



PHOTO: TIM DANIEL, OHIO DIV. OF WILDLIFE

Return of a native?
Some New Mexicans would like to see river otters frolicking once again in New Mexico rivers and streams. See *Partners*, pages 5-7.

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A publication devoted to the enjoyment and appreciation of New Mexico wildlife.



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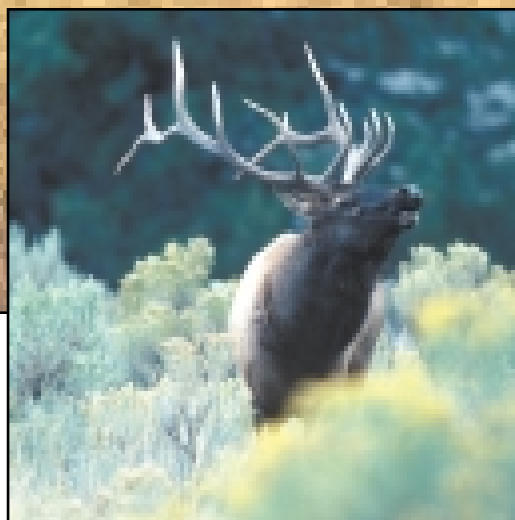
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In the **RIGHT PLACE...** **...at the RIGHT TIME**

Watchable wildlife takes center stage with **Gaining Access Into Nature** program



Fall elk bugling tours on the Sargent Wildlife Area near Chama put GAIN participants close to wildlife—New Mexico's state elk herd—in some of New Mexico's most spectacular scenery.

PHOTOS: DON MACCARTER

BY DAN WILLIAMS

Imagine yourself in the perfect spot to watch and listen to majestic bull elk during the annual September rut at the Sargent Wildlife Area near Chama. Picture yourself behind the lens—capturing images of desert bighorn sheep along the Gila River or snapping shots of some of New Mexico's largest mule deer in wintertime. Can you think of a wildlife-watching experience much better than the annual mating ritual of the lesser prairie chicken in east-central New Mexico?

Beginning this year, the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish can help put you in the right places and at the right times to witness some of the state's most spectacular wildlife and scenery. Some lucky wildlife watchers may even get a chance to join biologists and participate in hands-on conservation activities such as wildlife trapping and electro-fishing expeditions.

The Gaining Access Into Nature program, approved by the 2005 Legislature and signed into law by Governor Bill Richardson, opens new year-round wildlife-related recreational opportunities not normally associated with traditional hunting and angling. By providing greater access to state-owned lands, the Department hopes to stimulate local economies and promote a more diverse appreciation for the state's wildlife. Activities vary from bird watching to tours of the state's best areas to see elk, deer and bighorn sheep. To ensure quality experiences in GAIN's first year, Department of Game and Fish biologists and other experts will guide all activities. Program participants will be selected by public drawings, and reasonable fees will be charged for habitat maintenance and to help recover some program costs.

...continued on page 4



Outdoor Expo draws record crowd to Shooting Range Park

ALBUQUERQUE—When the last catfish bell rang Sunday evening, about the only things left at the 2005 New Mexico Outdoor Expo were smiles—more than 2,000 of them. That was the estimated attendance at the fourth-annual event at the Albuquerque Shooting Range Park, where families and individuals of all ages turned out May 14-15 for two free days of shooting, casting, climbing and fishing.

“It was our best turnout, and we hope to watch it grow again next year,” said Mark Birkhauser, Department of Game and Fish hunter education coordinator and Expo organizer. “Our goal is to introduce families, especially

kids, to the joys and responsibilities of outdoor and wildlife-related recreation. They can come to this event and learn in a safe environment how to shoot a bow, a pistol or a muzzleloader. They can take the kids catfishing, learn to cast or take a crack at the climbing wall—all free—no experience necessary.”

Participants shot about 30,000 rounds of ammunition at the .22-caliber rifle range, and countless rounds on the shotgun, pistol and muzzleloader ranges. Volunteer hunter education instructors were busy from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. making sure everyone had a pleasant and safe experience.

One of the top attractions was the 15,000-gallon aquarium full of large game fish, where fisheries biologists and expert anglers showed eager crowds how fish live and breathe—and how to catch them. Inside the tent, Department biologists set up educational displays and hands-on activities such as watercolor fish printing, skull and fur identification and a presentation about bats. Experts also were on hand to teach children and adults how to tie their own fishing flies.

The biggest crowd-pleaser, however, was the swimming pool full of large catfish. Children and adults whooped and hollered all day long as they caught and released fish, some weighing as much as five pounds.

“The look on the kids’ faces when they hook a big fish or shoot a gun for the first time makes it all worthwhile,” Birkhauser said. “Best of all, some of them who have never done anything like this before walk away from this event saying, ‘I can do that.’” ■



Young shooters got expert instruction from volunteers like George Tash at the 2005 New Mexico Outdoor Expo.

PHOTO: DAN WILLIAMS

Rio Grande wetlands project gets \$1 million federal grant

SANTA FE—A project to restore riparian areas in the Middle Rio Grande Valley has received a \$1 million federal grant to continue wetlands work under the North American Wetlands Conservation Act.

The New Mexico Department of Game and Fish is among a project partnership that includes state and local governmental agencies, Native American Pueblos, private landowners, sporting and conservation groups and others. The objective is to restore wetlands, river flows and other wildlife habitat along a 160-mile stretch of the Rio Grande from Cochiti to Elephant Butte reservoirs.

The grant will help fund the second phase of the project and

boost contributions to almost \$2.6 million in one-to-one matching funds and more than \$800,000 in non-matching funds. In Phase II, project partners will restore wetlands and floodplain-forest habitat to 2,056 acres of Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge, six private-land tracts, Sandia and Cochiti pueblo lands, the Ladd S. Gordon State Waterfowl Management Area, and the Valencia Soil and Water Conservation District’s Whitfield Tract.

Restoration work will include activities such as eradicating salt cedar and Russian olive, recontouring landscapes, installing water-control structures, and building fences to keep livestock out of

wetland areas. The work will benefit game and non-game wildlife that depends on the habitats in the river valley. It also will help with the recovery of the endangered southwestern willow flycatcher and the Rio Grande silvery minnow.

Improving wildlife habitat also will benefit communities in the valley, where every year, more than 200,000 visitors are drawn to state and federal wildlife refuges to view and hunt migrating waterfowl and other birds. Birding and hunting activities contribute an estimated \$8.6 million to the Middle Rio Grande’s economy each year. ■

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Got skeeters? Feed 'em to the fish

People who have permanent ponds or landscaping water features can do their part to control mosquitoes by providing homes to a few *Gambusia* (mosquito fish) this summer. The mosquito fish love to chow down on mosquito larvae, preventing the insects from becoming health threats by spreading West Nile Virus and other diseases.

Free mosquito fish are available from the City of Albuquerque, Environmental Health Department, Bio-Disease Management Program. Some deliveries are available, but people usually are asked to pick up the fish at various locations. To place an order or for more information about mosquito fish and where to get them, contact the Environmental Health Department call center at 768-2600, or visit: www.cabq.gov/bdm/. ■

Hunting, fishing will continue on State Trust Lands

The New Mexico Game Commission and the Commissioner of Public Lands signed a two-year easement May 20 that will continue to allow hunting and fishing on approximately 8.2 million acres of State Trust Lands.

The new easement will extend through June 30, 2007, and will permit valid license-holders to hunt, fish and trap on designated State Trust Lands during open seasons. The easement includes new provisions that will allow two people to accompany each licensed person, and also includes the potential for limited camping in specified areas in cooperation with lessees. ■

Springer Lake lease extended for 20 years

Public anglers will be able to fish for big northern pike and other warm-water fish at Springer Lake for another 20 years with the renewal of a Department of Game and Fish lease from the Springer Ditch Co.

The 150 surface-acre lake about two miles west of Springer is where Paul Casias caught a state-record 36-pound northern pike in 1978. The lake also contains bluegills, sunfish and bass, and has a boat ramp, parking area and outdoor restrooms. ■

Mandatory hunter reports will improve big-game management statewide

New Mexico deer and elk hunters soon will be required to report basic harvest information by telephone or over the Internet every time they go hunting—or risk paying a late fee or even losing their hunting privileges for the following year. The mandatory reporting program was approved by the State Game Commission and could begin with the 2006-2007 or 2007-2008 seasons.

Mandatory hunt reports will give the Department of Game and Fish more timely and accurate data, improve wildlife management, and save the Department an estimated \$65,000 a year by eliminating paper mail-in reporting forms. The new system will take hunters only a few minutes to report by telephone or over the Internet. ■

Bighorn license sells for \$177,500 at auction

SANTA FE—A permit to hunt bighorn sheep in New Mexico sold for a record \$177,500 at auction at the 2005 Foundation for North American Wild Sheep Convention in San Antonio, Texas. The price surpassed the previous New Mexico record of \$157,500 at the 2002 auction and was the third highest-priced permit sold at this year's convention.

The Department of Game and Fish contributes two bighorn tags a year to the foundation's fund-raising auction and raffle. Ninety percent of the proceeds—\$159,750 from this year's auction—is returned to the Department for use in bighorn sheep research, restoration and habitat projects. Since 1990, foundation fundraisers have contributed more than \$1.3 million to New Mexico bighorn sheep projects. ■

Father pays heavy price for shooting son's bighorn

SANTA FE—A Pennsylvania man who admitted shooting a Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep for his 9-year-old son during a 2004 hunt in the Pecos Wilderness agreed to pay more than \$2,500 in a plea agreement in which he pleaded guilty to charges of unlawful killing and possession of bighorn sheep. Aaron Black, 38, of Rochester, Pa., told a Department of Game and Fish conservation officer that he shot a bighorn ram Sept. 5, 2004, for his son, Hunter Black, who held the bighorn license. In a signed statement, Aaron Black said he made a bad choice when he shot the ram after an exhausting hunt and chase. He said when his son did not have the energy to make the shot himself, "That's when my dream hunt for my son went horribly bad."

Hunter Black was one of 2,054 applicants in the New Mexico drawing for 12 bighorn sheep permits in 2004. As a nonresident, his once-in-a-lifetime permit cost \$3,018. Hunter's father, Aaron Black, was sentenced March 25, 2005 in Santa Fe Magistrate Court and fined \$500 for each of two charges. He also was ordered to pay \$1,500 to Operation Game Thief in lieu of additional fines and civil damages, and \$114 in court costs. Civil damages normally are \$1,000 for a New Mexico bighorn sheep. Santa Fe County Magistrate Richard Padilla also sentenced Black to 364 days of unsupervised probation and banned Black from hunting in New Mexico for five years. ■

Online applications up for big-game hunts

SANTA FE—Online applications for New Mexico big-game hunts increased almost 54 percent for the 2005-2006 seasons, indicating hunters are finding the system more convenient than filing paper applications. Of the 145,126 total applications for deer, elk, antelope, ibex, javelina and bighorn sheep permits, 78,146 were done online. This was only the second year the Department of Game and Fish offered online applications.

