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PAJARITO ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION CENTER, LOS ALAMOS, NM

Tips for Wildlife Coexistence with Recreational Visitors in National Parks and Forests of the Jemez Mountains

by Bob Parmenter, Valles Caldera National Preserve, National Park Service (Retired)

Every year, millions of visitors come to our national parks and national forests to recreate, learn about, and enjoy the magnificent scenery, wildlife, vegetation, geology, and the natural and human histories of our landscapes. In the Jemez Mountains last year, over 247,000 people visited Bandelier National Monument, and nearly 85,000 visited Valles Caldera National Preserve. While the vast majority of these visitors have a wonderful time in these wildland areas, a small number are involved in conflicts with wildlife. These conflicts sometimes result in injuries to the human visitor or injuries or death to the resident wildlife species. To foster enhanced coexistence between visitors and wildlife, this article outlines the main sources of conflict and how to avoid them.

Wildlife Hazards to People

Large Mammals – Black bears and elk in the Jemez Mountains pose potential hazards when interacting with people, ranging from nuisance behaviors to serious injuries or deaths. Foraging bears (Fig. 1) are adept at taking advantage of human food sources, including picnic supplies in coolers, backpacks and vehicles, along with trash in unsecured containers. More seriously, unwary hikers may chance upon a mother bear with cubs, sometimes leading to severe attacks by the adult bear in defense of her cubs. Visitors should be careful to secure food away from hungry bears and always be alert for active bears, especially those traveling with their cubs, when picnicking, hiking, camping or fishing. In addition, elk can be unpredictable, especially during the autumn rut when bulls are defending their cow harems, and may charge towards visitors who come too close. Coyotes



Figure 1. Black bear in the Jemez Mountains. Photo credit: Sally King, National Park Service, Bandelier National Monument

generally shy away from humans, but occasionally a sick or injured animal may approach uncomfortably close to visitors. All visitors should view large wildlife from a safe distance, usually 100 yards or more, to avoid unpleasant or otherwise close encounters. Finally, large mammals treat roads and highways as part of the natural habitat, placing them (literally) on a collision course with speeding automobiles. Slamming into a 1,000-lb bull elk at 55 mph on State Route 4 will not only damage your vehicle, but could also inflict serious injury or death to the occupants – not to mention killing the elk. So please drive the posted speed limits and watch for wildlife, especially at night, dawn, and dusk.

Small Mammals – Squirrels, chipmunks, prairie dogs and other rodents present a variety of threats to humans. Some of the most common wildlife-related human injuries in national parks in the Southwest are – can you guess? – squirrel bites and scratches!!! These occur when visitors attempt to hand-feed these “cute, furry little animals” (perhaps thinking they’re



Figure 2. Gunnison's prairie dog standing by burrow along the entrance road to Valles Caldera.

Photo credit: Bob Parmenter, National Park Service, Valles Caldera National Preserve

like pet hamsters), and the squirrels bite them on their fingers. Park Rangers at Grand Canyon National Park typically handle a dozen such injuries every day during the summer! The Jemez Mountains support the same species of squirrels (in this case, the golden-mantled ground squirrel), and if these animals become habituated to receiving handouts from visitors, they can lose their fear of humans and become very aggressive. So all visitors should avoid feeding wildlife – and it's also illegal to do so! Other potential hazards from small mammals include transmission of deadly diseases, such as hantavirus (from deer mice), plague (usually from prairie dogs during outbreaks), and cat-scratch fever (nearly all species of rodents). Rabbits also carry tularemia bacteria. Needless to say, visitors should avoid contact with all rodents, including carcasses that they may see along trails or roads.

Arthropods – Insects and other invertebrates are ubiquitous in nature and are often seen up close on wildflowers while they search for nectar and pollen.

