

Grande Experience

By: Dave Menicucci, For the Journal

Jim Grossman is spending many spare hours tying flies, honing his casting skills, and dreaming about catching and releasing 30 or 40 brown trout in a single day. He has drawn out to fish the narrow Rio San Antonio that meanders through a knee-deep grassy meadow on the Valles Caldera Natural Preserve.

Jim is one of hundreds of anglers who will travel from around the globe to experience world-class fly fishing in one of the most spectacular high-mountain settings imaginable. All of it is located just 100 miles north of Albuquerque.

Fishing is but one of a myriad of challenging outdoor activities on the Preserve, which range from hiking 9000' elevation trails to an intense day of archeological study to stalking a six-point trophy elk.

For less active folks guided tours will bring them in photo range of an indescribable array of wildlife including wild turkey, elk, black bear, deer, mountain lions, eagles, rabbits, coyotes, squirrels, ducks, and a multitude of song birds and other small creatures. Whether you crave an arduous physical experience or simply want to enjoy breathtaking natural scenery, the Preserve has it all.

The Preserve's story started 1.4 million years ago when mammoth volcanic eruptions created the Jemez mountains. With power 50 times that of Mount Helens, rock and debris were blasted away leaving a huge caldera of bubbling lava. It cooled into a patchwork of magnificent grassy valleys surrounded by upland pine and fir forests. Until recently the area has been known as the Baca Location No. 1 or colloquially, the Valle Grande.

Consisting of nearly 90,000 acres, the property has been in private ranching hands since the Spanish crown granted it to the Cabeza de Baca family in the late 1700s. In 2000 the US government bought the property and created the Valles Caldera Trust to manage it as a national preserve with the goal of becoming financially self-sustaining by 2015.

The Preserve lies roughly equidistant between Jemez Springs and Los Alamos, with most of the property north of Highway 4. The main entrance, which leads to the visitor center and the main staging area, is about 21½ miles north of Jemez Springs (N35.83207°, W106.48712°). A downloadable map is available (<http://www.vallescaldera.gov/>).

Under the direction of Jeffrey Cross, Executive Director, the Preserve is becoming the nation's premier outdoor recreational grounds. However, because of limited parking and to avoid over-extending the resources and upsetting wildlife, access to the Preserve is carefully managed. You can make reservations at the web site or by calling the toll-free number (1-866-382-5537). The costs are modest.

Jeffrey emphasizes that "walk-in visitors are welcome, even without a reservation because there may be last-minute cancellations that you can fill."

Summer activities feature fly fishing, fishing clinics, hiking, mountain biking, marathon running, guided tours, study tours, wagon rides, and equestrian. In the fall the premier event is elk hunting. Winter brings opportunities for sleigh rides as well as cross country skiing and

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snow shoeing, both including overnights in one of the remote yurts. As winter yields to spring, turkey hunting highlights the sporting activity.

Because of high public interest in hunting and fishing, a lottery system is used to secure reservations. The system is similar to the public-land big-game lotteries, except that you may purchase virtually as many lottery tickets as you desire for dates that fit your schedule. Naturally, the more lottery tickets you purchase, the greater your chance of being drawn. Winners need a valid New Mexico hunting and/or fishing license to participate.

Grossman and his buddies have found that collaboration is the secret to winning a fishing date. Since each draw winner can bring three fishing guests with him, they all agree to buy a number of lottery tickets for certain dates. Typically at least one of them wins and that allows all to fish on that date. Jim fishes the Preserve two or three times per year.

There is no lottery for the other activities, but slots are limited. So you should sign up early in the year.

There are two marvelous hiking trails that are open most of the year without reservations: *Coyote Call* (N35.84844°, W106.46514°) and the *Valle Grande* (N35.84844°, W106.46514°). Both are located near the southern boundary of the property, just off of NM Highway 4.

As you plan your trip, remember that you will be above 8500' elevation. It can be cold in the early morning and hot in the afternoon—daily temperature swings of 45 degrees F are not uncommon. Dress in layers and bring a rain parka in case of a sudden shower. For a weather report visit the National Weather Service site (<http://www.srh.noaa.gov/abq/>) and click on the area of the map just west of Los Alamos.

The air is very thin, so if you are planning on vigorous activity, be sure that you are properly acclimated to high altitudes before disembarking.

Ultraviolet (UV) radiation is high in the area and can cause serious burns. It is best to keep the sun off of your body with hat, thick clothing, and UVA/UVB sunglasses. Sunblock is essential for any exposed skin.

Don't forget a first aid kit and plenty of water. Insect repellent is essential as the Preserve's ecosystem produces a bountiful range of buggers.

Most cell phones work on the Preserve.

Last year nearly 10,000 visitors frolicked, relaxed, and studied on the Preserve. With Jeffrey Cross' goal to increase visitation by 15% annually, you will be warmly welcomed and like the vast majority of previous guests your visit will surely produce life-long memories.