This year is the first year deer hunters were required to participate in a drawing to hunt on public lands. That accounted for an overall increase of more than 30,000 applications for deer hunts. Online applications comprised 44 percent of the 52,737 applications for public deer hunts. Elk hunting permits were most popular for the 2005-2006 drawing hunts, with 64,538 applications, almost 3,000 more than the previous year. Applications for antelope were next at 15,844; followed by bighorn sheep, 6,701; javelina, 2,904; and ibex, 2,412. ■

Lions destroyed after killing family pets



This 140-pound male mountain lion was tracked through yards, and under porches and decks before it was treed and killed because it was preying on pets in a subdivision east of Albuquerque.

PHOTO: SCOTT BROWN

Department of Game and Fish conservation officers killed two mountain lions this spring and early summer after the lions entered residential areas and killed a dog and four pet goats.

In early April a lion killed a Las Vegas area man's blue heeler, then chased the man into his house after the man tried to scare the lion away by firing his pistol. Officers used a predator call and killed the young female lion when it approached.

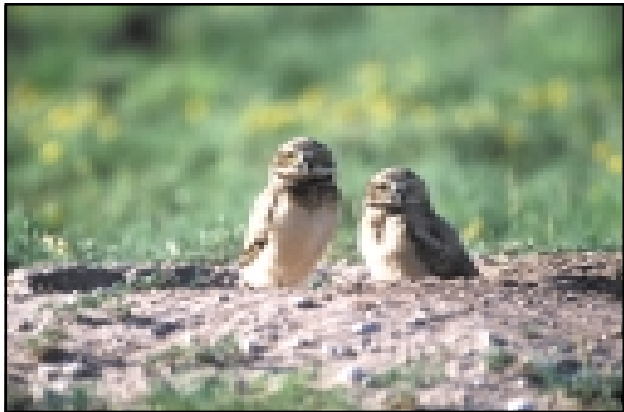
In early June, a large male lion visited a home east of Albuquerque three nights in a row and killed a couple's four pet pygmy goats. Dogs tracked the lion through the subdivision for two hours, including under porches and decks, before the lion was treed.

For information about how to deal with large predators if you live near them or encounter them, visit www.wildlife.state.nm.us and click on "Publications." ■

Wild and free

Vast public lands, diverse wildlife lure visitors to remote Otero Mesa

BY DAN WILLIAMS
PHOTOS BY DON MACCARTER



Burrowing owls like to make their homes in abandoned prairie dog burrows and are common sights on Otero Mesa.



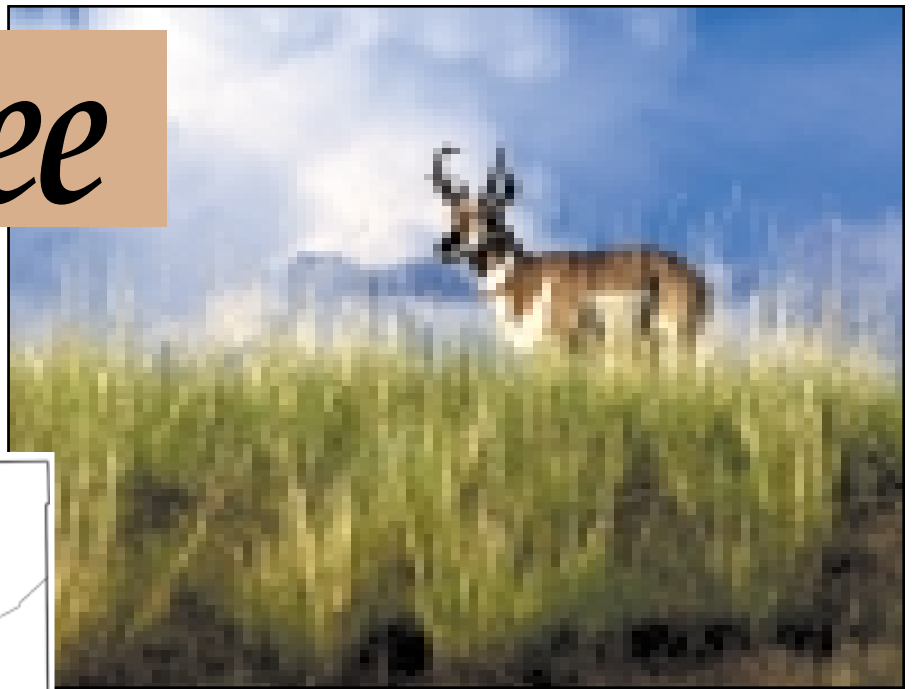
Twenty-three percent of the world's 1,500 cactus species occurs in the Chihuahuan Desert, and many can be found on Otero Mesa.



Once a candidate for the federal threatened species list, black-tailed prairie dogs are making a comeback on Otero Mesa.



Some of the best remaining native Chihuahuan desert grasslands can be found surrounding Alamo Mountain on Otero Mesa in southern New Mexico.



The Otero Mesa pronghorn herd is one of the few in New Mexico that survived the intense commercial hunting of the early 1900s.

IT IS ONE OF NEW MEXICO'S last truly wild places, 2.1 million acres of open landscapes, native grasslands, wildlife and natural beauty that should be preserved for generations to behold. Hunters, hikers and wildlife watchers respect Otero Mesa for its diverse natural resources and recreational opportunities. Gov. Bill Richardson has called it a "sacred environmental area."

The ongoing debate over the U.S. Bureau of Land Management's plans to open portions of Otero Mesa to oil and gas drilling has brought a flood of attention to a fragile ecosystem that otherwise might be overlooked because of its remoteness. In fact, that remoteness is what makes Otero Mesa so special, says Lisa Kirkpatrick, chief of the Department of Game and Fish Wildlife Conservation Services Division.

"Some of New Mexico's special wildlife have survived on Otero Mesa because the animals are sort of hidden away from the pressures that have consumed so many other species," Kirkpatrick says. "It truly is a special place."

Otero Mesa's pronghorn herd is one example of how remoteness can benefit wildlife. The herd is one of only a few in the state that survived the intense commercial market hunting of the early 1900s and is a truly native population. According to historical reports, New Mexico never has had to reintroduce antelope on Otero Mesa.

Whether you're traveling south from Alamogordo or northeast from El Paso, it takes some serious driving time to reach the heart of the Otero Mesa. Hunters familiar with the area consider it one of their favorite places to pursue quail, doves, deer and antelope. Hikers and wildlife watchers are never disappointed in the sights, sounds and scenery of one of the last Chihuahuan desert grasslands of its kind in the United States.

"It takes a while to get out there, but it's always worth the drive," says Ernie Sandoval, a Department of Game and Fish southeast area supervisor who lives and hunts in the area. "In good years, you'll find lots of Gambel's and scaled quail, and great dove hunting. Varmint hunters also enjoy going out there to call coyotes. And of course there are the deer and antelope."

The Otero Mesa pronghorn herd ranges in size from 100 to 800 animals depending

upon weather and habitat. Because of that, only 50 hunters are selected each season, and all must use primitive muzzleloader weapons. The hunts are so popular they have become among the hardest to draw in the state lottery system.

"Record-book antelope come out of that unit every year," Sandoval says. "Tags to hunt in Unit 29 are very coveted."

A small herd of desert mule deer also shares the Otero Mesa habitat with many other animals that thrive in the desert grasslands. Birds, including eagles, hawks and songbirds are abundant. There's even talk of reintroducing the endangered aplomado falcon, which based on some recent sightings may be making a comeback in the area. Black-tailed prairie dogs, a candidate for the federal threatened species list until 2004, have established more than 20 colonies on Otero Mesa. Their elaborate burrow systems also provide habitat for species such as mountain plovers and burrowing owls.

Recently, some newcomers have arrived to the Otero Mesa landscape. Oryx are making their way over from White Sands Missile Range, expanding their territory and opening new hunting opportunities. Some area ranchers are requesting Oryx permits, and the Department is happy to oblige in its efforts to remove the exotic species from areas of the state outside the missile range.

Efforts also are under way to keep other unwelcome newcomers out of much of Otero Mesa. Gov. Richardson, environmental groups and sporting organizations are fighting to dramatically limit the amount of oil and gas drilling in the region. The governor has proposed setting aside 640,000 acres of the mesa as a national conservation area.

"These are places that should be protected for other values such as groundwater, hunting and fishing, and ranching," Gov. Richardson said in June, when he announced plans to seek a court injunction to stop the BLM's plan to lease oil and gas tracts on Otero Mesa. "I proposed protecting about half of Otero Mesa, while allowing careful energy exploration on other portions. Instead the BLM proposed opening 95 percent of Otero Mesa. They want to drill everything, everywhere. But they won't get away with it without a fight." ■



Partners

conserving
endangered
species



*The aquatic weasels are fun to have around.
They won't scare our children or eat our livestock . . .
They will eat some of our carp and crawfish, but they won't
show up in our back yards or raid our camps.*

The River Otter: Return of a native?

**Playful, popular
predators haven't
been seen
in New Mexico
since 1953**

By M.H. "Dutch" Salmon

Water mammals always draw my attention, perhaps because as a fisherman I am drawn to water myself. So over the years I have watched, fascinated, as certain mammals revealed how they made riparian habitats their home. As a kid, the beavers I saw in the Adirondacks were always on the job, chewing, hauling, building and repairing. The muskrats seemed equally business-like; most often I'd see them swimming cross-current with water reeds and grasses in their mouths. The nutria along the Pecos in West Texas reminded me of muskrats on steroids – impressive but not inspiring. A Texas wildlife man told me, "They're exotics; if you see them on your canoe trip, go ahead and shoot." I did fell a couple with a Ruger .22 revolver but, like most exotics, it did little good and the critter is here to stay.

Then there is the otter. I have seen this aquatic predator in New York State, Ontario, Minnesota, Montana, and Arizona, but not yet in New Mexico. The otter is not business-like at all. It must be a fine fisher, for it lives on fish and I have seen the remnants of its meals, but it seems whenever you see one, it is always horsing around like a kid away from school on swim day. Thus, you would think it would be an easy addition to New Mexico's wildlife resource – reintroduce the native river otter to a few remote streams within the state and thereby enhance both biological diversity and wildlife viewing. You would be wrong.

As the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish discovered at public meetings last fall, New Mexicans have different opinions – and concerns – about bringing river otters back to their old neighborhoods after being absent for more than 50 years.