A number of these species (bees and wasps in particular) can inflict painful stings; if a person is allergic to their venom, then a potentially fatal reaction (anaphylaxis) can occur. Visitors should take care to avoid disturbing insects while out in the field, and carry adrenaline (epinephrine) pens if they know they are allergic to bee stings. Bees and yellow-jacket wasps are also attracted to human foods during picnics, so care should be taken to avoid aggravating these aerial party-crashers. In addition, areas with abundant water (stream-sides, wetlands) support deer flies and mosquitoes, the latter of which can transmit viral diseases like West Nile Virus. Ticks are found throughout the Jemez Mountains, the bites of which can transmit diseases like Rocky Mountain fever and Lyme disease. Protective clothing and insect repellent are advised for visitors during the warm months of the year.

Human Hazards to Wildlife

Visitors to national parks and forests rarely attempt to deliberately hurt or kill wildlife, but sometimes they can have unintentional impacts on wildlife species. First and foremost, vehicles on park and forest roads in the Jemez Mountains strike and kill a substantial number of large and small animals each year – road killed carcasses along State Route 4 are obvious. Even on back-country dirt roads, one can see the occasional traffic victim. Prairie dog colonies are common in Valles Caldera (Fig. 2), and even though the posted speed limit is 10 mph through these colonies, fatalities are not uncommon (note that park rangers can issue speeding tickets for exceeding 10 mph!). Small garter snakes, frogs, lizards (which are difficult to see) and occasionally birds are struck and killed by vehicles. Visitors are encouraged to look for these resident wildlife species when driving, and not be too distracted by the scenery.

Another source of visitor impact on wildlife is the mis-guided action of the “Good Samaritan” who finds a “baby” animal

Love Nature and People? Volunteer with PEEC



Questions?

Email our Visitor Services Manager, Nic, at nicole@peecnature.org or scan the QR code.



PEEC volunteer Terry Beery introducing Severus the Snake to a visitor during PEECnic 2025.

Photo credit: Casey Lundberg

Photo Gallery and Print Store Launched to Help Support PEEC



Thank you,
Richard!

White Rock resident, **Richard Skolnik**, has recently launched a photography website and print store to benefit the Pajarito Environmental Education Center. The gallery on Richard's website feature photos of insects, birds, and wildlife from a number of places, including White Rock, Los Alamos, Phoenix, Costa Rica, and Iceland. Each photo is available in two sizes and on two photographic papers. Photos will be printed at White Wall, one of the finest photo printers in the world, and delivered directly to the purchaser. We encourage you to take a look at Richard's wonderful photos at: **richardskolnikphotography.com**



Bighorn Sheep



Mallard Duck



Northern Flicker



Broad-tailed Hummingbird

Stop by the Los Alamos Nature Center to take a "PEEC" at his work!

and, thinking that it's been abandoned by its mother and will surely die, picks it up and brings it to a park ranger. Such incidents occur across the National Park System. Fortunately, these events are relatively rare in Valles Caldera and Bandelier; however, visitors often stumble across new-born elk calves lying in the valleys or surrounding forests (Fig. 3), and report these locations to rangers to send help. In reality, the mother elk is usually very close by, waiting for the humans to leave before returning to nurse her calf. The calf had been deliberately hidden and the bed site put at a distance from the cow elk, so as to reduce the risk of a predator discovering the calf. Visitors are free to report such sightings, but they should never approach the young animal or attempt to capture it.

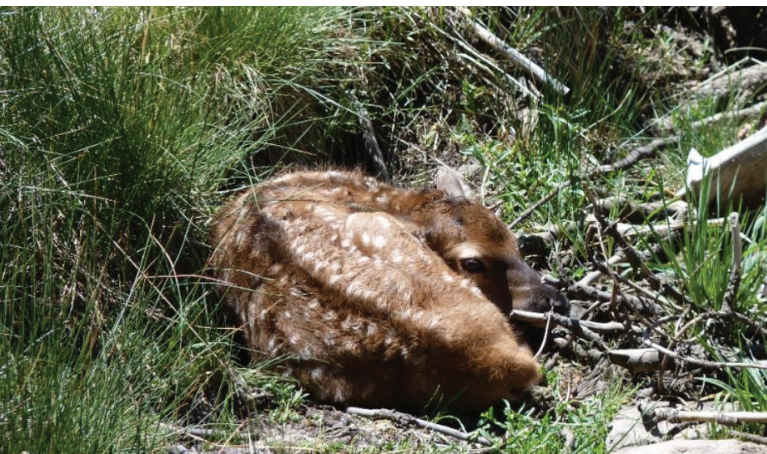


Figure 3. Elk calf bedded down in secluded hideaway in forest surrounding the Valle Grande.

