



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.

## The Living River

In the northwestern corner of New Mexico, a once-rushing river now slowly carves its way across a piñon-strewn valley. Head out with the WildEarth Guardians as they restore habitat that will help make the **Río Puerco** wild and vital again—and rejuvenate your spirit and the lands by volunteering.

**O**n the clear, frosty, early-spring morning that I join the WildEarth Guardians for their stream-restoration efforts 50 minutes north of Albuquerque, off U.S. 550, I struggle to imagine the landscape as it once was: teeming with pastures, neat rows of crops, and natural flora.

In the 18th century, farmers reaped life-sustaining harvests from the fertile ground in this valley near Cuba, New Mexico. Nourished by the Río Puerco's freely flowing waters, these lush, bountiful lands were known as the breadbasket of the state.

Since then, herds of livestock, their ancestors transported here during the heyday of the railroads, have overgrazed the area. Without native vegetation to cleave to, the riverbank's fine sands and habitat have been eroded—in fact, the Río Puerco is often described as the most eroded river in the western United States. In the mid-1960s, state officials rerouted the river from its original course between La Ventana and Cuba to make way for road construction. Meandering rivers have slower rates of flow and more miles of habitat—when the Puerco was diverted into its new, more swiftly flowing channel, the river's ecosystem changed at a speed that outpaced the abilities of the wildlife and vegetation to adapt. Once, the river's life force gallivanted like a blithe youth across this valley on the western edge of the Jémez Mountains; today's Río Puerco hobbles along like a careworn elder.

In 1996, WildEarth Guardians, a New Mexico-based nonprofit that strives to protect and restore the West's wildlife, wild places, and rivers, became the first entity to lease New Mexico state trust lands for conservation rather than for grazing. Since then, to restore this habitat to its thriving state, their staff and volunteers have replanted native coyote willows, cottonwoods, New Mexico olive, golden current, skunkbush sumac, silver-leaf buffalo berry, and chokecherry along five miles of the Río Puerco.

WildEarth Guardians' director of restoration projects, Jim Matison, says people tend to overlook New Mexico's river habitats because they make up only one percent of the state's area. However, as he points out, rivers “are really the life force of communities. Communities are founded around rivers, streams, and lakes, and that's what gives everything life.”

This morning, I join some 60 other volunteers planting trees along the Río Puerco. I heft a 20-foot-tall cottonwood into a waiting hole, then sink its tap root below the waterline. My heart beats in rhythm with my shovel as its blade clanks ineffectually



**Top**—Since 1996, the WildEarth Guardians have been working to restore river habitats in New Mexico to their former vibrancy. Here, the results of their work along the the Río Puerco, north of Albuquerque off U.S. 550, are clear: The river banks along these few miles are once again lush with life.

**Bottom**—After years of erosion, much of the Río Puerco's banks are bare, its waters muddy. In 2009, the WildEarth Guardians planted thousands of cottonwoods and willows along the shore here. In time, this area should look like the image above.

against clods of frozen caliche, which I must break apart to pack around the cottonwood. A saw hums nearby as two more volunteers fashion an enclosure to protect the saplings from elk, which can snap the young trees on their way to the riverbank to drink. A hand-cranked seeder whirs as another volunteer scatters a confetti of native grass seed on the boot-trodden ground.

The WildEarth Guardians have already completed work on the state trust lands they leased near here in 1996, and now work their way each year through a few more miles of Bureau of Land Management terrain. Their work, at first done by hand, progressed slowly. “That was the initial, very grassroots-oriented restoration work,” says Matison. “When I came on board [in 2002], I brought a different set of tools, using heavy equipment to do much more work, to think on a grander scale, and really change larger sections of the ecosystem rather than little pieces.”

By afternoon, the other volunteers and I have planted thousands of willows and hundreds of cottonwoods—their slim trunks of russet and gray rise from the banks in an erratic bouquet. My muscles are spent, but my spirit is invigorated in a way only physical labor can bring about. It may look haphazard today, but we’re sowing life in this field—life that will continue to mature and support these lands long after we’ve left them.

Later, I find Jim Matison in the driver’s seat of a mechanical auger. The drill churns the sandy soil like rich, brown butter as it bores into the riverbank. As we talk, it becomes clear that Matison is someone unaccustomed to standing still—he boyishly kicks a stick or a dirt clod, and interrupts his train of thought to answer questions his crew members shout to him across the river. There’s much to be done.

Each spring, Matison spends months camping along the seven rivers WildEarth Guardians are restoring in New Mexico. Though vital to the group’s efforts here, the half-dozen volunteer





PHOTOS BY ASHLEY M. BIGGERS

**Above**—Across the Río, volunteers construct an enclosure to protect newly planted cottonwoods and willows from area elk who can snap the young plants.  
**Left**—WildEarth Guardian volunteer Alexandra Permar, of Tucson, Arizona, readies the sandy earth for a sapling.

workdays are just one part of the equation. “People spend so much time focusing on the little plot of land that they own,” he says. “They spend so much time on it because it’s *theirs*. But our public lands are ours also. We, as a species, take a lot from nature. It’s important that we give back, not just because it’s gratifying, but because it makes us sustainable.”


In Matison’s monster truck, we bump down a road near the worksite to see the dirt berm the Federal Highway Administration placed here in the 1960s to divert the river, thus draining the river of its vitality. Two years ago, the department re-rerouted the river to its original, wandering course.

“This portion of the river has only had a couple of seasons of water in it,” Matison says. “The river is still finding itself. That’s why we didn’t plant right up against the stream. We want to give the river the opportunity to do what it needs to do.”

A few feet away, the river shyly babbles along. Its muddy waters earned it the Spanish name Puerco, meaning “dirty;” the river lives up to that name today. Its shallow waters course with the grit of its journey from its headwaters in the San Pedro Mountains, southward to its confluence with the Río Grande.

“This is a slow-healing system. It takes a lot of time,” Matison says. Still, there’s some evidence of the Guardians’ impact here: As if inhaling and exhaling, the river expands and contracts as it finds its natural path, and begins—literally—to get its groove back. It’s developing sinuosity, taking a more meandering course across the landscape, as it once did. Vegetation is spreading over once bare soil.

And as a river heals, so, too, do its aquatic and riparian habitats, which wildlife and humans alike enjoy.

As volunteers and land owners see the growing positive effects, Jim Matison hopes that the WildEarth Guardians’ restoration of the Río Puerco will expand from state trust and BLM lands to other tracts, as has happened with their efforts to bring back other rivers, such as the Santa Fe. “People are seeing the benefits of the work being done here. They’re seeing what’s possible.” 

After her work along the Río Puerco, Associate Editor **Ashley M. Biggers** can attest that mucking about in the mud does the body, and the soul, good.

#### GET INVOLVED:

Take part in a Stream Team restoration event:

- March 20: Río Puerco
- April 17: Santa Fe River
- May 1: Bluewater Creek

Contact WildEarth Guardians to register and for directions to work sites. (505) 988-9126; [www.wildearthguardians.org](http://www.wildearthguardians.org)

Post your pictures: WildEarth Guardians wants to see images of how you’re enjoying New Mexico’s wild places. Submit them at [www.watershedguardians.org](http://www.watershedguardians.org).