

# #1 with a bullet: The NRA Whittington Center caters to all forms of shooting sports, but there's more to it than that

---

BY GLEN ROSALES / JOURNAL STAFF WRITER

Sunday, January 3rd, 2021 at 12:02am



The NRA Whittington Center's shotgun facility is one of the largest in the country with 17 trap ranges, 4 skeet ranges, 2 five stands sporting clay range and 3 sporting clay courses.

It sits on a sprawling, 33,000-acre site cutting into the eastern edge of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains just south of the Colorado border near Raton.

Here in normal years, gunshots can be heard during most any season of the year.

As a matter of fact, the NRA Whittington Center – founded in 1973 – is a vast space committed to developing responsible gun owners who enjoy improving their shooting acumen and is known as the country’s premier hunting, shooting and outdoor recreation facility.

Ranges dedicated to everything from black-powder shot to high-power rifles, overseen by trained professional instructors, are a key part of the center’s lure.



Shooters from around the country come to the NRA Whittington Center for competitions.

“We have 23 improved ranges for basically any shooting discipline,” said Dave Kelner, executive director. “We have 17 trap fields, four skeet fields, two five-stands fields, three sporting clay fields and then everything for pistol and rifle discipline, we have a range for shooting it.”

Shooters can take part in competitive shooting, rifle and pistol silhouette and bull’s-eye disciplines, he said. The high-power rifle ranges tests abilities to as far as 900 yards. A sight-in range helps get a sight adjusted to precision performance.

Leaving politics aside, this is not a site dedicated to mayhem and carnage.

Families regularly visit the Whittington Center and its 300-bed lodge, or stay at one of its 125 recreational vehicle spaces. Cabins with four bedrooms, a living room and kitchen house large families who come to shoot together.

In a typical year, more than 100,000 people visit the Whittington Center, Kelner said.



The skeet range is one of the more popular of the NRA Whittington Center's ranges.

"It runs the whole gamut," he said. "We have people coming through, they're out traveling. Like any tourist facility, our busy season is the summer time. We have folks that like to come out and hike. Folks that like to do photography."

The two, two-week Adventure Camp summer sessions geared towards teenagers from 13-to-17-years-old provides direct staff supervision as the campers learn everything from shooting fundamentals to firearm safety, marksmanship and basic wilderness survival skills.

"We run 56 kids through the camp through each two-week period," Kelner said. "Typically they shoot up to 1,400 rounds in that two-week period. We have waiting lists for it. It's a couple years waiting list to get into it."

The center also houses the Frank Brownell Museum of the Southwest.

"It showcases the guns of the various eras of the southwest," he said. "We're very fortunate that the Santa Fe Trail runs through our property. It's one of the few places open to the public where the Santa Fe Trail actually goes through the property. We have two wagons that were on the Santa Fe Trail with the documentation and provenance that they were actually on the trail itself."



The long-range rifle range allows shooting from distances ranging from 50 yards to more than one mile.

The museum has examples of weaponry from muzzle loader through modern rifles, with specific displays for World War I, World War II and the Korean War, Kelner said.

The Bud and Willa Eyman Research Library is a center of education dedicated to the Second Amendment, gunsmithing, hunting, self-defense and firearms history. Located next to the museum, the library plays an important role in educating the public about the importance of the Second Amendment to shooting, hunting and the freedoms protected through the Bill of Rights.



The Frank Brownell Museum of the Southwest is the largest firearms museum in the region. Established in 2008, the museum is a jewel box museum with more than 200 firearms beautifully exhibited in a spectacular 2,750-square-foot facility.

The library contains a strong collection of books on everything from firearms and the Second Amendment, and is a valuable resource for history buffs, researchers and anyone interested in shooting sports.

The center also serves as hunters' camp, with guides who will take people in search of game in season.

"In the spring we have wild turkey hunts," he said. "In late summer and early fall, pronghorn antelope hunts, then bull elk, then mule deer and cow elk."

The center's 52 square miles also encompasses the ghost town of Van Houten, which is open to the public.

During its heyday more than 1,200 miners and their families called it home. It was developed by the Raton Coal and Fuel Company in the 1890s and the town had its own dairy, golf course and even baseball team. The coal mine was abandoned in 1952.

