



In recognition of Aldo Leopold's legacy, *New Mexico Magazine* brings you a series of articles celebrating our state's **WILD PLACES**. Accompanied by preservationists, scientists, and volunteers who truly know the lands, **Ashley M. Biggers** travels to these must-see destinations, showing you how to experience them for yourself, and soon.

Turn of the Tide

Deep in the southeastern corner of New Mexico, waves of grass undulate atop desert sands. At the dawn of a recent court decision protecting it from oil and gas exploration, experience the profound silence and sheltering sky of 1.2-million-acre **Otero Mesa**. Plus: How to visit and volunteer.

I relish New Mexico's wide-open spaces. Here, I feel I can stretch my arms as far as the horizon and breathe deeply. Still, when I drive onto Otero Mesa for the first time, its scale overwhelms me. The mesa comprises 1.2 million acres (1,875 square miles) of Chihuahuan Desert grassland—perhaps one of the last of its kind. Nearly the size of the state of Delaware, Otero Mesa is within the jurisdiction of the Bureau of Land Management, 90 miles east of Las Cruces—and in the middle of New Mexico's oil and gas country.

I pause in my travels to stand on the roadside, gazing at the sea of wheat-colored black grama grass as it rises and falls in the wind. "Grassland sea" is a fitting description: The huge expanse humbles me, making me feel as insignificant as if I were standing at the edge of an ocean.

Today I join Nathan Newcomer, associate director of the New Mexico Wilderness Alliance (NMWA), who has gathered volunteers here for one of the group's biannual trips to document the mesa's extraordinary diversities of plant and animal life. NMWA and other conservation groups like it have led the grassroots effort to protect Otero Mesa under the 1964 Wilderness Act. Written



Visiting Otero Mesa is an escape: It is a remote, expansive, untouched destination where true solitude is possible. Although primarily a grassland, three mountains crop up on the mesa near the Texas state line, including Wind Mountain (left), the highest of the three and a volcanic crater, and Flat Top Mountain (right).

by the Wilderness Society, of which Aldo Leopold was a founding member, the Wilderness Act protects large tracts of untouched lands from development, such as oil and gas drilling.

In 1997, the Roswell-based Harvey E. Yates Company (HEYCO) drilled two exploratory wells in New Mexico's Otero Mesa, both of which hit natural gas. Estimates of the reserves of oil and natural gas under Otero Mesa vary: HEYCO clearly believes they're worth drilling for; environmental groups claim they aren't. In 2004, HEYCO was prepared to begin more exploratory drilling under what the BLM then considered one of the most restrictive development plans written in its history. However, even that plan allowed for more than 85 percent of the mesa to be developed, with additional sections to be opened on a revolving basis. Although the plan required HEYCO to restore any lands they would clear for roads, drilling pads, and waste pits, environmental groups maintain that such tasks are largely impossible, due to the grasslands' fragile nature—once the soil here is disturbed, the rare grasses it supports, and hence the entire habitat, could be irreversibly altered.

The NMWA and other environmental groups mobilized and, along with the State of New Mexico, filed a lawsuit to halt the drilling—the first time in the state's history that it filed a federal lawsuit on a conservation issue. In April 2009, the U.S. 10th Circuit Court of Appeals ruled that the BLM could not move ahead with its development plan because it hadn't adequately considered the alternative of fully protecting the mesa, nor the potential threats to the Salt Basin Aquifer, which oil and gas exploration could pollute. Though experts are still investigating the aquifer, they currently estimate that it contains 15 million acre-feet of potable water—enough to supply one million citizens of water-scarce New Mexico for 100 years. Should the BLM choose to appeal the Court of Appeals' ruling, the U.S. Supreme Court is its only option.

However, the Court of Appeals ruling isn't enough to protect the mesa in perpetuity, so NMWA has continued its efforts to designate Otero Mesa a Wilderness Area. Newcomer, whose passion is contagious, calls the mesa his backyard. "In the mind of the public, having water, river, trees, and peaks is what wilderness

is,” he says. “Then you come out here, and it just looks like a flat, brown wasteland. But you spend time out here and you discover it’s so much more. You just have to give this place a chance.” When he returns from the mesa, Newcomer feels rejuvenated. “That’s one of the essential qualities of going to a wild place like this. It does something for your soul, your spirit.”