**Photos: Tim Daniel,
Ohio Division of Wildlife**

**River otters are
right at home
in icy water.**

Reintroductions? Public jury is still out

Otter reintroductions are being considered for the upper Rio Grande, possibly the Chama River, and the Gila and San Francisco rivers. The meetings, requested by the New Mexico State Game Commission, were conducted in Bayard, Albuquerque, Santa Fe and Taos to ascertain what local folks think. At the meetings, people in northern New Mexico were almost uniformly positive about the otter, while some of those who attended the southwestern meeting in Bayard were more skeptical. All, however, wanted to hear what Department of Game and Fish wildlife biologist Bill Dunn and Rachel Conn of the New Mexico River Otter Working Group, a citizens' coalition, had to say about otters.

Otters, they said, are members of the mustelid (weasel) family. They nest on land but live and hunt mostly in the water, feeding mostly on fish and crawfish. They weigh 10 to 25 pounds at maturity, love to play together, and are valuable furbearers in some states.

"Otters seem to interest people, so it's not surprising that many are excited about the possibility of bringing them back to a few of their native streams in New Mexico," Dunn said. "Of course, there also are skeptics with valid concerns about bringing back a species that has been extirpated. The environment we have to offer these animals today is far different from the environment they had when they were still living in New Mexico. That's why we are studying this proposal very carefully and involving the public every step of the way."

...continued on page 6





Impressive comebacks in other states

Although there have been recent reports of otter scat found in far northwest New Mexico — most likely from otters reintroduced in Colorado that moved downstream — the last and only confirmed otter reported in New Mexico was found dead in a beaver trap in 1953 in the Gila River. Nationwide, overtrapping, habitat loss, water pollution and other environmental factors contributed to the otters' decline and by 1980 river otters had disappeared from 11 states and were in serious decline in nine others. Since then, all those states but one — New Mexico — have implemented otter restoration programs. The results of those programs have been impressive. With oversight and without the threat of overtrapping, otters have rebounded in almost every waterway they have encountered. The program was most impressive in Missouri, where a nearly nonexistent otter population grew to 11,000 animals in about 20 years.

In the Southwest, otters have been successfully reintroduced in waters of

"I doubt if we're suddenly going to be inundated by thousands of otters."

Don Hurst,
avid trout fisherman

Colorado, Arizona and Utah. The otters have adapted well to their former native habitat and in most cases have established themselves as fine fishers and good neighbors — even among their fellow anglers.

"It would be wonderful to see them come back in New Mexico," said Don Hurst, an avid trout fisherman. "I've seen them while fishing in Wisconsin. They're such a joy to watch — playing and frolicking. Yes, they're going to eat a few trout, but in the whole balance of things, I don't think otters are going to decimate the trout population of New Mexico."

Playful, curious river otters can live and breed for 20 years.



Hurst, a member of New Mexico Trout, said although the organization has no formal stance on reintroducing otters to New Mexico, some members support the idea. "From my understanding, there would not be a major concentration of otters anywhere in the state," he said. "I doubt if we're suddenly going to be inundated by thousands of otters."

It is understandable that some anglers would be concerned about otter predation on game fish. But recent studies indicate reintroducing otters actually helps game fish populations by reducing competition. While otters can take fish up to 20 inches long, they tend to go after the slower, more phlegmatic species such as carp, catfish and suckers, which make easier meals than the more mercurial bass and wild trout. Anecdotal reports indicate that trout fishing guides have found no depletion of trout where they share water with otters in Arizona, Colorado and other states, and that clients enjoy seeing otters along the streams.



Adult river otters measure 40 to 60 inches from their nose to the tip of their powerful tail. Females typically are 25 percent smaller than males.

New evidence of river otters found in northern New Mexico

University of New Mexico researchers and two New Mexico State Parks rangers recently discovered evidence that river otters may be living in far northwestern New Mexico. UNM Associate Professor and longtime otter researcher Paul Polechla said DNA analysis of scat collected in November 2004 at Navajo Lake State Park was identified as coming from a river otter. It is the first known evidence of river otters in New Mexico since 1953, when an otter was captured in a beaver trap on the Gila River.

The otter scat is being analyzed further to try to determine subspecies. A Department of Game and Fish biologist said the otters that left the scat most likely traveled downstream from Colorado, where river otters were reintroduced in the 1980s.

The otter scat found in New Mexico was less than 15 miles from an established otter population in Colorado, wildlife biologist Bill Dunn said.

"It is not unexpected that we would find otter sign in this part of New Mexico," Dunn said. "It's encouraging that otters are thriving in southern Colorado, and we may benefit from the expansion of their population. But if citizens of New Mexico want a population of otters in our state, it probably will take a reintroduction effort on our part."



Menu of choice: Non-native species

I've seen otters while fishing the waters of the Verde River in Arizona, where otters were reintroduced from 1981-83. I can only say that the sightings enhanced my fishing experience. The game fish are still there in mass and diversity, and I can't imagine that any angler would resent sharing some of the take with such a delightful fellow fisher. And otter predation on crawfish would have to be seen as a plus by anglers, especially those who fish the Gila and San Francisco rivers, where crawfish populations have exploded in recent years. Crawfish eat fish eggs, along with a lot of other things, and because they aren't native to our southwest streams, they have a considerable potential for mischief as an imbalance among native aquatic populations. Otters, along with raccoons, find crawfish easy pickings as year-round prey, which lessens their focus on fish.

Indeed, there is a certain irony here. We know the Gila drainage held otters historically and that the last otter believed taken in the state was trapped along the Gila River in 1953. We'll probably never know how common they were, but oddly the Gila drainage may be better otter habitat today than before European settlement. Back then, there were no crawfish, and fish as prey would have been limited to the native suckers, Gila trout and roundtail chub. Today in the Gila there is more fish mass and more fish diversity than there was historically. The natives are still there, but they are for the most part outnumbered by non-native species that include hatchery trout, smallmouth bass, channel catfish, flathead catfish, bullheads, carp, and especially those pesky crawfish. The irony is rich, for we have a chance to restore a native while keeping him fat and happy primarily with non-native species. Otters most likely would not threaten the native Gila trout, which primarily are concentrated in higher reaches of the drainages. Otters are likely to prefer the lower reaches of the streams, where the water is deeper and supplies of their favorite foods – crawfish, suckers and carp

– are more plentiful.

Show us the money

Still, the concerns surfaced at the Bayard meeting. One familiar face wanted to know: "How are you going to pay for this reintroduction?" Biologist Dunn of the Department of Game and Fish said grant money from environmental groups is expected to augment the reintroduction fund.

Another area resident said the historical otter in southwestern New Mexico was a "Sonoran subspecies" and because that subspecies was extirpated, any otters brought in from elsewhere would be, in his opinion, an "alien species." That same argument could be applied to the Gila National Forest's current elk population, prized by most area residents since its reintroduction after being extirpated by 1900. The native elk

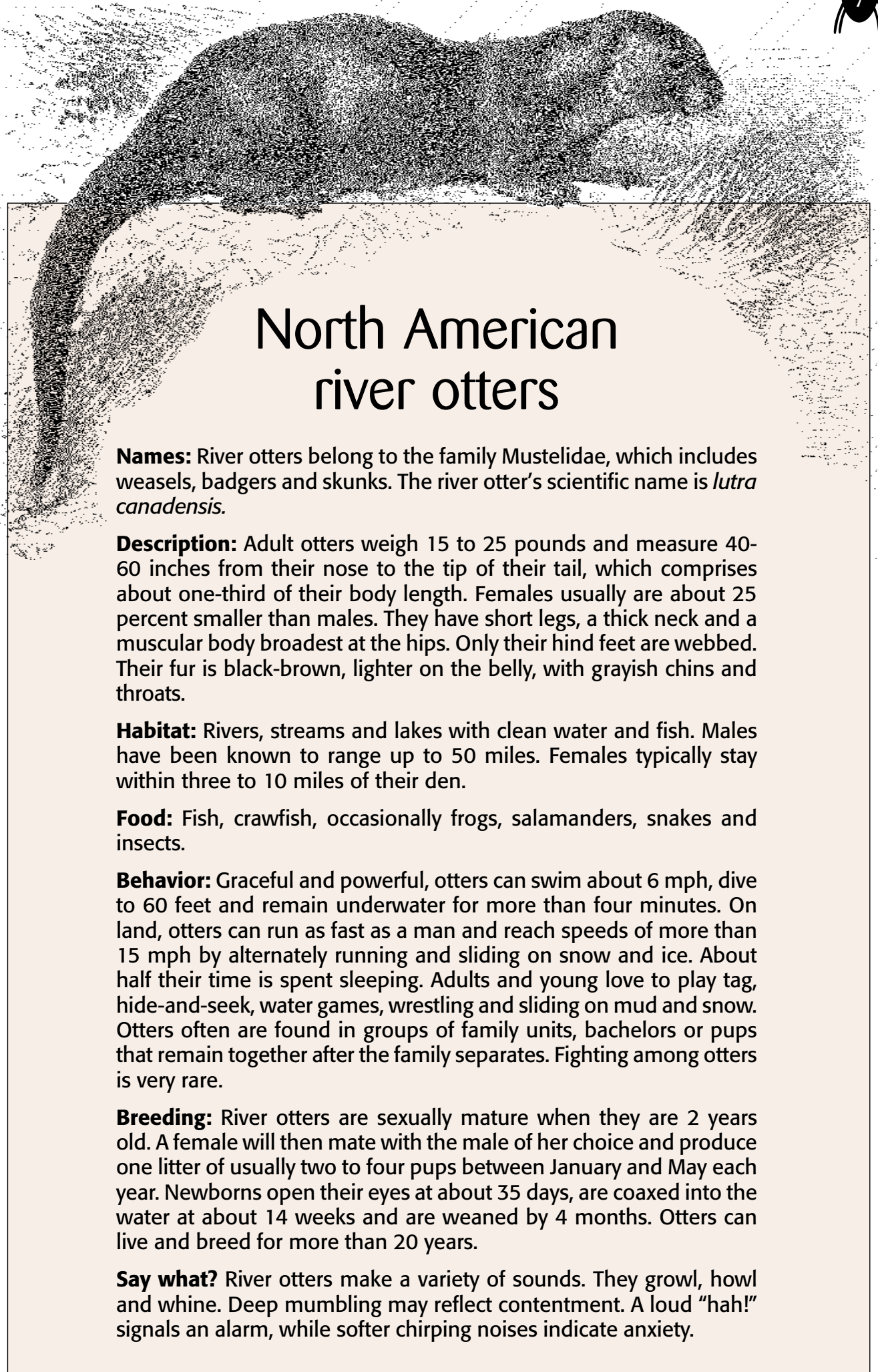
were the subspecies Merriam's elk, but the reintroduced subspecies came from the northern Rockies. Missouri otters would in all likelihood adapt to New Mexico streams as readily as Wyoming elk have adapted to New Mexico's mountains.

