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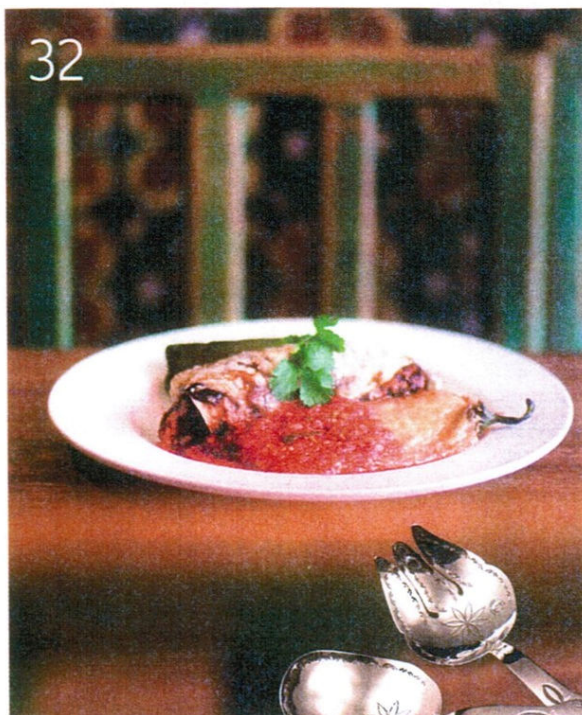
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# SANTA FEAN

NOVEMBER 2005

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Cover Russell Means, photo by Eric Swanson.

Credits A combination platter with mole sauce from Cafe Pasqual's, photo by Douglas Merriam; silver-and-turquoise serving set from Shush Yaz, [www.shushyaz.com](http://www.shushyaz.com); blue heron, photo by Charles Mann.

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# F I E L D S

Where earth and sky seem to meet:  
The three-mile-wide Valle Grande

28 NOVEMBER 2005





# OF GOLD

HIGH IN THE JEMEZ MOUNTAINS, A VOLCANIC  
ERUPTION LEFT A STUNNING NATURAL WONDER  
WHERE THE ADVENTUROUS CAN ROAM

BY JASON STEVENSON

PHOTOGRAPHS BY DON USNER



he silence of the Valles Caldera National Preserve is remarkable, even compared with the familiar solitude of Northern New Mexico. It strikes me when I first step out of my car at the overlook on N.M. 4, west of Los Alamos, to gaze across the three-mile-wide Valle Grande, the preserve's largest valley. A steady breeze pushes through this grassy bowl from the west, hinting that this must be a severe place in the winter. But the cold has yet to set in, and today, hundreds of mountain bluebirds hover like miniature kites above the dun-colored plain, their indigo wings flashing brilliantly, while dozens of cattle graze contentedly in fields still thick with grass, and a handful of horses rest nearby.

Most people know the 89,000-acre preserve from this roadside vista. High in the saddle of the Jemez Mountains, the state highway winds through a heavily forested flank of the mountains





Majestic and numerous elk herds  
coexist at the caldera with  
(inset from left) horse-drawn  
wagon rides, hiking, and ranching.

and then, suddenly, a wide curve brings you into the open along the lip of this giant rolling grassland that looks as if it was transplanted from the East African savanna. There are no RVs, no campgrounds, no gaggles of tourists in sight. In fact, it's rare to spot another person or vehicle anywhere, especially once you leave the main road and travel into the heart of this geographic wonder, formed when this still-active volcano blew its top some 1.2 million years ago. (The eruption was 100 times as big as that of Mount St. Helens.) Yet despite the seeming emptiness here, there is plenty to behold. Old-growth ponderosa pines cling stubbornly to steep hillsides, slow-flowing trout streams meander for miles, and, for those lucky enough to spot them, immense herds of elk roam beneath an enormous curving sky—all of them sharing this boundless space.

"We call Route 4 the 'Omigod' view," explains Jim Burns, a recreational specialist at the caldera, or cauldron (although in geographic terms, the word means "collapsed volcanic cone"). He meets me at the welcome cabin, a small building two miles down a dirt road from the main entrance off the highway at mile marker 39.2. There, I'm introduced to several employees who handle the preserve's recreational, scientific, and ranching programs, including Randy McKee, the one responsible for the hundreds of cattle that graze the valley floors during the summer. Reared in rural New Mexico, McKee is a reserved man with bright, piercing eyes who dresses like his work—cowboy boots that

*Continued on page 61*





## Fields of Gold

*Continued from page 31*

peek out beneath heavy jeans, a faded flannel shirt, and a wide-brimmed rancher's hat. He couldn't be more different from his colleague Jim Burns, a gregarious Wisconsin native who sports trail shoes, belongs to the Sierra Club, and is an avid cross-country skier.

