

## Trekking the Taos Valley Overlook

### Highlight: Escarpment Trail

Story and Photos by Cindy Brown

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In the winter, the wide, sage-covered mesa is quiet and windswept, allowing the echoes of the past to be heard. The land now known as the Taos Valley Overlook area south of town holds a network of trails and old roads that link up to provide miles of hiking, biking and horseback riding across the more than 2,600 acres of land, which is overseen by the federal Bureau of Land Management as part of the R'o Grande del Norte National Monument.

The winter months are a perfect time to visit the area before the warmer temperatures set in, and more people are out enjoying the trails.

### Taking a loop via the Escarpment Trail

Hikers can get to the many paths that run through this swath of mesa from the Taos Valley Overlook-Rift Valley trailhead, the pullout located on the west side of State Road 68 and south of Stakeout Drive. From this nexus, several trails web across the landscape.

The fastest route to the overlook of the confluence of the R'o Pueblo and the R'o Grande is to start walking straight west from the trailhead on Trader's Trail for about a mile. At the trailhead, the elevation is 7,000 feet but drops by about 300 feet as you head toward the east rim of the R'o Grande Gorge.

For a longer hike, piece together a number of trail sections that will lead to the rim. On a recent snowy morning, I set out on Trader's Trail, but near the trailhead turned left onto the Rift Valley Trail. The path wends through the sage, pi-on and juniper and crosses two arroyos. After about a mile and a half, look for the "Escarpment Trail" sign. Join this trail and follow it for a half mile across the top of a bluff, a continuous series of cliffs in the landscape that is also known by the trail's namesake, an escarpment.

Looking ahead, the edge of the gorge of the R'o Pueblo is visible. To the north are views of Taos Mountain and El Salto. At about the 2-mile point, look for a trail marker and turn left onto the Rift Valley Trail. A meandering path through the sage, it turns south and then east before joining with the La Gijosa Trail for a short distance. Soon, you will reach the intersection of several paths and the Picuris Trail, which further descends down to the Taos Junction Bridge.

From this point, you have views of the bridge and the confluence of the R'o Pueblo and the R'o Grande. It is a good spot to eat lunch and to watch the hawks and ravens soaring on the air currents above the meeting rivers. The total distance to this spot from the trailhead on State Road 68 is about 3.2 miles.

As for the return trip, there are a number of options. I set out along the Klauer Trail, a two-track heading north. I followed it for about 1.5 miles to the overlook of the confluence and then returned to the trailhead via Trader's Trail. The total distance for the return trip, including the visit to the overlook point, was 3.5 miles.

## **History**

Remnants of the past are plain to see in this area.

As Merrill Dicks, archaeologist with the BLM, explained, “There are historic and prehistoric artifacts situated along the rim and at least one small cluster of petroglyphs near the trail.” Those pieces of history, like the overall network of trails, tells the stories of a landscape inhabited, seized and visited by many different people.

Native American people crossed the land. Spanish explorers, missionaries and settlers as well as American trappers and traders used the complex of trails. It is believed that an extension of the Camino Real de Tierra Adentro came into Taos through this area. In 1876, the U.S. military built the first wagon road along the R'io Grande to bring supplies through New Mexico to Fort Garland in the southern San Luis Valley in Colorado.

The trails bear the names of prominent figures in Taos. The Gijosa Trail is named for the family who received the original land grant. Francisca Antonia de Gijosa petitioned for the grant in 1715. The area was used for many years to graze sheep and periodically saw Comanche raids.

Klauer Trail, the long two-track that runs parallel to the gorge, is named after the Klauer family of Iowa, which manufactured flumes and piping and produced stamped metal ceilings. They held this parcel from 1920 to 2001 when they transferred it to the BLM, with the assistance of the Trust for Public Lands and Taos Land Trust.

## **Wildlife**

During one of my recent visits, many birds, including hawks, were flying and gliding high above the rivers.

Bald eagles can sometimes be seen cruising the rivers and sagebrush steppe habitat of the Taos Valley Overlook. But Valerie Williams, a wildlife biologist with the BLM, says that this area is home to an array of other birds, too.

“The more common birds that would be seen here include Mourning dove, Pinyon jay, Common raven, Northern mockingbird, Sage thrasher, Green-tailed towhee, Spotted towhee, Brewer’s sparrow, and Sage sparrow,” said Williams.

“In the scattered pi-on-juniper stands, you might also see Gray flycatcher, Western wood-pewee, Ashthroated flycatcher, Plumbeous vireo, Clark’s nutcracker, Mountain chickadee, Blue-gray knatcatcher, Blackthroatedgray warbler, Western tanager and Chipping sparrow,” she added.

Bighorn sheep can be seen here, too, although the bovids are more common on the other side of the gorge, across the R'io Pueblo de Taos and R'io Grande.

