years. Before that, traps were fairly common as the agency continued its efforts to relocate antelope and build the statewide population. Using an improved version of a wing trap invented in 1937 by Department wildlife biologist T. Paul Russell, the agency gradually brought pronghorn antelope from a low of 1,740 reported by Aldo Leopold in 1916 to around 35,000 to 40,000 today.

This year, Rosebud Land and Cattle rancher Don Walker saw first-hand how the trap worked on his 3,520-acres, where as many as 400 antelope a day were visiting his irrigated fields of alfalfa, wheat and grass in recent winters. He said he likes seeing antelope on his property, but he welcomed the Department moving some of them elsewhere.

“I guess I griped about them long enough,” he said.

There are approximately 1,500 antelope in the Rosebud-area herd of northeastern New Mexico herd that spends time on property owned by Walker and his neighbors. Some landowners would like to see the herd trimmed to lessen the animals’ impact on agricultural crops. Others enjoy having larger herds for more hunting opportunities. All the landowners receive hunting authorizations each year, which they can give away or sell, sometimes for substantial profits.

Walker said he’s never put a dollar figure on how much wheat and alfalfa the antelope eat every fall. “But I think everyone could see I had a problem, especially during the drought,” he said. “When everything else is brown, we have something green -- and that really brings them in.”

By March 2, there were 152 fewer antelope on Walker’s property, thanks to trapping methods honed over the years by hundreds of Department personnel.

“It’s a very delicate operation, and each time, we try to make it a little better,” said pilot Sansom, who has helped trap more than 2,300 antelope over the years in dozens of trapping operations.

The wing trap is a simple V-shaped design, with fences set up along traditional antelope routes. Crews set up the trap days in advance, pounding posts and lining wire and netting with 8-foot tarps so the trapped animals can’t see out or easily escape as they are driven into a small corral, first by a helicopter, then by a line of crew members who fall in behind and block the gaps. As the animals approach the corral, a hidden gate is quickly closed behind them before they realize they are in a trap.

Once they are in a the corral, the antelope are allowed to settle down a bit before they are forced into a padded, darkened chute called the “grinder,” where two crew members catch and carry the animal to waiting veterinarians. To help keep them calm once they are caught, the animals’ hooves are not allowed to touch the ground until they are released into the trailers.

The entire capture operation for the Santa Ana herd was completed within a few hours.

“To me, it was quite amazing that we were able to do all that, and they were able to open the trailer at Santa Ana and watch all the animals get out,” Mower said.

And what about little pronghorn No. 10?

“She’s still with us,” Harper said. “I’ve seen her a couple times and she still seems kind of lethargic. She doesn’t seem to get excited about anything, but we’re hoping maybe that’s just her personality.”
Spring is “gone fishing” time, the season to enjoy more daylight and the season when the watery homes of fish become warmer in our southern lakes. The higher mountain streams, home to native trout, are cold with chilling snowmelt rushing over boulders. As you plan your fishing adventures, think about some important basics of fishing.

As you imagine the fish you will catch, remember to check your tackle boxes for fresh bait, fishing line, hooks and non-lead weights called splitshot that you can reuse. Even though this is a lot to remember and pack, the most important thing is to plan for safety.

Being safe is all about wearing life jackets and fishing with other people. You might think that life jackets are just to wear on boats, but it is safest to also wear a life jacket while fishing from the shore. Rain or snowmelt can create deep and fast flowing water along with slippery stream banks.

Planning where to fish and figuring out where different kinds of fish live will help you be successful in making that tasty catch for dinner. New Mexico has community and children’s fishing waters such as Aztec Pond near Farmington, city lakes such as Tingley Beach in Albuquerque, and Shuree and Cowlies children-only ponds in mountain areas. If you have a boat, you may want to visit large reservoirs, such as Heron and Elephant Butte lakes.

As spring approaches, you might dream about that big catch. Here are some lakes in New Mexico where people have caught record-size fish:

- **Biggest largemouth bass**: Bill Evans Lake.
- **Biggest trout**: Santa Cruz Lake.
- **Biggest walleye**: Clayton Lake.
- **Biggest catfish**: Elephant Butte Lake.

It is helpful to know different types of fish, where to catch them and the state fishing laws. For example, some laws state how many fish you can keep. Other rules tell you where you can catch fish but must release them back into the water. You can find the “New Mexico Fishing Rules & Information” booklet in some stores, at the Game and Fish offices or at this Web site: www.wildlife.state.nm.us. This booklet also has color pictures of warmwater and cold-water fish in New Mexico.

It’s fun to catch fish. If you are fishing from a dock, you often see the fish below and you do not have to cast. Just drop your baited hook into the water and wait for that tug on your line. When you fish along mountain streams or along the edges of large lakes, you will need to cast your line out into the water. Sometimes it helps to practice casting with an adult helper or a friend who knows how to cast.

Remember to plan ahead. Check out these two kid-friendly Web sites to help you plan your fantastic fishing trip:

- www.boatingsidekicks.com
- www.WaterWorksWonders.org

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