

The Rock Wall – Ponil Canyon

Valle Vidal Unit – Carson National Forest

Distance from Casa del Gavilan to trail head:
50 miles – 75-90 minutes drive time

Trail length: 4 miles each way Total 8 miles

Elevation descent: 800 feet

Difficulty: Easy but long. Good trail/road with steady descent.

Points of interest: Trail runs along Ponil Canyon with stream. Good area to view wildlife and birds.



Between 23 and 34 million years ago, during the Oligocene Epoch, enormous cracks opened in the Earth radiating from Baldy Mountain many miles north into what is today the Valle Vidal unit of the Carson National Forest. The cracks filled with lava from far below the Earth's surface. Since that cataclysmic event the lava within the cracks cooled slowly over thousands of years as evidenced by the crystals contained within the lava, and the surrounding earth weathered away, leaving several natural rock walls rolling across the landscape standing sentinel against wind, weather, and time. The most prominent of these features is known as "The Rock Wall" running through Valle Vidal and across Ponil Canyon. These walls formed and began to erode long before the Sangre de Cristo Range was uplifted five million years ago, basically as one large mass of rock, more than a mile high from sea level far into the sky of what is now New Mexico. This road/trail runs past one of the best and most accessible of these natural walls.

The east side of Valle Vidal is typically closed between January 1st through March 31. During this time the gravel road through Valle Vidal is open but no hiking or other activities off the main road are permitted, which includes this hike. During winter months snow can block the road in places. Be cautious of driving into Valle Vidal during or after heavy rains, or in winter weather. Cell phones will only work for a mile or two off Highway 64. The rest of the time you'll be out of cell phone range and "on your own". Traffic along the main road can be very sparse except for summer months and hunting season. Once you turn off toward the Cimarron Campground traffic will be nearly non-existent. Make certain you have a spare tire as flat tires do sometimes occur on the gravel road.

To reach the trailhead, drive north out of Cimarron on Highway 64 (toward Raton) five miles. On the right (east) side of the road you'll see a sign "Valle Vidal Unit Carson National Forest" pointing to the left (west). Turn west onto the gravel road. This part of the road passes through Ted Turner's nearly 600,000 Vermejo Park Ranch which runs into Colorado. You will see gated side roads for numerous gas wells along the main road. The road is a public highway, but no hiking or other activities are permitted off the gravel road. Twenty one miles from Highway 64 a sign marks the entrance into Valle Vidal. Beyond this point hiking and other off-road activities are permitted with some restrictions. Another 8 miles will bring you to the McCrystal campground on the right side of the road. Well maintained pit toilets are available in the McCrystal Campground.

An additional 9 miles will take you up the switchbacks to Windy Gap, over the The Rock Wall, and down into the Shuree Ponds area on the left. A mile past the turnoff to Shuree Ponds, and 38 miles from the Highway 64 turnoff, you'll see a sign to the left for the Cimarron Campground. Take this left and proceed $\frac{3}{4}$ of a mile up the hill to the Cimarron Campground on the left side of the road. Pit toilets are also available at the Cimarron Campground, but they are only maintained during the summer months.

This Forest Service road continues 4 miles past the campground to "The Rock Wall". Most of this road can be navigated in a regular car, but there are a few particularly bad areas so it's not recommended. This is a very remote part of Valle Vidal in which to damage your vehicle. This road is only recommended for high clearance, four-wheel drive vehicles with rock-resistant tires. Beyond the campground it's a single lane road, but it does widen in places in the unlikely event you find a vehicle coming the other way. For vehicles not quite up to the drive, park in the Cimarron Campground or on the wide part of the road in front of the campground, and hike four miles along the road to The Rock Wall. The road is easy to follow and descends steadily about 800 feet down the canyon to The Rock Wall. Three quarters of a mile from the campground you'll see a road that splits off to the right up a hill. Stay on the main road to the left (along the bottom of the canyon). It should take 75-90 minutes to hike from the Cimarron Campground to The Rock Wall, and a bit longer to hike back to your vehicle.

A trail follows the stream on the road side, but it may not be continuous the entire distance from the campground to The Rock Wall. It's recommended to hike along to road instead of the trail unless you're prepared for a more rugged experience.

For more information: https://www.fs.usda.gov/Internet/FSE_DOCUMENTS/fseprd593220.pdf

<https://www.fs.usda.gov/recarea/carson/recreation/horseriding-camping/recarea/?recid=44224&actid=104>

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