Villanueva State Park

Villanueva State Park is south of the small village of Villanueva on NM-3, approximately 23 mi southwest of Las Vegas (Fig. 1). Villanueva means new town in Spanish, but this town was already an old community when it received its name in 1890 (Pearce, 1965; Stanley, 1970; Young, 1984; Julian, 1996). The village name was derived from the name of one of the prominent families of the time, the Villanuevas (Stanley, 1970; Foster, 1984). Local families petitioned the U.S. government for a U.S. Post Office, and it is said that the petition contained more signatures from the Villanueva family; thus the town received its name in 1890. It was originally called La Cuesta (Spanish, “hill”) because the village sits on top of a steeply sloping hill or cuesta in the Pecos Valley.

Access to the park can be reached from the south via paved roads from an exit on I-40, approximately 70 mi east of Albuquerque to NM-3 or from the north via an exit on I-25, approximately 43 mi east of Santa Fe to NM-3 (Fig. 1). The south route from I-25 takes the traveler over rolling hills and mesas to the top of Glorieta Mesa, which forms the edge of the Pecos Valley. The north route from I-25 takes the traveler along the Pecos River and passes through the small Spanish communities of Riberia, San Miguel, Pueblo, and Sena. Neither route is intended for high-speed traffic, so plan to take your time and enjoy the scenery. Once in Villanueva, look for the signs leading to the state park.

Accommodations and facilities

Villanueva State Park was established in 1967 and consists of 1,652 (Fig. 1) acres at elevations from 5,600 ft at the river to 6,250 ft on top of Glorieta Mesa. The park facilities have undergone recent renovation and maintenance. The Visitor’s Center and park office, showers, and restrooms are now accessible to the handicapped via ramps. Overnight camping and picnic shelters are scattered beneath piñon and cottonwood trees along the banks of the Pecos River (Fig. 2), and are made of cement blocks and covered with adobe plaster to look like adobe houses in Villanueva (Fig. 3). Red to brown sandstone boulders (Permian Yeso Formation) are scattered throughout the park. Hornos, Pueblo Indian adobe ovens, are found in the center of the park near the remodeled Visitor’s Center and park office.

The upper picnic area/camping loop road (Fig. 4) winds up the north cliff and offers spectacular overviews of the park and the Pecos River valley. The picnicking and camping shelters beneath piñon trees (El Cuervo area) are made of local red to buff Yeso sandstone cemented together (Fig. 5). This upper loop road is not recommended for trailers or large recreation vehicles. The park manager’s residence and workshop are along this road (Fig. 4).

FIGURE 1—Location of Villanueva State Park and simplified geologic map of the park showing its boundaries (modified from Johnson, 1970).

FIGURE 2—Villanueva State Park, looking at trails and picnic shelters near the Visitor’s Center.

FIGURE 3—Picnic shelters patterned after adobe houses in Villanueva, surrounded by piñon and cottonwood trees. Here a rock squirrel sits on top of the wall.
TABLE 1—Birds in Villanueva State Park. How many can you find during your stay?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Bird</th>
<th>Where sighted</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Black-headed grosbeak</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rufous-sided towhee (sparrow)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Canyon (brown) towhee</td>
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<tr>
<td>Chipping sparrow</td>
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<tr>
<td>White-crowned sparrow</td>
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<tr>
<td>Red-winged blackbird</td>
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<tr>
<td>Western meadowlark</td>
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<tr>
<td>Brewer's blackbird</td>
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<tr>
<td>Northern oriole</td>
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<tr>
<td>House finch</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>House sparrow (finch)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Rufous hummingbird</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Mallard</td>
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<tr>
<td>Turkey vulture</td>
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<tr>
<td>Red-tailed hawk</td>
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<tr>
<td>Band-tailed pigeon</td>
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<td>Mourning dove</td>
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<td>Great horned owl</td>
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<tr>
<td>Common nighthawk</td>
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<td>Northern flicker</td>
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<tr>
<td>Western flycatcher</td>
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<tr>
<td>Say's phoebe (flycatcher)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Western kingbird</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Violet-green swallow</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cliff swallow</td>
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<tr>
<td>Scrub jay</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pinyon jay</td>
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<tr>
<td>Common raven</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Canyon wren</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Western bluebird</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>American robin</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Cedar waxwing</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Yellow warbler</td>
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<tr>
<td>Roadrunner</td>
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Park facilities (Fig. 4) include restrooms, showers, drinking water, a playground, a group shelter, and a disposal station. The Pecos River flows through the state park (Figs. 1, 4, 6) and offers fishing (brown trout, catfish, rainbow trout), swimming, rafting, and kayaking. The Pecos River at the park is rated Class 3 for rafting and kayaking. A concrete footbridge crosses the river near the Visitor's Center (Fig. 4). Two hiking trails, totaling 3 mi, wind up each side of the canyon and offer excellent views for the more-hardy visitor. The south trail passes Spanish ruins. Easier trails follow the Pecos River (Fig. 6). The vegetation varies from juniper and pifion along the upper cliffs to mesquite and cottonwoods near the river bottom. Cholla and prickly pear cactus and yucca are also common. A variety of birds can be sighted inside the park boundaries (Table 1) and offer excellent bird watching. Rock squirrels, jackrabbits, cottontail rabbits, and chipmunks are common throughout the park.

