

TEXAS PARKS AND WILDLIFE

ROADS TO NOWHERE

A guide to unmaintained
4X4 high-clearance roads in
Big Bend Ranch State Parks



By David Riskind and Dan Sholly



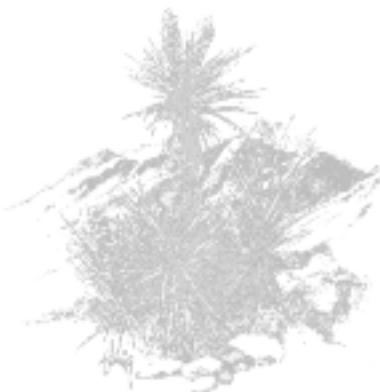
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**“WE DON’T NEED
NO STINKIN’
PAVEMENT.”**

*Anonymous (apologies to the screenwriters
of “The Treasure of the Sierra Madre”)*

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HISTORY

There have been trails and travel routes for people in the Big Bend for over 10,000 years. In early historic times Spanish explorers entered the region. The military scouted and blazed trails throughout the area, including the famous Echols' Camel expedition that used Terneros Creek. Early traders first used wagons on the Chihuahua Trail, part of which traversed Alamito Creek, in what is now the northwestern area of Big Bend Ranch State Park (BBRSP). By the 1890s, ranching and mining had begun in earnest, and by the first decade of the 20th century the first motor vehicles began using the old wagon roads. Additional roads were established with the invention of the bulldozer and hardier 4X4 trucks. The roads which are now within BBRSP were constructed to support public commerce and settlement, fence building, waterline construction, livestock production, and for mineral prospecting and mining.

Today - When BBRSP was established in 1988 there were approximately 700 miles of these old "ranch and mining"

roads within the park, and about 50 miles of the roads were kept opened to support public use. In 2008, the BBRSP Public Use Plan was approved. Today this plan allows for 153 miles of road to be used by park visitors. Of these, nearly 70 miles are unmaintained and available for those adequately prepared. **All roads in BBRSP are dirt.**

4WD HC – Unmaintained – These roads are not maintained except by the users. Roads are not brushed and may not be passable. Users may need to use pick and shovel to fix some sections, especially creek crossings or eroded areas. Desert pin-striping (brush scratches) is likely.

The "4WD HC – unmaintained" roads provide a different kind of opportunity for park users. There are approxi-



mately 70 miles of park roads that are not maintained, but which are available for visitors to travel at their own risk.

These roads will lead visitors to less-traveled, and in most cases, very remote and beautiful desert landscapes. Unmaintained roads in BBRSP are not considered “extreme 4X4.” There is no rock crawling or rating system, and not every mile requires 4X4.

These roads simply are not maintained, which means they are rougher and more difficult and challenging to travel.

Unmaintained roads of BBRSP should only be attempted by experienced 4X4 drivers, with a capable vehicle and adequate “self-rescue” equipment.

These roads are not patrolled on a regular basis. You are pretty much “on your own” should you have a problem.



Road guides available upon request.

BASIC EQUIPMENT RECOMMENDATIONS

Special preparation highly recommended!

- Two well-maintained 4X4 high-clearance vehicles. It is always safer to travel in pairs.
- 6-ply tires - absolute minimum
- Two inflated spare tires
- Plenty of fuel (there is NO fuel for sale in BBRSP)
- Shovel and pick
- Rock bar
- High-lift jack - at least 48 inches
- Heavy-duty nylon recovery strap (3" wide x 20' long - no hooks)
- 10' chain with hooks
- Tool kit
- Abundant drinking water (at least 5 gallons extra)
- Food for at least two days



FOR A GREAT OUTBACK ROAD TRIP

“Show me a 4X4 driver who has never been stuck, and I will show you a 4X4 driver who has not been down many bad roads.” *Anonymous*



For a great “outback” road-trip: Roads may be overgrown with the ubiquitous white-thorn acacia or other desert shrubs, and your vehicle will be exposed to desert pin-striping. Your trusty steed will get scratched and very dirty. Those who choose to drive unmaintained BBRSP roads (Special Use Permit required) may have to fill the washout, rut or track to progress. If your four-wheel drive goes out, you may get stuck. You must use these roads ever-mindful of the consequences of your driving skill and be prepared for self-extraction.