Photo credit: Valles Caldera National Preserve staff

Finally, many visitors have the desire to approach wildlife as close as possible to get better views or take close-up photographs, and in so doing will "spook" the animals so that they suddenly run or fly away. While no direct injury has occurred, the animals have expended energy unnecessarily in their rapid escape, and this lost energy has to be made up with additional foraging at a later time. Reduced energy intake and fat retention can negatively affect reproduction, nursing of young, predator avoidance, and future winter survival. Visitors should always view wildlife from a sufficient distance that will not disturb their natural activities.

Summary Safety Tips for Visitors and Wildlife

Coexistence: Visitors should always maintain a minimum distance from wildlife (25 yards for many species, 100 yards for large mammals), avoid feeding wildlife, and be alert for signs of illness or unusual behavior. This reduces the risk of bites, disease, and dangerous encounters, and helps to ensure that the visitor experience in the Jemez Mountains will be fun, relaxing, and free from wildlife conflict. Enjoy our national parks and forests! 🦋

Green Chile Stew

by Liddie Martinez

We all know that green chile has an abundance of vitamin C and provides protein and potassium, but most impressive, green chile helps the body block cholesterol absorption and increases your metabolism. Eat more green chile—it's good for you!

PEEC-A-BOO



AT THE NATURE CENTER

FRI, OCT 30 4-6 PM

Stop by during Trick-or-Treat on
Mainstreet for spooky animal encounters
& sweet treats, provided by PEEC.



PEEC
Pajarito Environmental
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**LOS ALAMOS
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AND CREATIVE DISTRICT

Green chile has been produced and consumed in New Mexico for hundreds of years and likely came to northern New Mexico via the Native American trade routes established centuries ago prior to El Camino Real. And, like the three sisters (beans, squash and corn), chile, both red and green, became staple crops in New Mexico long before we were a state or even part of the United States for that matter. The recipes for Green Chile Stew will all ring familiar, but I can tell you from personal experience, no two versions are identical, even when cooked in your own kitchen. The beauty of this dish is that you use whatever is on hand. So long as you have green chile, green chile stew is an option regardless of the contents of your refrigerator or pantry. I've had it with fresh spinach leaves added at the end and with corn or carrots or potatoes mixed together or as single additions- all very different and all delicious. For my family, the base is called Chile Verde Guisado, the basic green chile recipe thickened with roux that I use for many dishes embellished with whichever vegetables are available that moment and the addition of a good stock. I'm sharing my family's favorite today. Enjoy a bowl!



Green Chile Stew
Photo credit: Liddie Martinez

INGREDIENTS

- 2 Pounds of Beef or Chicken (cubed, ground or shredded)
- 1 Small Onion, chopped
- 3 Celery Ribs, chopped
- 4 Carrots, sliced
- 5 Potatoes, peeled and chopped
- 4 Cloves Garlic, minced
- 1 Cup Frozen Corn Kernels
- 2 Zucchini, chopped
- 5 Tablespoons Olive Oil, plus 2 Tbsp. reserved
- 2 Tablespoons Flour
- 6 Cups Chicken or Beef Stock
- 2 Cups Green Chile, roasted peeled and chopped
- 1 Cup Tomatoes, chopped
- Salt and Pepper to taste
- Water

In a large dutch oven, sauté beef or chicken, onions, celery, and carrots in 5 Tbsp. of olive oil stirring often over medium-high heat until the onions are transparent.

Then, set aside the contents of the pot and add remaining oil and garlic—cook for 2 minutes.

