

Deirdre Monroe

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If you map it, they will come

When the Weapon Systems Engineering Division's Deirdre Monroe and a horseback riding friend left her horse's boarding stable on the fringes of Santa Fe to ride west toward the Santa Fe National Forest's "Caja del Rio Unit" for the first time, she could not have imagined that the "Caja" would capture her heart so dramatically and completely as to turn her into a dedicated endurance rider, Caja advocate, trail developer and cartographer over the next 18 years.

Today, thanks in large part to Monroe's efforts, the Caja is one of Santa Fe's best high-desert plateau areas for hiking, rock climbing, mountain biking and equestrian trail riding.

"Our initial ride took place in 1997," Monroe recalls. "It was a crystal-clear but chilly fall day as we rode out, just the two of us, over the rolling, piñon-dotted hills that are now developed as part of Santa Fe's Las Campañas subdivision. We rode past periodic

homes at first and then across nothing but open land interrupted by an occasional stock tank for cattle, which was welcome to both of us and our horses.”

Ten miles later, Monroe and her companion finally reached the eastern boundary of the Forest Service’s Caja del Rio Unit at what is now the “Headquarters Well” trailhead. At the time, they found nothing but old corrals and adobe buildings that were clearly abandoned, covered with graffiti and decaying back into the soil.

“The buildings were the ‘Pankey’ ranch headquarters during the 1930s,’ Monroe explains. “As I looked at the beautiful nearby mesas and listened to the wind, I conjured up a long-gone working cattle operation with people, working horses and cows—a bustling place that had been very alive back then.”

More than just a ride

After the first trek, Monroe thought of the Caja as nothing more than a long-distance riding option from her boarding stable until Monroe and the same friend started trailering their horses out to the Pankey ranch headquarters and began to explore the Caja itself.

View from the Caja's Chino Mesa. To the northwest across the Rio Grande are the town of White Rock and the Jemez Mountains in the distance.

“This was the turning point,” Monroe says, “both for my endurance riding and my Caja involvement. We needed to do 10- to 15- or even 20-mile horseback rides to prepare for long-distance endurance events. Since my riding friend had a truck and trailer, I tagged along pretty much wherever she wanted to go for the day. The Caja was perfect, being close to town and having a reliable water source at the abandoned ranch. Perhaps just as importantly, the Caja’s wide-open landscape refreshed me and nourished my soul.”

Monroe and her Arabian gelding Buddy during one of their actual competitions, the 100-mile Western States Trail Ride (Tevis Cup) in California. Photo courtesy of Hughes Photography.

But Monroe and her riding partner did not have a good sense of where to go or what they would find. The Caja continued to be a remote, isolated and quite unknown “Wild West” region, except for local cattle ranchers.

The two explorers purchased U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) maps of the area, but the maps turned out to be not very accurate or complete. So, being an engineer, Monroe bought herself a Global Positioning System (GPS) device for Christmas.

Diablo Canyon (officially Caja del Rio Canyon) is a great rock climbing destination on the northern edge of the Caja. Films like "3:10 to Yuma" and "Cowboys and Aliens" were filmed in this area.

“I vividly remember riding north of the Pankey cattle operation one day,” Monroe explains. “I had taken my USGS quadrangle maps, but we were riding in a location where four quads came together. I was pulling out one map and then the other, folding them on the border to try to match up the contours. Buddy, my horse, was not fussy despite being an Arabian, but the whole process was just exasperating.”

Monroe wanted to find an additional method for figuring out where she was, how far she had ridden and just what connected with what. She next bought topography computer software and was on her way to becoming a map maker.

“Now I could record our rides with my GPS,” Monroe notes, “dump the data into my topo system at night and occasionally have the results printed at a Santa Fe travel store for personal use.”

2005 and 2014 maps

During the next few years, Monroe and her riding companion continued to explore most of the Santa Fe National Forest’s roughly 67,000 “Caja del Rio Unit” acres and some of the approximately 33,000 acres that are under the stewardship of the Bureau of Land Management (BLM).

