

May 22 - 25, 2015

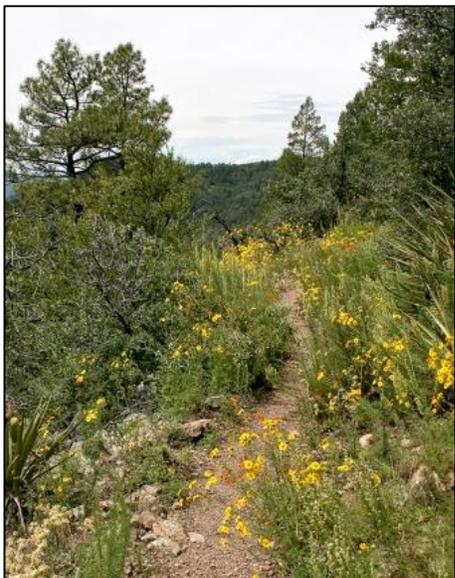
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New Mexico's Aldo Leopold Wilderness is an enormous tract of land encompassing steep rugged mountains, dense brush, deep canyons, broad mesas, and rushing mountain streams. In years past, I've gone with a group of friends to New Mexico's Gila Wilderness for a Memorial Day backpacking trip. This year, I thought we'd change things up a bit and try the Aldo Leopold Wilderness. This is your chance to see that wilderness for yourself.

## The Drive

We'll make the 250-mile, seven hour drive to New Mexico very early on Friday morning, May 22nd. Along the way to the trailhead, we'll pass through Silver City, where we'll stop for a quick lunch. After our repast, we'll continue to the tiny settlement of Mimbres. We'll stop at the Mimbres Ranger Station to check the weather, road, and water situation. From there, we'll drive a bit north then turn onto Forest Road 152 (McKnight Road) and drive for 15 miles to the trailhead. The first 8 miles of the road is maintained gravel, the last seven miles is "steep and rocky, with hairpin turns." This trip is going to require 4WD vehicles. It's going to be slow-going on this road, and may take an hour to get to the trailhead.

## The Plan



After the drive, we have a three-point-seven mile hike along the Mimbres Crest Trail 79 to get to Mimbres Lake, but we should still have plenty of time to get to our campsite. Along the way, we'll hike up and over the high point of the Aldo Leopold Wilderness. At 10,165 feet, grass-topped McKnight Mountain surely deserves a visit. This mileage includes a point-six-mile round-trip trek to Ridge Spring, our probable water source for the night. Ridge Spring is accessed via an unsigned trail to the west, spotted by watching for log cuts and an opening in the old stock fence. The spring is 0.3 miles downhill from the trail.

On Saturday, we'll pack up and head off to Reeds Peak, our second night's campsite. We'll pass by our return trail (Middle Fork Mimbres Trail 78), unreliable Willow Spring and the hopefully flowing Newman Spring. We'll stop there for water, if the spring is running. Soon after passing Newman Spring, we'll reach the junction with the North Fork Mimbres Trail 77, which we'll be taking in the morning. Continue past the junction for just over a half-mile, and we should find a trail branching to the right. That trail leads to Reeds Peak, the highest point on the Continental Divide in the Aldo Leopold Wilderness at 10,011 feet. We'll stay in and around the lookout tower and

cabin for the night. If we weren't able to find water at Newman Spring, another good possibility is Squeaky Spring, about 0.6 miles to the north.

Sunday will dawn with a mostly-downhill hike before us. We'll head back down the Mimbres Crest Trail 79 until we reach the North Fork Mimbres Trail 77 branching off to the right. We'll take that right-hand turn and head down to the Mimbres River. After four-and-a-half miles, we'll reach the Forks, where the North and South Forks of the Mimbres River converge. There's also another trail junction here. This is where the west end of the Middle Fork Mimbres Trail 78 meets Trail 77. This time, we'll turn left and hike up the South Fork for two-point-six miles, and 1,000 feet, to our last campsite near the South Fork 78 / Middle Fork 77 Trail Jct.

After a relaxing evening in camp, we'll arise early for the hike up to the Crest Trail 79, just under two miles away. Once we get up to the Crest Trail, we still have five miles of hiking and a few hundred feet of climbing ahead of us before we begin the drive home. We should be back in Tucson by late afternoon on Memorial Day, including a stop somewhere along the road for some good food.

## **The Prep**

This trip is planned for up to eight people, depending on the availability of 4WD vehicles. There should be plenty of room available at each campsite, and it's all free!

You'll need food for three breakfasts, two lunches, and three dinners.

## **The Elements**

There should be water at or near each of our campsites in the Wilderness. There is definitely water in the Mimbres River!

The weather in the Aldo Leopold Wilderness, much like that in the nearby Gila Wilderness, is ever-changing. We've had very sunny and dry weekends in the Gila Wilderness, and we've had very wet weekends. You simply have to place your bets and take your chances. Your best bet is to plan for anything. Daytime highs will likely be in the upper 70s with lows in the mid 40s. Remember, however, that our first campsite is at 9,800 feet and the next is at 10,011 feet. That particular campsite will surely be colder, although we'll have a cabin to use there. Our last campsite is at 8,800 feet and is somewhat sheltered, so may be a bit warmer. Plan as best you can.

## The Hike

day	miles	elev gain	destination
Fri	0.0 / 0.0	0 ft / 0 ft	Black Range Crest Trailhead; 9,500 ft
Fri	1.5 / 1.5	650 ft / 650 ft	McKnight Mountain; 10,165 ft
Fri	0.9 / 2.4	-200 ft / 650 ft	Ridge Spring spur trail
Fri	0.6 / 3.0	300 ft / 950 ft	Ridge Spring and back
Fri	0.7 / 3.7	-200 ft / 950 ft	Campsite; Mimbres Lake
Sat	4.8 / 8.5	400 ft / 1350 ft	Willow Spring
Sat	1.3 / 9.8	200 ft / 1550 ft	Newman Spring
Sat	1.6 / 11.4	500 ft / 2050 ft	Campsite; Reeds Peak; 10,011 ft
Sun	0.8 / 12.7	-400 ft / 2050 ft	North Fork Mimbres Trail Jct
Sun	4.6 / 17.3	-1800 ft / 2050 ft	Mimbres River Forks
Sun	1.7 / 19.0	600 ft / 2650 ft	South Fork Trail bends south
Sun	0.9 / 19.9	400 ft / 3050 ft	Campsite; Jct of South Fork and Middle Fork Trails; 8,500 ft
Mon	2.0 / 21.9	850 ft / 3900 ft	Black Range Crest Trail Jct
Mon	1.2 / 23.1	700 ft / 4600 ft	McKnight Mountain
Mon	1.5 / 24.6	-650 ft / 4600 ft	Black Range Crest Trailhead

## The End

We've got a long drive home after our trek. We should be back in Tucson by late afternoon on Memorial Day, taking into account a stop in Silver City or Lordsburg for a tasty lunch.