These roads are old ranch roads for the most part. They were installed with economy of effort. They are short wheel-base roads

where a high angle of attack is required. If you have a big honking front bumper or running boards, or a receiver hitch with a removable three-ball setup, be prepared to either modify your rig or get stuck in a steep, short dip. If your vehicle’s exhaust tailpipe hangs low and is not up and out of the way, it is going to get rearranged! If your towing wiring harness is not stowed and secured, you’ll lose it.

LOAD RANGE E TIRES are strongly recommended. If you have standard 4-ply tread/2-ply polyester sidewalls, stay home. Six-ply tires are recommended as an absolute minimum.

Bring two spares! Leave the jack that came with your vehicle at home. You’ll need a high-lift jack with a bottle-jack added for good measure. Make sure you have something on your vehicle to affix your jack to. Lots of factory or even after-market accessory bumpers are NOT SUITABLE for the application you will need for BBRSP roads. Best to practice at home before you get backcountry. Flats do NOT HAPPEN at convenient

spots, and you can be sure that at BBRSP they will not happen on level ground. To change a tire you may have to jacked AND dig and level your vehicle for safety.

Bring abundant drinking water in sturdy containers in addition to personal canteens. **Have a gallon with you at all times. Even if you do not plan to camp out, bring high-energy, nutritious snack foods**—at least a two-day supply for everyone.

BEFORE you come to BBRSP, make sure your vehicle is in good shape mechanically. Make sure all your tires are aired fully. Stow your gear so that it does not bounce around. Strap down everything that has a sharp point.

THERE IS NO GAS OR DIESEL AVAILABLE IN THE PARK INTERIOR. Gas up and top off before you drive into BBRSP. Fuel is available at Presidio, Lajitas and Study Butte only.

Unmaintained roads available for adventure travel on BBRSP are shown on the facility maps in *El Solitario* and elsewhere at park visitor centers or information kiosks. Access to unmaintained roads will be by permit

only. Check in at Warnock, Ft. Leaton or Sauceda Ranger Station to obtain a permit.

There are some ranch roads that are NOT AVAILABLE for public vehicular access. Park roads open to 4WD HC vehicles are not designed for H1 or H2 Hummers — if you have one of these that you are itching to use, it is likely that it WON'T FIT the tread width of our ranch roads. Consequently, you may experience more roadside brush and greater exposure to road hazards.

Generally speaking, cell phone coverage in most areas at BBRSP is almost nonexistent. However, in the Cienega area—the northwest portion of the park—there is good coverage. For extra safety, a satellite phone is recommended. The only local extraction and mechanic service is in Presidio: Rio Grande Wrecker Service. (432) 229-3312 or, after hours (432) 229-3740.

TPWD staff will do their best to assist park visitors, but it is possible that the services of a professional tow truck or mechanic may be required. That can be quite expensive.

**For park emergencies call
Sauceda Ranger
Station at
(432) 358-4444.**

Note this number works only during business hours daily. For park notification after business hours call (432) 229-4913 or (432) 358-4451. 911 is the emergency number where cell coverage is available. **REMEMBER: response is usually hours away, if not a day or two.**