FIGURE 4—Map of the camping and picnicking facilities in the park.

FIGURE 5—Rock shelters made of Yeso sandstone along the upper loop, view looking across the Pecos Valley.

FIGURE 6—Looking south from the bridge across the Pecos River. Foot trails follow the river. Here the cliffs are Glorieta Sandstone.
Permian in age (Fig. 1). The oldest rocks form the lower parts of
were completed in 1976, is 265 ft long, and consists of 41 panels,
near San Miguel before being marched to Mexico. General Kerney
Villanueva and San Miguel. The Texans were later captured and
imprisoned by Mexican forces under Governor Manuel Armijo
entered the area in 1846 and established American control.
However, Villanueva and the surrounding towns were left alone
established prior to 1794.
Unlike most northern Spanish communities, Villanueva was
ever a separate land grant. Instead it was part of the San Miguel
del Bado Grant (St. Michael of the Crossing Place), established in
1794, and was settled by farmers who wandered into the valley
looking for rich farmland in the late 1700s and early 1800s. In the
1830s, former Mexican soldiers were given farmland near
Villanueva as compensation for their service. Even today, farming
is the main occupation. Irrigated fields and orchards are found
along the Pecos River where farmers grow chili, squash, onions,
alfalfa, beans, and fruit. There is a winery north of Villanueva
along NM-3.
Villanueva still maintains part of the original adobe wall that
surrounded the old community and offered some protection from
raiding Indians. Many of the houses faced toward the central plaza
so that the solid back walls formed the outer barricade (Foster,
1984). The Texas–Santa Fe Expedition of 1841 passed through the
area and members were fed and sheltered by the residents of
Villanueva and San Miguel. The Texans were later captured and
imprisoned by Mexican forces under Governor Manuel Armijo
near San Miguel before being marched to Mexico. General Kerney
entered the area in 1846 and established American control.
However, Villanueva and the surrounding towns were left alone
and almost forgotten for decades. Population declined at the turn
of the century, and the area was by-passed by railroads and paved
roads until more recent times. The road through Villanueva that
connects both I–25 and I–40 was paved in the late 1960s and early
1970s.
One of several churches in Villanueva, Our Lady of Guadalupe
Church, was completed in 1830 and is known today for magnifi-
cent tapestry panels hanging from the inner walls. The tapestry
was completed in 1976, is 265 ft long, and consists of 41 panels,
embroidered by 36 different stitchers, that depict local culture and
religious and historical events.

History
The earliest visitors were American Indians who left their mark
in the many caves and left their petroglyphs on the rocks forming
the cliffs. Francisco Vásquez de Coronado and later Spanish
Conquistadors passed through this area in 1541–1592, the site is
marked by a historical marker in the park. San Miguel to the north
is the Pecos River crossing on the Santa Fe Trail, and that town was
formed this picturesque valley. Villanueva and Villanueva State
Park occur at natural bends in the meandering Pecos River.
Downcutting by the Pecos River during the last million years
formed this picturesque valley. Villanueva and Villanueva State
Formation is gradational from the red to orange silstone and
sandstones to the overlying cleaner, gray Glenria Sandstone.
Glorieta Mesa and the uppermost part of the cliffs are formed by
the Glenria Sandstone and capped by the San Andres Formation
(Johnson, 1970; Anderson et al., 1995). Most of the 300–500-ft-high
cliffs visible in the park are formed by the Glenria Sandstone,
which is 150 to 350 ft thick and consists of white to light-gray to
brown, massive to thin-bedded, fine- to medium-grained quartz
sandstone with thin interbeds of yellow to red to gray glitstone
(Griggs and Hendrickson, 1951). The sandstones are typically
crossbedded, indicating deposition in eolian dunes and local
streams along the shoreface of the Permian sea, which extended
across New Mexico at this time (Fig. 7). Some units of the Glenria
Sandstone consist of very pure quartz, suggesting deposition by
sand dunes. The Glenria Sandstone interfingers with both the
underlying Yeso Formation and overlying San Andres Formation.
The San Andres Formation, the youngest of the Permian rocks,
crops out locally, out of view of the valley on top of Glenria Mesa.
There, the San Andres Formation is thin, only 9–20 ft thick, and
consists of gray to brown fine-grained limestone with local silty
interbeds. It was deposited in marine environments of the Permian
sea. Both the Glenria Sandstone and San Andres Formation are
exposed along the south route from I–40.
The Pecos River runs through the state park; the main facilities
are situated at the bottom of the steep cliffs of Glenria Mesa.
Downcutting by the Pecos River during the last million years
formed this picturesque valley. Villanueva and Villanueva State
Park occur at natural bends in the meandering Pecos River.
Upstream of Villanueva, the Pecos River flows along a broad river
valley, whereas downstream of the picnic area the river incises a
steep, meandering, narrow gorge. The valley floor consists of
Quaternary alluvium, less than 15,000 years old, of unconsolidat-
ed gravel, sand, silt, and clay derived from eroding the nearby
cliffs and subsequently deposited by the river. Pebbles of Precambrian rocks (granite, gneiss, schist) and older limestone and
sandstone eroded from areas upstream, are found in the river bed.
Much of the farmland is also on this alluvium. The fine-grained
alluvium found in these deposits is used to make the adobe hous-
Geology
Rocks exposed in the park are Recent, Late Pleistocene, and
Permian in age (Fig. 1). The oldest rocks form the lower parts of