But the very roads that make Otero Mesa somewhat

accessible to hikers, campers, rock climbers, bird-watchers, and photographers also hinder the efforts of NMWA, which has proposed the designation of 26 separate wilderness areas from the patches of land between the seldom-used county roads. Totalling between 460,000 and 500,000 acres, these parcels would make Otero Mesa the state’s largest Wilderness Area. However, opponents of the Wilderness Area designation often cite the

roads as a reason the mesa shouldn’t earn such status, because it isn’t entirely “untrammelled by man,” as required by the Wilderness Act. “I’ll be the first to acknowledge there are roads here,” says Newcomer. “It’s not pristine. But in between those roads, there’s nothing.”

Today, along with volunteer Kim Freeman, NMWA staff scientist Steve West, and NMWA GIS Coordinator Miranda Gray, we trundle toward a trio of hills: 6,670-foot Alamo Mountain, the site of 12,000 ancient petroglyphs and two modern oil-drilling pads; 6,130-foot Flat Top Mountain; and our final destination, 7,280-foot Wind Mountain. Along the way we pass one of the handful of ranch homes on the mesa. The ranchers, along with area sportsmen and business leaders, have supported environmental groups’ efforts to prevent drilling here.



PHOTOS BY JEFF KAAKE

Top—Though it may appear to be a barren place, Otero Mesa is home to numerous plant species, including yucca, ocotillo, agave, horse crippler, and strawberry hedgehog cactuses (above), plus the 13 types of grasses that make up the grassland sea.

Bottom—In spring, cactus and wildflowers burst to life. In fall, black and blue grama grasses, among others, go to seed turning the mesa into rolling waves of grain.






More than 1,000 wildlife species are thought to make their homes on Otero Mesa, including the pronghorn. Unlike most other herds in the Southwest that have been reintroduced to certain areas, the mesa's herd is native to the place.

We camp in Wind Mountain's shadow, and as the sun sinks I watch the light cast a dusty purple hue across its jagged face. The call of a poorwill sounds across the expanse of creosote, yucca, and rocky ground. The wind is our sole, tempestuous companion.

We wake to a tangerine sunrise, then set out to support NMWA's wilderness petition by cataloging Otero Mesa's ecological diversity. The mesa is home to an estimated 1,000 species of wildlife, including black-tailed prairie dogs, mule deer, pronghorn antelope, and the endangered aplomado falcon. We walk softly so as not to disrupt a rare species of insect or cactus. At first the landscape looks barren, but closer inspection reveals that myriad plants, such as horse crippler cactus, sprout from the rocky ground. We climb a ridge and trace a surprisingly lush canyon in which we find more than 85 different plants, including several unexpected Mexican buckeye shrubs, and spot 35 animal species, including a sapsucker woodpecker—a rare delight.

The plants and animals here are patient: They bide their time, tucked away from the harsh landscape until a rainstorm causes them to burst to life. In the stillness, time is measured in millennia. So far, life's slow march has been unaffected by fleeting human inventions like mineral rights and water policy. Here, in the words of the Wilderness Act, "man himself is a visitor who does not remain,"—and many, like Newcomer, hope Otero Mesa stays this way. 

To avoid blowing out a tire on Otero Mesa's *caliche*-strewn roads, Associate Editor **Ashley M. Biggers** recommends taking Nathan Newcomer's advice literally: "Slow down and enjoy the scenery."

For info or to volunteer: BLM Las Cruces District Office, (575) 525-4300; New Mexico Wilderness Alliance Albuquerque Office, (505) 843-8696; NMWA Las Cruces Office, (575) 527-9962; www.nmwild.org

IF YOU GO:

- The NMWA's next outing to Otero Mesa is scheduled for September 25–27.
- The best time to visit Otero Mesa is from August through October, when the grasslands are at their most robust. Another good time to visit is April, between the winter cold and the summer heat.
- The best times to see wildlife are at dawn and dusk. Go hiking in an arroyo (when it isn't raining) to discover an oasis of flora and fauna—just watch out for cactuses and snakes.
- Otero Mesa is completely undeveloped backcountry with no modern conveniences, no paved roads, and no developed trails, campgrounds, or other facilities. You'll need food and water, clothing appropriate for hot days and cool nights, and a reliable car with decent clearance and, if it's rainy or muddy, four-wheel drive.
- Know where you are. Otero Mesa comprises Bureau of Land Management territory as well as state and private lands. You're free to camp anywhere on BLM land, but will need a permit for state lands; private lands are off limits. Current maps of the area are available at www.oteromesa.org.