



## WILD PLACES

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.

# Sweet Symphony

**Saddle up for a horseback ride in harmony with mesas, peaks, and ravines that would be protected by the proposed **Organ Mountains–Desert Peaks Wilderness Act**. How best to preserve these lands outside Las Cruces has been the subject of local debate, but no matter where you stand on the issue, this dynamic terrain is worth a trip.**

**L**as Cruces, the state's second largest city, springs forth from the desert floor like a geyser. This 90,000-strong burg is a testament to industry and ingenuity, to the make-it-work attitude of the community-minded folks in abundance here. There's a beauty to its culture and commerce.

More beautiful still is that place where the city's persistent flow of concrete and steel burbles to a stop, the landscape unfolds, and the urban cacophony hushes. If you listen, you'll hear a quiet music here—one conducted with batons of yucca and strummed by the wind on native grasses.

It's a place I eagerly anticipate as I ride shotgun with Don Patterson, of the Back Country Horsemen of New Mexico (BCHNM), as we drive northwest of Las Cruces, to the Valles Canyon and Broad Canyon areas. Chance and Tu, his Colombian Paso Fino horses, are in the trailer behind us. From I-10, it's difficult to believe there are acres of wild lands ahead. They're here, he assures me. Just wait.

Along with several other members of the BCHNM, the New Mexico Wilderness Alliance (NMWA), a nonprofit environmental conservation group, and rangers from New Mexico State Parks, we'll be exploring a small portion of the more than 300,000



PHOTOS BY ASHLEY M. BIGGERS

Joyce Getrost (left) riding her horse, Pinto, and Debbie Luke, riding Dallas, take in the desert landscape in Valles Canyon—part of the more than 300,000 acres in Doña Ana County up for protection under the proposed Organ Mountains–Desert Peaks Wilderness Act.

acres of Doña Ana County lands slated for protection by the proposed Organ Mountains–Desert Peaks Wilderness Act.

As Don saddles the horses, he nods across the landscape. “Riding out here is more interesting than riding in a pasture. You can make it as adventuresome as you want—there’s endless adventure out here.” He and the BCHNM have advocated protecting these lands under the 1964 Wilderness Act since the grassroots effort to do so gained momentum in 2005. The BCHNM is a service group with a history of more than 30 years of fighting to preserve open spaces and establish trails around the United States.

Don will tell you that he’s built like his black-maned horses: short in the legs. During my visit, I discover that he and they also share a temperament: straightforward, conscientious, and sometimes downright willful. “There’s really no downside to it,” he says of the proposed wilderness areas. “It’s gonna protect areas from being developed. Lord knows, there’s enough land down here to build houses. There’s no reason to build in pristine areas. I’ve been to those mountains a million times, and each time, they still impress me.”

As the horses pick their ways along the challenging, rocky trails, it’s easy to be amazed. To the south, the folds of the West

and East Potrillo Mountains unfurl themselves like the mainsails of a fleet of ships gliding across the desert. To the east, the craggy pipes of the Organ Mountains blow to azure heavens. Ahead, celery-green sotol skip up fawn-colored hillsides like quarter notes across a staff. Seldom receiving moisture, this plant and others of its kind, such as little leaf sumac, wild Texas mulberry, Mexican soapberry willow, and Apache plume are also members of this fragile ecosystem. “Once something is tore up out here, it’s going to stay that way,” Don observes.

Which is exactly why community groups have gathered to permanently protect these lands.



Some of the lands comprising the proposed Organ Mountains–Desert Peaks Wilderness Act were set aside decades ago for study as potential federal Wilderness Areas; a formal designation won’t much change the experience for outdoor enthusiasts. The only difference for these visitors will be that communing with these lands—just as they are today—will be possible in perpetuity.

