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U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
http://www.fws.gov

For Refuge Information
1 800 / 344 WILD

Reprinted November 2019

White-faced ibis
Dave Menke / USFWS

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

Alamosa and Monte Vista

National Wildlife Refuges

Sandhill cranes silhouetted against a morning sky
Dave Menke / USFWS

In a high mountain valley in south-central Colorado, the sun rises above a tapestry of wetlands and agricultural fields. The sounds of cranes, geese, and ducks fill the air as the sun rises in the sky. An elk herd feeds on grasses in a meadow.

A Crossroads for People and Wildlife

This blue goose, designed by J.N. "Ding" Darling, is the symbol of the National Wildlife Refuge System.

Welcome to Alamosa and Monte Vista National Wildlife Refuges (NWR), two of the three refuges in the San Luis Valley NWR Complex. These Refuges are places for people and wildlife.

The San Luis Valley has long been a sanctuary for humans and wildlife. The valley was once inhabited by the Ute Indians who lived off an abundance of elk, deer, pronghorn, small game, and waterfowl. Comanche parties occasionally came into the valley to hunt.

In 1694, an early Spanish explorer, Diego de Vargas, was the first recorded European in the San Luis Valley. Lieutenant Zebulon Pike's 1806-1807 expedition traveled through the valley when it was still a Spanish territory. At the conclusion of the Mexican War in 1848, the valley became American territory. A "ditch boom" in the 1880s sent irrigation canals fanning out through the valley, making it agriculturally productive. The development of mines, ranches, farms, and railroads soon led to the establishment of small communities throughout the valley and surrounding mountains.

Canada geese rise off frozen wetlands on Monte Vista NWR.

USFWS

High Mountain Valley Refuges

Hollingsworth / USFWS

Swainson's hawk

Realizing the urgent need for a place for waterfowl and other wildlife in the valley, the Migratory Bird Conservation Commission created Monte Vista National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) in 1952. Alamosa NWR was established in 1962 as another haven for migratory birds and other wildlife in the valley. In 1979, the two Refuges were combined administratively into the Alamosa-Monte Vista National Wildlife Refuge Complex. In 2003, an area to the north of these two refuges became Baca NWR. While Baca NWR is not currently open to the public, all these refuges are now managed as part of the San Luis Valley NWR Complex.

Alamosa and Monte Vista NWRs are two of over 565 refuges in the National Wildlife Refuge System – a network of lands set aside and managed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service specifically for wildlife. The Refuge System is a living heritage, conserving wildlife and habitat for people today and generations to come.

Alamosa NWR

The 12,026 acres that make up Alamosa NWR include upland areas, riparian corridors, wet meadows, and river oxbows. The wetland and river habitats provide a wildlife oasis in this dry region. These habitats support a variety of wildlife, including songbirds, water birds, raptors, deer, beavers, coyotes, and more.

Monte Vista NWR

The artificially created wetlands on Monte Vista NWR's 14,804 acres are intensively managed to provide habitat for a wide variety of waterfowl and other water birds. Mallards, pintails, teal, and Canada geese are common, as are American avocets, killdeer, white-faced ibis, egrets, and herons. Irrigation canals and wells provide precious water to maintain the important wetland habitat.

Managing Habitats for a Variety of Wildlife

The mission of both Alamosa NWR and Monte Vista NWR is to provide food, cover, migration, and breeding habitat for migratory birds and other wildlife. Both Refuges conserve and enhance the mixture of wetland and desert habitats found in the area to accomplish these goals. Habitat management tools used on the Refuges include water and wetland management, farming, grazing, and prescribed fire.

Water – A Vital Substance

Water is the lifeblood of the San Luis Valley and the Refuges within it. While only 7 inches of precipitation falls annually in the valley, spring snow melt from the Sangre de Cristo Range and San Juan Mountains provides essential water to the valley. The melting snow feeds the Rio Grande and valley streams and replenishes underground water. This inflow of water creates a unique mosaic of wetland and desert habitats, each with its own plant and animal community.

