

Valle Vidal Unit

Carson National Forest

Distance from Casa del Gavilan: Starting at Casa del Gavilan
Length of drive: Approximately 155 miles – 4-5 hours plus stops
Elevation change: from 7,000 to 10,035 feet
Points of interest: 101,794 acre remote wildlife area/recreational access. Part of Carson National Forest

Required documents: None

Open year round, but snow is common in the mountains during the winter and spring months. Caution is urged during rainy weather as the road can be slippery.

For more information see: www.wildlife.state.nm.us/

Contact: Questa Ranger District
184 State Hwy 38, Questa, NM 87556
(575) 586-0520 or (575) 758-6200 (Taos Office)

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The Valle Vidal (which is Spanish for "Valley of Life") is a 101,794 acre area on the Questa Ranger District of the Carson National Forest in the Sangre de Cristo Mountains. It used to be part of the Maxwell Land Grant until purchased by William Bartlett in 1902. Part of the Vermejo Park Ranch, Valle Vidal became a hunting and fishing preserve for wealthy people and celebrities. In 1973, the Vermejo Park Ranch was sold to the Vermejo Park Corporation, a subsidiary of the Pennzoil Company. In 1982, Pennzoil donated the Valle Vidal portion of the ranch to the American public and it became part of the Carson National Forest.



Valle Vidal boasts spectacular scenery plus timber, minerals, and grazing land. It is being managed to enhance its most important feature, wildlife, which includes a trophy elk herd of up to 2,000 head, mule deer, Merriam's turkey, black bear, mountain lion, and numerous varieties of birds and fish. Elevations in the Valle Vidal range from 7,700 to 12,554 feet. The land generally increases in elevation from east to west, culminating in Little Costilla Mountain which rises above timberline.

At the heart of Valle Vidal is the Big Valle. It is comprised of 3,800 acres of extensive rolling grass-covered meadows surrounded by conifer and quaking aspen at an elevation of about 9,500 feet.

The drive though Valle Vidal is the crown jewel of scenic drives, as well as one of the best kept secrets, of northern New Mexico. Make certain you have a good spare tire. Flat tires aren't common, but they can occur on the gravel road. Though it can be a long and bumpy drive with 50 miles of gravel roads, the scenery is well worth the bumps. For several reasons it's marginally better to drive through Valle Vidal from west to east, so I'd recommend driving into Cimarron and turning left onto Highway 64 toward Taos. Proceed through the small town of Ute Park. A short stop at the Palisades of Cimarron Canyon State Park is always a nice place to stretch your legs. Toilets are available at several areas along the highway in the park. Spending more than a few minutes in the park will require the purchase of a day pass, which can be done at any of the self-serve kiosks within the park. Several excellent hiking trails are within the park.

Continue to the town of Eagle Nest where you'll make a right turn toward the town of Red River. Five miles ahead on the left is what's left of the ghost town of Elizabethtown. This town, founded in 1866 during a gold rush, was the first incorporated town in New Mexico. A small museum is near the town and well worth a visit as you're passing through. Proceed north over Bobcat Pass at 9,820 feet, and down into the former gold mining town – turned ski town - of Red River. Several excellent restaurants and other tourist attractions are in town, so you may want to stop and look around a bit. It's the last town of any size you'll see until you return to Cimarron.

As you head west out of Red River you'll be in the narrow, deep canyon alongside Red River. Keep an eye out for Bighorn Sheep along the highway. They were reintroduced to the area in the early 1990s, and aren't the least bit bashful about handing out along the highway and showing off for the tourists. The enormous piles of mine tailings you'll see on the north (right) side of the highway are from the Molybdenum mine – referred to simply as "Moly" for those who's tongues get cramped tripping over the vowels. Molybdenum is a steel additive used to create high-strength lightweight steel used for products such as wheelchairs and mountain bikes. The ore has been mined in this area since the early 1920s and has left 100 million tons of tailings behind an earthen dam, in addition to over 300 million tons of waste rock and lagoons of acidic sludge. While the mine, which is mostly an open pit over a quarter of a mile deep, has brought a lot of on again/off again economic benefit to the area it's obviously been hard on both the landscape and the environment.

Winding further down the canyon brings you to the small town of Questa. Toilets are located at a few campgrounds on the south (left) side of the highway between Red River and Questa. The Questa Ranger Station for the Carson National Forest is on the left as you're coming into town if you want to stop for any reason.

