

FOLLOWING THE WARPATH: The Apache Kid Wilderness

“Nothing yet invented has ever caught a Chiricahua in the mountains, certainly not from the rear.” – Lt. Charles Elliott (*Sweeney*, p. 472)



The San Mateo and neighboring Magdalena Mountains comprise the the Apache Kid and Withington Wilderness areas, 44,650 acres of some of the most remote and rugged backcountry in New Mexico.



“It is impossible to describe the roughness of such mountains as the Black Range and the San Mateo(sic). The well-known Modoc lava beds are a lawn – compared to them.” – Col. Edward Hatch, 9th Cavalry (quoted in Thrapp, *Victorio*, p.265)

It's in climbing up into the San Mateos that my respect for Nana turns close to admiration if not awe. As Hatch complained in justifying his failure to catch up with the raiders, the San Mateos comprise some of the most rugged country in the Southwest, and are all but inaccessible even today. As a much younger man I hiked and camped in these mountains, sometimes alone and sometimes with my son. We made several unsuccessful attempts to reach the legendary grave of the Apache Kid, in the very heart of the wilderness. We were defeated on two occasions by shortage of water – with the mountain springs dry, we simply could not carry enough to see us there and back – and on another excursion by a deluge of summer rain that left us wet as drowned rats and the trails a morass of slippery mud.



The last couple of miles up to Luna Park CG are some of the worst 4WD road I've ever driven. Narrow switchbacks and steep curves, frequent washouts and rockslides limit speed to 5-10 mph. As compensation, views from the campground are spectacular, and the overlook would provide a sharp-eyed sentry with a clear view of the backtrail to the south.



There are only three or four fire rings and a pit toilet at Luna Park, and it's little visited. The shallow caves in the cliff behind make it a great spot to tell the story of the little boy and the Clown that Sweeney recounts in *From Cochise* (pp.88-89)



There was time to build a fire and feast on one of the captured horses or mules.



1881 was a “wet year” as such things are counted in New Mexico – where 12 inches of rain is an optimistic estimate of the annual average – and July the height of the rainy season, so the springs in the San Mateos were flowing. Nana had roamed these mountains since boyhood and knew every spring, stream and trail.



Cibola NF Road 225 north from Luna Park is narrow and winding.



Outstanding scenery, but I wouldn't attempt this road from either direction without a sturdy 4WD and a skilled driver.

Beware especially the washouts that cut right across the road; they can be quite narrow but axle-busting deep and are almost impossible to see until you're right on top of them. The road passes Springtime Campground (a good jumping off point for hiking up higher into the wilderness) and then turns east down Nogal Canyon back toward pavement. There is no road across the San Mateos to West Red Canyon.