When water is in short supply, as in drought years, migratory birds sometimes are forced to pass by the Refuges and private and State-owned wetlands in search of wetter areas. Locally nesting birds may fail to nest, and other wildlife may decline.

Killdeer

Dave Menke / USFWS

Dave Menke / USFWS

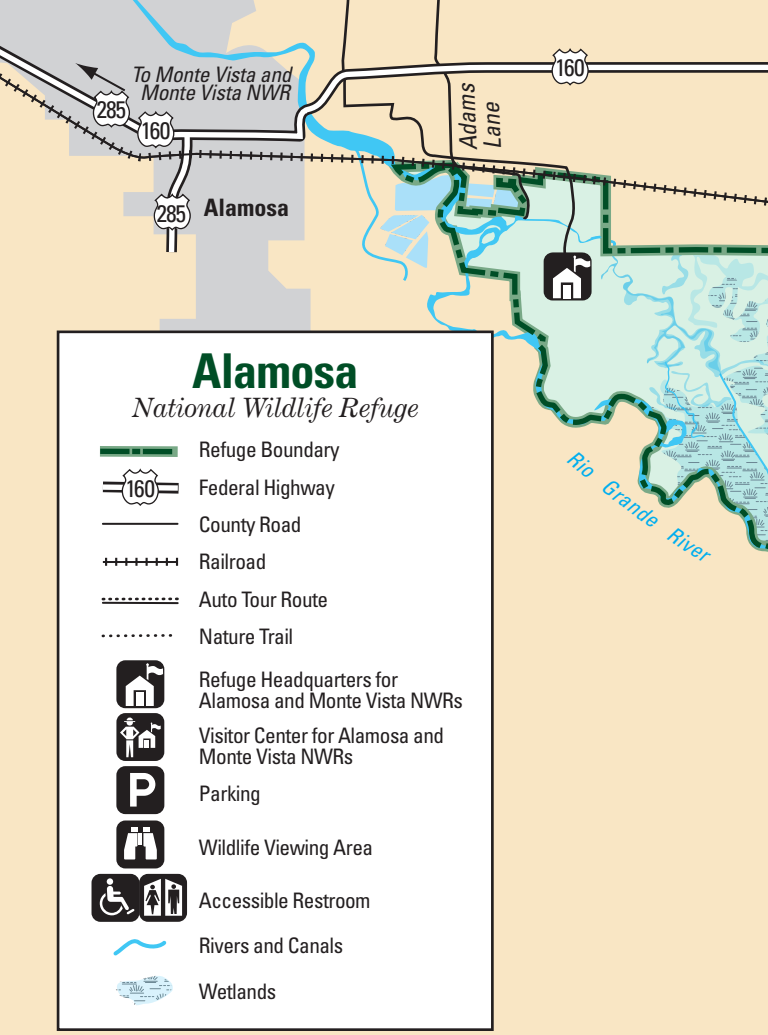
Cinnamon teal

Water Management

Because of the importance of water to this region, water management on the Refuges is particularly important. Water levels in the ponds and wetlands can be manipulated to provide birds with adequate aquatic vegetation for food and escape cover.

Many of the irrigation canals built during the 1880s still provide water to the Refuges and other valley water users. On both Refuges, staff distribute and manipulate water through an extensive system of ditches, water control structures, dikes, and levees to manage much of the wetland habitat.

