

# Monte Vista

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In the agricultural heart of the  
largest alpine valley in the world  
is a town that's gone to the birds







**I**N THE SAN LUIS VALLEY town of Monte Vista, the fields are full of potatoes – and the skies are full of cranes.

Twenty thousand greater sandhills swoop through the valley each spring. Each bird looks like an arrowhead as the flock moves in an undulating line of V-shaped patterns across the sky. The surrounding mountains force their migration route into this high mountain basin, creating both a birder's paradise and the perfect excuse for a festival honoring the fowl.

Evenings offer some of the most spectacular sights of the cranes, said Karla Shriver, a former Rio Grande County commissioner and potato farmer. She has seen as many as 500 greater sandhill cranes fly down to roost on the ranch where she lives northeast of Monte Vista.

Rio Rancho, former home of business-

man and philanthropist Ralph Outcalt, perfectly sums up life in this part of the valley: cranes, community and crops.

A successful tractor salesman, businessman and philanthropist, Outcalt, who lived to be 101 and credited green chile for his long life, instructed his estate to directly reinvest in the valley. Shriver is now a trustee of the Outcalt Foundation, which distributes funds to college scholarships, veterans groups and senior centers.

When it comes to crops, Monte Vista is the center of agricultural action in the San Luis Valley – the town of 4,000 residents has both a John Deere and a Kubota tractor dealership. The barley Coors uses to make its beer is grown here. But of all the agri-businesses in Monte Vista, potatoes are the biggest.

“I feel like everyone is somehow intertwined with potatoes even if they don't

think they are,” said Jessica Crowther, assistant director of the Colorado Potato Administrative Council.

Most of the potatoes grown in Colorado come from this region, about 50,000 acres in all. Colorado is second only to Idaho in growing the most “fresh market” potatoes purchased directly by consumers. After all, the average American eats about 114 pounds of potatoes per year.

Monte Vista hosts the San Luis Valley Potato Festival each September, but each March it goes gaga for the greater sandhill crane. During the Monte Vista Crane Festival, it isn't just the skies – even the streets downtown are lined with metal cranes decorated by local artists and nonprofits.

The Monte Vista National Wildlife Refuge was the first national wildlife refuge in Colorado when it was established in



On the opening spread, a crane comes in for a landing at the Monte Vista National Wildlife Refuge. Ubaldo Aguilera Sr. owns Baldo's Mexican Restaurant in downtown Monte Vista. John Patterson shows off one of his sculptural creations. Former Rio Grande County Commissioner Karla Shriver has helped drive the renovation of the Ski Hi Complex, which hosts rodeos and events.

1952. Today, it spans nearly 15,000 acres, including fields where small grains are grown specifically for the birds to feast upon when they migrate north.

The Monte Vista Crane Festival has celebrated these red-crested creatures every March for the past four decades. About 10,000 cranes rest and refuel on this refuge and another 10,000 on lands and fields nearby, like Rio Rancho. The cacophony sounds a bit like a cocktail party, but one where only the birds are guests.

"Gar-oo-oo," a bird calls out upon landing, folding up its 6-foot wingspan. Perhaps it's a greeting or even a declaration: I'm here. Let's eat.

Buses ferry festival attendees on sunrise and sunset crane tours. In between, people shop the vendors at the Crane, Craft and Home Expo at the new Outcalt Event and Conference Center at Monte Vista's

Ski Hi Complex.

Ten minutes east of the refuge, Worth the Drive Family Bakery serves up snacks to those watching the cranes come and go. Both the bakery and Allen and Irene Graber's home next door are 100 percent solar-powered and are not connected to the power grid – an important tenet of their Amish faith. The family is representative of the growing community of 300 or so Amish who first started moving to the San Luis Valley two decades ago.

Their bakery is busiest on Saturdays, when folks spill out into the parking lot while enjoying their goodies. By 1 p.m., the jalapeño cheese bread is already sold out; only four flavors of the fried pies typically available in a dozen or so varieties remain. Jim Clare snags a blackberry hand pie before climbing into his truck to travel past fields irrigated with center-pivot

sprinklers and back into town to connect with fellow antique tractor enthusiasts at a meeting of the San Luis Valley Antique Iron Club.

Clare, who was born and raised in Monte Vista, spent 37 years with the San Luis Valley Rural Electric Cooperative. As he slows down to go around an Amish buggy, he points to shiny silver dampers on the power lines near the refuge. These globes make the lines more visible to the cranes and other birds, like raptors, whether they're just passing through or live here full-time.

Rusticated stone buildings line the streets of downtown Monte Vista, a national historic district. Hand-quarried from nearby rock cliffs enjoyed by mountain bikers and hunters today, the buildings cut a handsome figure, which is saying a lot in a place whose name is Spanish for "mountain view."



A mural on First Avenue and Washington Street celebrates Monte Vista's beloved cranes. Along U.S. Highway 160 is the crane sculpture known as "Cooper the Whooper," which artist John Patterson made out of old farm tools and metal scrap. On the next page, a crane dances at Monte Vista National Wildlife Refuge while other cranes take flight with the San Juan Mountains behind them.



