

SIERRA LADRONES **51****IN BRIEF**

Following a game path on a long, undulating uplift, this straightforward route provides a friendly introduction to an isolated mountain range with a mean reputation. Peaks along the way allow for great views down to the foothills and canyons, and up to the toothy ridges of the Sierra Ladrones.

DESCRIPTION

Sierra Ladrones, or “thieves mountains,” earned their name as a hideout for Navajo raiders who, having relieved local ranches of their stock, spirited them across the *jaral* (chaparral or scrubland) to untraceable retreats. Later bandits and rustlers continued the tradition by holing up in the range’s deep canyons. Few were known to reemerge, and speculation of lost loot continues to this day.

Also called Los Ladrones, the dark mountains figure into local lore as the setting for Apache ambushes, disastrous treasure hunts, and encounters with ghostly white werewolves. Sightings of *brazas*—fireballs wheeling in the night—are not uncommon, and a few known meteor-impact sites in the area do not

Directions →

From I-25 South, take Exit 175 at Bernardo. Take the first left off the exit ramp and head toward the RV park. Go southwest on Old Highway 85 and cross the Rio Puerco Bridge. A half-mile past the bridge, turn right on County Road B12 and reset your odometer. (B12 is a long, bumpy road, but passable for most vehicles in dry conditions.) Go northwest on the main road, following signs toward Riley and Magdalena. At 18.8 miles, park at the junction. The hike begins at the tip of the ridge on your left. See Description for a shuttle option.

**KEY AT-A-GLANCE INFORMATION**

LENGTH: 7-mile out-and-back, 5-mile shuttle option

DIFFICULTY: Moderate–strenuous

SCENERY: Desert scrub, cacti, raptors, expansive views

EXPOSURE: Full sun

TRAIL TRAFFIC: Low

SHARED USE: Low (livestock)

TRAIL SURFACE: Sand, limestone pavements, loose rock

HIKING TIME: 3–4 hours

DRIVING DISTANCE: 72 miles

ACCESS: Year-round

LAND STATUS: BLM–Socorro, Wilderness Study Area

MAPS: USGS Riley, Ladron Peak

FACILITIES: None

LAST-CHANCE FOOD/GAS:

All services available at Exit 191 in Belen, 38 miles from the trailhead

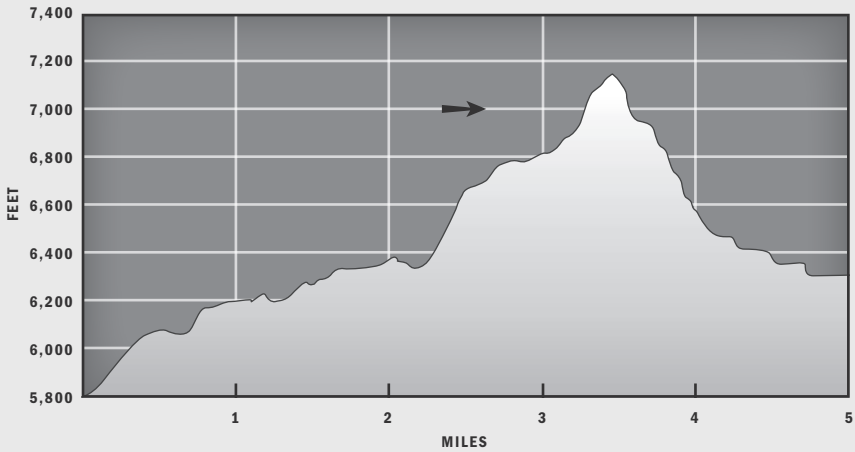
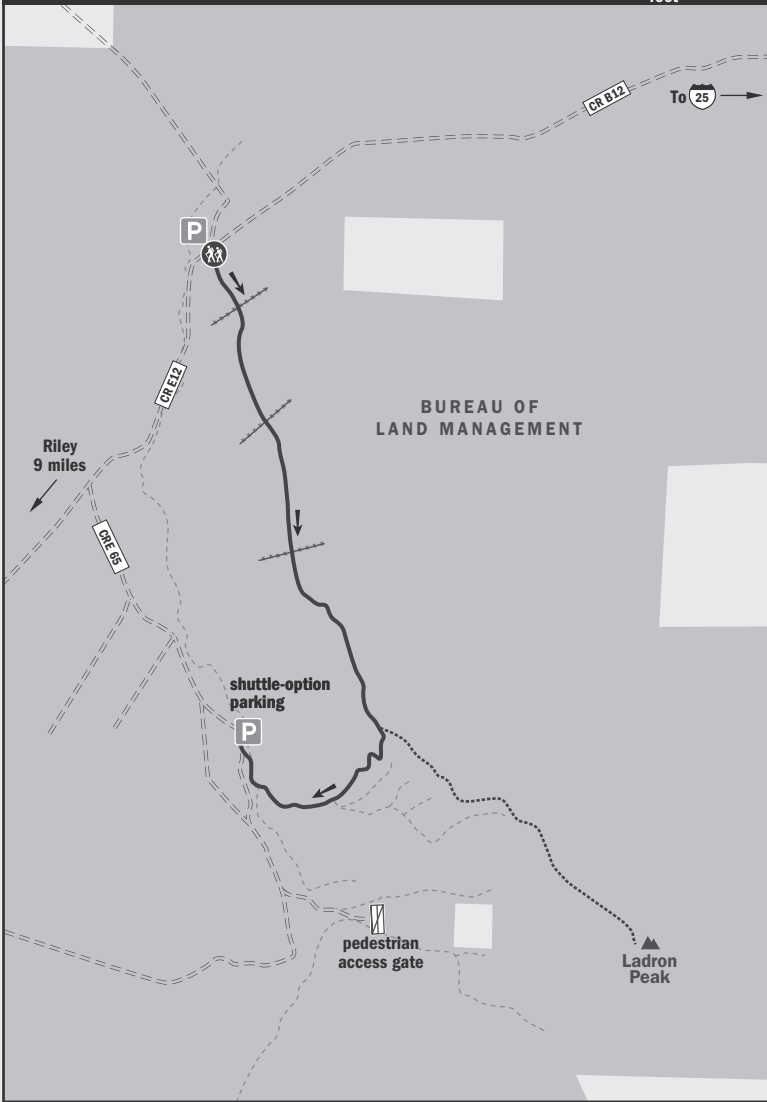
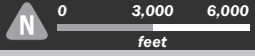
SPECIAL COMMENTS: The hike featured here does *not* reach Ladron Peak. The elevation profile describes the shuttle option.