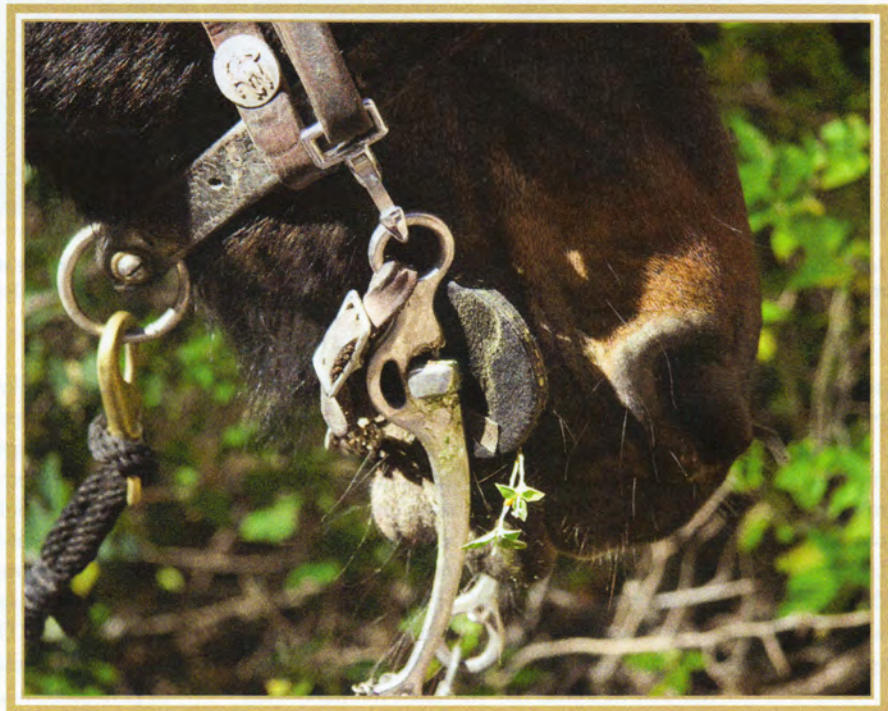


*Left*—Back Country Horsemen of New Mexico member Don Patterson, seen here with his Colombian Paso Fino horse, Tu, is an ardent Wilderness supporter. He's ridden trails like this one through Valles Canyon numerous times in pursuit of his passions: riding and land preservation.

*Below*—Don's other horse, Chance, snacks on the foliage in the Organ Mountains' Soledad Canyon.

In September 2009, New Mexico's U.S. Senators, Jeff Bingaman and Tom Udall, introduced federal legislation that would preserve 271,050 acres as Wilderness Areas, and an additional 109,6000 acres as National Conservation Areas. To earn the designations, Wilderness and National Conservation areas must meet slightly different standards, and are supervised differently by the Bureau of Land Management, which ultimately oversees them. Wilderness Areas must be largely unaffected by humans, be of a certain minimum size, and guarantee a "primitive" experience—meaning, in part, no motorized vehicles, or even mountain bikes, allowed. Federally designated Wilderness Areas and, to some extent, National Conservation Areas, draw a line in the sand. It says: The hand of humanity, which steadily molds the landscape over decades and centuries, will not lay its hand beyond here.

The lands proposed for protection by the act include: the Organ Mountains Wilderness and the Organ Mountains National Conservation Area, both east of Las Cruces; the Potrillo Mountains Wilderness, the Aden Lava Flow Wilderness, the Cinder Cone Wilderness, and the Whitehorn Wilderness, all in southwestern Doña Ana County; and the Sierra de las Uvas Wilderness, the Broad Canyon Wilderness, the Robledo Mountain Wilderness, and the Desert Peaks National Conservation Area, all northwest of Las Cruces. If the act is passed, these areas would become only the second grouping of Wilderness Areas established in southern New Mexico, after the Gila, Aldo Leopold,



and Blue Range areas encompassed by the Gila National Forest.

