



BACKPACKING IN THE GILA WILDERNESS

Welcome to the Gila Wilderness! You are about to begin an adventure that will challenge your backpacking skills and offer you many wonderful memories. The Gila Wilderness is a backpacker's paradise, covering 558,014 acres of unspoiled, mountainous country in southwestern New Mexico. The following information will describe the opportunities awaiting you and give tips on how to make your backpacking experience a safe one, while leaving minimal impact on this wilderness.

“Wilderness is a severe mother, bent more on justice than on mercy. Through generations of survival, the plants, animals, and all living things around us have found means of protecting themselves from death by heat, cold, and drought. Note the many varied ways. You, too, must learn the wisdom of the wilderness if you want to be safe within it”.

Aldo Leopold (1887-1948)

AVOIDING THE RUSH You may wish to plan your trip during a time when visitor use is relatively light. The backpacking season begins the first week of March, with spring break. Ideal backpacking occurs in May and June, due to the mild, dry weather, and in September through mid-October. Heavy visitation occurs on the summer holiday weekends (Memorial Day, July 4th and Labor Day). Prepare adequately for the rainy seasons during the winter months, and in July and August. Be aware of hunting seasons: the spring turkey hunting season in late April and early May, the fall deer and elk seasons by bow hunters during the first three weeks of September, rifle hunters in October and November, December and January seasons for bear and cougar.

PERMITS AND TRIP ITINERARIES Backpacking permits and trip itineraries are not required in the Gila Wilderness. However, it is a good idea to leave an itinerary with a friend or family member, so someone will be aware of your intentions. The itinerary should include your point of entry into the wilderness, the location where you will leave your vehicle, a description of your vehicle, (including license number), the route you plan to hike, and the point and date of your return. Be sure to allow yourself enough time for unexpected delays due to weather, etc. When your trip is completed, immediately inform the person who has your trip itinerary to prevent any unnecessary search effort.

RESCUE SERVICES *Taking care of yourself and accepting responsibility for your actions is an essential part of wilderness travel.* By planning carefully and using proper caution, you can make your trip both challenging and safe, and avoid the need for rescue. Unless the situation is life-threatening, search and rescue operations are conducted with pack animals rather than helicopters to avoid the use of mechanized equipment in the wilderness. The Gila Visitor Center can provide information on search and rescue procedures if you need assistance. Being prepared for any eventuality by carrying adequate water, food, clothing, and shelter is the best way to avoid the need to be rescued.

MAPS AND OTHER INFORMATION The Gila Visitor Center, located at the confluence of the West and Middle Forks of the Gila River, can provide you with topographic maps and additional information about the Gila Wilderness. You may contact the Visitor Center at (505) 536-9461, or at HC 68, Box 100, Silver City, NM 88061. The “Visitors Travel Guide and Map of the Gila Wilderness” is approximately three feet square, printed on both sides. It is excellent for gaining an overview of the entire wilderness, including the trail system. However, its large contour interval (200 feet) omits some significant terrain details. USGS maps 7.5 minute

series covering all quadrangles of the Gila Wilderness are especially good for detailed contour lines, but trail information is out of date.

You may also obtain information about the Gila Wilderness (West Side) by contacting the Glenwood Ranger District at (505) 539-2481.

TERRAIN Many different types of terrain are found in the Gila Wilderness. The northeastern and far eastern sections of the wilderness tend to consist of high mesas and rolling hills, ranging in elevation from approximately 5,000 to 8,000 feet and cut by the deep canyons of the Gila River. The vegetation there consists primarily of mixed junipers and pinyon pines, grasses, and at the higher elevations and on northern slopes, ponderosa pines. Vast stands of ponderosas cover the central part of the wilderness in this area. The river canyons offer spectacular cliffs, with mixed hardwoods and ponderosa pine growing along the riparian bottoms. The far western and southwestern sections of the Gila Wilderness consist of high mountains, particularly the Mogollon Range, with the highest elevation reaching 10,895 feet. Steep side canyons are common, and vegetation includes Douglas fir, ponderosa pine, aspens and a variety of ferns. The area includes the drainage basins of both Mogollon Creek and Turkey Creek.

DANGEROUS FLORA AND FAUNA Learn to identify poison ivy, and distinguish it from the benign box elder tree. Both have compound leaves with three leaflets and normally grow in creek and river bottoms. Some humans react to poison ivy more severely than others. It has the potential to make your trip miserable, and bring it to an irritating end.

