

A New-Style Watering Hole at Sevilleta Refuge

By Karen Bailey-Bowman

When it comes to a wildlife drinking station, Sevilleta National Wildlife Refuge has gone naturalistic.

So many black bears were trying to access one small metal drinker at the central New Mexico refuge that staffers nicknamed it “the bear spa.” The problem was the bruins were tearing apart the plumbing trying to soak in the cool water at the Pino Well site.

The drinker – one of 20 active on the 230,000-acre refuge – is an artifact of 40 years of ranching activities prior to the refuge’s establishment in 1973. The drinkers range from huge metal tanks and concrete troughs to smaller Bureau of Land Management-style metal boxes with small openings.

The bears’ frustration with the old-style drinker prompted refuge wildlife biologist Jon Erz to think outside the box – literally.

“The impetus for a more naturalistic drinker came about from problems with the bears’ accessing the old-style drinker,” Erz said.

The refuge built the approximately 12-foot-by-18-foot shallow rock and concrete naturalistic drinker at Pino Well with the help of a Youth Conservation Corps summer work crew and using supplies already on hand. “They dug a big depression, lined it with a big sheet of landscaping fabric and then put concrete and rocks in,” refuge manager Kathy Granillo said.

A red-spotted toad and some oarsmen bugs showed up right away. Granillo expects the gently sloped edges and greater surface area will encourage more birds as well as reptiles and smaller mammals, such as bats.

“A big naturalistic drinker serves all wildlife,” she said. “Bats need a four-foot diameter area to drink.”



At top, a bear tries to access a small metal drinker at Sevilleta National Wildlife Refuge. As part of an effort to benefit bears and other wildlife, the central New Mexico refuge replaced that drinker with the naturalistic one below. (USFWS)



She said many refuges provide supplemental water for wildlife, but few use naturalistic drinkers. “Small drinkers are common in the West,” she said. “They conserve water and serve game animals, such as ungulates and quail.”

Sevilleta Refuge plans to build more naturalistic drinkers in coming years.



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