ADDITIONAL SAFETY ADMONITIONS

- WEAR YOUR SEATBELT, especially if you are in the back seat.
- When jacking your vehicle always chock your wheels.
- When making vehicle repairs on sloping terrain be especially mindful of helpers/watchers that may be down slope.
- The high-lift jack can hurt or maim you. Be careful; wear gloves. WHEN LOWERING JACK, consider using hammer or rock to release action.
- If your repair or extraction takes a while, and the weather is hot and sunny, consider setting a shade tarp. Mistakes are made when you overheat or are tired.
- **Always, always grip your steering wheel firmly with two hands.** This is especially important where there are steep drop-offs. A large rock or other road hazard can jerk your wheels suddenly with dire consequences.
- Bad shocks, especially in front, can make your vehicle bounce, slip and slide sideways on slopes.
- Use a spotter.
- Try very hard to avoid spinning your tires—sharp rocks cut through tires.
- **Without fail, bring a map:** ideally, a USGS 7.5 minute topo quad sheets. They can save your life. Limited copies are available for sale at Saucedo Ranger Station Trading Post.
- **Be especially mindful of the potential for flash-flooding.** Be weather wise. Intense storms can materialize very quickly.

ROADS TO NOWHERE, AND BACK

Unmaintained 4WD HC Park Roads

CIENEGA

Casa Piedra Trailhead to Casa Ramon

(7.5 USGS Map Quads: Alamo Spring, Cienega Mountains and Casa Piedra)

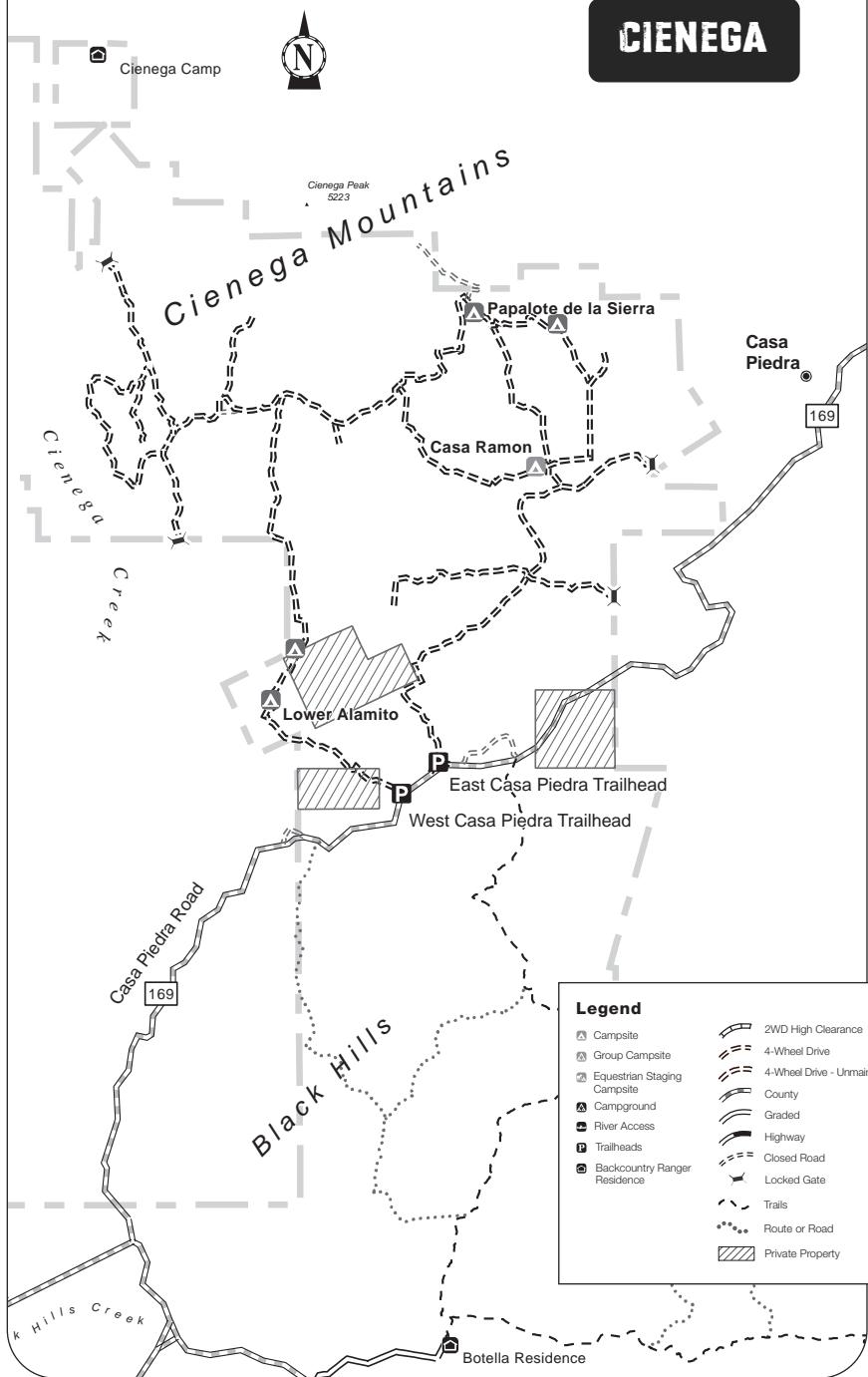
Beginning at the East Casa Piedra Trailhead on the county road, this segment travels in a northerly direction for about 1 mile. At a locked gate it turns ENE along a fenceline, thence NNW and intersects an historic roadway heading E. After .25 miles a large arroyo cuts the road. Continue over rolling terrain and gravelly pediments for 2.25 miles to an arroyo and follow the road as it descends to the soft ford (vado) of Alamito Creek. The road crosses near the historic Chihuahua Trail and is likely to be in looser sand that may require reduced tire pressure or winching for a successful crossing. If Alamito is flowing or has just recently subsided, the crossing may be impassable. You may want to wait for another day. At Alamito Creek head ENE to N bank--about 2000 feet to intersect the connecting road. Scout ahead before you commit to this crossing. Continue .3 miles and take the left (N) road fork. After negotiating some severely eroded land, you'll come to the railroad tracks. Now the South Orient RR, there is traffic about once a week. Just across the tracks is Casa Ramon, an adobe line camp of the former Big Bend Ranch. Here, there are three unmaintained road choices:

