



Las Vegas

National Wildlife Refuge

Welcome: Hawk Country

A Swainson's hawk veers in the winds above Las Vegas National Wildlife Refuge. Where the Sangre de Cristo Mountains meet the Great Plains in northern New Mexico, hawks and eagles find easy gliding in the mountain updrafts.

Las Vegas NWR rests on a plateau in the foothills of the Rocky Mountains. River canyon walls drop below the refuge on three sides. The Gallinas Nature Trail begins near crumbling rock home ruins and squeezes between cliffs ruled by prairie falcons. Las Vegas (Spanish for "the meadows") preserves both wildlife homes and a slice of New Mexico's rich cultural history.

Above the timbered canyons, the refuge encircles a series of ponds. Migratory birds following the Central Flyway rest and feed here. Long-billed curlews, avocets, Canada geese, mallards, northern pintails, blue-winged and cinnamon teal, gadwall and ruddy ducks nest on the refuge. Sandhill cranes arrive in the fall for a winter stay. A year-round, auto route and a special fall flight drive offer plenty of opportunities to see wildlife.

Wildlife: Where Plains Meet Mountains

When two ecosystems transition, you are bound to find more types of wildlife than in either ecosystem separately. Las Vegas NWR harbors mammals, birds and plants that thrive in both systems.

Central Flyway Stop

Northern harriers hover over marshes in search of voles. Gulls plunge into the lakes to snag fish with their bills. Wild turkeys wander the piñon-juniper woodlands. Antelope blend into native prairies home to badgers and burrowing owls. Mule deer find shelter in timbered, sandstone canyons. Coyotes roam across every habitat.

Birds winging north and south along the Central Flyway add to the refuge bird wealth. The Las Vegas NWR bird list records 256 species, many that ebb and flow with the seasons. Out of the list,

80 species nest here. Another 134 are neotropical migrant birds that spend summers in North America but migrate through the refuge and winter in Central or South America. The refuge's 24 species of raptors glide through in the fall and spring. Viewers might see three or four hawk species on a typical fall/spring day visit.

Migrating shorebirds, like long-billed dowitchers and sandpipers, probe the mudflats in early fall and spring. Some 20-50 bald eagles spend winters here, attracted by open waters and hundreds of ducks and geese. Mallards, canvasbacks, and wigeon peak in September and October. You will find highest numbers of ruddy ducks, northern shovelers, northern pintails, and gadwalls in March and April. For best sandhill crane and Canada geese watching, visit in fall and winter.

Lending a Hand for Wildlife

National wildlife refuges like Las Vegas appear as island oases in an ocean of habitat fragmentation, especially for birds that migrate thousands of miles north and south. Where once wildlife could range freely for food and shelter, today their choices are limited.

That is why refuges often actively manage lands to make sure food, water, and shelter will be as productive as possible. Las Vegas NWR plants wheat, barley, corn, and peas for wildlife to feed. The refuge lowers and raises water levels in the ponds to provide the best mix of feeding, nesting, and rearing habitats for waterfowl. Finally, do not be surprised if you notice some cattle on the grasslands between May and October. Careful grazing is rejuvenating native grasslands.

Things to do at the Refuge

Take a Wildlife Drive and Nature Walk

Drive the 8-mile auto loop through the heart of the refuge at any time of the year. The drive forms a horseshoe loop along State Highway 281 and County Road 22C. You will pass ponds, lakes, marshes, grasslands, brush thickets, and

cottonwood groves. Be alert for wildlife at any point along the way. Enjoy some of the best wildlife viewing from our Crane Lake observation deck or capture that perfect photograph. Interpretive panels provide information about some of the species you might see from this vantage point. Excellent viewing opportunities exist here year-round. McAllister Lake Waterfowl Management Area, owned and managed by New Mexico Department of Game and Fish, lies within the refuge and forms the southern end of the auto loop.

Gallinas Nature Trail Walk

The sweet song of a canyon wren trails off somewhere above you. Cliff swallows dart out from sandstone bluffs towering 200 feet overhead. If you can, bring binoculars and a camera on this half-mile round-trip. You will descend into a strikingly beautiful canyon, past several features profiled here. The trail is open on weekdays.

