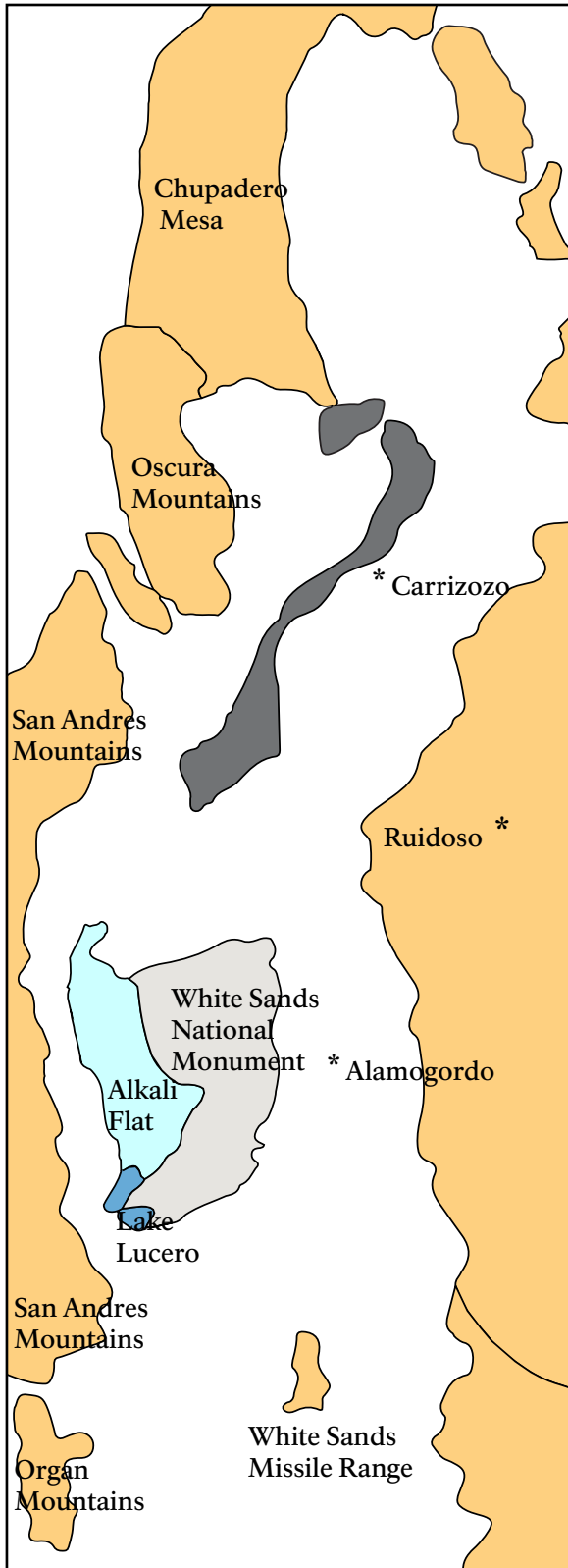




## Features of the Tularosa Basin

Place names in New Mexico, as you might imagine, often derive from Native American, Spanish, and Anglo words and family names. The Tularosa Basin is no exception—the word “tularosa” is Spanish for “reddish reeds.” Like much of the American Southwest, the basin is full of such colorful place names. Below you’ll find a description of the most significant features, arranged to correspond with the accompanying map.



**The Chupadera Mesa** is an upland rising at the north end of the Tularosa Basin. Chupadera probably refers to “sinkholes”—although geographer T. M. Pearce says that it could also refer to “sucking insects.”

**The Oscura Mountains** form the northwest border of the Tularosa basin. Oscura means “dark” in Spanish, and with their piñon and juniper forested tops, the Oscura Mountains can appear darker than the neighboring San Andres Mountain range to the south. The highest elevation in the range is Oscura Peak at 8,732 feet high.

**The San Andres Mountains** border the Tularosa Basin on the west. The range extends approximately 75 miles north to south. The highest point is Salinas Peak, with an elevation just under 9,000 feet. The southern San Andres Mountains are home to a wildlife refuge of the same name. However, the San Andres National Wildlife Refuge and the San Andres Mountains are within the boundaries of the White Sands Missile Range and therefore closed to public access. The Oscura Mountains to the north are separated from the San Andres range at Mockingbird Gap, while the Organ Mountains to the south are separated from the San Andres by San Augustin Pass.