FIGURE 7—Cross-bedded sandstone along the foot trail up the cliff of
Glorieta Sandstone.

FIGURE 8—Sketch of a mesa (flat top) and a cuesta (steeply dipping).
Villanueva sits on a cuesta (Fig. 8) that dips steeply to the northeast and is approximately 100 ft above the river. This cuesta is capped by terrace deposits of gravel, sand, and silt that overlie steeply dipping sandstone beds of the Yeso Formation, which are poorly exposed on the slopes southeast of the village (Fig. 1). Part of the upper El Cuervo picnic area in the state park also lies on remnant stream-terrace deposits, approximately 75 ft above the river.

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References

—by Virginia T. McLemore

Explore New Mexico in the summertime (and all year round)
with SCENIC TRIPS TO THE GEOLOGIC PAST!

Much of the research undertaken by the staff at the New Mexico Bureau of Mines and Mineral Resources is published in technical reports that are useful mainly to earth scientists. Many people not interested in these technical reports would like to know more about the geology of New Mexico. To meet this need, the Bureau publishes a series of books (Scenic Trips to the Geologic Past) designed to guide would-be explorers through many of New Mexico’s scenic and geologic attractions.

Scenic Trip 15—A TRIP THROUGH SPACE AND TIME, LAS CRUCES TO CLOUDCROFT, by R. E. Clemons, 1996, 194 pp., 3 tables, 9 figures, 6 maps, glossary, index, 146 black-and-white photos (includes 62 historical photos), and 26 color photos, $12.00

South central New Mexico is characterized by extremes. During geologic history the area has been covered by ocean water at least six times before becoming the arid region we see today. Prehistoric hunter-gatherers crisscrossed the area for centuries before Spanish explorers arrived in the 1500s. The railroads brought “civilization” from the east in the late 1800s, and with it local historical characters like Pat Garret, Oliver Lee, and Albert Fall, some of whom live on in legend. In the 20th century, the area has become home for White Sands Missile Range and Johnson Space Center. With elevations ranging from less than 4000 feet in the Tularosa Basin to nearly 9700 feet in the Sacramento Mountains, the seven road logs and one trail log give the traveler an exciting trip through space and time.

Scenic Trip 16—ELEPHANT BUTTE EASTERN BLACK RANGE REGION, JOURNEYS FROM DESERT LAKES TO MOUNTAIN GHOST TOWNS, by R. P. Lozinsky, R. W. Harrison, and S. H. Lekson, 1995, 171 pp., 2 tables, 23 figs., 61 black-and-white photos, 26 color photos, glossary, index, $8.00

From warm, tropical seas to erupting volcanoes, the landscape in south-central New Mexico has changed character many times over its two-billion-year history. Blended with diverse geologic development is a rich cultural heritage that includes early American Indian settlements dating back as far as 500 A.D. Famous Indians such as Victorio and Geronimo campaigned against the U.S. Calvary in the mountains and valleys. Fortunes were made and lost in the old mining towns. One trip follows the western shore of Elephant Butte Lake and travels across the dam into the infamous Jornada del Muerto (journey of death) to the old railroad town of Engle; a second visits the ghost towns of Winston and Chloride; a third visits Caballo Lake and the Black Range towns of Hillsboro, Kingston, and Lake Valley with a side trip to Emory Pass; and the fourth is a boat tour of southern Elephant Butte Lake.

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