Papalote de la Sierra Loop

This is the most challenging of the unmaintained BBRSP road segments. One choice ascends N of Casa Ramon from the cattle pens, and for the lower portion (.6 miles) lies nearly entirely in an arroyo filled with boulders and, is by now, a brushy roadway. It is uphill, and gravity will be working against you. You'll need a full-time spotter. The going is slow but deliberate with lots of maneuvering. Continue upslope NNW to Papalote de la Sierra, about 2.4 miles.

A little-used jeep trail leaves Casa Ramon to the E and steadily climbs the flanks of Cienega Mountain. Both arrive at the highest windmill on BBRSP--Papalote de la Sierra. It no longer pumps. From the papalote, one can return to Casa Ramon from one of the routes previously traversed, or proceed 2.5 miles WSW on a very rough road and down slope to the intersection with the road described below.

CIENEGA



Casa Ramon to Cat and Chupadero Springs and Beyond

Leave Casa Ramon to the W and cross an arroyo that may take some work. After paralleling the railroad tracks, the road then ascends steadily, passing gravel cliffs (pretty in good light) up through the gravelly and rocky flanks of Cienega Mountain to a T intersection--about 2.9 miles. Take the E turn to Papalote de la Sierra or back to Casa Ramon the way you came, OR left (W) to Cat Springs--about .8 miles. Cat Springs, whose traditional name is Ojo del Alamo Caido, is a great wildlife observation spot, but unless it is a very wet year, there will be little surface water. The road is rocky and gravelly and pretty eroded near the spring. Just beyond to the W (nearly a mile) is the intersection that will take you back to Alamito Creek and the West Casa Piedra Trailhead. West .3 mi. beyond this intersection lies Chupadero de Tomas Hernandez (Chupadero Springs).