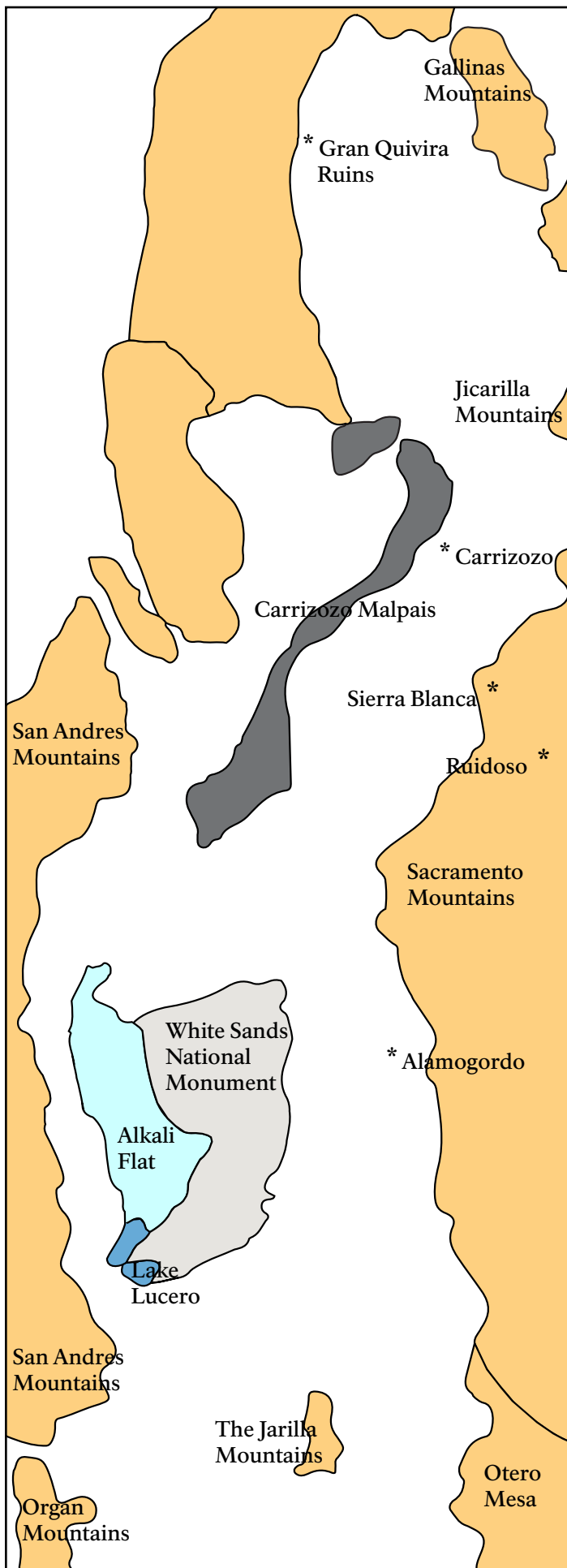
**White Sands National Monument** is centrally located within the Tularosa Basin, protecting the most impressive portion of the 275 square mile dunefield that is nearly as soft and white as snow. The sands are particles of gypsum, not silica—by far the largest gypsum dunefield in the world. The Monument was established in 1933 by President Hoover to preserve this geological wonder.

**Alkali Flat** is a dry lakebed—often called a playa in the Southwest. During the last ice age, it was part of the very large Lake Otero, which collected water from the mountain ranges surrounding the Tularosa Basin. The water brought with it dissolved gypsum into the basin.

**Lake Lucero**, the lowest point in the Tularosa Basin, is a normally dry playa. However, like the Alkali Flat, it too was once part of the ancient Lake Otero. As the last ice age ended and Lake Otero dried up, gypsum was left behind in the form of selenite crystals. The crystals break down into smaller and smaller particles, until sand particles are left to dance on the wind and become the flowing dunes you can see northeast of Lake Lucero. The water that trickles down from the mountains into Lake Lucero still carries dissolved gypsum into the basin where it evaporates under the desert sun. Selenite crystals are still forming thanks to this process. The lake is named for the Lucero brothers, Jose and Felipe, who ranched in the area and took turns serving as sheriff of Doña Ana County.