Thanks to grassroots efforts and the extensive negotiations of Bingaman's and Udall's offices, the proposed act has won widespread support from local government, including the City of Las Cruces and the Doña Ana County Commission; and business groups, such as the Hispano Chamber of Commerce de Las Cruces, who anticipate that the wilderness will contribute to economic development because up-and-coming companies seek to locate in

communities with a good quality of life. Hunting and angling groups are on the bandwagon, too. All these organizations say that undeveloped lands are—to invoke the words of Clinton P. Anderson, U.S. Senator from New Mexico when the original Wilderness Act was voted into law in 1964—“an anchor to windward”: a last hope.

Nathan Small, a NMWA wilderness-protection organizer, summarizes, “Wilderness fundamentally improves quality of life now and in the future. This is the community saying, ‘We don’t want to lose that which makes us special.’”

The refrain I hear from those on both sides of the issue is that people here believe in open space, community, and heritage—the catch is, they don’t always agree on just what that entails.

On our way through Valles Canyon, the trail becomes too boulder-strewn to continue on horseback. We meet Alex Mares, interim manager for Mesilla Valley Bosque State Park, and Kevin Hansen, a regional interpretive ranger also with New Mexico State Parks, and several NMWA volunteers. Together we explore the red-rock canyon on foot, the zigzags of the wash echoed in the lightning-bolt petroglyphs Alex points out along the way.

Also etched on the walls here are the shapes of birds, antelope hoofprints, and human figures wearing horn headdresses—perhaps symbols of wisdom. These images, the forerunners and contemporaries of symbols made by the Mimbres people, could be as old as several thousand years, Alex explains.

The canyon floor is littered with round red, black, and gray rocks carried here by rushing water on its journey to the nearby Río Grande. But water isn’t the only thing flowing here. Hansen describes the area as a highway for wildlife: mountain lion, bobcats, mule deer, javelina, cottontail rabbits, and more funnel through here in search of *tinajas* (natural water catchments). Raptors such as golden eagles and prairie falcons might swoop overhead as well.

In turn, the wildlife draws sportsmen such as Jim Bates, whom I later meet, and who has hunted in the proposed Wilderness and National Conservation Areas for decades. “A lot of people have the idea that the desert doesn’t have anything remarkable,” he notes. “There’s a lot of things to be surprised by here—the diversity of wildlife, for example. Once you discover these things, and you know how difficult it is for them to survive here, you see the need to preserve these animal and plant communities.”

Several groups of sportsmen, such as the New Mexico Wildlife Federation (NMWF) and the Southwest Consolidated Sportsmen (SCS), support the proposed Wilderness and National Conservation designations because they would protect vital habitat necessary for their sport to flourish. Donning a camouflage-print National Wild Turkey Federation cap, Jim describes teaching his sons to hunt here, and how they’ve returned again and again—often without their guns—to experience this undeveloped area.