There was also a comment at the Bayard meeting that otters might somehow be bad for the local economy. This is a legitimate concern but I would argue that the opposite may be more likely. When I canoed the Verde River, all the river runners talked with pleasure about the otters they had seen. Those who didn't see any otters felt left out. The aquatic weasels are fun to have around. They won't scare our children or eat our livestock, and they are potentially harvestable furbearers that are not protected by the Endangered Species Act, although the possibility exists

for listing action under the State Wildlife Conservation Act. They will eat some of our carp and crawfish, but they won't show up in our back yards or raid our camps.

Over the next year, the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish will consider public input and study the feasibility of otter reintroduction in New Mexico. The research and studies then will be presented to the State Game Commission, which will direct the Department whether to proceed with the efforts to return a New Mexico native to its natural home. ♦

M.H. "DUTCH" SALMON of Silver City is an accomplished outdoor writer, book author and editor, and the newest member of the New Mexico Game Commission.



North American river otters

Names: River otters belong to the family Mustelidae, which includes weasels, badgers and skunks. The river otter's scientific name is *Lutra canadensis*.

Description: Adult otters weigh 15 to 25 pounds and measure 40-60 inches from their nose to the tip of their tail, which comprises about one-third of their body length. Females usually are about 25 percent smaller than males. They have short legs, a thick neck and a muscular body broadest at the hips. Only their hind feet are webbed. Their fur is black-brown, lighter on the belly, with grayish chins and throats.

Habitat: Rivers, streams and lakes with clean water and fish. Males have been known to range up to 50 miles. Females typically stay within three to 10 miles of their den.

Food: Fish, crawfish, occasionally frogs, salamanders, snakes and insects.

Behavior: Graceful and powerful, otters can swim about 6 mph, dive to 60 feet and remain underwater for more than four minutes. On land, otters can run as fast as a man and reach speeds of more than 15 mph by alternately running and sliding on snow and ice. About half their time is spent sleeping. Adults and young love to play tag, hide-and-seek, water games, wrestling and sliding on mud and snow. Otters often are found in groups of family units, bachelors or pups that remain together after the family separates. Fighting among otters is very rare.

Breeding: River otters are sexually mature when they are 2 years old. A female will then mate with the male of her choice and produce one litter of usually two to four pups between January and May each year. Newborns open their eyes at about 35 days, are coaxed into the water at about 14 weeks and are weaned by 4 months. Otters can live and breed for more than 20 years.

Say what? River otters make a variety of sounds. They growl, howl and whine. Deep mumbling may reflect contentment. A loud "hah!" signals an alarm, while softer chirping noises indicate anxiety.



(below)
Guided tours will put GAIN participants as close as 30 feet to lesser prairie chickens during their annual spring mating rituals near Milnesand in southeastern New Mexico.

PHOTO:
 DON MACCARTER



(at right)
Winter wildlife viewing on the Sargent, Humphries and Rio Chama wildlife areas will be a popular GAIN activity for photographers.

PHOTO:
 DON MACCARTER



"GAIN is a great first step toward creating more wildlife-related activities for people who may not hunt or fish," said Bruce Thompson, Department of Game and Fish Director. "We can do this on some of our State Game Commission properties without interfering with the uses for which the properties originally were acquired," Game Commission Chairman Guy Riordan added.

Initial GAIN activities began early in summer 2005 on the state's Wildlife Management Areas. Application for fall and winter activities is under way on the Department web site, www.wildlife.state.nm.us. More opportunities will be added in wildlife areas statewide depending upon seasons and viewing opportunities. Fall is expected to be one of the most popular GAIN seasons, when participants can join wildlife biologists and other experts to listen to the elk bugling in the Sargent Wildlife Area near Chama in northern New Mexico.

ing access to activities that people have enjoyed in these areas for years," Department Assistant Director Luke Shelby said. "Really, the only times we close our wildlife areas are when the wild animals need privacy, such as during calving and fawning seasons. The rest of the time, people are welcome to take hikes, enjoy the scenery or go hunting or fishing in season. However, people who want to participate in the specially designed GAIN activities will have to apply for permits."

Successful GAIN participants will apply for and receive permits through seasonal drawings. Applications will cost \$6 through an online lottery drawing system that will bill individual credit cards. The permit fee will be billed if the applicant is successful. Activity fees will vary according to activity. As an added bonus, some special GAIN opportunities will be available to people who would like to assist Department biologists with activities such as wildlife trapping operations and electro-fishing surveys.

The Gaining Access Into Nature initiative was a highlight identified at Governor Richardson's Summit on Wildlife-Related Recreation in August 2004. Anglers, hunters, guides, mountain bikers, resource managers and wildlife activists who gathered around Governor Richardson's round table decided that putting more people in touch with the state's wildlife not only would help the wildlife, but also would stimulate local economies, especially in rural communities.

"Wildlife-associated recreation brings more than \$1 billion a year to our state's

"Enjoying New Mexico's wildlife is something that can be done year-round in all regions of the state," Director Thompson said. "GAIN allows us open more public lands and help people enjoy and perhaps better appreciate our natural resources."

Many of New Mexico's Wildlife Management Areas originally were purchased with money from the federal Pittman-Robertson Act, which created an excise tax on firearms, ammunition and archery equipment. Because the properties were bought and maintained through continued support of hunters and anglers, their interests must take priority, said Joyce Johnson, federal aid program manager for the southwestern region of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Allowing expanded uses of the areas is a good idea, she said, as long as the wildlife comes first.

Activities associated with GAIN will not conflict with hunting seasons or be scheduled during sensitive times for the wildlife, such as spring calving and fawning seasons. All GAIN-managed wildlife-watching activities will be scheduled to have no effects on the wildlife and its habitat. Hiking, horseback riding and some mountain biking will be preferred methods of travel, although there may be limited vehicle use. Areas will be developed and maintained to accommodate GAIN participants while conserving habitat. Other outdoor activities not managed under GAIN, such as hiking, horseback riding, mountain biking and camping, will not be restricted as long as the areas are open to those activities.

"We are creating special opportunities, not restrict-

economy and supports almost 15,000 jobs," Thompson said. "Some people don't realize that nearly 60 percent of that \$1 billion involves various outdoor and wildlife appreciation activities not associated with hunting and fishing, but enjoyed by many, including hunters and anglers."

Preliminary thinking about expanded wildlife opportunities took root in July 2004 at the Sargent Wildlife Area outside Chama, where Governor Richardson proclaimed the official New Mexico State Elk Herd. With its outstanding scenery and existing trails, fishing and wildlife viewing opportunities, the Sargent is an ideal location for GAIN activities. Special limited tours are planned to see the elk bugling in the fall and deer in the winter, with Game and Fish biologists and other experts as guides. An elk viewing facility is being constructed there to further assist people with viewing opportunities.

Many business owners and residents of the Chama Valley expect the GAIN activities to be welcome additions to area attractions that already are bolstering the local economy. The expanding Cumbres & Toltec Scenic



Outstanding wildlife activities await lucky GAIN applicants

To apply for GAIN activities, visit the Department web site at www.wildlife.state.nm.us, where you can learn about program opportunities, seasons and rules. Maps and information about the state's Wildlife Management Areas also are available on the site. When you're ready to apply, just click on Online Application and you're on your way. If you can't get to a computer with Internet access, the Department will be happy to help you out over the telephone. Just call (505) 476-8000 and have your credit card handy. It only costs \$6 to apply, and your card will be billed for the GAIN fee only if you are successful.

The Department is accepting applications now for fall and winter GAIN activities. Application deadlines are midnight Aug. 22 for the fall activities and midnight Nov. 21 for winter activities. Visit our web site for updates on activity dates, times and fees.



Fall GAIN activities

Elk bugling tours: Join a Department of Game and Fish wildlife biologist or an expert elk bugler on a tour of the Sargent Wildlife Area, home of the official New Mexico elk herd as proclaimed by Governor Bill Richardson. Two tours will be available, with room for six people each on Sept. 17 and Sept. 24. The fee will be \$56 per person. The activity sites will be accessible by roads and some light hiking.

Bighorn sheep trapping: Only a few lucky applicants will draw for these outstanding opportunities to join Department biologists and possibly participate in efforts to catch bighorn sheep and help them on their way to new homes in other parts of the state. Two trapping operations are scheduled this fall, one for desert bighorns at the Red Rock Wildlife Area near Lordsburg, and one for Rocky Mountain bighorns in the Latir Wilderness. Check the web site for dates and fees.

Winter GAIN activities

Deer viewing: Six applicants will be selected to tour the Sargent, Humphries or Rio Chama wildlife areas to see some of New Mexico's largest mule deer. One tour is planned. Check the web site for dates. The fee is \$74 per person.

Desert bighorn sheep viewing: The public rarely gets to venture inside the Red Rock Wildlife Area, the Department's breeding facility for desert bighorn sheep. That's why three separate GAIN activities are so special. Rugged hiking will put participants very close to some very large sheep on these three guided tours. Six applicants will be selected for each of the tours, scheduled Dec. 3, Jan. 3 and Feb. 4. The fee is \$56 per person.

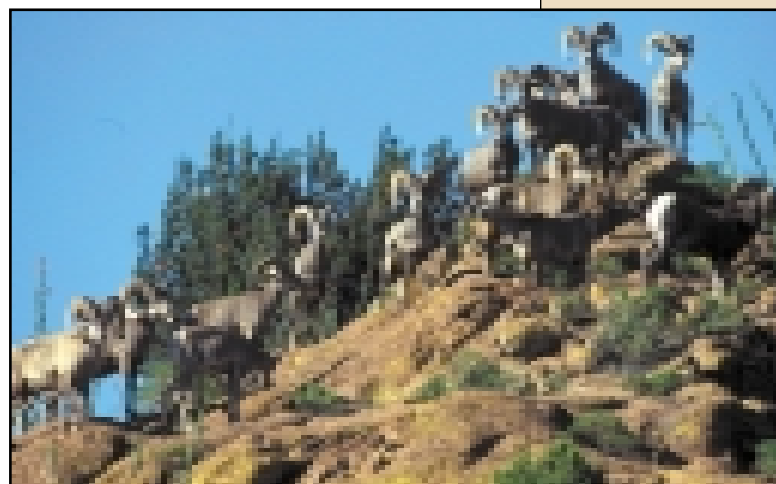
Railroad is attracting more tourists each season, and last winter's generous snowpack raised lake levels at nearby Heron and El Vado lakes.