Though Burns and McKee come from different sides of the wilderness world, their presence at Valles Caldera personifies its complex mission: to provide low-impact recreation while also supporting grazing, logging, and hunting—and to be profitable doing so by 2015. The arrangement has not been without tension, culminating in the resignation of the preserve's executive director this fall. But these disagreements have not detracted from the exceptional wilderness that no other place in Northern New Mexico can match.

"We're trying to do something very different from national forests or national parks," Burns explains as he takes me in a Chevy Tahoe up a rough track at the base of Cerros del Abrigo (Shelter Hills). Higher up on this central dome is the preserve's most popular hiking trail, a seven-mile loop that circles the 10,332-foot summit and gives visitors 360-degree views, along with a good history lesson. Heavy logging decades ago caused muddy washouts and terrible erosion. Now, bands of fir and spruce trees stand sentinel on the steep terrain, thinning only where the slopes flatten and the grasslands begin. Hikers can circumnavigate the peak on old logging roads, and immense valleys sweep in from all sides, with faraway cattle and elk visible as dark pinpricks on the open prairie.

The caldera has long been in a class by itself. After being purchased by Congress in 2000 for \$101 million, a nine-member board of trustees was appointed to govern it. Seven members were selected by President Clinton, while the other two come from nearby: the forest supervisor of the Santa Fe National Forest and the superintendent of Bandelier National Monument are permanent delegates. All management decisions are open to public scrutiny.



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## Fields of Gold

This new governing body is a far cry from the private ownership that dominated the area's past 150 years, during which this former sheep and cattle ranch was in the hands of several prominent Southwestern families, including the Bacas, who received the original holding as a federal land grant in 1860. The ranch's last owners, the Dunigan family of Abilene, Texas, were conservative stewards who minimized the human and agricultural intrusion prevalent in most other places. Hundreds of obsidian flakes still litter the lower slopes of Cerro del Medio, the caldera's easternmost dome, evidence of prehistoric tool makers who once gathered here. "Much of the human imprint on this land is very old," Burns says as he handles one of the shiny black shards before tossing it back to the ground. "This valley has received far fewer visitors over the past decades than a national forest." In fact, many assume the site, fenced off during its ranch days, is still closed to the public. "People tell us that they've been looking over that fence for years and have always wanted to come in," he says. "Well, now we really want them to."

Attracting people has been a challenge. Recreational interest has been minimal, with employees citing lack of public information on activities, coupled with the preserve's self-imposed restrictions on the numbers and impact of visitors. Yet over the past four years, an impressive lineup of ways to enjoy the caldera has been created. Summer offers outstanding mountain biking, horseback riding, and hiking (both guided and non-). Fall brings premier elk hunting (by lottery, in which hunters are assigned 5,000-acre spots) and fly-fishing (anglers get a mile or more of stream to themselves); while in winter, cross-country skiing and snowshoeing routes outclass the Santa Fe National Forest's Norsk Trail. There's also a smattering of specialty events: stargazing nights; artist workshops; expert-taught hunting, fishing, and tracking clinics; even overnight photography and bird-watching excursions.



But visiting Valles Caldera is not as easy as throwing your hiking boots in the back of your car and driving to a trailhead. Most activities require advance reservations, plus a \$10 daily fee; clinics and overnight excursions cost more. Visitors must park at the welcome cabin and then be shuttled to staging areas in vans. Hiking and riding trails are limited to former logging roads, and many areas are off-limits because of unsurveyed artifacts and sacred Indian sites. While some visitors deride the bureaucracy, the advance reservation system and the absence of vehicle traffic does much to protect the quiet sanctuary that is the caldera's main attraction.

Winter offers the most access, with deep snow allowing skiers and snowshoers unrestricted play because drifts cover sensitive archaeological areas. You can track over to the frontier house that served as the main homestead for Tommy Lee Jones and Cate Blanchett in the 2003 film *The Missing*—which volunteers keep stocked with hot chocolate and warm cider—or explore Hidden Valley, a north-facing slope that receives ample snow even when other spots are bare. Glide through History Grove's centuries-old ponderosas and Douglas firs, or go for a challenging aerobic workout on Powerline Trail. Backcountry aficionados have miles and miles of off-trail areas at their disposal. "Everything is more primitive and open here, making it a much more wild place," says Burns.