Water used on both Refuges is appropriated under Colorado water law and is either diverted directly from the Rio Grande or comes from wells. Some of the Refuges' rights to divert water from the Rio Grande are high priority and are consistently available for use at the Refuges. Other rights are lower in priority and are only available in wet years.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Rio Grande River
Alamosa
National Wildlife Refuge
Refuge Boundary
160
Federal Highway
County Road
Railroad
Auto Tour Route
Nature Trail
Refuge Headquarters for
Alamosa and Monte Vista NWRs
Visitor Center for Alamosa and
Monte Vista NWRs
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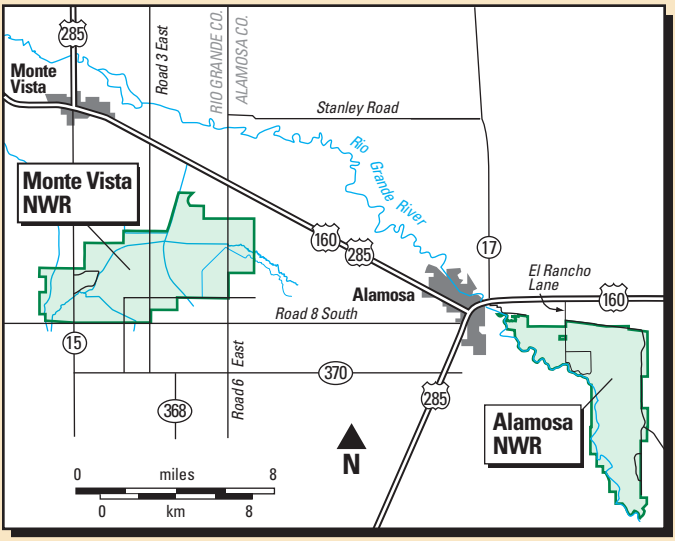
Parking
Wildlife Viewing Area
Accessible Restroom
Rivers and Canals
