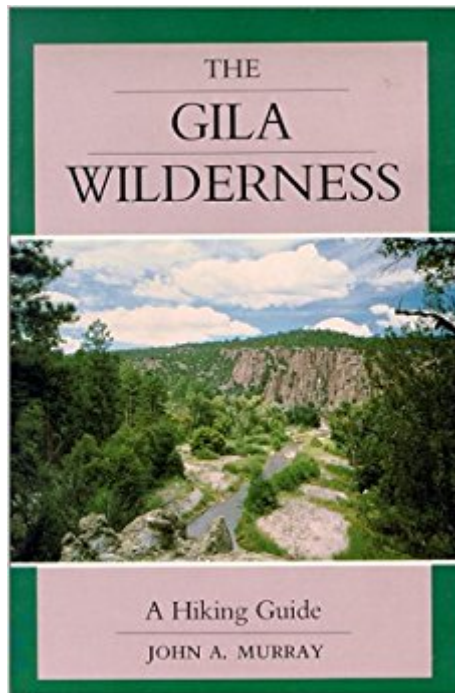


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The Gila Wilderness: A Hiking Guide



Synopsis

From Upper Sonoran desert canyons to sub alpine mountain peaks, New Mexico's Gila Wilderness Area is a world of contrasts and diversity. Named a wilderness region by Congress in 1924, the Gila was the first place in the world to be so protected. Today it encompasses 1,000 square miles and protects the headwaters of the three forks of the Gila River. Blessed with the rich human and natural history, it is home to Indian, Spanish, and Anglo cultures and Central and North American flora and fauna. In this complete guide to the Gila Wilderness Area, John A. Murray explores the region's natural history, highlights its human history, and provides tips for backcountry trips. The hiking section describes twenty-four trails for both the serious backpacker and the casual day hiker, in all covering some three hundred miles of trail. Each trail description gives directions to the trailhead, length, elevation, level of difficulty, scenic highlights, and natural and human history along the trail.

Book Information

Paperback: 261 pages

Publisher: University of New Mexico Press; 1st edition (May 1, 1988)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0826310672

ISBN-13: 978-0826310675

Product Dimensions: 6 x 0.6 x 9 inches

Shipping Weight: 15.2 ounces

Average Customer Review: 3.6 out of 5 stars 3 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #1,076,888 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #10 in Books > Travel > United States > New Mexico > General #288 in Books > Travel > Specialty Travel > Travel with Pets #993 in Books > Science & Math > Nature & Ecology > Natural History

Customer Reviews

“Not only are there excellent descriptions of trails and hikes, but the region's natural and human history are examined.” (Books of the Southwest)

John A. Murray is the author or editor of forty books, including Cinema Southwest, which received the Southwest Book Award, and Mythmakers of the West, recipient of the Colorado Book Award. He lives in Denver.

John A. Murray quotes passages from *Geronimo: His Own Story: The Autobiography of a Great Patriot Warrior* and Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* as introductions to his guide to the Gila Wilderness. Geronimo once lived, and hid out in this vast expanse of pristine wilderness. Conrad never visited it, but the entire quote evokes the pull of "blank spots on the map" and why some of us declare we have to fill in the blank with our presence. The Gila has been declared the largest contiguous area in the lower 48 states that is "pristine," which means, on one scale, 97% the way it was when Columbus arrived. Murray's book is more than a simple guide to the trails. The first third of the book is a brief covers the natural and human history of the area, along with some localized standard information on hiking in remote areas. The essential part of the guide is the descriptions of 24 different hikes. Each hike is prefaced with a box containing the trail number, elevations at beginning and end, total vertical ascent, length, recommended season, usage of the trail (heavy, moderate, etc.), the difficulty of the hike, access to the trail head, and the particular U.S.G.S. map. The box is then followed by a narrative description of the hike, usually a black or white picture taken along the way, and a copy of the topo map, with the hike indicated with a heavy black line. This guide led me to the Crest trail (p. 77), which seems to be one of the best hikes in the wilderness, particularly in summer. It starts at 9,100 ft., and ends at 10,700, with virtually the entire hike being in forest. I've hiked it twice, to Hummingbird Pass (no, I didn't see any hummingbirds there... only when I returned to the campground did I see any). On the second hike, just last May, I was surprised to see the wreckage of a small plane just off the trail. Apparently it crashed in 2007, and was stolen. There are a number of useful appendixes, and that includes various checklists for the common plants, fish, amphibians and reptiles, mammals, and birds. Also useful is a section which explains the derivation of the place names. There is also a couple sections pertaining to the reintroduction of the grizzly bear into the Gila, and if I had the power, I'd veto it. It's one of the nice things NOT to have to worry about, since sometime you get the bear, and sometimes the bear gets you. One of the "knocks" on this book is that it is over 20 years old, and therefore has no GPS information. Yes, once upon a time you could hike without one, but they are most useful, particularly in bad weather. Also, some of the reproductions of the topo maps, with the trail marked, were done to a scale as to make them almost unreadable. And it would have been useful to have a vertical graph of the trail. There appears to be one other hiking guide, a decade newer, "Hiking New Mexico's Gila Wilderness". I haven't read it, but there also seem to be numerous criticism in posted reviews. It might be time for an update...or... maybe it is best to leave things "pristine," which means the hiker has to figure out a few things for himself. 4-stars for this effort.

The Gila Wilderness was the first official wilderness area of the United States and at about 900 square miles is one of the largest. It's also one of the most diverse with terrain from semi-desert at 4,800 feet up to sub-alpine spruce, fir, and aspen forest at a top of 10,892 feet. The Gila River is floatable during the spring melt and old Indian cliff dwellings are found in the canyons. Trout fishing in the Gila and its tributaries is pretty good, and wildlife is abundant. Hiking and solitude are the major attractions. You can walk for a week or more and never cross your path twice. The scenery may not be quite as rugged and spectacular as the Rockies or the canyonlands to the north, but there's plenty of beauty to be enjoyed. This is an excellent guide to hiking in the Gila Wilderness Area. The author describes 25 hiking trails and routes, some of them more than 30 miles long. Each of the trails has a topo map that goes along with it plus a description. A lengthy introduction acquaints you with the history and natural history of the Gila, including the Apaches and other Indians who lived here. Appendices provide lists of birds, plants, mammals, and reptiles found in the Gila. An interesting study concerning the reintroduction of the Grizzly Bear to the Gila is reprinted in the appendices. Possibly the most spectacular of the trails in the Gila is the Whitewater Trail which follows a narrow "catwalk" through a steep sided canyon. The catwalk was built more than a century ago to facilitate mining operations -- now long abandoned. The Three Forks area (Wilderness Ranger District) offers hot springs, cliff dwellings, and long, easy trails that lead into the heart of the wilderness. At lower elevations, the Gila can be visited and hiked year round, barring the rare snowstorm. Smallchief

I was disappointed with this guide book. The book was published in 1988, which means there is nothing about GPS in the book. I found the organization of the book to be confusing. The guide has maps of some of the trails, but they are hard to read and there is no map that provides a big picture view of the trails. Information about many trails in the Gila Wilderness is available, but would be more useful with an easy to find section providing information about each trail such as length, elevation changes, connecting trails, water availability, etc. Several trails are cited as connecting to included trails, but no other information is provided.

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