**GPS TRAILHEAD COORDINATES**

Latitude 34° 29' 45"

Longitude 107° 07' 56"

51 Sierra Ladrones



About 3.5 miles up the ridge, you've gained 1,300 feet in elevation ...

adequately explain the strange phenomenon.

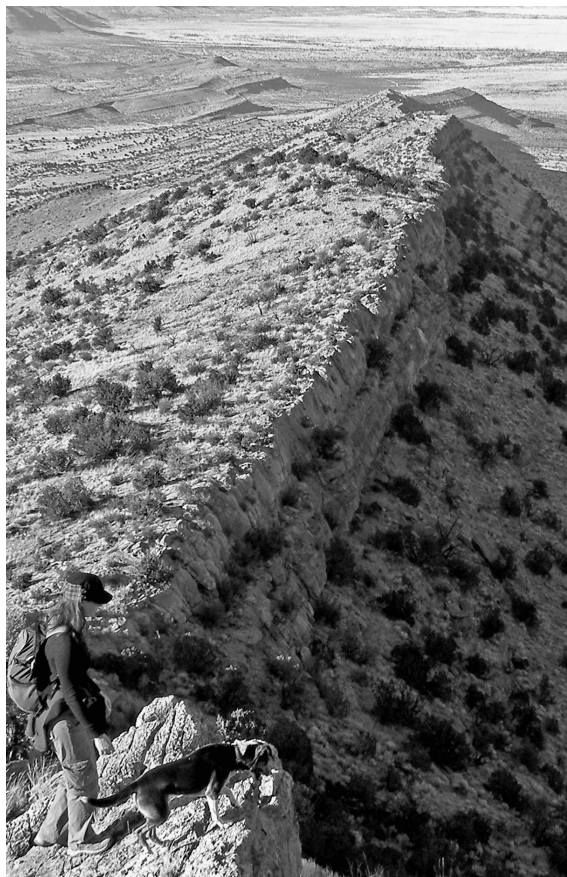
The remote granite massif rises 4,500 feet above the Rio Puerco. It stands alone on a plain too prone to erosion to sustain reliable roads. A checkerboard of private rangeland further complicates the approach from the northeast, whereas its southeast quadrant falls in the strictly off-limits Sevilleta National Wildlife Refuge.

More than 45,300 acres in the Ladrones have been designated as a BLM Wilderness Study Area. The local wildlife population includes mule deer, black bear, mountain lion, and pronghorn. Desert bighorn sheep were reintroduced in 1992. Grasses and scrub sum up the vegetation on the lower slopes; ponderosa pine, aspen, and Douglas-fir grow near the twin summits. The eastern summit, Ladron Peak, is the only named peak in the range, but the summit less than a half-mile to its west is the taller of the two.

Looming on Albuquerque's southwest horizon, the range appears monolithic. Its complexity becomes more apparent up close. It has a longstanding reputation as one of the last places you'd want to hike alone. A local fireman who knows the peak well summed it up best: "It will kick your butt."