“Coyotes can often be seen cruising the area for small mammals, usually cottontail or jack rabbits,” Williams said.

“Big game that is likely to use the area include mule deer and Rocky Mountain elk as they move from water sources on the rivers below the rim to the higher country of mixed-conifer forests east of the Horseshoe Curve. Less likely to be seen, due to their secretive nature, are skunk and badger. Snakes, including prairie rattlesnakes, are in the area but not an issue during colder months as they hibernate until emergence in late spring and summer,” Williams said.

## **Changes afoot**

A comprehensive land management plan for the Taos Valley Overlook area released in 2006 is almost fully implemented, according to the agency's trails planner Tami Torres. Still to come are a concrete vault toilet, interpretive signs and picnic tables at the Cascabel Trailhead, located at the northern entry point to the overlook area on County Road 110, past the golf course.

"We recognize the need to replace and install additional trail signs at each intersection, and currently we're working on updates to our trailhead map as well," says Torres. "We get lots of positive feedback about the trails."

*Cindy Brown is the author of the Taos Hiking Guide, available at local retailers and at [www.nighthawkpress.com](http://www.nighthawkpress.com). Contact her at [cindybrowntaos2010@yahoo.com](mailto:cindybrowntaos2010@yahoo.com).*

## **Directions**

From Taos Plaza, drive south on Paseo del Pueblo Sur and State Road 68 for a bit less than ten miles. Pass Stakeout Drive and continue to a brown hiker sign, just past mile marker 36. The trailhead parking lot is a short distance beyond, on the right.

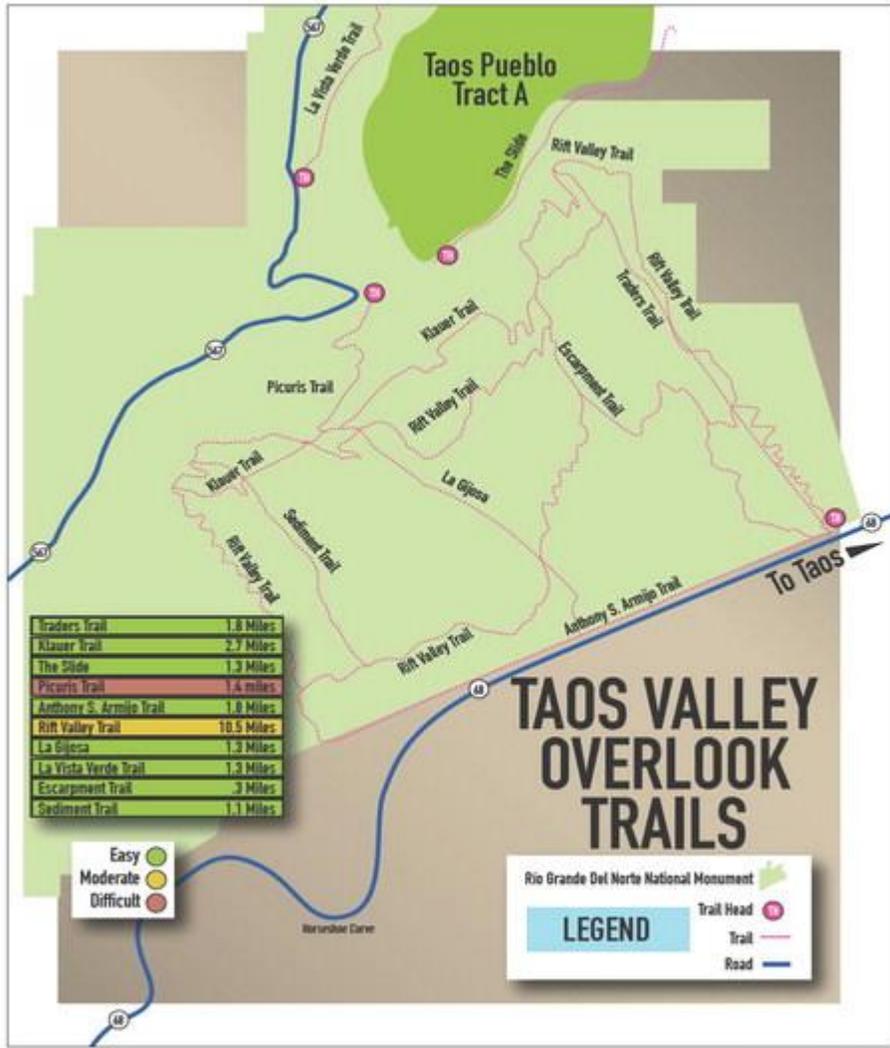
For more information, call the BLM Taos Field Office at (575) 7588851 or stop by 226 Cruz Alta Road to pick up maps. Visit the BLM on line at [blm.gov/new-mexico](http://blm.gov/new-mexico) .



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