Stir the flour into the olive oil mixture. Let the flour cook in the oil, bubbling a bit until it turns a golden color, then stir it all in and add stock, chile, tomatoes, and potatoes.

Bring it to a boil, then add corn and zucchini, stir well and add about a cup or two of water to cover.

When the pot returns to a boil, reduce the flame to a low simmer and cook for 30 minutes uncovered or until the carrots are fork tender.

Cover the pot and let it sit for 10 minutes before serving.

This makes 10 hearty servings. Freeze the leftovers for another time. 🌀

Wednesdays with PEEC

Dear PEEC Community,

It's 4:45 on a Wednesday, and the Los Alamos Nature Center is humming. A dad crouches next to his daughter at an activity table. Two caregivers who met a few weeks ago catch up while their kids watch the birds. A small crowd peppers our astronomer with questions after the planetarium show. Nobody made an appointment. They just came.

This is *Nature at Night*, the free Wednesday program we launched in January 2026 because parents and caregivers told us they needed a place to land mid-week. The U.S. Surgeon General has named loneliness a public health concern, and a 2024 Ohio State study found 66% of parents feel isolated by the demands of parenthood. Eight months in, we've learned *Nature at Night* isn't really about the activities; it's a "third space" where families can gather, unwind, and connect, no reason required.

It's the kind of gathering place PEEC has always worked to create.

This year, we're looking in two directions at once, grateful for what we built together, and excited for what's next. In 2025, we welcomed more than 12,000 visitors to the nature center, reached nearly 5,000 school children, and connected with 12,000 participants more through public programs.

Behind every number is a child meeting a snake for the first time, a teacher with a new classroom tool, or a family finding room to breathe on a busy Wednesday evening.

None of it happens without you. Looking ahead, we're focused on:

- Expanding access to nature-based education across north-central New Mexico
- Strengthening community partnerships with schools, tribal communities, and regional partners
- Growing programs like Nature at Night, so this free, welcoming space stays open to every family

The need has never been greater, and neither has our potential, because of a community like ours. As you think about your year-end giving, we hope you'll consider PEEC. Your gift helps keep Wednesday evenings free and open, and funds the programs that forge lifelong stewardship and connection sparked by curiosity.

Thank you for being part of our story.

With gratitude,



Jillian Rubio

Executive Director, Pajarito Environmental Education Center 



Nature @Night

WEDNESDAYS 4-6 PM
LOS ALAMOS NATURE CENTER
WITH PEEC EDUCATORS

PEECNATURE.ORG/EVENTS





Book Review: Medicine Wheel for the Planet, by Jennifer Grenz

by Ed Santiago, PEEC Board Member

Invasive species. What comes to mind when you hear that? And how has your thinking changed about them over the course of your life?

Dr. Jennifer Grenz (Nlaka'pamux Nation) has dedicated her career to this question. Early on, as part of an environmental nonprofit working on "restoration" of ecologically imbalanced areas, she started noticing cracks in the foundation of how things were done: projects that made no sense, were incomplete or poorly thought out, projects that would clearly be—and ended up being—a whole lot of effort with no long-term benefit. Her tentative questions were met with resigned shrugs: "yeah... that's how things are done."

Nevertheless, she persisted. And made interesting findings, plants that were not expected in the areas she was seeing them in. And she was ignored: "not enough letters after your name." So she earned her letters. And still she felt there was something missing. In *Medicine Wheel for the Planet*:

A Journey Toward Personal and Ecological Healing she describes her questions and her path to learning new ways to think about our responsibilities to our Mother.

Unsurprisingly, Grenz's journey begins with listening. Grenz, a committed scientist, struggles to find the right balance between Pasteur's prepared mind and the Buddhist beginner's mind: we need both in order to really see without being blinded by our expectations and inner narratives.

When she catches herself

one day so focused on finding and eradicating invasives that she's oblivious to the entire rest of the ecosystem around her, she feels shaken: that's not who she had set out to be. That gets her to start listening deeply. To tribal Elders. To her precociously wise children. And to the land.

