

White Sands

National Monument / New Mexico

National Park Service

U.S. Department of the Interior



Like a mirage, dazzling white sand dunes shimmer in the tucked-away Tularosa Basin in southern New Mexico. They shift and settle over the Chihuahuan Desert, covering 275 square miles—the largest gypsum dunefield in the world. White Sands National Monument preserves more than half of this oasis, its shallow water supply, and the plants and animals living here.

Paths to Survival

GROW FAST – Sand verbena survives because it flowers and disperses seeds in one growing season. It also quickly spreads shallow roots. New plants emerge as passing dunes bury older plants.

CHANGE COLORS – The bleached earless lizard and Apache pocket mouse are a lighter color than the same species in the nearby desert. Their lighter color reflects heat, which keeps them cooler and hides them better.

GO OUT AT NIGHT – Like many desert animals, the fox comes out at night when the air is cooler. Look for its tracks during the day.

GROW TALL – As sand buries a soap tree yucca, its stem grows longer to keep new leaves above the sand. But after the dune moves on, an exposed yucca will soon fall over and die.

HOLD ON – A few shrubs like skunkbush sumac grow dense, deep roots that help form a pedestal after the dune moves on. Kit foxes dig their dens in pedestals; other animals find shelter here too.

People of the Tularosa Basin

People arrived in the Tularosa Basin after the last ice age ended 11,000 years ago. The Jornada Mogollon were the first to farm the area, and lived here until drought forced them out in the 1300s. American Indians returned in the 1600s and European Americans came in the late 1800s. Soon the railroad

rolled in—and so did settlers. Residents of Alamogordo promoted the idea of White Sands National Monument, which President Herbert Hoover proclaimed in 1933. During World War II, the US military tested weapons in the dunefield beyond the park. In 1945, the first atomic bomb was detonated at Trinity Site, 100 miles north of here.

Exploring White Sands

The Why of White Sands

GYPSUM FROM AN ANCIENT SEA – When the Permian Sea retreated millions of years ago, it left behind deep layers of gypsum. Mountains rose and carried the gypsum high. Later, water from melting glaciers dissolved the mineral and returned it to the basin. Today, rain and snow continue the process.

WIND AND WATER POWER – For thousands of years in shallow lakes like Lake Lucero, wind and sun have separated the water from the gypsum and formed selenite crystals. Wind and water break down the crystals making them smaller and smaller until they are sand. Steady, strong southwest winds keep gypsum sand moving, piling it up and pushing dunes into various shapes and sizes.

GLUE FROM BELOW – Beneath your feet is the glue that holds this vast dunefield together—water, inches below the surface. Compared to other dune types, gypsum dunes remain moist during the longest droughts. This moisture prevents the dunes from blowing away. Water becomes older and saltier toward the center of the dunefield. Scientists are working to understand this change and other phenomena of this shimmering land.

Plan Your Visit

The entrance to White Sands National Monument is on US 70, 15 miles southwest of Alamogordo and 54 miles east of Las Cruces. Camping and lodging are available in Alamogordo and nearby

areas. Ask at the visitor center about backcountry camping.

At the visitor center, view exhibits and a movie about the monument. Ask about park programs and ranger-led activities, and visit the bookstore and gift shop.

The visitor center is the only place to fill water containers.

Follow Dunes Drive into the heart of the dunes. Roadside exhibits and self-guiding trails show you secrets of the white sands. Relax at the picnic areas, which have shade, tables, grills, and restrooms—but no water.

Accessibility – We strive to make our facilities, services, and programs accessible to all. For information go to the visitor center, ask a ranger, call, or check our website.

For a Safe Visit

Always keep landmarks in sight—don't get lost!

- Carry water, even when walking a short distance. No water is available beyond the visitor center.
- Wear sunscreen, sunglasses, and a hat.
- Do not tunnel into dunes; they can collapse and suffocate you.
- Sled away from road.
- Watch out for heavy traffic in picnic areas.
- Lock your vehicle and keep belongings out of sight.

Regulations

Federal law protects all archeological and natural objects.

- Pets must be leashed.
- Do not drive or park on dunes or interdunal areas.



BLEACHED EARLESS LIZARD

- For firearms regulations see the park website.

More Information

White Sands National Monument
PO Box 1086
Holloman AFB, NM 88330-1086
575-479-6124
www.nps.gov/whsa

White Sands National Monument is one of over 400 parks in the National Park System. To learn more, visit www.nps.gov.

Emergencies call 911

Closed During Testing

White Sands Missile Range surrounds the monument. For public safety, the monument and US 70 between the monument and Las Cruces may be closed during missile range tests. Closures average twice a week for one to two hours. The National Park Service and the Department of Defense appreciate your cooperation and patience.

WHITE SANDS NATIONAL MONUMENT

Zone of Cooperative Use
 Restricted area.
 Permits required.

Cooperative Use Area Boundary

Heart of the Sands

Alkali Flat Trail
 5 mi / 8 km

Backcountry Camping Area
 2.2 mi / 3.5 km

Group Use Area
 (reservations required)

Interdune Boardwalk
 2000 ft / 600m

Playa Trail
 1200 ft / 365m

Dune Life Nature Trail
 1 mi / 1.6 km

Visitor Center

Entrance Station
 Border Patrol Checkpoint

Holloman Air Force Base

To Alamogordo and 54

To Las Cruces and 10 25

70



- Picnic area
- Self-guiding trail
- Hiking trail

- Restrooms
- Primitive camping