Chupadero is the site of extensive cattle pens--a remnant of the days as late as the 1970s when there was abundant stock in these pastures and an active cattle operation. The adobe is the ruins of a "getaway" house built around 1936 by the S.S. (Ted) Harper's. The spring was surrounded by great cottonwoods and the still spectacular velvet ash. We think that a severe storm hit the site and tore half of the ash away, and lightning likely struck and set fire to the cottonwood whose charred skeletons remain.

West Casa Piedra Trailhead to Chupadero de Tomas Hernandez (Chupadero Spring)

This segment to Alamito Creek is straightforward. Travel northwesterly for 1.5 miles and take the right fork. Then proceed .75 miles to a right angle intersection. Take the right (E) road and proceed to Alamito Creek. The road drops following a steep hill; at the bottom head upstream through the trees and drop into the drainage at an angle. Head upstream about 1,000 feet, sticking to firm ground. Aim for the white rocks on the opposite bank and then turn W toward some long-abandoned, crude, cattle working pens and corrals. A campsite is on this vega.

From the pens/campsite, the road trends N and climbs the gravelly pediment steadily. Ahead are the Cienega Mountains; behind are the scenic Alamito lowlands with the Bofecillos in the distance. After 4.3 miles there is a T intersection. To the east less than a mile is Cat Springs; beyond the return to Casa Ramon or continuing E is the Papalote de la Sierra Loop. To the west are Chupadero de Tomas Hernandez and Cienega Creek.

Cienega Creek Loop

West of Chupadero the unmaintained park road flanks Cienega Mountain, called F Mountain long ago to honor Milton Favor, one of the earliest cattle ranchers of the area. Locked gates mark the limits of BBRSP. Cienega Creek and the limestone Sierra Blanca are the outstanding features. Cienega Creek is an example of one the most intact desert riparian ecosystems in the region. Take the time to walk slowly upstream and observe its riches, including rare desert fishes and aquatic life. Birdlife is abundant.

An historic loop roadway will take you on uplands above the creek and Cienega Gorge, where you can experience the scenic Cienega terrain. Explore the side canyons and arroyos that join Cienega Creek. The loop joins the main ranch road and affords the return S and E to Chupadero Springs.

Campsites in Cienega

To facilitate exploration there are three designated campsites in the Cienega area. The easternmost is around the old cattle working pens just NNW of Casa Ramon; the highest elevation at the Papalote de la Sierra at the site of the old mill--still standing but non-working; and the third is on the N bank of the Alamito Creek crossing of the W Casa Piedra Trailhead on the vega (river terrace) at the makeshift-looking pens (see map).



SOLITARIO

The Road to Nowhere

(Map Quads: Solitario and Bandera Mesa South)

Experience a narrow, one-way dead-end prospect road that leads into the heart of the Solitario. This jeep road climbs the eastern flank of the ridge observable from Tres Papalotes and angles toward a scenic pass. This saddle has room for a couple of vehicles and a turn-around. Here, on an isolated outcrop of tuff, there are a series of bedrock mortars used by ancient people thousands of years ago. “Nowhere” offers good day-hike access to interior ridges of the Solitario and forks several times but ultimately goes nowhere. You may have to practice your backing skills or your nerve if you meet someone. Flip a coin for the inside lane if you do! This road can be dangerous, with steep 400 foot slopes off to the side of the mountain. **Keep a firm grip on your steering wheel, and pay attention.**

Molybdenum Prospect (N fork) and Uranium Mine (S fork)

These two short prospect tracks are accessed from the first south fork SSW of Tres Papalotes. The uranium prospect shaft is to be gated for safety. It is at the very peak of an interior ridge and offers a 360-degree panorama. The moly prospect is a simple, short horizontal shaft. Both date from pre-park days, and are remnants of the Cold War demand for domestic sources of strategic metals. Neither was ever developed further. Each has a turn around at or near the road terminus.