Did you just cringe? Roll your eyes? I understand. Chances are 99% that you or someone very close to you has an advanced science degree or two. You don't need me to tell you that the scientific method is humanity's most powerful tool for understanding. But if you garden; if you practice any land-healing work; if you've lived through any of our wildfires and seen how conditions change; you know there are nuances and complexities that defy our best models. There's a need for judgment with humility. Like many of the recent voices calling for recognition of Indigenous ways of knowledge, Grenz points out that much of this judgment exists already—we just haven't been listening.

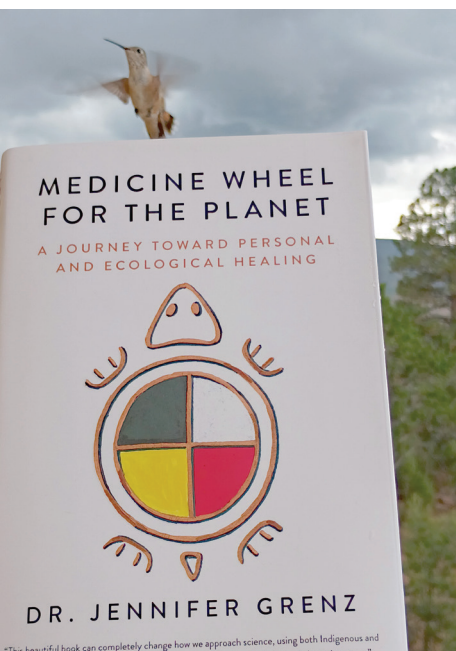
One element that resonated deeply with me is her awareness of language. Which words we hear, and speak, affect how we approach challenges. One example is the word "restoration": it has undertones of idealism, hints of a static vision, a no longer relevant past. She prefers "healing" as more appropriate to a dynamic, living landscape with active caretakers.

This is not light reading. Part storytelling (highly engaging), part lecture (uh, less so), all of it bluntly acknowledging the stark reality of climate change and the impossible tradeoffs we must make if we are to be responsible stewards of our home. Some of you reading this will manage major healing projects; some will participate; some will fund; all of us, as PEEC members and Terrans, have something to learn from Grenz's thoughtful work. 🌱

The One Los Alamos Book Club meets every other month at the Los Alamos Nature Center.



linktr.ee/OneLosAlamos



"Medicine Wheel for the Planet" book cover.
Photo credit: Ed Santiago

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PEECnic

ANNUAL MEMBER MEETING & MEMBERSHIP APPRECIATION

Saturday, October 10 | 1-3 PM
Los Alamos Nature Center



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Our Mission: Enriching people's lives by strengthening their connections to our canyons, mesas, mountains, and skies.

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"Gorgeous views at this very inviting and well maintained nature center with interesting and informative exhibits. Outside, there's a play structure for kids. Check to see when the planetarium shows are being held."

— Los Alamos Nature Center Visitor

Nature Center hours:

Monday: 10 – 4

Tuesday: Closed

Wednesday: 10 – 6

Thursday: 10 – 4

Friday: 10 – 4

Saturday: 10 – 4

Sunday: Closed

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*Visitors crafting at PEEC-A-BOO 2025.
Photo credit: Jillian Rubio*

INSIDE

- 1 Tips for Wildlife Coexistence in the Jemez Mountains
- 3 Recipe for Green Chile Stew
- 5 Wednesdays with PEEC
- 6 Book Review: Medicine Wheel for the Planet, by Jennifer Grenz

UPCOMING EVENTS

- 🍁 Nature Play **MONDAY MORNINGS**
- 🍁 Nature at Night **WEDNESDAY EVENINGS**
- 🍁 PEECnic **OCT 10**
- 🍁 PEEC-A-BOO at the Nature Center **OCT 30**
- 🍁 Snow Outlook & Powder Chasing in NM **NOV 19**
- 🍁 Home Alone 2 and Hot Chocolate **DEC 12**

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