Rattlesnakes generally live in rocky areas where they can have access to both sun and shade to maintain their body temperature. Rattlesnakes have no interest in backpackers, but react defensively when startled or stepped on. Their bites are rarely fatal to healthy individuals, but unexcited evacuation and treatment is advisable. Learn proper first response procedures before entering the field. Be observant for all wildlife viewing opportunities in the wilderness. Preserve it all.

HOT SPRINGS A number of hot springs are found in the Gila Wilderness, reminders of the volcanic activity that formed the area millions of years ago. Be aware that hot springs may contain a tiny amoeba (*Naegleria fowleri*) that can cause a severe and possibly fatal form of meningitis. The organism enters the brain through the nasal passages and initially causes a runny nose, sore throat and severe headache. Do not immerse your head in hot spring water or splash water on your face or into your nose. Public nudity in the Gila National Forest is not allowed.

ARCHEOLOGICAL SITES Numerous prehistoric archeological sites are located within the wilderness, remnants of the Native American cultures that once flourished here. *Please do not camp on such sites or otherwise enter or disturb them in any way, since these sites are protected by law. Disturbing, removing, defacing, or destroying cultural remains, including pottery shards and projectile points, is a felony.* Enjoy the history of the Gila, but please leave it in place for future adventurers to enjoy.

PRIVATE PROPERTY There are a number of private land holdings along the East Fork of the Gila River and some of the property owners do not permit hikers to cross their property without written permission. Please check with landowners in advance of your trip or go around these areas. If you have questions about the location or accessibility of private land, please contact the Visitor Center at (505) 536-9461.

CAMPING AND FIREWOOD Please help preserve the unspoiled character of the wilderness by traveling and camping on durable surfaces. In high use areas, concentrate activities where vegetation is already absent by using existing trails and selecting already impacted campsites (none are designated). Disperse your use in pristine, less traveled areas. Move your camp daily to avoid creating permanent campsites. With only a little effort, you will find many suitable locations well away from the trail. Also, to protect water sources, please *do not* camp within 300 feet of any spring (hot or cold), within 100 feet of a stream, or within 300 yards of a tank or other manmade water source.

You may *gather* firewood that is both dead and down in areas where it is plentiful. *Do not* remove dead branches from living trees. To keep the wilderness primitive please *do not* construct fire rings. Scatter any fire rings you may discover. Follow the LEAVE NO TRACE ethics. For example, deposit human waste and toilet paper in an 8-inch hole, located at least 200 feet from any water source. *Pack out all trash, even if it is not*

your own. Treat our natural heritage and archeological sites with respect. Leave only footprints, take only memories.

The Forest Service is now designating natural fires as “wanted” and “unwanted” in the sense that many fires serve to refresh and restore the forest. As you hike in the backcountry you might see a prescribed natural fire (PNF) slowly burning through the understory. To avoid smoke and firefighters working a PNF area it is always wise to check with the Visitor Center or Ranger Station before starting your trip. The staff can show you the location of any currently burning PNF’s.

The Gila National Forest has the flexibility to use lightning-caused fire as a tool in creating a healthy forest. Such a fire is termed a wild land use fire and it produces benefits such as watershed improvement, wildlife habitat enhancement and fuel reduction. As you hike you may see this natural process in action. Be prepared for this by first checking with the Visitor Center or Ranger Station for any fire information before starting into the backcountry. In the event that you do come across a fire, stay clear of the perimeter to avoid smoke, snags, and flames.

ENCOUNTERS WITH LIVESTOCK USERS Stock use is traditional in the Gila and because of the idiosyncrasies of horse and mule behavior, it is desirable for foot travelers to yield the right of way. Please step off the trail to the lower side as this makes you appear less of a threat to animals. Remember, horses and mules are prey animals and their natural reaction to anything strange is flight. This can prove harmful to any human or dog in the vicinity of the incident.

WEATHER The following chart shows typical averages for daily high and low temperatures and monthly precipitation recorded near the confluence of the West and Middle Forks of the Gila River – elevation 5,600 feet.

