

*Organ Mountains*

THE

# SOUTH CENTRAL DESERT REGION

THE CHIHUAHUAN DESERT, A MAJOR NEW MEXICO ECOSYSTEM, is well-represented in the wildlands of the South Central Desert region near Las Cruces. The Organ Mountains-Desert Peaks National Monument is the region's heart. The monument protects a beautifully rugged landscape with rich natural and cultural resources. Divided into four separate areas, it includes the Organ Mountains, Desert Peaks, Potrillo Mountains, and Doña Ana Mountains.

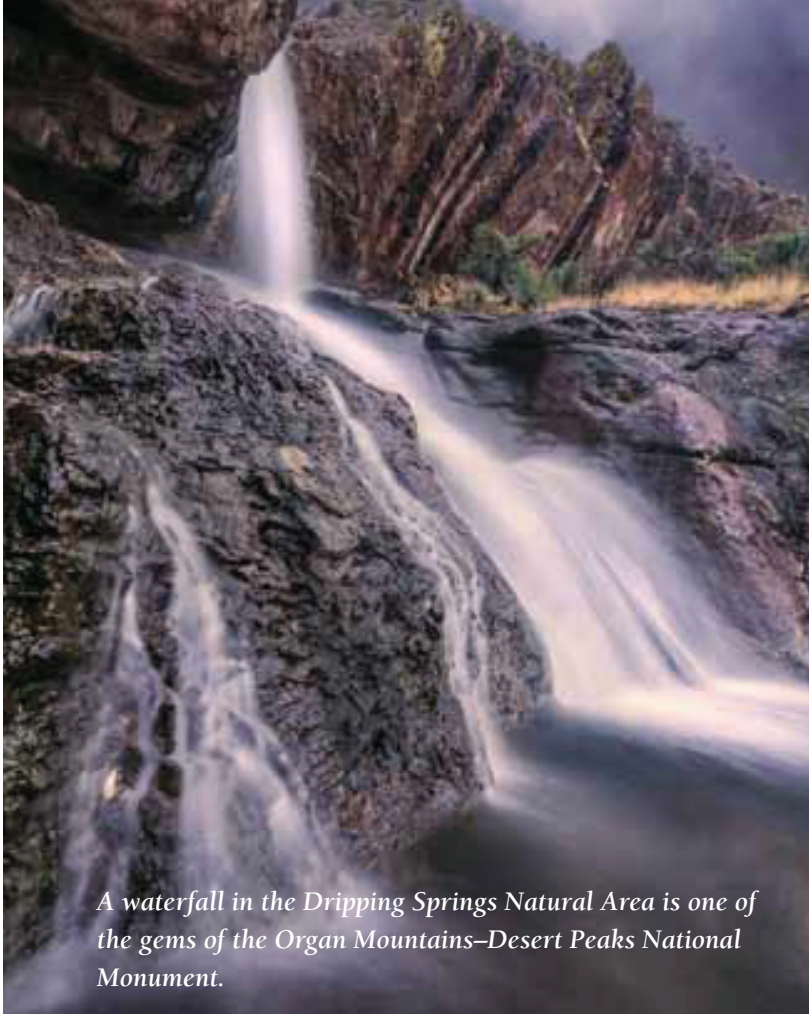
The New Mexico Wilderness Alliance worked for more than a decade to protect these special lands as a national monument. While no wilderness has been formally designated here, the Wilderness Alliance is still working to secure wilderness status for the eight wilderness study areas and citizen-proposed areas that are within the monument.

The most conspicuous area within the monument is the Organ Mountains, whose dramatic spires, reminiscent of an organ's huge pipes (hence the name), are a dramatic eastern backdrop for New Mexico's second largest city. Easy access and high visibility mean the Organs receive intense recreational use, especially among hikers and rock climbers; the climbing here is among the state's best, and a well-developed hiking trail network exists here. The scenic mountains are a wonderful place to discover the varied and interesting plants of the Chihuahuan Desert—alligator juniper, sotol, mountain mahogany, prickly pear cactus,



Apache plume, squawbush, mesquite, and many more. Water is scarce here, although several springs and intermittent streams exist within the canyons.

In contrast to the Organ Mountains, the monument's other wildlands are seldom-visited. Southwest of Las Cruces and northwest of El Paso are the Potrillo Mountains that—except for geologists, naturalists, and intrepid outdoor recreationists—are little known to hikers. These wildlands include the West Potrillo Mountains, Mount Riley, and Aden Lava Flow WSAs, all volcanic in origin. Access is often difficult, although not impossible; the main reason these areas receive so little attention is their low profile. After all, who would want to hike on a lava flow in southern New Mexico, when the Organ Mountains are closer at hand? Still, the Aden Lava flow hosts incredibly diverse plants and animals, with hidden hackberry trees, two quail species, javelina, mule deer, and an annual raptor migration. Among the lessons wilderness has for us is that beyond surface appearances things exist that are far more interesting and important than we'd ever imagined.



*A waterfall in the Dripping Springs Natural Area is one of the gems of the Organ Mountains–Desert Peaks National Monument.*

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This is especially true in the Desert Peaks section of the monument where the Robledo Mountains and the Las Uvas Mountains dominate the landscape northwest of Las Cruces. These are true desert mountains, where yuccas and sotol stalks rival the height of scarce and small juniper trees. Mule deer and javelina abound, as do a wide complement of coyotes and other predators. The Robledos are a good destination for day hikers. An excellent entry is at the Prehistoric Trackways National Monument that borders the southern end of the Robledo Mountains WSA. The Las Uvas Mountains to the northwest are more difficult to access and have rougher terrain with high volcanic bluffs overlooking desert grasslands. Higher elevation and slightly more moisture mean richer vegetation. On canyon walls in some drainages (usually dry) are petroglyphs from the prehistoric Jornada-Mogollon Culture and later Apache peoples. DO NOT touch petroglyphs or disturb them in other ways.

These are do-it-yourself wildlands—there are no designated trails, but simply following an arroyo or a ridge is sure to lead to something interesting. Water is scarce. But for these reasons alone these mountains are wild. No park ranger will assign you to a campsite—and no one will intrude upon your solitude. And if you're among those who seek in wilderness the excitement of discovery, you'll find much here to reward you.

The Doña Ana Mountains section of the monument is located between the Organ Mountains and Desert Peaks sections. With extensive pedestrian, equestrian, and mountain bike trails, as well as rock climbing routes, this is a popular recreation area that hosts the annual Horny Toad Hustle mountain bike race.

The Prehistoric Trackways National Monument was established in 2009 to protect important paleontological resources on the eastern side of the Robledos Mountains. The monument contains one of the most scientifically significant Early Permian track sites in the world.

Still farther north and separate from the monument are the Caballo Mountains. Like the Robledos, these mountains are made up of long, sinuous, pale sedimentary layers. The mountains are laced with numerous roads and mining claims, which caused the BLM to drop the Caballos from wilderness consideration, but the Wilderness Alliance says they deserve another look.

**For more information on featured areas in the South Central Desert section, please see pages 236-239 or visit [www.nmwild.org](http://www.nmwild.org).**