Lying just south of the Rio Grande, Monte Vista has a 7,664-foot elevation and a view of two mountain ranges: the San Juans to the west and, further away across the valley, the jagged Sangre de Cristos, known by locals as the "East Range." The city lies on the west side of the San Luis Valley, which at 122 miles long and 74 miles wide is the largest alpine valley in the world.

The welcoming community and ample recreation options have drawn young families to town in recent years. Hiking, four-wheeling, fishing and horseback riding are enjoyed by locals and newcomers alike. Climbers congregate in Rock Creek Canyon, where mountain bikers love the 40-acre Bishop Rock Area, practically a nature-made skatepark.

Downtown's streets are dotted with small business gems like the Art Deco-style Mon-

te Villa Hotel, the quirky Rain Brews coffee shop and craft brew bar and an outpost of Quincy's Steaks & Spirits, where, as one resident described, "you get what you get and you don't throw a fit." That means choosing from two menu items: filet mignon Sunday through Thursday and prime rib on Friday and Saturday nights.

But when people come into town for the crane festival, Dianna Paulson at the Wash-tub Laundromat tells them one thing: "I hope you like Mexican food."

There are indeed more than a half dozen Mexican restaurants in Monte Vista, like Baldo's Mexican Restaurant, where the Aguilera family is in constant motion. At any point, one or all of Ubaldo and Maria Aguilera's seven children might be working. Cynthia answers the seemingly non-stop phone calls in between seating people, while

her partner, Taylor, waits on a table of seven and brother Ubaldo "Baldo" Jr. takes food to one table before bussing another.

As a teenager, Baldo Jr. and his friends would load a couch into the back of a truck to watch films in comfort at the Star Drive In. A Monte Vista staple since 1955, today the Star Drive In is one of only eight remaining drive-in theaters in Colorado. It's the only one with an attached motel, the Movie Manor, where motel guests can also watch the show, but from the comfort of a bed while sound is piped in through special, in-room speakers.

Farm fields lie across the highway from the Movie Manor. Agriculture is everywhere, and most families in Monte Vista have some connection to it. However, the number of families farming has shifted over time, as some farmers have grown bigger by



## MONTE VISTA CRANE FESTIVAL

To commemorate its 40th anniversary, the 2023 Monte Vista Crane Festival, March 10-12, includes photography classes, lectures and tours, plus a 5K fun run and the premiere of a film about crane conservation. Festival events occur in town and surrounding areas such as Ski Hi Complex, the Monte Vista National Wildlife Refuge and Rio Grande National Forest, plus the exclusive showing of the *Wings over Water* film at the historic Vali 3 Theatre. The Crane, Craft, Nature & Home Expo is also held at Ski Hi Complex, where jewelry, art, quilts and fiberwork, fine foods and other handmade items are sold by local and regional vendors.



A rainbow appears over the corner of First Avenue and Adams Street after a thunderstorm. Many of the buildings in downtown Monte Vista are made of stone hewn by hand from nearby cliffs.

buying out their neighbors.

John Patterson's family sold their fourth-generation farm to a neighbor in 2000, but he continued to plant and harvest for others until his death this past December. Aside from potatoes, he also made mixed media sculptures from metal farm scrap, like rusted spigots painted a bold blue or a potato harvester sprocket turned an obstinate orange.

He started "playing Tinker Toys" with his welder when he was 21, after he saw sculptures in galleries in Aspen and Taos and realized he could do the same. Patterson sold work at the crane festival every year and made several thousand creations over his lifetime, including downtown Monte Vista's bike racks, each made of recycled materials plucked from farms and ranches from across the valley.

His most recognizable piece might be Cooper the Whooper, a decades-old public art piece installed on US-160. The crane

statue was named by area grade schoolers, and the city paid Patterson in the form of a two-year membership to the Monte Vista Golf Club.

"It did not help my golf game," he often said with a wink and a belly laugh.

Another area artform are the rock-art glyphs located southwest of town. According to the Bureau of Land Management's Bryan Flynn, an archaeologist and tribal liaison, these include the first archaeological site formally recorded in Rio Grande County. The area has no signage and isn't named on a map; that the petroglyphs exist at all is not heavily advertised, in large part to keep them protected.

You can see places where people have shot at the walls and rock art panels, said Price Heiner, an archaeologist with the Rio Grande National Forest.

Depictions of plants, animals and religious iconography are located in three areas

spanning three different time frames. BLM monitors these and other sites spread across nearly 500,000 acres in the Rio Grande basin. The Ute, Jicarilla Apache and Puebloans left their mark here, as did early Hispano settlers who came in the 1840s and 1850s after Mexico began issuing land grants.

The lush grassland they grazed their sheep on – the reason Pueblo tribes still call this area "The Medicine Basket" – began to give way to family farms in the 1860s, and the first potatoes were planted in 1875.

Today, several farms and ranches near Monte Vista are returning to the wild, like Rio Rancho, whose 320 acres were put under conservation easement by Ralph Outcalt. The only active crops grown on Outcalt's land are barley fields, planted specifically for the cranes. His bird-loving legacy continues on, both here at Rio Rancho and valley wide.

Especially in March when the cranes come to roost. 🦢