McGuirk's Loop and Dos Pilas Spur

Accessible from the road to McGuirk's Tank Campsite or from a south trending cut-off just as the main road passes a marked rideline N and W of Tres Papalotes, this historic waterline service road includes a spur (.3m) which climbs to a set of double pilas in a saddle looking eastward above Tres Papalotes. From here, ridge-running on foot is easy. The jeep road descends steeply from the tanks and runs WNW and connects to what remains of an old pumping station and thence to McGuirk's campground or Burnt Camp Tralhead beyond. It is the perfect short 4WD HC adventure in the Solitario and can easily be combined with any of the aforementioned 4WD HC Solitario segments for a full day.

SOLITARIO LOS ALAMOS



LOS ALAMOS

Los Alamos Loop

(Map Quads: Solitario and Bandera Mesa South)

Leaving the main access road near the campsite Paso al Solitario, this road segment makes a 5.5-mile loop through the very northern portion of the outer Solitario. It passes through varied terrain of both limestone and igneous rocks eroded and carved by the Alamo de Cessaria drainage. The mostly rolling terrain does not seem to present any hazards, but the jeep road crosses many arroyos and has several segments requiring careful spotting and good driving execution. At 3.8 miles from Paso al Solitario and 1.5 mile from Los Alamos residence a 1.5-mile spur departs from this road and ends just about where the spectacular badlands begin. This loop primarily provided access to remote pasturage when Los Alamos was a key ranching nexus.