Although Jim Bates’s tale of sighting a black bear here is

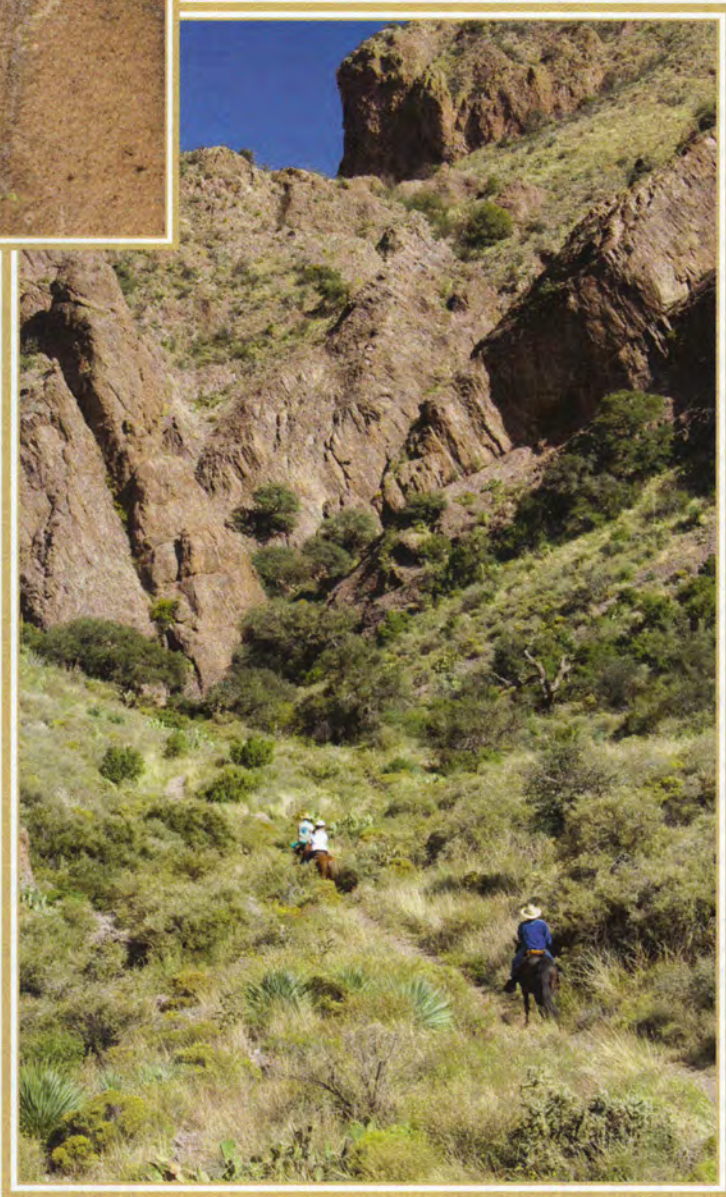
thrilling, most of the beasts I spot during my excursion are cows. Twenty-five different ranching operations hold grazing permits for these territories, their presence made visible in the form of stock tanks and meandering herds of sand-colored cattle. Ranching has been a part of Wilderness since the act was first passed into law in 1964; any existing ranching operations on the proposed Wilderness and NCAs around Las Cruces would be allowed to keep their grazing permits.

Local ranchers’ opinions about the act range from support to



**Left**—This bird figure is just one of the many rock art symbols etched in the walls of Valles and Broad Canyons. Both canyons containing the thousand-year-old petroglyphs would become federally designated Wilderness Areas under the proposed Organ Mountains–Desert Peaks Wilderness Act.

**Below**—Soledad Canyon lies just minutes outside New Mexico’s second-largest metropolitan area, Las Cruces. Under the proposed Act, this canyon would become part of a National Conservation Area.





**Left**—This waterfall is just one of the hidden delights in Soledad Canyon.

**Below**—Pat Buls, president of the Lower Rio Grande Chapter of the Back Country Horsemen of New Mexico, and other members of the service organization established this trail through Soledad Canyon and have maintained it with regular patrols.

concern to outright opposition. Some argue that lack of motorized access will limit their ability to sustain their operations, which these days means driving to maintain stock tanks, clear brush, and haul cattle, among other tasks.

