

Birding Albuquerque to Santa Fe

Don't miss these highlights on your way in or out of our Land of Enchantment!

Note that in early October the Albuquerque Balloon Fiesta is held. If you do not already have reservations to stay in the Albuquerque area during that time, do not expect to find any motel rooms available during this period. However, a dawn to about 9 am ride up I-25 from the airport north out of Albuquerque can be a marvelous sight with 200+ balloons in the air.

1. **Rio Grande Nature Center**

Follow I-25 north to I-40 west (towards Gallup). Take I-40 West to the Rio Grande Boulevard exit. Exit and turn right or north. Follow to Candelaria Boulevard. Turn left and follow to the end of the street turning right into the Nature Center. The gated parking lot is open from 8-5pm (Visitor Center opens at 10am). Waterfowl will be moving through and this is a good time for unusual (for NM) neotropical migrants in the cottonwood forest, though most regular breeding neotropical migrants will have already left. Admission \$3 or display of NM Parks yearly entry placard is required. Easy walking. Rio Grande Cottonwood gallery forest, constructed wetlands. Several trails and access to the entire Rio Grande Bosque (forest) in case you've brought your bikes or jogging outfits. Elev. 5,000 ft.

To get back to I-25 heading north, head out of the Nature Center lot turning left onto Candelaria. Follow Candelaria east to I-25. Turn left onto frontage road (University) heading north after crossing I-25.

2. **Cochiti Lake and Tent Rocks National Monument**

Cochiti Lake is a large reservoir which may have Western/Clark's grebes, waterfowl and gulls. Follow I-25 north to the Santo Domingo Pueblo exit (Hwy 22). Turn left off the exit ramp and follow past Pena Blanca to Cochiti Lake, passing the spillway. Waterfowl and perhaps an American Dipper can be on the river just below the spillway, a little before the entrance to the lake access. However, walking anywhere off the road shoulder has been prohibited by Cochiti pueblo and parking can only be done on the large shoulders on either side of the bridge. Later in the afternoon is best at the boat ramps for scoping the lake as you are facing directly into the sun in the morning. Elevation 5,300 ft. An alternative birding destination is to follow the signs to Tent Rocks, a fascinating geologic area. Hwy 22 cuts to the left just past the spillway. Turn right off NM 22 at the pueblo water tower (painted like a drum) onto Tribal Route 92, which connects to Forest Service Road 266. From the fee station, travel five miles on a gravel road to the national monument heading through some of Cochiti pueblo before turning west on a good dirt road to the fee area (\$5). It is located approx. 9 miles from the spillway. This area is probably the most reliable for Pinyon Jay in the Albuquerque-Santa Fe corridor. Hiking here is moderate. Elev. 6,000 ft.

To get back to I-25 heading north take Hwy 16 off of Hwy 22 after passing the spillway but before the town of Pena Blanca. Follow east back to the interstate.

3. **Sandia Mountains**

Follow I-25 north to I – 40 east (towards Santa Rosa). Follow I-40 east into Tijeras (pronounced tee-‘hair-us) Canyon and exit at Tijeras. Bear left towards Cedar Crest. Follow NM 14 (about 6 miles) to San Antonito and turn left following signs to Sandia Park and Sandia Crest road. Follow this road to Sandia Crest (about 10 miles of very windy road). There are several turnoffs, picnic areas and hiking areas on the way up. You pass through ponderosa pine, mixed conifer to reach subalpine conifer forest at the crest (from about 7,000 - 10,700 ft in elevation). At the crest is a snack/gift shop and spectacular views of the Rio Grande Valley. Note: It will be too early to see wintering rosy-finches and too late for many breeding southwestern neotropical migrants (i.e. Grace’s Warbler, Plumbeous Vireo) but resident birds will be around such as Pygmy Nuthatch. Parking anywhere along the Crest Road requires a \$3 admission or display of federal land access cards (Golden Eagle, Golden Age, Golden Access). Hiking may be easy to difficult depending on which sites are chosen. Note the elevation, be prepared. Follow the Crest Road back to NM 14 to leave the area.
4. **Tres Pistoles Canyon**

This is a lower elevation canyon dominated by pinyon-juniper and southern evergreen oaks. Follow the beginning of the directions to the Sandia Mts. It is on the way to Tijeras, but you reach it by taking the Carnuel exit at the eastern edge of Albuquerque on I-40 heading east. Excellent for resident pinyon-juniper birds such as Juniper Titmouse and Canyon Towhee and on the canyon sides one can find Rufous-crowned Sparrow. (Unfortunately Scott’s Orioles, which breed here will probably already have gone.) Parking is \$3 or the federal passes noted above. Hiking is moderate to strenuous. Elevation is about 6,300 ft.
5. **Sunrise Springs via NM 14**

Follow I-25 north to I – 40 east (towards Santa Rosa). Follow I-40 east into Tijeras (pronounced tee-‘hair-us) Canyon and exit at Tijeras. Bear left towards Cedar Crest. Follow NM 14 to the top of the very long hill (about 6 miles) to San Antonito. Continue north to Hwy 599 near I-25 (about 40 miles) which is the exit road for Sunrise Springs off of the interstate. Follow regular directions from 599. This is known as the “back road” to Santa Fe and may have significantly less traffic than following I-25 up to Santa Fe. It is also slower by a good 15-20 minutes.