Wetlands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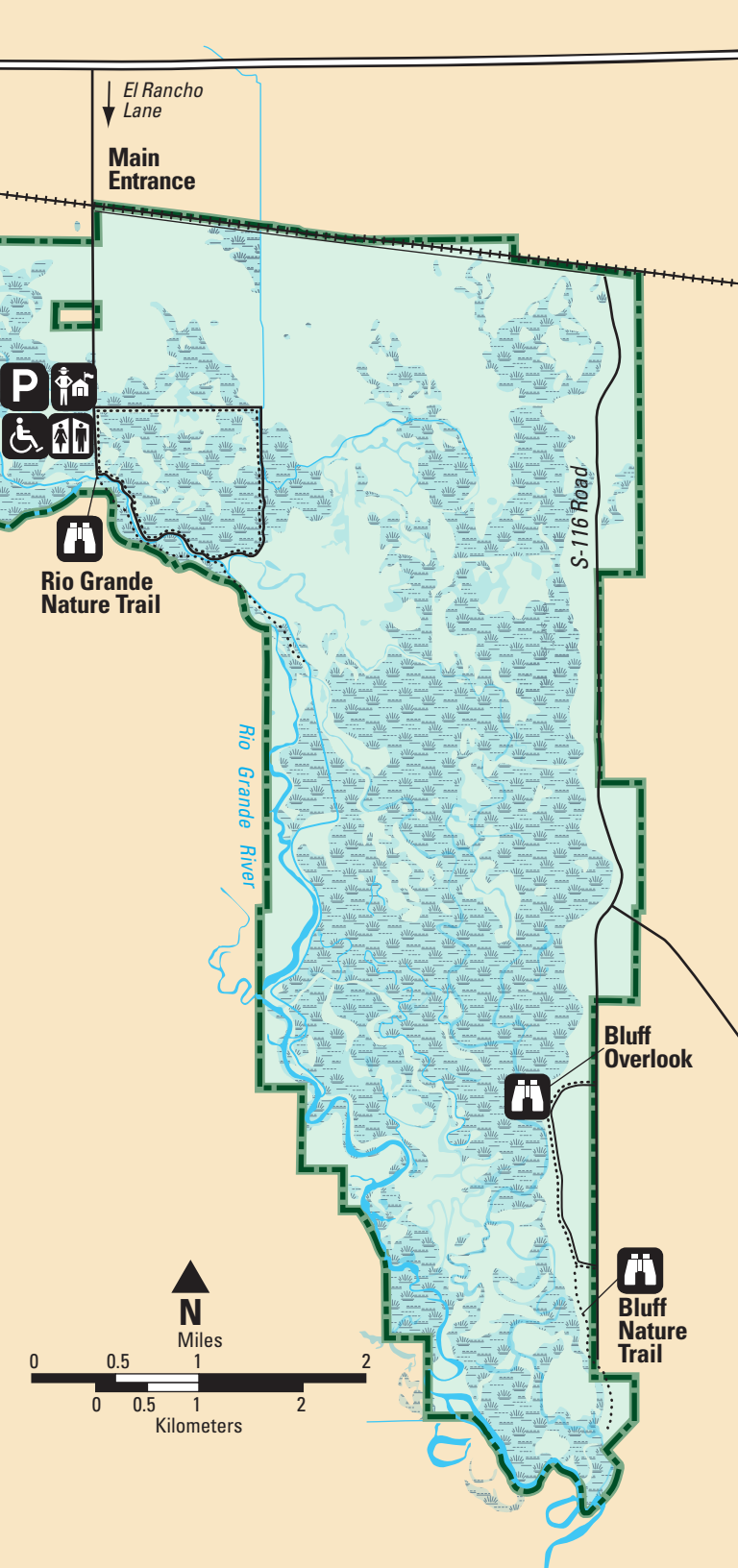
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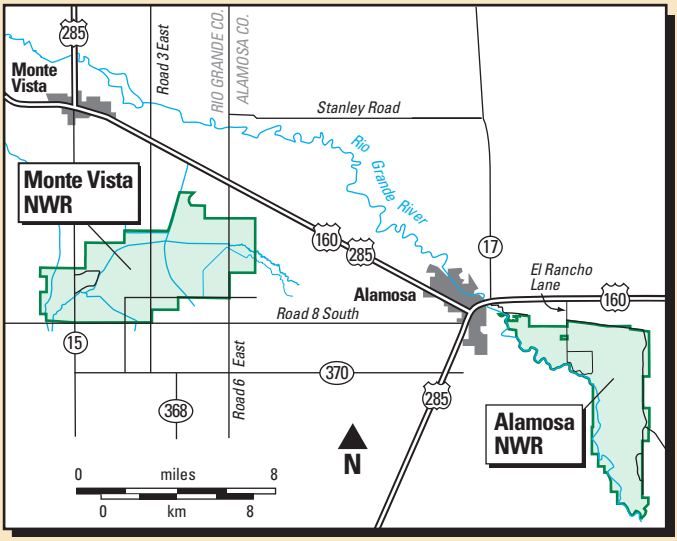
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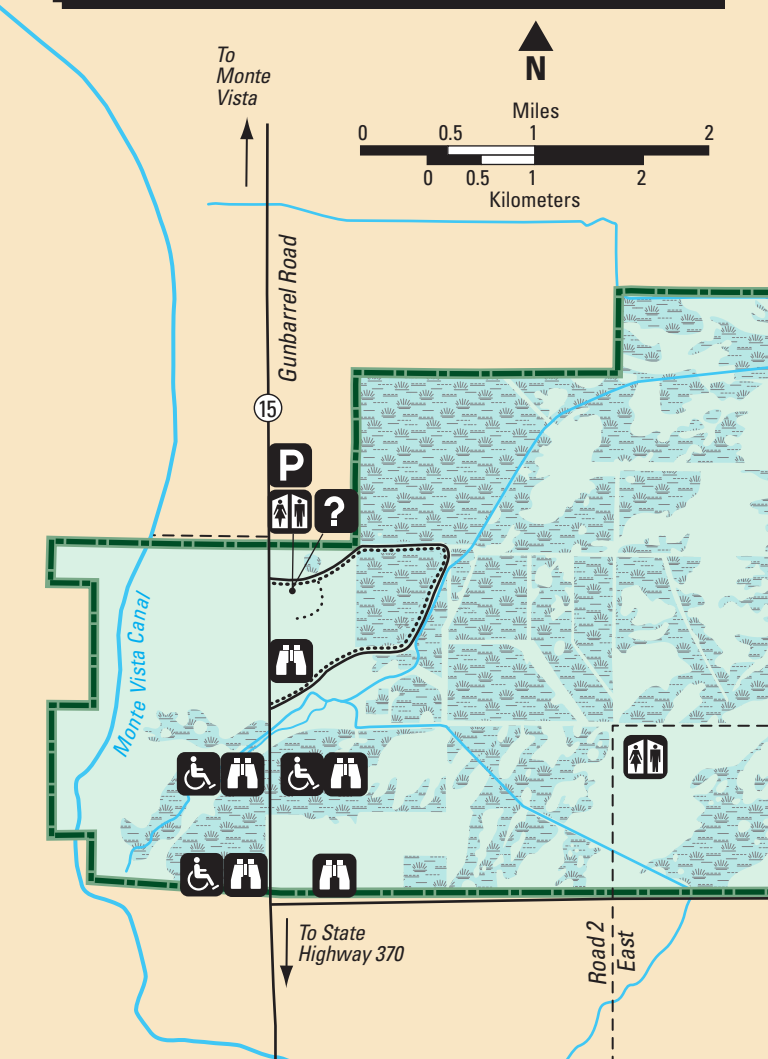
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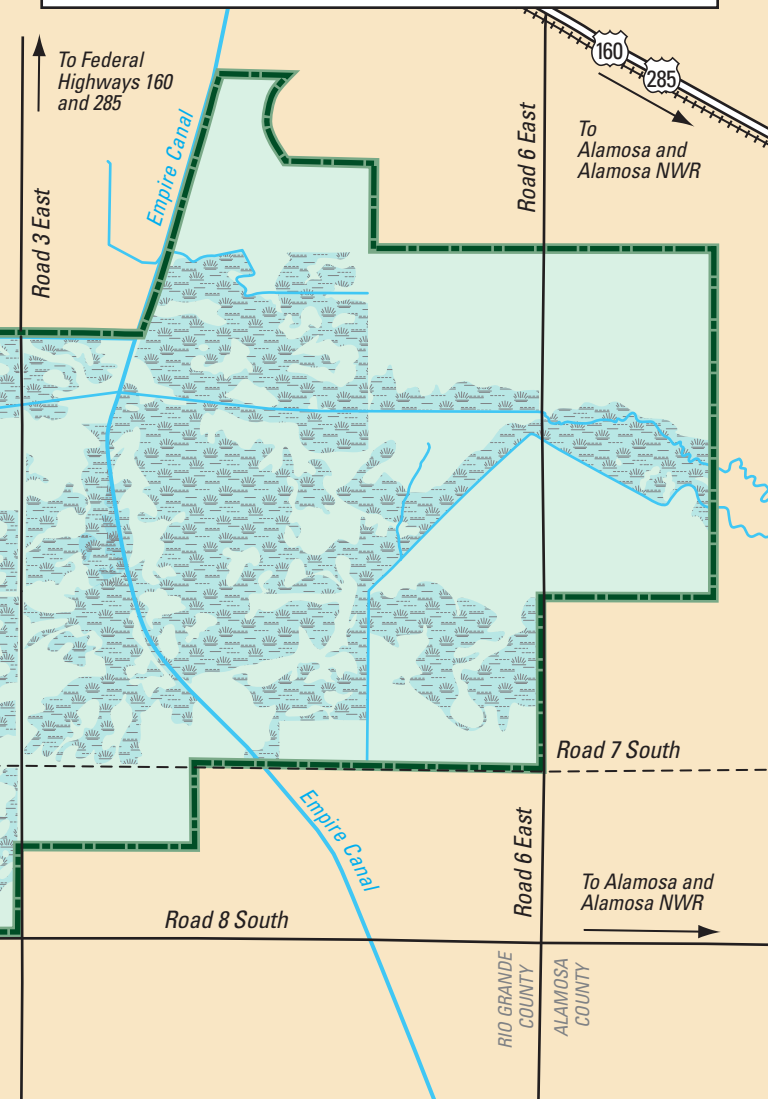
Monte Vista