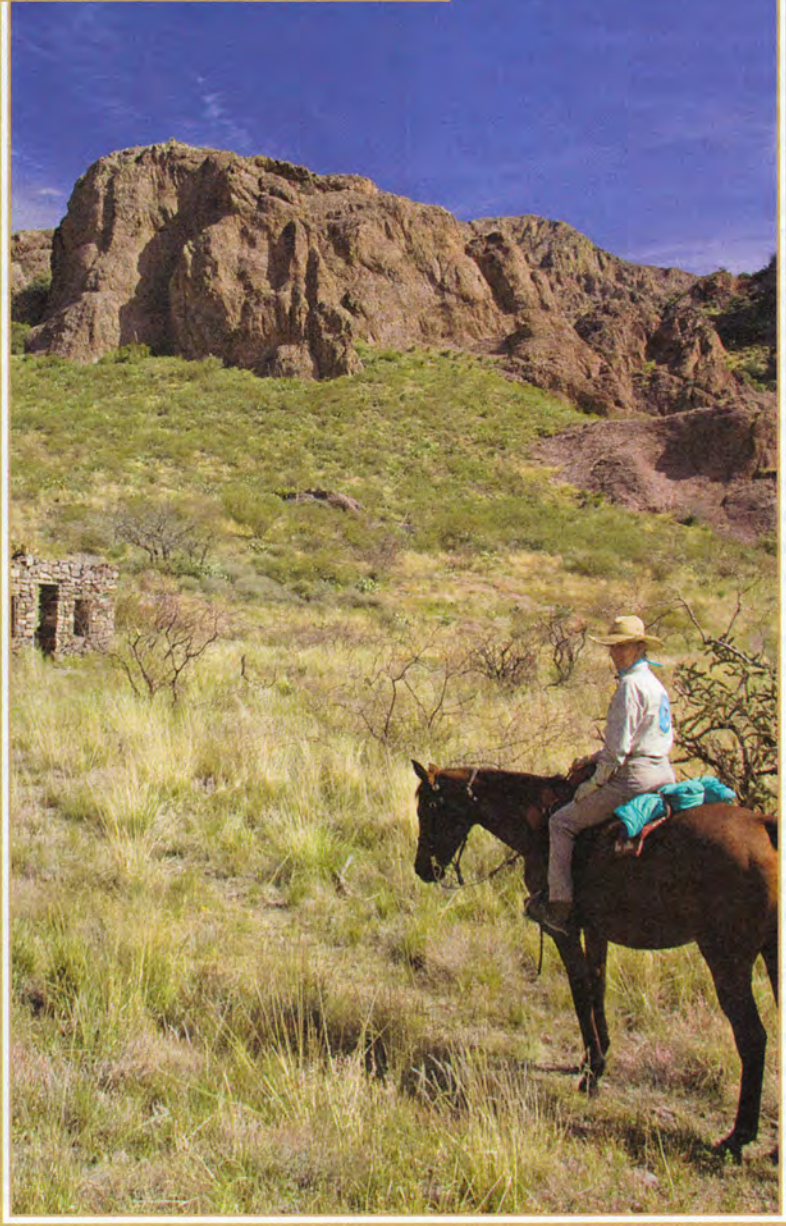
Jim validates the cattlemen's concerns: "Many sportsmen recognize the sacrifices that ranchers are going to have to make." But, he believes, "Ultimately these small sacrifices mean very little versus what will be preserved. I can say the same thing from the consumptive users' standpoint. There's got to be a balance between human intrusion and preserving plant and animal life here."

Not everyone agrees. The ranchers, businesses, and organizations that oppose federal Wilderness Area designation have banded together as the People for Preserving Our Western Heritage (PFPOWH), a group whose chief aim is the protection of rural ways of life. Their main concern is that Wilderness Areas will put cattlemen out of business, thus ending the century-long history of ranching in the Mesilla Valley.

"It would pretty well shut me down," says Dudley Williams, proprietor of the Williams Family Ranches in the West Potrillo Mountains and Aden Lava Flow areas, in a video created by PFPOWH. "I have to have freedom to go over my roads whenever I feel it's necessary to make those travels. It's limiting as it is because it's such rugged country."

Among their supporters, the PFPOWH also count some sportsmen; ATV and four-wheel-drive clubs, who would find these lands off-limits for their activities; and the National Association of Former Border Patrol Officers, which is concerned that Wilderness Areas would create unpatrolled corridors for illegal immigration and trafficking. This camp's list of concerns also includes an inability to appropriately funnel water to prevent flooding and provide a resource to surrounding desert communities, and a lack of access for future development of railroads, oil, and natural gas.

PFPOWH says that they, too, support access to open





This *tinaja* (water catchment) is a wildlife watering hole in the desert landscape.

spaces, but, believing that a Wilderness Area designation is too restrictive, they've proposed an alternative: a Rangeland Preservation Area. Currently, however, there is no such federal designation. The community would be working from scratch to develop a model for it, and it would, by design, offer fewer permanent protections than would a Wilderness Area designation.