"Things are beginning to look up for the Chama Valley," said Ray Casados, a Chamber of Commerce trustee and superintendent at Heron Lake State Park. "More people are discovering all the great things we have here when it comes to outdoor recreation. Promoting the wildlife only makes sense out here where we have an abundance of elk, deer and other animals."

Watch for GAIN activities at wildlife areas across the state as seasons change and GAIN matures. ■

Eighteen lucky GAIN applicants will be selected for guided tours to see desert bighorn sheep this winter at the Red Rock Wildlife Area near Lordsburg.

BIGHORN PHOTOS: DON MACCARTER



After the burn...

PHOTOS:
NEW MEXICO
STATE FORESTRY



Devastating forest fire kindles partnership to study watershed recovery on Philmont Ranch

BY RICHARD SCHRADER



Charred stumps form eerie sculptures after the Ponil fire.

PHOTO: MARTI NIMAN

IT'S INTERESTING HOW a catastrophe can bring a community together to share resources and make the best of a dire situation. One striking example of this can be seen at Philmont Scout Ranch in northeastern New Mexico, where a massive fire in the summer of 2002 wiped out all the trout in Ponil Creek. Over time, that summer's disaster also kindled a new spirit of cooperation and education between the ranch and Cimarron High School.

Doug Palmer of Philmont and Leigh Heddermon, a science teacher at Cimarron High School, watched the 90,000-acre Ponil Fire rage through the watershed. It destroyed vegetation and killed every rainbow and Rio Grande cutthroat trout in two of the creek's tributaries. It altered the stream hydrology and severely damaged the fish habitat.

While looking at the damage, Palmer and Heddermon saw a chance to form a partnership that would help the ranch and allow students to participate in a long-term fisheries project to document the recovery of the fish habitat.

"The fire created an opportunity for a real laboratory for how nature heals itself with our help," Palmer said. The research is important to the ranch, which wants to sustain a healthy native fish population. The ranch also wants to grow enough fish to supply other landowners willing to reintroduce the fish that originally inhabited the Sangre de Cristo Mountains, Palmer said.

Philmont's efforts to restore native Rio Grande cutthroat trout to Ponil Creek began in 1999. After years of planning and collaboration with the Department of Game and Fish, the ranch built a fish barrier and reintroduced Rio Grande cutthroats to the South Ponil drainage. The fire and ensuing runoff destroyed all that, and more. The ranch started doing restoration work on the fire-scarred land soon after the ashes cooled. Workers laid down rolls of erosion blankets on the steep slopes to slow runoff and give vegetation a chance to take root.

In the next year, Hedderman contacted Palmer to see if the ranch had an interest in student research that could provide useful data to the ranch. Recognizing that Philmont doesn't have the staff to gather fisheries data about the health of the Ponil watershed on a consistent and long-term basis, Palmer agreed to talk. He and students from Cimarron High School began a study design process to identify the values Philmont wants to see pro-

tected or restored in the Ponil watershed.

River Source Incorporated, which runs the New Mexico Watershed Watch program for the Department of Game and Fish, assisted Hedderman and Palmer in selecting four monitoring locations in the Ponil watershed to track recovery over the next 5 years. Hedderman raised funds from the PNM Foundation Earth Study Grant to buy equipment. She also attended annual teacher trainings for the New Mexico Watershed Watch program, which gives teachers skills to help their students study physical, chemical and biological measurements of watersheds and fisheries health.

The Department's Watershed Watch program works with teachers and students statewide to monitor trends and conditions of fish habitat and watershed health. Long-term studies are designed to assist local and state agencies and groups gather data. The students then present their findings to area residents, school boards, watershed groups and agencies. The students' research has real-world implications for how people behave, plan, and possibly impact fisheries habitat positively in the watershed.

"Here in this project, everything that we had been learning in environmental science came into play," said Beth Romero, a junior at Cimarron High. "We got to see all of our textbook terms come to life."

In 2003, students began studying the fish habitat with trips every spring during or just before snowmelt to assess the recovery of the fish habitat in the South and Middle Ponil Creeks. That same year, the ranch reintroduced Rio Grande cutthroat into the South Ponil by backpacking 500 fingerlings into the French Henry and Pueblano reaches in the upper part of the watershed.

Preliminary data for South Ponil Creek indicated that the watershed made significant recovery and the habitat can sustain trout. Turbidity data, gathered with a state-of-the-art turbidimeter on loan to the school from the Department, showed the water becoming clearer and free of ash and fire-related debris over the past three years. Students will complete their data analysis in May 2006 and provide an annual report to Philmont Scout Ranch, the Cimarron School Board, and the Cimarron Watershed Partnership.

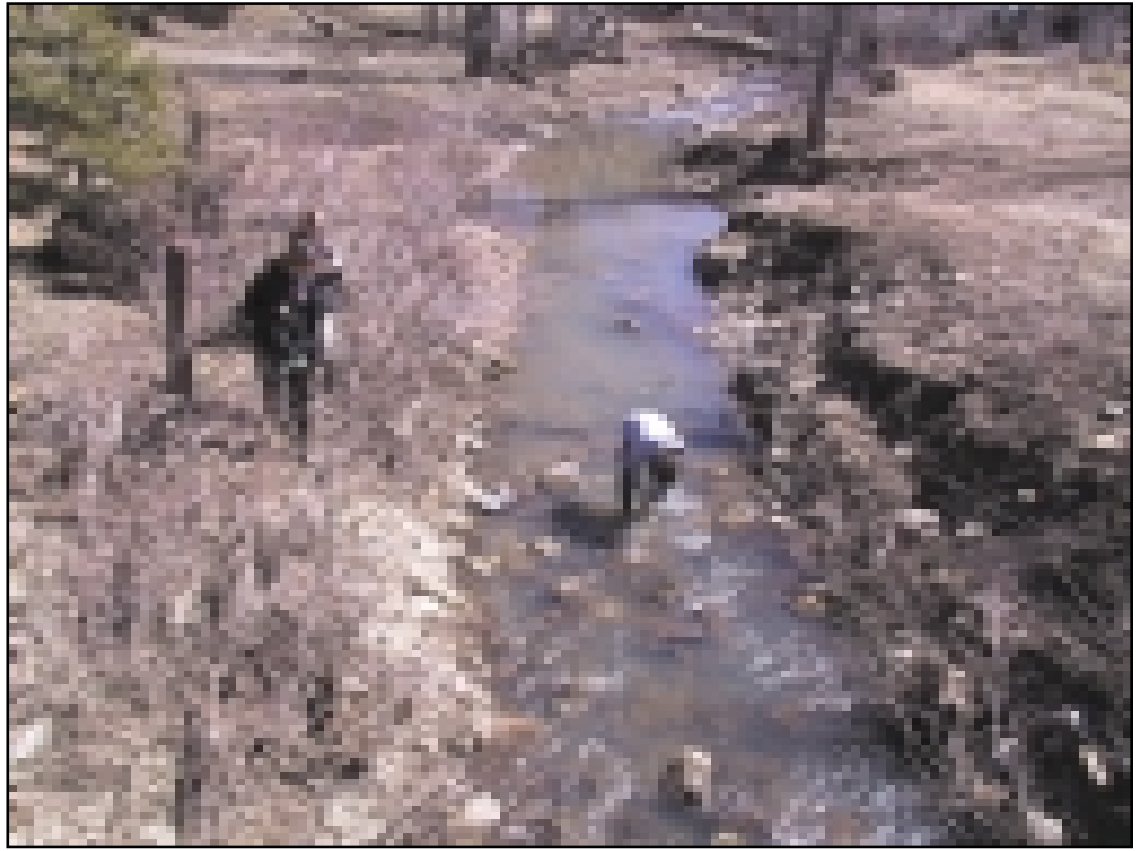
The study has had an impact on the students' understanding of fisheries protection and upstream-to-downstream connections of communities. Eric Peterson, a Cimarron High junior, said, "The study of the Ponil Creek and Cimarron River helps residents



get an idea of what different actions up stream affect the water and organisms downstream. If there are pollutants upstream, the studies of how they affect life downstream might inspire us to make products less harmful in the future.”

An intense, widespread fire like the Ponil Fire initially seemed like a tragedy for native cutthroat trout. However, the partnership between the Department of Game and Fish, Philmont Ranch and Cimarron Schools has proven to be a boon to the community and the Rio Grande cutthroat trout. Cimarron Schools and the Department continue to support Philmont and other land managers with data gathering and education to the public. New Mexico Watershed Watch also works with schools, government agencies and landowners to create more healthy fisheries and inspire New Mexico youth to become good stewards for the state’s precious watersheds. ■

RICHARD SCHRADER engages students and communities in watershed education and monitoring in the Southwest and Rocky Mountains through his company, River Source Inc.



(above)
Students from Cimarron High School have been studying Ponil Creek on the Philmont Scout Ranch since 2003, the year after a forest fire killed all the trout in the creek.

PHOTO: RICHARD SCHRADER



(left)
Collecting, identifying and counting aquatic insects is one way students determine how well Ponil Creek is recovering from the effects of a forest fire.

PHOTO: RICHARD SCHRADER

New Mexico Watershed Watch

New Mexico Watershed Watch is part of the Aquatic Resource Education program sponsored by the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish and funded through the federal Sportfish Restoration program, money generated from an excise tax on boat fuel and fishing related equipment. Watershed Watch trains teachers, loans equipment, and assists secondary schools with field and laboratory activities. Students engage in long-term studies of fish habitat, watershed health, and water quality using modern methods and equipment. Activities involve local groups and parents, and the data helps answer questions that are relevant to the community about fish habitat and watershed health.

Some examples of school studies include:

- Bosque School’s study of fish habitat and water quality

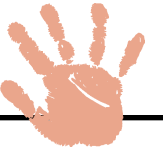
trends in the Jemez and Sandia Mountains—in partnership with the Cibola and Santa Fe National Forest staffs.

- East Mountain High School’s study of fishery and riparian habitat recovery from years of overgrazing—in collaboration with Campbell Corporation and Talking Talons.
- Farmington High School’s study of water quality and fish habitat on the lower Animas River.

For more information about New Mexico Watershed Watch, contact River Source Inc., at (505) 992-0726, e-mail res13131@cybermesa.com, or visit www.riversource.net.

To learn more about the Department of Game and Fish Aquatic Education program, visit www.wildlife.state.nm.us/education and click on Project WILD.





Creatures of the deep

New Mexico's aquatic "monsters" really aren't that scary

By COLLEEN WELCH



Visitors at this spring's New Mexico Wildlife Expo at Albuquerque's Shooting Range Park had a chance to catch and release some pretty big channel catfish at the kids' fishin' pond.