Please stay on the trail and use caution. Snakes and old ruins can be a hazard. Children should never put their hands or feet in places they cannot see.

1. Even Rock Houses Don't Last Forever

At the trail parking area, notice the remains of rock homes built around 1920. Settlers labored to build these houses, quarrying nearby rock and cutting trees. The pine roof beams have since weathered away. Imagine the refuge in the early part of the twentieth century when two small communities, several farms, a church and a mission staked out a place to live out on the prairie below the Sangre de Cristo Mountains.

2. Box Canyons Made Corralling Livestock

Easy

Stone walls on three sides once penned livestock in box canyons. Season after season, livestock owners returned to the same canyon corrals. Most early settlers raised cattle, while some bred sheep or goats. Box canyon corrals proved a cheap and efficient alternative to standard barbed wire enclosures.

3. Native Prairies

One Grass is not Like Another

What if lawns around people's homes bloomed with wildflowers and grasses ruffled in the winds like a sea? That is a far cry from our typical Kentucky bluegrass turf, but fits the description of a native prairie. The refuge lies at the meeting place of the Southern Rocky Mountains and Great Plains grasslands.

Every grass species has a role in this ecosystem. Here, there is strength in diversity. Blue grama and buffalo grass fall into a group called shortgrasses. Bluestem, switch grass, Indian grass, prairie-Junegrass and side oats grama fall in between. All these grasses are adapted to thrive without any water or fertilizing beyond what nature provides through grazing animals. They are adapted to grazing by the bison and elk that once dwelled here. The refuge carefully grazes livestock to help keep the grassland healthy.

4. Why Are These Mountains Called

Sangre de Cristo?

Sangre de Cristo translates from Spanish as blood of Christ, but no one is quite sure why the region was given this name. The aspen and scrub oak you see along the mountain sides transforms the range into a crimson vision each fall. Perhaps the deeply religious Spanish settlers imagined the red hues to the color of blood.

Joining the scrub oak on slopes are tough, gnarled evergreens—piñon and juniper. Stately ponderosa pines line the canyon rims. Trees and canyons together form an ideal home for gray squirrels, as well as canyon and rock wrens, Steller's jays, and mountain and western bluebirds.

5. Springs and Seeps Offer the Gift of Water

Intermittent springs along the Gallinas Nature Trail are actually seeps. The seeps result from water stored in McAllister Lake, refuge impoundments, and from

irrigation of refuge crops. Water from seeps along the trail flow southwest to the Gallinas River. The river defines the western edge of the refuge. Vegosa Creek and its canyon form the eastern boundary.

6. Nature's Sculptors Nest in Cliffs

Listen for the twitter of cliff swallows darting out from the cliffs. Look closely and you will see their artful mud nests under rock outcroppings. Males and females daub mud against the rock faces, slowly building a platform, then molding a gourd-shaped nest. Some colonies resemble apartment complexes with thousands of individual residences. The swallows repair and reuse nests each year after returning from a winter in South America.

Meeting Your Needs

Preparing for Your Visit

Dress for mild summers with temperatures rarely above 90 degrees, thanks to the refuge high elevations, ranging between 6,000 and 6,500 feet. Summer thundershowers make up most of the 16 inches of annual precipitation. Fall through spring weather can vary from pleasant 50's and 60's to below freezing.

Nearby Places for Food, Fuel, and Lodging

The refuge is close to the community of Las Vegas, where you will find motels, gas, grocery stores, and restaurants. A state park in Las Vegas offers the closest camping. For those willing to drive about 20 miles, national forests also offer camping.

Fishing

All refuge lakes and ponds are closed to fishing.

Hunting

The refuge offers a limited dove and goose hunting season. Contact the refuge office for drawing and permit information.

Help Us Protect the Refuge

To keep Las Vegas NWR a safe place for wildlife and people, all firearms, fireworks, intoxicants, and alcohol consumption are prohibited.

Please remember that all plants and animals are protected on national wildlife refuges.

Pets must be on a leash.

For More Information

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