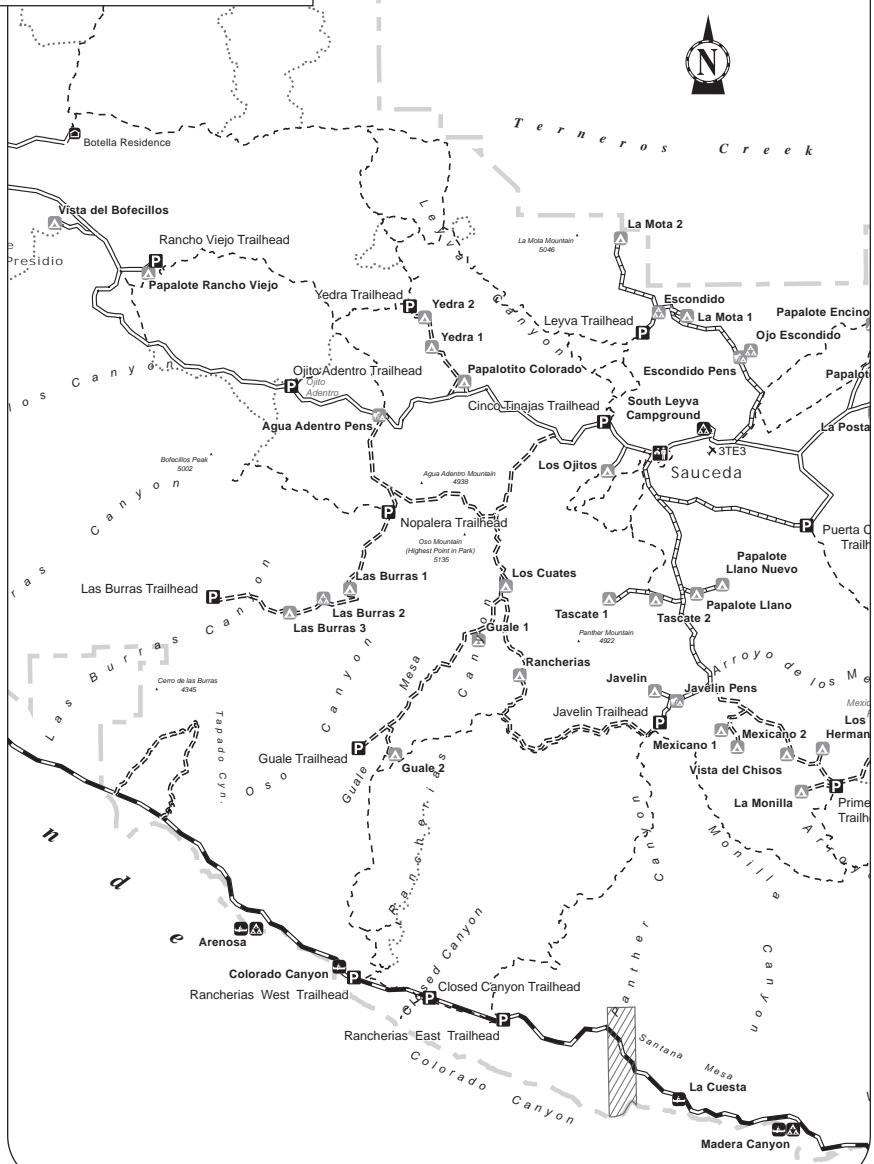
Los Alamos Campsite Spur

Similar to the more ambitious Paso al Solitario loop, this shorter segment also has Los Alamos residence as a destination. Short, steep gullies and eroded roadways are the main hazards for this segment. Today, Los Alamos is a park residence but formerly a stand-alone ranch that was one of the later additions to Big Bend Ranch in the late 1950s well before acquisition by TPWD.

Legend

- Campsite
- Group Campsite
- Equestrian Staging Campsite
- Campground
- River Access
- Trailheads
- Backcountry Ranger Residence
- 2WD High Clearance
- 4-Wheel Drive
- 4-Wheel Drive - Unmaintained
- County
- Graded
- Highway
- Closed Road
- Locked Gate
- Trails
- Route or Road
- Private Property

CAMINO DEL RIO BOFECILLOS MOUNTAINS



CAMINO DEL RIO

Cerro de las Burras Loop

(Map Quad: Agua Adentro Mountain)

From FM 170 between Las Burras and Oso/Tapado Canyons, this loop offers one of the premier vistas of BBRSP. As one gradually climbs the road, more and more of the Redford Bolson is revealed. At the top of the roadway loop and as you descend, the Rio Grande Valley, its irrigable lands and the small agricultural settlements of both the U.S. and Mexico are all visible against the surrounding mountains. The loop is bounded by the massive cliffs of welded tuff which form the Cerro de las Burras. The eastern loop segment passes scenic Three-dike Hill with its starkly contrasting geology. Loose sandy soil at the lower, east end is the primary road hazard. The prime time to experience this loop is in the late afternoon, when shadows are long and color is best.

BOFECILLOS MOUNTAINS

Rancherias Loop

(Map Quads: Agua Adentro Mountain and Saucedo Ranch)

From the W, this multi-use trailway is accessed from the Oso Loop and splits from the road to Guale Mesa and proceeds beyond Rancherias Campsite. From the E it is accessed S of Javelin Pens Campground .3 miles beyond the trailhead. The unmaintained 4WD HC road portion of the Rancherias Loop is approximately 3.5 miles. The road and trail overprint an old wagon road that ended at Rancherias Spring. In modern times this track was a waterline service and pasture access road. The unmaintained road has a few short spurs that go to water troughs and earth tanks (tanques) that are no longer used, but it is easy to discern the main track. The segment lies entirely within the Rancherias drainage, has numerous arroyo crossings and is on erosive clayey soils, for the most part. It will be very difficult during wet conditions and is subject to flash-flooding. Keep a careful weather eye before you attempt this segment.

Taking this loop from W to E is more challenging, so more novice drivers may elect to go from E to W. Trail-only segments are clearly marked. Just for reference, Rancherias Loop lies about 6 air miles from the Rio Grande over very rugged terrain marked by deep canyons and arroyos.



This material is provided to give the visitor a general feel for the unmaintained 4WD HC segments. It is NOT a road log with detailed guidance. Descriptions are very general so that the visitor will have full benefit of exploring the BBRSP outback.

We'd like to hear about your adventures and get some feedback. For those who want to share, please send us your accounts. Please send your accounts, including photographs, to: david.riskind@tpwd.state.tx.us. They will NOT be posted by TPWD.



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