

Valles Caldera National Preserve



Looking North from HWY 4 (southern boundary of the Preserve)

The Valles Caldera National Preserve is located in north-central New Mexico about an 80 mile drive from Albuquerque. Surrounded by the Jemez (Hey-Mez) mountains, the Preserve sits at about 8000 feet in elevation. The preserve is known for its huge mountain meadows, abundant wildlife (2nd largest summering Elk herd in the State) and meandering streams.

About 1.25 million years ago, a spectacular volcanic eruption caused the volcano to collapse upon itself and created the 13 mile-wide circular depression known as the Valles Caldera. The site is still volcanically active as about 10 mountains ranging from 8500 feet to Redondo peak at 11254 feet are located in the area..

Access to the preserve is by hiking or by car. Hiking access is 24/7, but unfortunately car access is limited to 8am - 5pm during the summer and 9am - 5pm in the winter. No overnight access is allowed.

I arrived about 630am which gave me time to hike the Valles Grande trail on the SE corner of the refuge. It is a one mile trail out and back. I saw an Abert's squirrel, Least chipmunk, Mountain cottontails and a curious short-tailed weasel. Heard Red squirrels.





Leaving the hike I headed for the entrance gate. I saw a herd of Elk from the HWY. Shortly upon entering I saw a solitary Coyote.





It also doesn't take long to see the many many Gunnison's prairie dogs. Once you cross the East Fork of the Jemez River, they can be easily seen between the river and the visitor center at the two mile mark. We have had a very good monsoon season so far and the ample rain has produced lots of purple, white and yellow wildflowers.



Golden-mantle ground squirrels are also present. I saw five of them in different locations.

It is a 13 mile drive from the visitor center to the northern-most end. Prairie dogs were seen and heard peppered along the road.

I saw the Badger on the way out. It ran across the road about 100 feet in front of me so I got out and looked around. I heard a “growling” coming from a hole so I backed off and it popped up for me.



I also saw some Botta (?) pocket gopher dirt on the surface. Missed on Mule deer. They are usually seen on the drive up to the preserve.