	H	L	Prec.		H	L	Prec.
January	51	17	.71	July	91	48	2.81
February	58	23	.68	August	89	47	2.83
March	63	25	.65	September	86	38	1.88
April	75	30	.47	October	80	27	1.59
May	75	42	.33	November	63	12	.56
June	84	40	.58	December	55	15	1.44

Daytime temperatures tend to be relatively mild or warm and nighttime temperatures tend to be relatively cool or cold throughout the year. Average temperatures in the higher elevations, particularly in the Mogollon Range, can be cooler by 10-20 degrees or more, depending on the season. Summer is the monsoon or rainy season with afternoon thunderstorms, accompanied by dangerous lightning, likely during July and August. If you are hiking and get caught in an area where lightning is striking, stay off ridges and away from open areas. Remove metallic objects from your pack or clothing and stay away from anything that might serve as a lightning rod. Take shelter under a cluster of smaller trees, not under a large tree. It is *not* safe to shelter in shallow caves. Lightning seeks high points, the tallest object in an open area, the biggest object (such as a large boulder) and ridgelines.

During most winters the lower elevations tend to be free of snow most of the time and when it does snow the melt-off usually occurs within a few days. Normally there is some snow accumulation in the higher elevations and during severe winters, the snow may range up to 10 feet or more in the Mogollon Range. Melt-off usually occurs during late March and April, but snow and ice may hinder travel on upper elevation trails as late as June.

WATER AVAILABILITY The three forks of the Gila River are generally reliable water sources throughout the year. Other sources, such as creeks, springs, and tanks, may vary significantly with the season and year. Always have an alternate plan in case you find one of these sources dry. Never assume that water will be plentiful. You may check with the staff at the Visitor Center for relatively up-to-date information about water availability, but be aware that the most recent reports may not reflect current conditions. Always purify all the water from wilderness sources by boiling, filtering, or chemical means.

RIVER CROSSINGS

There are no bridges on wilderness trails and river and creek crossings require wading through water that varies in depth from a few inches to several feet. The trails along the Gila River and all three of its forks frequently require several crossings per mile. During spring run-off (mid-March through April) and the rainy season (July and August) some crossings may be extremely hazardous, with deep and swift currents. Do not attempt a crossing if you are unsure about its safety. Cautious hikers unbuckle hip belts and sternum straps at all water crossings.

FLASH FLOODS

Dangerous flash floods can occur along the Gila River and all three of its forks, along major creeks, and in side canyons at any time of the year, but particularly during the spring run-off and in the rainy season. Be alert at all times for sudden and violent rises in water levels due to storms, even though there is no rain in your immediate area. Camp on high ground that shows no sign of previous flooding. Never underestimate the threat of flash floods – they are common and extremely dangerous!

BACKPACKER GROUPS

Large groups of backpackers can detract from the experience of others and even threaten the primitive character of the wilderness. If you backpack with others, please keep your group as small as possible. If it consists of more than ten people, consider dividing it into smaller groups that use different routes. Group sizes over 25 people are not allowed.

PETS

Pets are allowed in the wilderness but are required to be under the owner's control at all times. Please be considerate of wildlife and other users when deciding whether or not to bring your pet. You are responsible for their actions.

WOLVES

Mexican Grey Wolves were re-introduced to the Gila Wilderness in 1999. They may be seen in high use areas as well as in the wilderness depths. Curious and intelligent, wolves are often drawn to domestic animals that they encounter. Backpackers with pets are required to maintain total control over their animals. If you encounter a wolf, contain your pets, then yell and throw rocks or sticks to frighten off the wolf. Check with the Visitor Center for special closure areas that may exist in support of the wolf recovery effort.

MOUNTAIN LIONS AND BEARS

Store all of your food away from your sleeping area by hanging it from trees or rock overhangs. If you encounter a bear or mountain lion, provide the animal with adequate space for your safety and avoid threatening actions. Wave your arms, yell, and throw rocks if these wilderness residents threaten your safety.

“No servant brought them meals. No traffic cop whistled them off the hidden rock in the next rapids. No friendly roof kept them dry when they misguessed whether or not to pitch the tent. No guide showed them which camping spots offered a night-long breeze and which night-long misery of mosquitoes; which firewood made clear coals and which would only smoke.

The elemental simplicities of wilderness travel were thrills, because they represented complete freedom to make mistakes. The wilderness gave those rewards and penalties for wise and foolish acts against which civilization has built a thousand buffers”.

Aldo Leopold (1887-1948)