PHOTO: MARTIN FRENTZEL

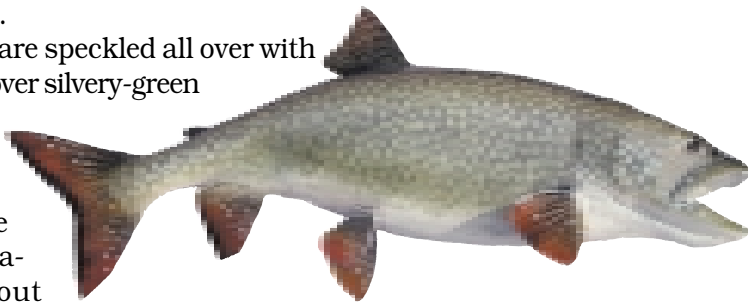
Some fishy business is going on deep under the surface ripples of New Mexico's largest lakes. That's where you'll find the state's biggest aquatic creatures—some as big as watermelons—swimming and eating.

They are creatures of the deep, but they are not giant water monsters like the Loch Ness monster of Scotland. New Mexico's big aquatic creatures are sport fish that many people, young and old, love to catch on their fishing lines. Some of these fish grow to be larger than our dogs and cats, but they are definitely not scary monsters. New Mexico's creatures of the deep may have spiny dorsal fins, long whiskers, or be shaped like torpedoes, but instead of being scary, they make for some fun fishing and really yummy eating. How deep will they go? As deep as they can, depending on water temperature, available oxygen and food.

Cold-water giant

Every year, people travel to Heron Lake in northern New Mexico to try to catch lake trout, a cold-water giant that is North America's largest member of the trout/salmon/char family. Scientists know this family by the name Salmonidae. Lake trout are newcomers to New Mexico. They were brought to Heron Lake in the 1970s and 1980s. Today, anglers might catch a lake trout lurking 60 to 70 feet below the surface.

Lake trout are speckled all over with dull white spots over silvery-green bodies. These trout have bodies so big and robust that they are grande by all measures. Lake trout have torpedo-shaped bodies with very strongly forked tails. The biggest lake trout ever caught in New Mexico was 41-1/2 inches long and weighed 31 pounds, 6 ounces. How big is that fish? One gallon of milk weighs about 4 pounds. Eight gallons of milk stacked together would weigh about 32 pounds. Grab a yardstick and some chalk to measure out 41-1/2 inches on your sidewalk.



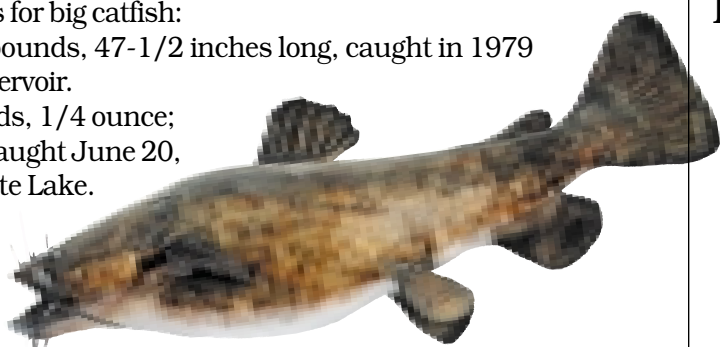
A different kind of cat

Catfish have one thing in common with our household feline cats: They have "whiskers." Unlike our earthy family cats, these aquatic cats live in warm water and are very adapted to life in large reservoirs such as Elephant Butte Lake. Catfish, in the Ictaluridae family, are nocturnal scavengers, hunting at night along the bottom, whether the water is murky or crystal clear. These "whiskered" fish feed on anything they might come across, including invertebrates such as insects, small fish and some plants. You could hook a catfish swimming in the shallows or in much deeper water.

Channel and **flathead catfish** each have eight long, black and fleshy "whiskers" called barbels. Commonly known as "cats," they have smooth, scaleless skin. Their fins are dark and soft, except for parts of the dorsal and pectoral fins.

New Mexico records for big catfish:

- Flathead catfish: 78 pounds, 47-1/2 inches long, caught in 1979 at Elephant Butte Reservoir.
- Blue catfish: 52 pounds, 1/4 ounce; 43-1/2 inches long; caught June 20, 2005 at Elephant Butte Lake.
- Channel catfish: 36 pounds, 8 ounces; 38 inches long; caught in 1999 at Stubblefield Lake.



All three catfish are native to New Mexico. Practice your math skills using the milk-jug analogy to get a better idea of the sizes for these prize catfish catches.

Stripes and spines

New Mexico's biggest bass live in Elephant Butte Lake, where they often are found swimming 30 to 40 feet deep. They are striped bass, and because they grow so big, they are a favorite among anglers since they were brought to New Mexico from the North American Atlantic Coast. Our state-record striped bass was caught in 1992 at Elephant Butte, weighing 54 pounds, 8 ounces and measuring 45 inches long.

Striped bass have two dorsal fins with both spines and rays. Spines are stiff and often controlled by muscles that raise and lower them. Rays are flexible and segmented or in sections. If they prick you, spines and rays can cause skin damage or even an infection. Striped bass are colored olive to blackish blue with silvery sides that have seven to eight dark stripes. Their abdomen or belly is whitish.



What if you catch one?

Handling big fish may require some help from the adults that you are fishing with. Here are a few 'ouch' tips:

- Catfish are slippery because they do not have scales, but they can raise and lower stiff, sharp spines attached to the pectoral and dorsal fins. A jab and poke from one of these spines can be as painful as a bee sting.
- Bass need to be held by the lower jaw. Remember that their dorsal fins have spines and rays.
- Catching a huge lake trout is no easy business. Like most big fish, they have very sharp teeth; so if you get near one, don't put your fingers near its mouth. Sometimes for kids, it's great just knowing that they are there.

Fish detectives

Take along a hand lens or magnifying glass when you go fishing. You may enjoy the adventure of looking closer at what you've caught. Look at the body of a catfish. How does the smooth skin of a catfish compare to the skin of a bass? What do those long, whiskery barbels look like when magnified? Take a closer look at the pectoral spine of a catfish. How does it compare to the pectoral fins of other fish?

Make some notes in a field journal or draw some sketches of your fish. This will help you remember what you saw long after your fish is cooked and eaten. Your teacher at school may even give you extra credit for your journal notations. You will be on your way to becoming a junior naturalist, plus a really good angler.

Learn more!

Fishing and Fishes, Golden Guide. St. Martin's Press, NY

Fishes. Michael Filisky. Peterson First Guides, Boston, NY

First Field Guide Fishes. National Audubon Society, Scholastic, NY

Watching Nature—A Beginner's Field Guide. Monica Russo. Sterling Publishing Co., Inc., NY

COLLEEN WELCH is Co-coordinator for Conservation Education and Project WILD for the Department of Game and Fish.



Bear rocks the houseboat

Party crasher gets a free boat ride in a bear trap

By SCOTT BROWN

TAKE A BEAR THAT LIKES WATER, a houseboat on Navajo Lake and mix with a couple of folks and a couple of dogs out for a weekend on the lake. When well-stirred, toss in some officers from Game and Fish and State Parks, a boat loaded with a bear trap—and hope for the best. It could have been a recipe for disaster this past Memorial Day, but thanks to a newly greased plan and one key ingredient—a cooperative bear—the picnic was a success.



A black bear that discovered he could find easy meals by swimming out and boarding houseboats patrolled the bank looking for snacks during Memorial Day Weekend at Navajo Lake State Park.

PHOTO: MARCY JUNG

IT ALL BEGAN Saturday morning as Marcy Jung and Barb LaRue of Ignacio, Colo., were out for a morning canoe ride in Negro Andy Canyon off the San Juan arm of Navajo Lake. As they were returning to their houseboat, they saw an animal swimming in the lake. Thinking first that it was one of their dogs, they weren't too worried. Imagine their surprise when they realized it was instead a black bear, out for a morning swim, and heading toward them. It was not, by any means, the start to a normal day. Jung and LaRue quickly returned to the houseboat and were near panic as the bear decided to join the party, climbing on board and walking around the deck while people and dogs wisely stayed inside, yelling, barking and banging on pots.

The unwelcome party crasher seemed unperturbed as he scouted the boat for an easy meal.

The party got more interesting when a couple of friends arrived in a speedboat and quickly realized that the bear was not at all interested in leaving the houseboat. "We watched as the bear didn't take long to open the cooler on the deck, only a few minutes," said Angie Morrison, who then raced to the main body of the lake to get cell phone coverage and called Navajo Lake State Park headquarters for help. Imagine the response they first got when they reported a bear, on a houseboat, at the north end of the lake!

Before help arrived, Jung and LaRue decided to spray the bear with Windex, which he didn't like (would you?). He decided the party had gone on long enough, so he climbed off the boat and started playing with the buoy attached to the side. Then he decided to lie down in a shady spot on the bank, right close to where the boat was tied, and take a snooze.

When New Mexico Department of Game and Fish Officer Brad Ryan arrived at the popular camping area, he realized that the ingredients were there for possible trouble. Ryan peppered the bear several times with rubber buckshot to encourage it to leave the area. The bear reluctantly did just that, only to return almost as soon as Ryan got back on his boat and left the channel. Deciding that enough was enough, LaRue and Jung untied the houseboat, and Morrison and her friend packed up their tent on shore. "I have never taken down a camp so fast," Morrison said.

"It was extraordinary," Jung said. "Initially there was panic because you didn't know what to do. That panic then turned to peace because somehow I felt that he wasn't going to hurt us."

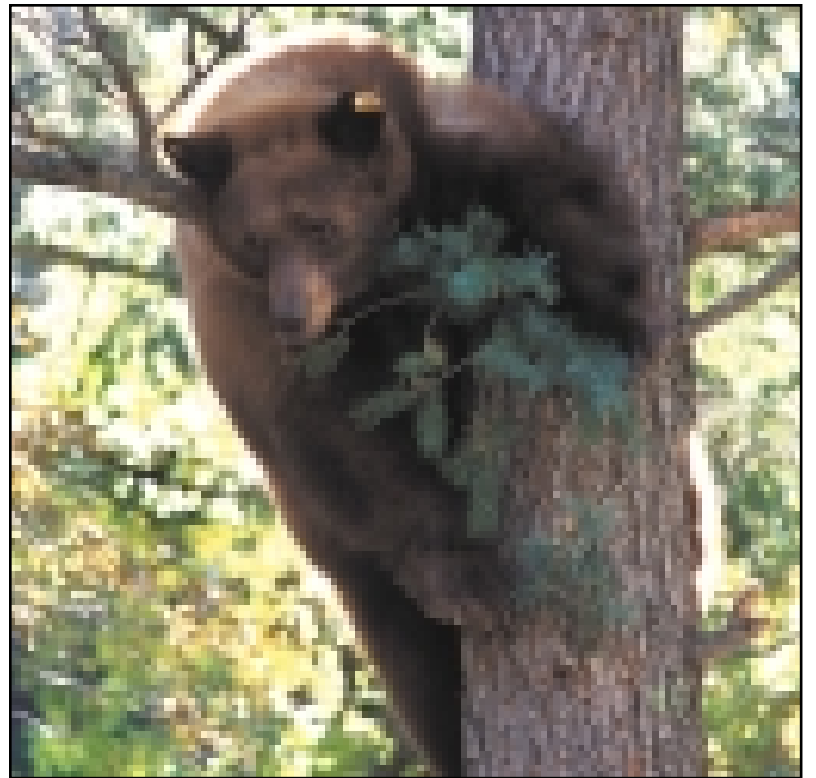
That evening, the bear returned to the area and wandered through several campsites and again was reported to Game and Fish. Sergeant Kathy McKim enlisted rangers from Navajo Lake State Park, who came up with the idea to load a bear trap onto another boat and take it up the lake. So probably New Mexico's first "floating bear trap" headed north.