**White Sands Missile Range (WSMR)** has its headquarters nestled below the Organ Mountains. The installation was originally a World War II practice range for bomber crews. In 1945, the area became the testing ground for the earliest U.S. missiles and rockets. The missile range is very large—approximately 3,200 square miles—and encompasses much of the Tularosa Basin and the San Andres and Oscura Mountains. WSMR nearly surrounds White Sands National Monument and the remaining portion of the gypsum dunefield.

**The Organ Mountains** received a few different names from Spanish explorers and settlers but the resemblance of their granite spires to organ pipes fixed the name on official maps. The highest peak is just over 9,000 feet. In 2014, the range and some other mountains around Las Cruces became the Organ Mountains and Desert Peaks National Monument. This brand new national monument is administered by the Bureau of Land Management.



**The Gallinas Mountains** are a domal uplift. Gallinas Peak is its highest summit at 8,615 feet.

**The Gran Quivira Ruins** are a bit north of the Tularosa Basin, situated 25 miles south of Mountainair, New Mexico. However, the ruins are part of another monument, namely Salinas Pueblo Missions National Monument. The origin of the term “quivira” is the subject of hot debate. It is thought that it could be a corruption of a native Pueblo place name, Tabira, or it could have come from the name of the mythical “cities of gold” that Coronado was searching for in 1540. The ruins are impressive and picturesque, encompassing both native pueblos and Spanish missions of stone. However, they never held great riches.

**The Jicarilla Mountains** form a northeast border for the Tularosa Basin. The mountains are named for a band of Apache who once shared a reservation with the Mescalero Apache. There is now a Jicarilla Apache Reservation in the far northwest of New Mexico. The highest mountain in this range, separate from the Sacramento Mountains to the south, is Ancho Peak at 7,825 feet.

**The Carrizozo Malpais** is a large and, geologically speaking, recent lava flow west of Carrizozo. The Spanish words “malpais” translates literally as “bad lands.” The term is often used in New Mexico to refer to lava flows. Striking images of the Tularosa Basin taken from space show the black Malpais formation in the northern end of the Tularosa Basin almost flowing into the white sand dunes to the south.

**Carrizozo** is a small town at the northeast edge of the Tularosa Basin. Although small, it is the county seat of Lincoln County. Like Alamogordo, the town was established by the railroad. The Spanish word “carrizo” means “reed grass.” According to historian Robert Julyan, the extra syllable “-zo” was added to indicate abundance.

**Sierra Blanca**, Spanish for “white mountain,” is the highest peak in the area and can attract heavy winter snows. It is approximately 12,000 feet tall.

**Ruidoso** is named for the Rio Ruidoso, meaning “noisy river” in Spanish. The town was first established as Dowlin’s Mill, named for the owner of a grist mill who was also a post trader at nearby Ft. Stanton during cavalry days. Now the town attracts tourists seeking a cooler elevation (7,000 ft.) in the summer and skiers seeking snow at the nearby ski resort on the slopes of Sierra Blanca in the winter.

**The Sacramento Mountains**, which include Sierra Blanca, form the ramparts that border the east side of the Tularosa Basin. The name comes from the Spanish for “sacrament” but geographer T. M. Pearce says it refers to a religious sacrament known as the Holy Eucharist.

**Alamogordo**, the county seat of Otero County, was founded in 1898 by railroad developers near the location of Alamo Spring. The name Alamogordo means “large cottonwood,” and indeed large cottonwoods shade the city’s Alameda Park, home to the Alamogordo Zoo.

**The Jarilla Mountains** stand as low hills at the south end of the Tularosa Basin. Jarilla in Spanish refers to “willows.” Once there was considerable mining activity in the area.

**Otero Mesa** is an upland bordering the southeast corner of the Tularosa Basin. It holds the largest expanse of Chihuahan Desert grassland left in the United States. The Spanish family name Otero first appears in New Mexican records in 1659, according to Pearce. However, many of New Mexico’s Otero places are named in honor of Miguel A. Otero, Territorial Governor at the beginning of the twentieth century.

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