By 2004, Monroe’s mapmaking interests took on a life of their own and received an important boost when she conceived of and organized the American Endurance Riding Conference’s first endurance ride in the Caja.

“I had no idea what I was getting into even though I had a lot of help,” Monroe recalls. “Still, at that point I was the only person who really knew the Caja trails. My friend had ridden them with me, but the map project was more my cup of tea.”

In addition to being a successful event, the 2004 endurance ride clarified for Monroe that a detailed, professional-quality map of the Caja was needed not just for equestrians but other users as well. She began the painstaking process of refining her personal maps by returning to the Caja many more times to verify GPS points and look for trails she might have missed before. She also met with Forest Service officials to further coordinate her project.

Monroe leads a group of Caja endurance riders.

“My first professional map, which covered only the northern Caja, was published in 2005,” Monroe says, “and a much more comprehensive, 100,000-acre one in 2014, both by Otowi Crossing Press out of Los Alamos.”

\$100,000

With the 2005 map as a foundation, Monroe turned her attention to the sad shape of parts of the Caja and the overall lack of trail amenities.

“Here and there illegal dumps marred the Caja’s beauty,” Monroe explains, “and people had used the Caja for target practice or as a partying place with left-behind beer cans and whiskey bottles. If we could attract more respectful and environmentally conscious outdoor users, they might edge out the troublemakers, I thought.”

Monroe also used the Caja to train her new horse, Arabian mare Sasha, for endurance competitions. Here on left during the Valles Caldera endurance ride.

Monroe began to write a “Recreational Trails Program” grant application in collaboration with the Forest Service and in the process brought together a number of seemingly unrelated interest groups, including the Northern New Mexico Cattlemen’s Association, whose members held grazing permits on the Caja del Rio Plateau.

“Our common ground was that we shared the same villains on the Caja, the dumpers and shooters and vandals,” Monroe says, “and it worked. The grant required a five-percent cash match for a \$100,000 project, and in 2007 the grant was approved, with the American Endurance Riding Conference writing a check for \$5,000.”

In 2008, the American Trails organization presented Monroe with their State Trail Advocacy Award for New Mexico, and the next year the American Endurance Riding Conference honored her as well.

Meanwhile, the Santa Fe National Forest and BLM used the \$100,000 grant funds to install gravel parking lots, toilet facilities, map kiosks, trail signs and horse-friendly gates in the Caja. Volunteers hauled away mattresses, old TVs, and many bags of smaller trash.

Today's Headquarters Well trailhead.

Earlier this year, Santa Fe County declared Santa Fe to be an “Equestrian Destination,” and New Mexico Governor Susana Martinez signed the Rio Grande Trail Bill, which envisions a long-distance trail stretching from Colorado to Mexico and creates a commission composed of state and local governments, trail advocates and local pueblos and tribes. Depending on the Rio Grande Trail’s exact route, it might run along the base of Caja del Rio.

“Looking back, I am touched that a small personal project, and one largely based on curiosity, has created so much enthusiasm and assistance from others,” Monroe says. “People I met along the way are now some of my best and dearest friends.”

Southern Caja near the La Bajada escarpment. Photo courtesy of Nancy Ambrosiano.

Monroe works for the Weapon Systems Engineering Division’s Detonator Technology group.

The left photo at the very top of the page is courtesy of Nancy Ambrosiano, the right courtesy of Diana Decker Photography.

Resources

- [Santa Fe National Forest’s Española Ranger District](#) (Includes the “Caja del Rio Unit”)
- [Forest Service's Caja Del Rio Area](#) (The website's satellite map provides a broad overview of the Caja region)
- [BLM's Taos Field Office](#) (Includes portions of the Caja outside the Forest Service unit)
- [American Endurance Riding Conference](#) (National organization)

Monroe’s 2014 “Caja del Rio Plateau: Riding, Hiking, & Biking Trails” map is available through the nonprofit [Public Lands Interpretive Association](#) and commercial booksellers.

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Los Alamos National Laboratory

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(505) 667-7000

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