When they arrived, the trap was set and the waiting began (sort of like putting a cake in a hot oven and hoping that it doesn't fall). As if all this had been done many times before, the plan worked to perfection. Within nine minutes of docking and setting the trap, the bear appeared, came onto the barge, ate the apples that were to be used as bait and walked into the trap after the other bait, some salmon. Suffice it to say, it probably was the fastest trapped bear in the west. "I have to tell you, it was lots of fun, a little stressful, and a real kick to actually see it work in front of our eyes," said McKim. "I was so glad the bear joined in and helped us."

Because it was the second time the bear had been trapped (it had earlier been moved across the lake from Sims Mesa), it was taken to the Wildlife Center in Espanola for care while a new plan was investigated. The bear, which was generally underweight, seemed comfortable around people, making it a good candidate for adoption at Wildlife West Wildlife Park in Edgewood. The park has been building a large enclosure to house a bear and, "The temperament of this animal seems just right," said Roger Alink, owner of Wildlife West. He hopes to have the bear habitat ready for occupancy by the end of the summer, just in time for folks to stop and see a swimming, houseboat-loving bear. They named the bear Koshari, which means "clown" in Navajo, and they are seeking donations to help in the feeding and care of their new resident. A formal fundraising and bear-education event is planned for Aug. 27 at Wildlife West. ■

SCOTT BROWN is the northwest area public information and outreach officer with the Department of Game and Fish.





(above)
Every summer, hungry bears are drawn to the foothills of Albuquerque, where they have been accustomed to finding easy meals.

PHOTO:
 CHUCK BARTLEBAUGH

Some bear facts

In New Mexico: Black bears live in forested and mountainous areas throughout the state, from Chama in the north to the Guadalupe and Peloncillo mountains in the south. The Department of Game and Fish estimates there are 5,000 to 6,000 bears statewide.

Appearance: Black bears can weigh anywhere from 125 to nearly 500 pounds, and vary in color from jet black to brown to cinnamon to blond.

Behavior: Black bears are generally shy and will avoid humans, but can be extremely dangerous if startled or provoked, or when females are with their cubs. They are strong enough to rip doors off of cars, can run up to 35 mph, can easily climb trees and are excellent swimmers.

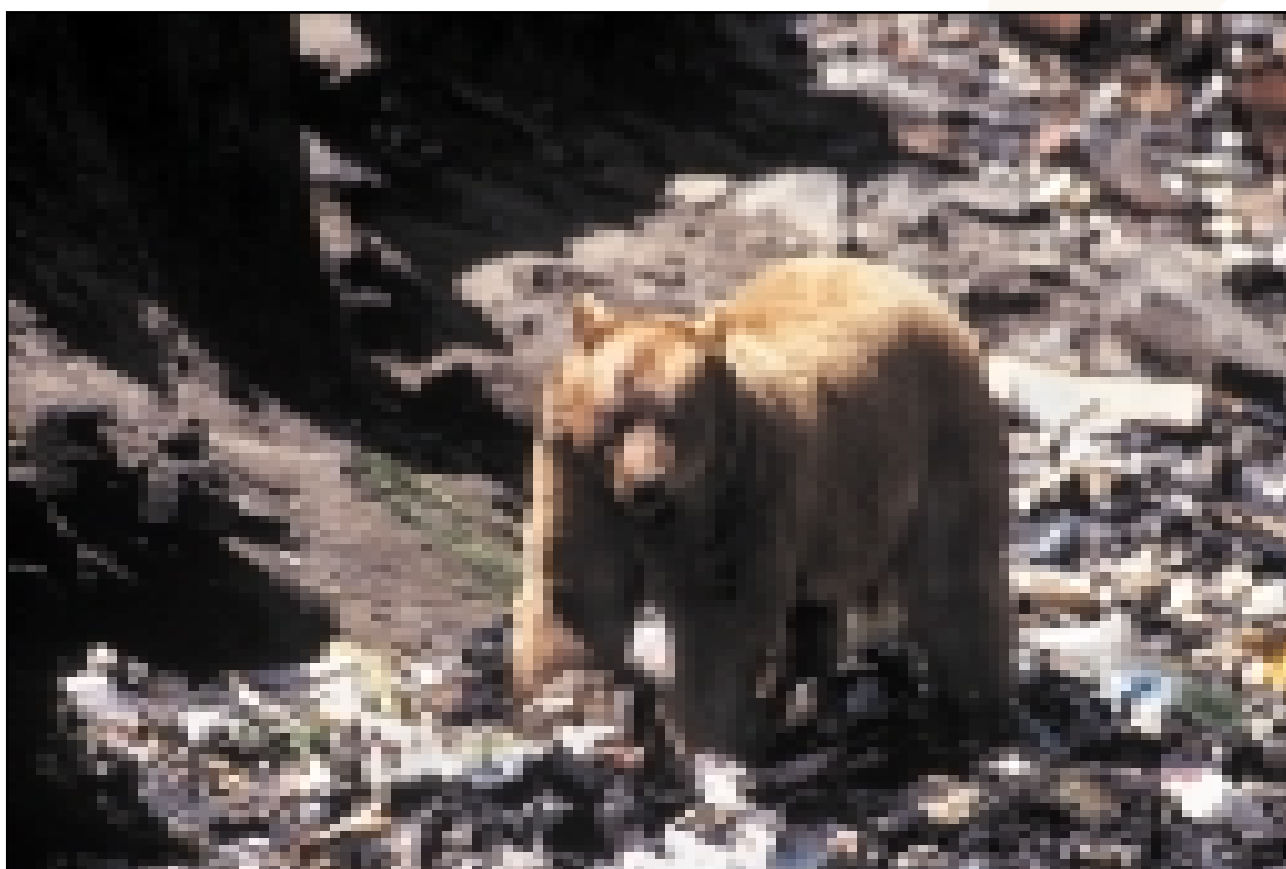
Food: Bears eat plants and animals, but their diet generally consists of roughly 85 percent vegetable material. They are intelligent and opportunistic—and they can smell odors from well over a mile away. It's important to remember that to a bear, anything that smells like food is food—including garbage, pet food or spoiled fruit.

Bears causing trouble in residential areas are treed, tagged and moved to an area far from humans. Nuisance bears that return and pose risks to humans are killed.

PHOTO: DON MACCARTER

Looking for trouble? Human food sources are the biggest source of trouble for bears, accounting for 70 percent of bear-human conflicts, according to one study. If a bear finds an easy meal on your property— even once— it will learn to seek similar food rewards. Mothers may also pass this behavior on to their cubs. When bears start to associate humans with food, they lose their natural fear of people and can become aggressive. In many cases, these bears must pay the ultimate price because they pose too great a danger to people. Whether you live or recreate in bear country, always remember that a fed bear is a dead bear.

CHAD NELSON is a public information specialist for the Department of Game and Fish.



Unattended, uncovered trash dumps often lure bears into urban areas.

PHOTO: DON MACCARTER



More bear facts

Avoiding encounters with bears

When traveling or camping in bear country, the following recommendations can help you avoid bear encounters.

- ◆ **Travel in groups:** Bears normally retreat when outnumbered.
- ◆ **Make noise:** Avoid surprising a bear. They can be very dangerous if startled.
- ◆ **Keep children and pets close by:** Always be aware of where your children are and keep pets on a leash.
- ◆ **Pack your trash out:** Don't leave trash on the trail or in your campground, and don't bury or burn your garbage. Later hikers or campers may encounter a bear that was attracted by your trash. It is also a good idea to strain your dishwasher and pack out the food particles. Pack it in, pack it out!
- ◆ **Look for cubs:** Never come between a mother and her cubs. No matter how cute and cuddly they appear, if you see cubs, the mother is likely to be nearby — and will be far less cute and cuddly.
- ◆ **Keep your camp clean:** Don't leave food out when not in use.
- ◆ **Stow your cooler:** Keep your cooler in a hard-sided trailer, camper or vehicle with the windows rolled up.
- ◆ **Don't cook in your tent or sleeping area:** Your cooking area should be at least 100 yards from where you sleep, if possible. Change your clothes after cooking and before going to sleep.
- ◆ **Hang items that might attract bears:** Suspend your food, pet food, garbage and other fragrant items such as toothpaste, soap, even insect repellents, from a tree. These items should be hung at least 10 feet off the ground and four feet from side trunks or branches.

If you encounter a bear

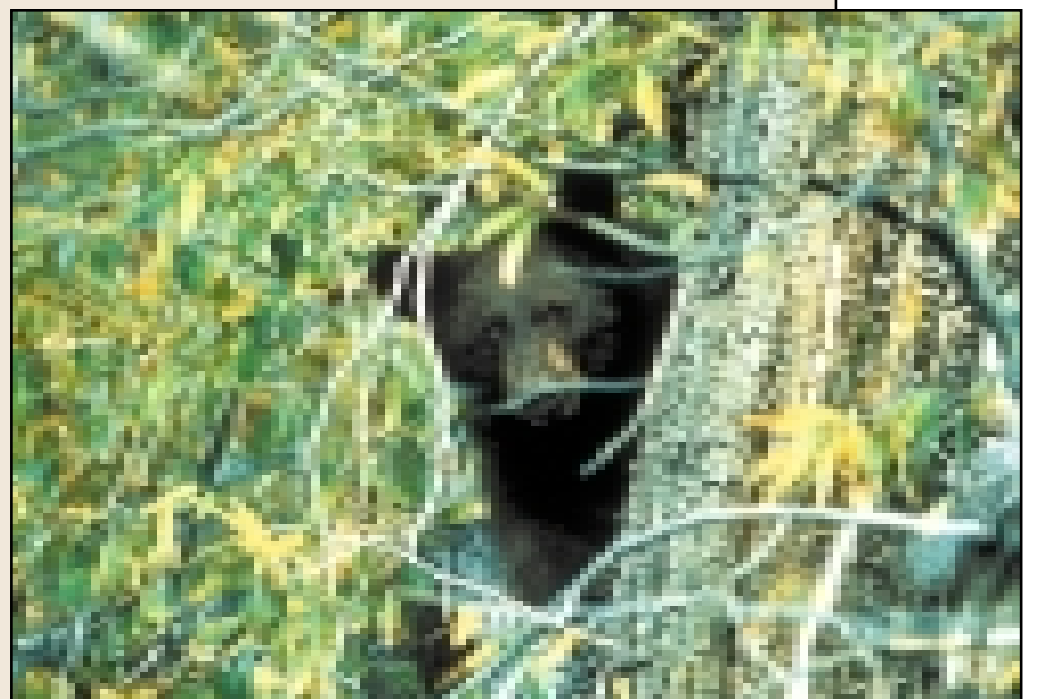
Usually, a wild bear will detect you and flee from the area before you are even aware of it. Occasionally, however, humans come face-to-face with a black bear. If the bear has become accustomed to humans and their food, it may not flee. If this happens to you, don't panic.