At the traffic light turn left on Highway 522 to the town of Costilla 20 miles to the north. Turn right just before the Costilla Gas and Grocery and head east on Highway 196. Costilla Gas and Grocery on the right is your last chance for flush toilets, cold drinks, munchies, and gas before you start into the mountains. It's a bumpy, dusty 50 miles through Valle Vidal back to Highway 64 near Cimarron. Follow the highway through the Costilla Creek valley and the town of Amalia before entering Carson National Forest 17 miles from Costilla Gas and Grocery. The road will turn from pavement to gravel. You'll pass a sign that reads "Entering motor travel restricted area". This just means you're not allowed to drive on anything other than established roads while in the National Forest. You'll also pass a sign that says "One Lane Road". The road through the National Forest is between 1 and a half and two lanes wide, so don't let the sign scare you. The road is bumpy, but in good condition and sufficiently wide to pass oncoming traffic with a bit of care. It's best to pull over and stop to allow approaching trucks with stock trailers, mobile homes, and other wide loads to pass.

Two miles into the National Forest you'll come to a T-intersection. The large rock formation ahead and to your right is Comanche Point. This ominous volcanic formation consists of rhyolite, a high-silica form of lava which is typically very viscous and often results in cataclysmic eruptions. The road straight ahead follows Costilla Creek a few miles further north before stopping at a closed gate at the Little Costilla Peak trail. Instead, turn right following Comanche Creek toward McCrystal Campground and Highway 64. From this point it's 46 miles back to pavement, and 56 back to the Casa. The roughest part of the road, with a fair bit of washboard, is between the National Forest entrance and the next 8 miles to the Clayton Corrals. The road gets better once you pass the corrals. A bit further up the road are two placards on the left a short walk from a parking area. While these were probably once very informative didactics describing the unique geology of the area, they have long since faded into obscurity. Don't bother parking and walking to the placards as this will just lead to disappointment.

Stay on the main road as it winds through the high country of the Carson National Forest. A few miles further along you'll see a small dirt road running off to the right and down a hill before turning south. This road leads to some of the old gold mining towns of Midnight City, La Belle, Anchor, and others, as well as numerous abandoned mines and works north of Red River which is about 9 miles southwest of this point – though a very long and bumpy drive. Red River was once a very active mining community and the mountains surrounding the town are full of long-abandoned ruins and mines. These smaller roads off the main road are in poor condition and only recommended for off-road vehicles.

The highest elevation of the drive is at the Clayton Corrals, which you'll see on your right, with an elevation of 10,000 feet. This is where ranchers load and unload their cattle for grazing during the summer months. Two miles from the corrals will bring you to a turnoff on the right to Shuree Ponds. There are several small ponds for fishing, with one reserved only for kids under the age of 12. There are also picnic tables and a toilet, so this is a good place for a picnic or a rest stop. Bring along a jacket as even in the summer months it can be cool at this high elevation. Near the ponds you'll see the old Shuree Lodge, built in the late 1950s by W. J. Gourley of Fort Worth, Texas when the Valle Vidal tract was a part of the Vermejo Park Ranch which was owned by Gourley at that time.

Once back out to the main road from Shuree Ponds, turn right. One mile will bring you to Windy Gap, which offers a stunning view of the lower valleys to the east. The road curves to the right and starts down the first switchback. At the end of this switchback, just before the turn back to the left, is a parking area on the right. This is a good place to park and get out for a few photographs. The rest of the switchbacks are the only part of the drive that may be uncomfortably close to a precipice for some drivers. Traffic is rare on this road so hang toward the middle of the road as long as you can see there are no vehicles coming up the switchbacks.

At the bottom of the switchbacks another four miles will bring you to the McCrystal Campground on the left. You can park just inside the campground entrance and take the "Ring Place Interpretive Trail" that begins at a large sign at the entrance to the McCrystal Campground. This trail is about a mile long and goes to the old Ring homestead on the south side of the road. Signs and photographs at various locations around the homestead describe the life of the Ring family and their history during the logging days in what is now Valle Vidal. Toilets are available at the McCrystal Campground as well as near The Ring Place.

Back in the car another eight miles will bring you to the east boundary of Valle Vidal as the road winds through high Ponderosa forests, grassy meadows, and sandstone formations. A sign will let you know you're leaving Valle Vidal. Beyond this point you may not leave the roadway as both sides of the road are private property. From the exit of Valle Vidal it's twenty one miles to the pavement at Highway 64.

When you arrive at Highway 64 you can turn right and five miles will bring you back into Cimarron. If it's late in the afternoon you can instead turn left and drive the few miles to The Colfax Tavern (the only building on the right side of the road past the railroad crossing) for dinner and cold drinks to wash down the road dust. Give them a call first to make sure they're open at 575-376-2229.

Valle Vidal - Red River, Costilla, Cimarron



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