National Wildlife Refuge

- Refuge Boundary
- 285 Federal Highway
- 15 State Highway
- County Road
- Unimproved Road
- Railroad
- Auto Tour Route
- Nature Trail
- Information
- Parking
- Wildlife Viewing Area
- Restroom
- Accessible
- Rivers and Canals
- Wetlands



Changing Seasons, Changing Wildlife

As seasons change in the San Luis Valley, so does the wildlife found on the land and in the waters. Spring brings ducks, geese, sandhill cranes, avocets, ibis, and herons to the valley. Some of these birds stay in the valley through the summer and fall, while others travel further north.

Even when winter "icebox" conditions set in, eagles, hawks, owls, and some waterfowl are found in the valley. Resident deer and elk are found in the valley year-round, while migrant deer and elk move down from the high country to the foothills of the valley for their winter food supply.

Mike Boylan / USFWS

American avocet (right); Black-necked stilt walking through a wetland (below).

Dave Menke / USFWS

A Spectacular Migration Showplace

In both spring and fall, thousands of sandhill cranes migrate through the valley. Refuge farm fields and privately-owned farmland provide essential feeding habitat.

Dave Menke / USFWS

Monte Vista NWR provides vital migration habitat for sandhill cranes during their spring and fall migrations. The Monte Vista Crane Festival in mid-March celebrates the return of the cranes to the valley each spring. The Kids Crane Festival in October provides educational opportunities for children and their parents. Please contact the Refuge staff for more details about these festivals.

Short-eared owl (above); Sandhill crane (below).

Hollingsworth / USFWS

Visitor Opportunities

National wildlife refuges are great places to see, enjoy, and learn more about wildlife. Alamosa NWR and Monte Vista NWR are no exceptions. Visitors are encouraged to enjoy the Refuge activities discussed in this leaflet. Any activities not discussed in this leaflet are prohibited due to their conflict with the Refuges' wildlife conservation mission and goals. For example, fishing, canoeing, boating, and jogging are some of the activities not allowed on the Refuges due to resulting disturbance to wildlife. If you have any questions, please contact the Refuge staff.

Dave Menke / USFWS

Bald eagle

Headquarters and Visitor Center

The headquarters office for the Complex is located off Adams Lane, approximately 1 mile east of the town of Alamosa.

The visitor center, located on Alamosa NWR, is staffed seasonally by volunteers. It is located 4 miles east of the town of Alamosa on Highway 160 and 2 miles south on El Rancho Lane. A self-serve kiosk provides Refuge information when the visitor center is closed.

Wildlife Observation and Photography

Self-guided, interpretive auto tour routes are found at both Alamosa and Monte Vista NWRs. Each auto tour showcases the wildlife, habitat, and management activities of that Refuge. Pull-offs located along public roads adjacent to Monte Vista NWR also offer wildlife viewing opportunities and more information about the Refuge.

At Alamosa NWR, the Bluff Overlook offers excellent wildlife and wild lands viewing. A short walking trail is available south of the overlook. For more energetic visitors, the 2-mile Rio Grande Nature Trail, located along a section of the river as it flows through Alamosa NWR, is also available. On Monte Vista NWR, a short walking trail is available for wildlife viewing. It is located near the beginning of the auto tour route.

Hunting

Waterfowl and small game hunting are permitted on a portion of each Refuge according to State regulations. Special Refuge regulations and specific areas open to hunting are found in the hunting leaflet. The leaflet is available at the headquarters office.

Environmental Education Opportunities

Please contact the Refuge staff to arrange Refuge tours and environmental education activities.

Nearby Accommodations

Motels and restaurants are found in both the towns of Alamosa and Monte Vista. A limited number of commercial campgrounds are also available in the area.

Accessibility Information

Equal opportunity to participate in and benefit from programs and activities of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is available to all individuals regardless of physical or mental ability. Dial 711 for a free connection to the State relay service for TTY and voice calls to and from people with hearing and speech disabilities. For more information or to address accessibility needs, please contact the Refuge staff at 719 / 589 4021, or the U.S. Department of the Interior, Office of Equal Opportunity, 1849 C Street, NW, Washington, D.C. 20240.