- ◆ **Do not run!** If you see a black bear, stay calm and continue to face the bear. Running is likely to trigger the bear's predatory instinct and it can run faster than you can. If you have small children, pick them up so they don't panic and run.
- ◆ **Stand upright:** Don't kneel or bend over. Slowly wave your arms, a jacket or other materials. Appearing larger will make the bear think twice about attacking you.
- ◆ **Back away:** Slowly back away from the bear. Don't turn your back on the bear or make any sudden movement.
- ◆ **Make lots of noise:** Yell, rattle pots and pans, whistle or break sticks to scare the bear away if it approaches.
- ◆ **Do not approach:** If a bear feels cornered or threatened, it can be extremely dangerous. Give the bear plenty of room to escape.
- ◆ **Never offer food:** Offering food to a bear is the worst thing you can do. Not only will the bear not leave the area if it finds food, it also will learn to associate humans with food and could become dangerous to other people.
- ◆ **Fight back:** If all else fails and you are attacked by a black bear, fight back aggressively. Do not play dead. (There are no grizzly bears in New Mexico, but this strategy is NOT recommended for grizzly bear attacks)

Bear-proof your home

Homeowners in bear country can take reasonable steps to keep themselves and their property safe from bears. These steps also could save a bear's life by preventing it from associating humans with food.

- ◆ **Garbage:** Store your garbage in airtight containers inside a garage or a sturdy shed, or in an approved bear-resistant receptacle. Clean trashcans with ammonia to reduce odors that can attract bears. Put the garbage out the morning of a scheduled pickup, not the night before.
- ◆ **Pet Food:** Feed your pets indoors. Don't leave pet food outside. Store it in a sturdy building or the garage. Make sure your garage door is closed at night.
- ◆ **Barbecues:** Keep barbecues clean and free of grease. Store them in the garage or a sturdy shed.
- ◆ **Birdfeeders:** Hang birdfeeders out of reach of bears, not on your porch or from the house rafters. Bring hummingbird feeders inside every night.
- ◆ **Fruit trees:** Plant fruit trees away from your house, and pick fruit as it ripens. Spoiled fruit that falls to the ground should be removed because the odor is a powerful bear attractant.
- ◆ **Compost piles:** Keep compost piles away from your house. Don't put meat, fish, other pungent scraps or fragrant fruits such as melons on your compost pile. Add lime to reduce odors and accelerate decomposition.
- ◆ **Livestock and beehives:** Electric fences can help keep bears away from chickens or other livestock. Keep livestock pens and beehives away from your house.
- ◆ **Woodpiles:** Keep woodpiles away from your house. They can attract rodents, and bears like to snack on rodents. ■



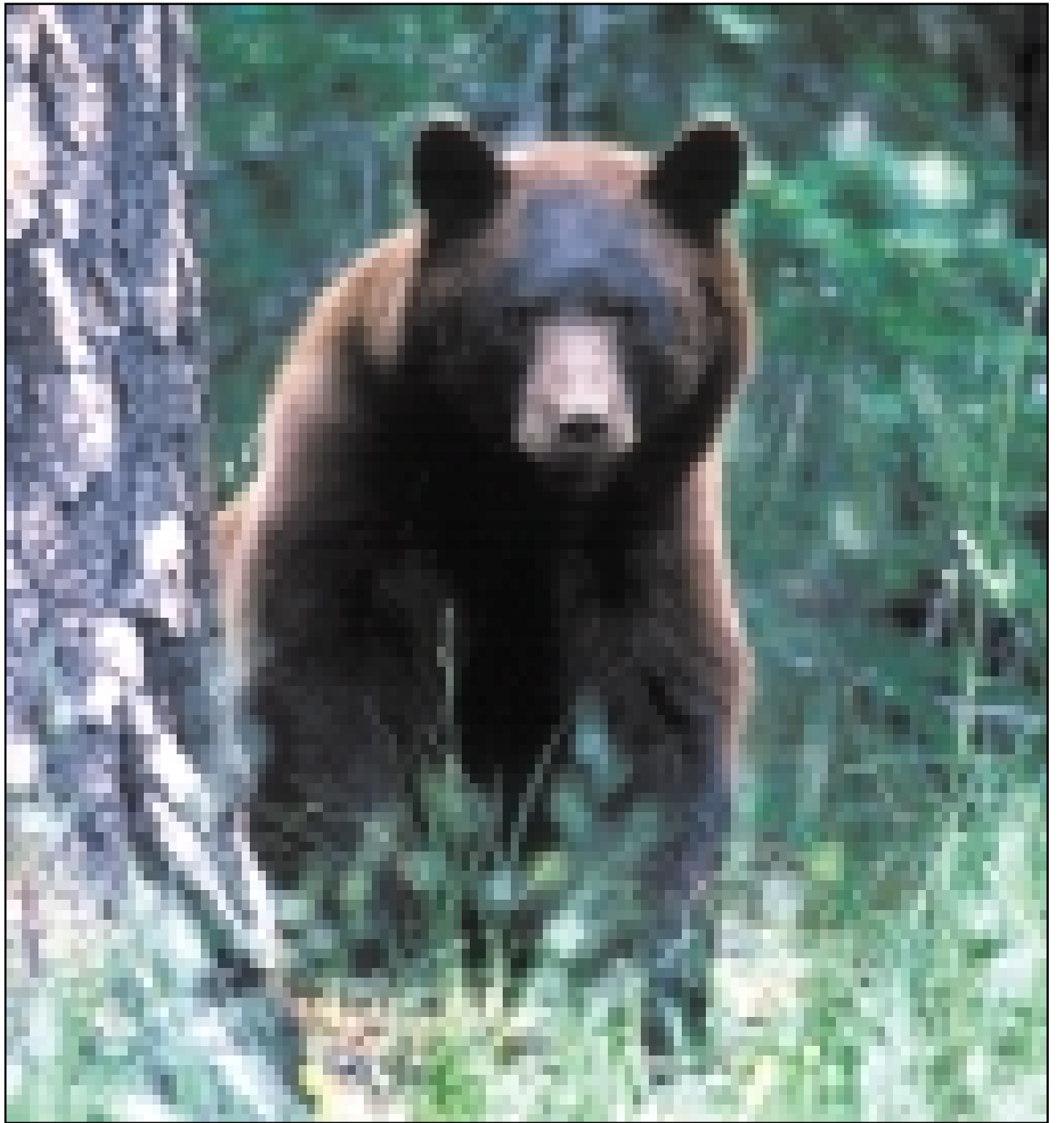
Bear cubs are cute, but not cuddly. Expect trouble if you get between a cub and its mother.

PHOTO: DON MACCARTER

Don't feed (kill) the bears!

*Keep them wild,
keep them alive*

BY CHAD NELSON



A wild black bear in its natural habitat is a rare and memorable sight. A black bear digging through trash in your backyard, however, is a sight you'd probably rather forget. Encounters like these can be costly and potentially dangerous for homeowners, but they can have far more devastating consequences for the bear.

(top right)
Big black bears are right at home in New Mexico's forests, but they can be easily lured into campgrounds or residential areas when there's food around.

PHOTO:
DON MACCARTER

As people continue to build houses and develop prime bear habitat throughout the western states, contact with these animals has been increasing in recent years. Homeowners living in bear country should take appropriate steps not only to ensure their own safety, but also to avoid creating a nuisance bear—a violation that can cost them from \$50 to \$500, and can cost the bear its life. Balancing the safety of citizens with preserving and protecting these impressive animals is a major challenge for the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish, especially in the summertime when bears are most active.

Squatting rights?

Jon Armijo, Conservation Officer for the Santa Fe area, said every summer during peak season he receives 15 to 20 calls a day about bears. "People move into the hills, right into the bears' backyards, and then they're surprised to see a bear on or near their land. I tell them the bears aren't coming down to their property; they were already living there. People are encroaching on the bears' habitat, not the other way around," Armijo said.

When Game and Fish officers respond to nuisance bear calls, they usually begin by performing a home assessment to determine what the homeowner can do to reduce the chance of a repeat visit by the bear. "We try to assist people in resolving the problem without having to relocate the bear," said Chris Chadwick, the Game and Fish District Supervisor for the Albuquerque area. This usually requires the homeowner to take "reasonable steps" to prevent another encounter. For example, it may be unreasonable to expect homeowners to cut down their fruit trees, but it is reasonable for that homeowner to dispose of spoiled fruit that has fallen from the trees, Chadwick said.

The Department of Game and Fish expects homeowners to voluntarily comply with the officer's recommendations, and can issue citations if they fail to take the necessary steps to eliminate the problem. "People need to realize that it's not just them," Chadwick said. "Creating a nuisance bear can be dangerous for their neighbors and others who come in contact with the bear afterward."

Feed a deer, kill a bear

Ty Jackson, conservation officer for the Mayhill area in southern New Mexico, responded to a nuisance bear call near Cloudcroft last year and discovered that the homeowner had been spreading corn and dog food in her yard to attract deer. Jackson issued her a warning for causing a nuisance bear.

The Department usually will trap and relocate a bear caught foraging in trash cans or in residential areas for the first time. Relocating a bear requires a great deal of time and effort by Game and Fish officers, and is often only a temporary solution, as the bears frequently either return to where they were originally trapped or become a nuisance in their new area. "You'd be surprised how many people think it's easier for us to move a bear than it is for them to bring in their hummingbird feeders every night," Chadwick said.

With a greater understanding of the bears and by taking appropriate precautions to prevent bear encounters, homeowners in rural and mountainous areas can significantly reduce the risks that come with living in bear country, and can help keep New Mexico's bears wild.

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