Don't let that deter you. Navigationally, this route is foolproof. You just follow a ridgeline from bottom to top or however far you want to go. Climbing becomes more difficult with distance. Each new mile begins with an incremental challenge. How far you get depends entirely on how hard you want to hike. Elevation enhances the views, of course, but you don't have to go far for wide-open vistas in all directions. So pack a lunch and plenty to drink. Above all, gringos, remember the sunscreen.

Start the hike at the side of the road by climbing south up the point of the ridge. This elongated uplift runs parallel to Cañon del Norte, but like most features in the





... but you're not quite halfway to Ladron Peak. To follow this route, turn back here or begin your descent to the shuttle.

Ladrones, lacks a name for itself. Creative christening suggestions include: El Cuchillo de la Viuda, Lomo del Vaquero, and Rustlers' Ramp—each appropriate in its own way. For now it remains unnamed.

Juniper, creosote, and cacti do their best to green the otherwise barren slopes. Limestone pavements keep the vegetation spread out, and narrow paths seem to show up wherever grasses take hold. Your only obstacles in the first 2 miles are a few barbwire fences, all easily crossed or circumvented.

The fence at 2 miles into the hike crosses near a peak (elevation 6,398 feet). It's a good spot for a quick breather because the climb is about to become somewhat more difficult. Now instead of marching directly up the backbone, you might find it easier to veer slightly to your right and aim for the saddle ahead. Once you reach that, angle back to your left for a short but steep push back up to the crest. A short rest on the 6,780-foot peak just ahead might be warranted as well.

The next mile skirts the edge of the sheer east-facing cliffs. The drop to your left is a good 300 feet in places. Your next challenge comes roughly 3.2 miles into the hike with a steep 0.25-mile push to the next peak (7,155 feet). From this vantage point, you should be able to make out the giant fir trees growing at the collar of Ladron Peak, in addition to the rows of enormous tiger-tooth rocks standing on its left shoulder. Also take a moment to scout out the trail ahead. The ridgeline bends to your left and assumes a relatively gentle temperament for the next 0.5 mile

or so. But then, as you can see, the mountain reddens and becomes fiercely steep. That was my goal, but my group turned mutinous at the sight of it and refused to ascend the ridge any higher. In their defense, temperatures had hit 107, and our perch at 7,155 feet now seemed like a satisfactory accomplishment. Later group hikes stalled out here despite significantly lower temperatures. In that sense, the 7,155-foot mark seems a natural point to turn around or head for the shuttle.

The shuttle option is a bit more complicated and shaves off a couple of miles at best, but it dispenses with the backtracking and varies the scenery. From the trailhead, take two vehicles 1.7 miles southwest on CR 12. A junction here should be marked with a sign for Riley and another for CR E-65. Turn left and go southeast for about 1 mile. At this point, the road bends south (right) to briefly parallel a prominent arroyo. Continue another 0.6 mile and turn left. In another 0.25 mile, the road returns to the arroyo and heads south again. It also gets narrow and rocky, so pull over and park anywhere you can without blocking the road. If you have a GPS unit, you might later find it useful to have taken a waypoint now. However, it's more helpful to know that all drainages on the west side of the ridge eventually lead to this arroyo. Take a moment to inspect it before leaving the vehicle so it'll seem familiar when you return this way.

From the ridge, just past the 7,155-foot peak, descend south about 300 yards, then veer down toward the drainage on your right. Now just follow it downstream for about 1 mile. You might find walking easier on what appears to be traces of an old jeep road near the right bank. Outside the drainage, vegetation remains fairly sparse so there's no need for bushwhacking.

The road leads into the drainage as it widens near the base. After you enter the main arroyo, climb out on the west side (your left) and turn right on the dirt road. If you parked near the second bend to the south, you'll find your car about 0.25 mile down the road.

NEARBY ACTIVITIES

The Bernardo Waterfowl Area (BWA) is the second largest of the four wildlife-management areas that make up the Ladd S. Gordon Waterfowl Complex. (The biggest is La Joya, briefly explored in Sevilleta [Hike 52].) From November to February, about 15,000 sandhill cranes commute along the Rio Grande, with throngs of bird-watchers keeping pace on I-25. Up to 5,000 winged creatures may drop in at once on the BWA. The spectacle culminates in November with the Festival of the Cranes at the Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge. But then that's a 100-mile drive south of Albuquerque, making the Gordon Complex an attractive compromise for its proximity.

Best enjoyed from November through February, the BWA features three observation decks along a 2.8-mile dirt road. To get there from Exit 175, turn left on the frontage road immediately after the northbound ramp. Drive north 1.7 miles and turn right at the sign for the Bernardo unit. For more information, call (505) 864-9187 or visit wildlife.state.nm.us.