

Sagebrush wilderness

Ute Mountain awaits trekkers yearning for rugged, untamed outback

By Bobby Magill
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UTE MOUNTAIN — Step onto the edge of the Río Grande Gorge on the western flanks of Ute Mountain, and you'll be greeted with a serene, snaking river, home to honking geese, soaring golden eagles and placid waters.

The gorge is only about 130 feet deep here, part of a bucolic scene where the basalt crevasse is juxtaposed with the old volcanic cone of northern Taos County's Ute Mountain and more than a half-dozen of Colorado's snow-clad peaks rising above 14,000 feet.

Ute Mountain is many things: It's sacred to the Utes, the winter home of up to 500 elk and a signal to southbound travelers from Colorado that they're about to pass into the Land of Enchantment.

Signs of man are sparse here, but the land's human history is inescapable.

Scattered along the gorge rim and amid the piñón, juniper and big sagebrush smattered about Ute Mountain's lower slopes are countless low stone walls built by shepherding settlers more than a century ago and myriad rock flakes, or "lithics," created by ancient peoples more than 8,000 years ago. They are constant reminders that this land with so little evidence of modern society has long seen the evolution of civilization.

With a new federal Bureau of Land Management land acquisition, the next chapter in Ute Mountain's history is about to begin. Once part of the Sangre de Cristo Land Grant, Ute Mountain and its surrounding sagebrush flats are now in public hands after more than a century of private ownership.

For more than three years, the Santa Fe-based Trust for Public Land worked with the

Taos Land Trust to purchase the 14,344-acre Ute Mountain tract in two phases from Texas landowner Robert Starks.

The Trust for Public Land purchased the west half of the tract up to the Río Grande Gorge rim in 2002 and the east side earlier this year with a price tag totaling \$5 million. The group transferred ownership of the land to the BLM just last month.

The agency plans to open the land, including the Río Grande Wild and Scenic River corridor, to the public by Aug. 1.

Looting the mountain

Not everyone is happy with the BLM's plans to open Ute

Mountain to the public. According to recent newspaper reports, the Ute Mountain Tribe of Towaoc, Colo., is unhappy that the mountain will be open to the public because ancient ruins could be threatened by looters and vandals.

Terry Knight, Ute Mountain Tribe spokesman and spiritual leader, said he would not comment for this story because *The Taos News* refused to allow him to approve this story before it was printed.

Despite the tribe's concern, BLM Taos Field Manager Sam DesGeorges said the ruins on the mountain have more protection under federal ownership than if the land were still in

private hands.

"We take it (vandalism) very seriously," he said, adding that the Archaeological Protection

Act of 1979 makes it a federal crime to vandalize or abscond with any historical artifact on federal land.

Hands off

DesGeorges led representatives of the Trust for Public Land, the Taos Land Trust and

the state BLM office on a trip to Ute Mountain Thursday (May 12) so they could see first-hand the latest addition to BLM's portfolio of public land.

"It's nice to see it so lush," said Deb Love of the Trust for Public Land, calling the mountain "pretty humbling."

"No trails, no roads, no nothing," she said. "Pretty neat."

Ernie Atencio of the Taos Land Trust wondered if the mountain's roadlessness might one day qualify it for wilderness status.

Under rules set by U.S. Secretary of Interior Gale Norton, the BLM must inventory the area for wilderness quality land, but it cannot designate the land as a potential wilderness area or wilderness study area, the next step toward wilderness status. That responsibility would be left to Congress.

"Thank God there's not an oil well in sight," Ron Dunton, BLM deputy state director, said below a giant andesite rock outcropping on the side of Ute Mountain.

will be mined or drilled for minerals any time soon, DesGeorges said, because the mineral rights to the peak are discretionary — no one holds any mineral claims there.

In fact, the view of New Mexico's San Luis Valley is likely to look just as pristine a half century from now as it does today, DesGeorges said. The BLM has no plans to develop the area, and it is working to consolidate ownership of the land in the valley, which could mean trading land with the state.

With the trill of a hummingbird in the background, Dunton and the rest of the group stood in awe of their surroundings hundreds of feet above the valley floor: From Dunton's

perch, the group could see as far as the South San Juan Wilderness and the canyon of the Río Costilla emptying snowmelt into the Río Grande, a rare sight because the lower reaches of the Río Costilla are usually dry.

Visitors to Ute Mountain will have to enjoy bushwhacking through the piñón, prickly pear and juniper along the peak's rugged flanks.

Primitive cross country trekking here will remain the primary mode of exploration because the BLM, DesGeorges said, will manage the area with a "hands-off" approach: No trails will be built and no new roads will likely be plowed into the area.

When the public is finally

allowed to explore the peak, visitors will have to traverse many miles of rough four-wheel-drive roads to get there. The BLM will likely encourage visitors to access the area from a dirt road just south of Costilla. The route winds its way north to the state line, which marks the northern boundary of the Ute Mountain tract.

Atencio called Ute Mountain "a great resource for hunting."

"For the BLM, I think it's really a gem," he said. "I'd hate to see people ripping up this place on ATVs."

For more information, contact the BLM Taos Field Office at 505-758-8851.

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