The proposed Organ Mountains–Desert Peaks Wilderness Act has mitigated many of these concerns by allowing more access to secure the U.S./Mexico border and to make ranching improvements. Additionally, certain areas have been excluded entirely from the proposal, to allow ranchers less restricted access to their operations. There is also plenty of other space for off-roading and mountain biking—just not in the proposed Wilderness Areas. Jeff Steinborn, southern director of NMWA, observes that, as the bill was developed, “We had to pick out the crown jewels for protection.”


Sportsman Jim Bates notes, “I really think that everybody’s voice has been heard and taken into consideration. The parties that wanted to get together to compromise are satisfied with the result.”

Still, as the bill has moved through the legislative process, the PFPOWH has continued to voice its concerns.



As I saddle up Chance the next morning in Soledad Canyon, it’s easy to see why the future of these lands has sparked such strong debate. This morning, just minutes east of Las Cruces, we drove past one person’s backyard, over a cattle guard, and into the backyard of the entire community: the showstopping Organ Mountains, their foothills dancing with yellow wildflowers, full-leafed cholla, sotol, and mesquite.

We’re joined by Pat Buls, president of the Lower Río Grande Chapter of the Back Country Horsemen of New Mexico. This petite woman’s personality has nothing in common with her stature. She tells me about the group’s efforts in using horsepower to haul equipment and blaze a trail here, and the work they do patrolling the trail and picking up litter. “We’re a bunch of old farts, but we do the best we can.” Pat, too, advocates permanently protecting places like Soledad Canyon. “We have to be proactive and stay ahead of the development. We have to say, ‘This is what we value,’ and put it aside now.”

We head off onto the foothills, where surprising delights, such as a waterfall pounding rocks like a timpani, await us. “This is a horseman’s paradise,” Pat observes. “You can ride year-round. The big charm here is these wide-open spaces. We hope to keep it that way.” 

Ashley M. Biggers is featured in “Storytellers” on page 6.

### IF YOU GO:

- The Back Country Horsemen of New Mexico have eight chapters around the state. The Lower Río Grande Chapter, based in Las Cruces, welcomes visitors with their own horses to participate in the group’s activities twice before they can become members. For info on this chapter: Pat Buls, (505) 990-7801; [www.bchnm.org](http://www.bchnm.org)
- To reach Valles Canyon: Exit I-10 at Las Cruces Airport (Exit 132). Head N toward the airport. Turn right on Corralitos Ranch Road. Head NW for 3.5 miles. Turn right on County Road 007 at Corralitos Ranch. Head NE on pavement for 3.1 miles. Veer left on County Road D012 and head NW for 3.7 miles. Veer right at fork (stay on pavement) and continue on County Road D012 for 10.9 miles. Turn right after cattle guard to park for Valles Canyon access.
- To reach Soledad Canyon: Exit I-25 at University Avenue/Dripping Springs Road (Exit 1). Travel E toward the Organ Mountains for about 4.5 miles. Turn S (right) on Soledad Canyon Road. That road turns E in 1 mile; follow it to the end. Parking is available in the day-use lot.
- As with any outdoor excursion, you’ll need appropriate food, water, and clothing. For the most enjoyable visit, avoid the summer months, when temperatures can soar over 100 degrees. Most of the Wilderness and National Conservation areas are fairly accessible by car.
- Know where you are. These areas comprise Bureau of Land Management territory, but nearby you’ll find lands belonging to New Mexico State University, the U.S. military, and private owners.

### BE HEARD:

- To voice your opinion on the proposed Organ Mountains–Desert Peaks Wilderness Act, contact your local, state, and national representatives.

### FOR INFO:

- On the proposed wilderness: [www.nmwild.org](http://www.nmwild.org), [www.donaanawild.org](http://www.donaanawild.org)
- About People for Preserving Our Western Heritage: [www.peopleforwesternheritage.com](http://www.peopleforwesternheritage.com)