

The Davis Creek Nature Trail is set in a very unique environment, in which the forests and mountains of the Sierra blend with the deserts of the Great Basin. This creates an opportunity to see a large diversity of plants and animals because of the presence of two different ecosystems. Can you see the slow transition of the landscape from West to East? As you walk this trail you will be learning about the natural surroundings of Davis Creek Park. Remember to take your time and look around you as you take this walk; the opportunity to see something spectacular may be around the next shrub.

Slide Mountain

1

Looking to the West above the tree line you will see Slide Mountain. It is one of the highest peaks (9676 ft.) in the Carson Range of the Sierra Nevada. Look at the southeast slope of the mountain. Can you guess how it got its name? This area of the mountain, covered in loose granite, lacks enough mineral soil to support much plant life. For thousands of years there have been massive landslides coming from this mountain, with the most recent slide occurring in 1983. Much of Washoe Valley was covered in debris from this slide, which caused extensive damage to the area. The slides that have occurred here are a good example of how unpredictable nature can be.

Desert Plants

2

In front of you are two desert plants that can be found throughout the Great Basin. Antelope Bitterbrush (*Purshia tridentata*), the taller dark green leafed plant is a favorite of deer and elk. In the spring it has bright yellow blooms. The



leaves of this plant are three toothed at the tip and have a very bitter taste. Try one and see for yourself. Great Basin Sagebrush (*Artemisia tridentata*) is easily recognized by its light green, three-lobed leaves. Sagebrush

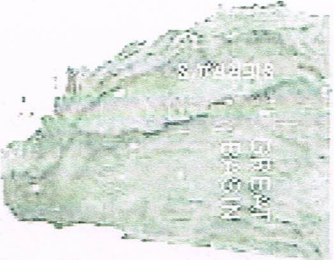
is one of the most abundant plants in the Great Basin, and after a heavy desert rain you can't hide from its distinct odor. This shrub was used extensively by Indians for firewood and ceremonial purposes.

The Great Basin

3

Looking east across Washoe Valley

you see the beginning of the Great Basin which extends across most of Nevada and into Western Utah. The basin is full of alternating high mountain ranges and intervening valleys. Mountains range in elevation from 9,000 to 14,000 feet. The streams and rivers that flow into the Great Basin never



reach the ocean, but end up in desert lakes and playas, which are remnants of much larger lakes that occupied the Great Basin over 10,000 years ago.

4

This pond is an attraction for many animals, including deer, bobcat, porcupine, skunks, bats and many species of birds, most of which come here to drink and hunt for food. Look closely around you for signs of these animals, such as nests, tracks, or scat. The abundance of fish in the pond has always been an attraction for fishermen, as well as some kinds of birds. The stillness and peaceful sounds that are provided by the pond's natural surroundings are also an attraction for many humans looking to get away from the hustle and bustle of the city. Listen closely. Can you hear any sign of animals or birds?

5

Forest Habitat

Look up towards the sky. Can you see it through the dense stand of trees? As these trees grow larger they decrease the amount of sunlight that reaches the forest floor, thus accounting for



the lack of other plants growing here. The pine needles that cover the ground, which are replenished annually, are important to the forest for many reasons. They preserve soil moisture by protecting the forest floor from drying summer temperatures, while adding nutrients and humus to the topsoil as they decay. Look an inch or two underneath the needles. Can you see any sign of decay?

Trees of Yesterday

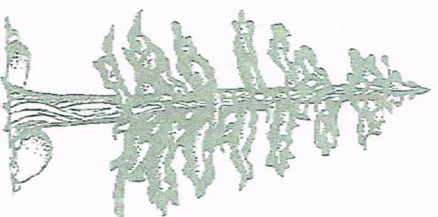
6

This stump is from a Jeffrey Pine tree that was probably cut down in the 1860's. It is representative of the size of trees that existed in this forest before its trees were clear-cut for use in the mines and construction at Virginia City. Before the clear-cutting, many of the Jeffrey pines were 60-180 feet in height, and from 4-7 feet in trunk diameter. Some were approaching 400 years of age. The changes that have occurred here since the clearcutting are a good example of how nature reacts after a severe alteration of an environment. Most of the trees you see now are second growth trees, which rarely exceed 100 years of age, and are not representative of a healthy forest. Take a moment to imagine how different this forest might look if all of the trees had trunks as large as this stump.

Pine Trees

7

The majority of the pine trees that surround you are Jeffrey pines (*Pinus jeffreyi*). They have needles 8-10 inches long that are in bundles of three. The cones are 5-10 inches long with turned-in prickles. If you put your face close to the tree you may detect a vanilla or



pineapple smell. The Jeffrey pine is highly drought resistant which allows it to thrive in this desert environment. You might also see a few Ponderosa pines (*Pinus ponderosa*) dispersed throughout this forest which are very similar to Jeffrey pines, but have prickles that stick out on their pinecones. Ouch! A good way to remember this difference is "gentle Jeffrey" and "prickly Ponderosa." Can you find any Ponderosas among these trees?

8

Wild Rose

The thorny shrub you see around you is the Wild Rose (*Rosa woodsii*). Its long, straight shoots, used by Indians for arrows, are adorned with small jagged leaves. The berries of the wild rose, called rose hips, are somewhat round, smooth and contracted to a neck on top. The hips, rich in vitamin C, remain on the shrub during the winter, providing food for many birds and animals. They are highly nutritious eaten off the bush, or better yet make a great tea when mixed with pine needles. The wild rose is protected by tiny thorns, so be careful not to get poked.

Willows

9

Willows are abundant throughout the Sierra, with a variety of species present. The Willows (*Salix* sp.) around you are deciduous shrubs that are characterized by a slender upsweeping of the branches and long narrow leaves. Willows prefer wet or marshy areas and provide ideal nesting sites for many small birds. Indians used willows extensively to make such items as baskets, cradle boards, snares and framing for houses. Willows, now used to make aspirin, were also used for medicinal purposes because of their ability to relieve pain and reduce fevers.

Preservation

10

The things that you have seen today along the trail all play important roles in the surrounding environment. There is a large diversity of plants and animals in the area that are interconnected in many ways, and many of the species are dependent on one another for survival. Any alteration or damage to this environment could be detrimental to the plant and animal communities that exist here, including the human one. It is important to understand that these local communities are tied to other ecosystems throughout the Great Basin and the Sierra. It is critical that we are aware of our surroundings and that we respect the life and forms that are present. By treading lightly and preserving our environment we can live more harmoniously with nature and each other.



Davis Creek Naturalist Guide



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