

## Ten Best in the U.S. Campgrounds

### Valle Vidal

#### New Mexico

*By Suzanne Dow*

There is a corner in northeastern New Mexico where the land is as it was 100, 200, or more years ago. It is an expanse of land where the wide-open space is filled with tall grass and thick patches of pine and spruce. Here, elk roam free with deer, turkeys, bears, and mountain lions, much as they did 100 years. This place, called Valle Vidal Wildlife Management Unit of [Carson National Forest](#), is a special treasure to those who want to experience the West as it once was.



**Valle Vidal**

Pennzoil Company, the petroleum corporation, once owned this magnificent 100,000-acre parcel of land. Fortunately, Pennzoil discovered there was little worth exploiting beneath the lush grassland. In 1982, it donated the Valle Vidal parcel to the USDA Forest Service. Other than designating the land a Wildlife Management Unit, very little has been done to this near-pristine land.

East of Taos and west of Raton, bordered by the Colorado state line to the north and the spectacular Cimarron Canyon along U.S. Highway 64 to the south, the Valle Vidal Wildlife Management Unit has retained its natural appearance. In the middle of this almost-wilderness area are two equally pleasant, though very different, campgrounds called Cimarron and McCrystal.

Cimarron campground, located at the heart of the Unit, is draped over the top of a spruce-covered hill. Its 35 campsites are scattered among the trees, providing pleasant privacy for campers. Nearby creeks, such as Grassy, Vidal, and Ponil, offer good opportunities for anglers to match wits with wily native fish. For those who prefer a more certain thing, there is a 0.5-mile hike from the campground to the rainbow-trout-stocked Shuree Ponds.

Less than eight miles east of Cimarron campground is McCrystal. A "rouger" campground, McCrystal has more open sites and a less well-kept appearance. The campground stretches out along the base of a rise—some might call it a hill—in a stand of uniformly sized ponderosa pines (the product of past logging practice). The equestrian-campground feel is confirmed by the hitching rails scattered throughout the area.

### Hitting the Trail

Both campgrounds offer unlimited hiking over the surrounding prairie. The unit permits no motorized traffic except on established forest service roadways, so the Unit, with few designated trails, is truly wide open for exploration. This means some orientation skills are advisable when exploring 100,000 acres either on foot or horseback.

Although little remains of Pennzoil's earlier presence, remnants of various homesteads can be found. These old homesteads, with their log cabins and outbuildings, are scattered throughout the Unit. One of the more convenient homestead ruins to explore is located south of McCrystal campground at the end of the one-mile Ring Place Interpretative trail. Wandering around what remains of the old house, barn, and outbuilding gives a sense of what life must have been like in those bygone days.

Once a playground for the rich and famous, today the Valle Vidal Wildlife Management Unit is open to all who want to experience wide-open spaces, clear flowing streams, and robust wildlife populations. Signs in McCrystal and Cimarron warn that "Buffalo Are Wildlife." Yes, there really are American buffalo, along with elks, deer, and more, wandering the Unit—much as they have since before the Europeans came. And campers can wander, too, or just sit and enjoy the West as it might have been 100, 200, or 1,000 years ago.