The majority of the trails are rated "more difficult" simply because of their length and exposed conditions, but skiers at all endurance levels can find an experience just right for them, simply because there's so much to choose from. (For more information, see page 64.)

For the first time this winter, Ski New Mexico will post weather and snow conditions at [www.skinewmexico.com](http://www.skinewmexico.com). Plus, this season will see the debut of the overnight Abrigo yurt expedition: a six-mile ski to this isolated hut in the north-central region, accessible only by a trail that cuts through steep-sided mountain passes and crosses frozen streams. Skiers will be chosen by lottery, with a deadline to enter in early



Herd mentality: Part of the Valles Caldera's mission is to allow sustainable cattle grazing.

December. The cost for this yurt skiing adventure: \$125 per night for a group of six. "The chance to go into the wilds of the caldera and spend the night will be just awe-inspiring," Burns says. Next year, he expects to open a second hut along the preserve's northern boundary and offer a three-day, two-night trip.

Not all of the winter activities require self-propulsion. Once the snowpack is

sufficient, horse-drawn sleighs will take visitors on hour-long tours of the Valle Grande, with horse-drawn wagons making the trek until then.

For those who want unfettered freedom, volunteers can assist scientists and staff researchers working in areas normally closed to the public. Santa Fe resident Marty Peale helps with the grasslands monitoring program, a twice-yearly survey

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## Fields of Gold

of 40 sites that measures the impact of cattle and elk grazing. "You can go to places that you otherwise can't normally go, using GPS to navigate and sleeping out under the stars," says Peale, who also serves as the coordinator of the Valles Caldera Coalition. The group was founded in 1997 to lobby for greater recreational access, including new hiking trails and more overnight camping.

Fulfilling its mission to operate simultaneously as a ranch, a recreational haven, and a wildlife preserve hasn't been an easy task, but a visit to Valles Caldera National Preserve is the perfect reminder that wilderness is full of surprises. Each season offers an exceptional recreational arena: cross-country skiing when winter snow covers the great valleys, horseback riding as spring breaks out, mountain biking along forested ridgelines in the summer, and fly-fishing on a lonely stream in the fall.

The tension between commercial interests and recreation, a common theme throughout the West, will not disappear, but the experiment is worth it. "Here in Valles Caldera," Jim Burns explains as he

navigates a road that cuts between cattle herds and future ski trails, "all those conflicting interests must actually sit down and work things out."

He then adds one of his favorite refrains: "I like to tell people that we're still learning out here." Maybe because the Valles Caldera National Preserve requires more effort to visit, it has remained an alluring place. Those who find their way here will not be disappointed by what nature can do. **SF**

*Jason Stevenson, a writer living in Santa Fe, braves for scenic overlooks and stupendous views. His last article for the Santa Fean took him stargazing.*



### CROSS-COUNTRY SKIING

The season opens December 16, with skiing allowed Friday to Sunday, 9 to 4. No reservations are needed. Four-wheel-drive vehicles are recommended. Day-use permits are \$10 for adults, \$5 for children under 15. Full-moon ski trips are planned in February and March.

### ABRIGO YURT LOTTERY

Price: \$125/night for a party of six. The deadline for entering the lottery will be in December.

### SLEIGH RIDES

Schedules will be available online in November. Reservations are accepted. Price: \$25 for adults, \$15 for children 15 and under.

### VOLUNTEER OPPORTUNITIES

www.vallescalderacoalition.org  
Marty Peale, 505-983-4609, ext. 27

## ACCESS AND RESOURCES

The easiest and best way to access information about Valles Caldera is through its new website. Complete information on all recreational activities is available online. Preserve staff will also handle reservations over the phone or answer specific questions about activities. Call between 8 AM and 5 PM, Monday through Friday, and Saturdays from 9 AM to 5 PM.

### GENERAL INFORMATION

www.vallescaldera.gov  
505-661-3333  
E-mail: info@vallescaldera.gov

### RECREATION RESERVATIONS

www.vallescaldera.gov/reservations  
866-382-5537 (toll free)

### WINTER WEATHER INFORMATION

www.skinewmexico.com  
The caldera is working on a 24-hour weather line: 505-661-3333, ext. 3

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