NATURE TRAIL GUIDE

Your self-guided tour of the Kern River Preserve (KRP) nature trail begins at the headquarters sign. About one mile long, the trail takes an hour to walk at a good pace. Expect to spend two or three hours if you want to experience the extraordinary plant and animal diversity.

1. HISTORY - The Kern River Preserve is managed by Audubon-California for the preservation of California’s largest contiguous Great Valley Cottonwood-Willow Riparian Forest and the wildlife it supports. As you drove into the preserve you may have noticed some historic buildings on your right. Built in 1878, the largest building is one of the oldest structures in the Kern River Valley. These buildings housed the Flour Mill for the Andrew Brown Ranch. Off limits to humans, the mill is now home to Barn Owls, bats, and other animals. With 21st century acquisitions, the preserve now encompasses 2,987 acres.

NOTE: Do not walk across the cattle guard into the pasture, this is not part of the preserve. The entrance road is a vehicle easement only.

2. WATER DIVERSION - The section of forest before you is known as the Slough Channel. This waterway through it is named Prince Ditch after the family who own water rights. Water rights in the valley date to the 1880’s. Fed by the South Fork of the Kern River, the canal provides water to the slough channel on its way to the farmland southwest of the Preserve. The canal is home to introduced fish and bullfrogs as well as native wildlife. The driveway is closed to foot traffic to protect endangered birds during the breeding season.

3. BIRDS - Over 300 bird species are attracted to the South Fork Kern Valley each year, some of which are considered rare or endangered. Nesting species include: Southwestern Willow Flycatcher, Western Yellow-billed Cuckoo, Summer Tanager, and Yellow Warbler. Each season brings unique birding experiences. Species diversity during spring migration is greatest among the best in the west. Summer visitors can enjoy the 108 species that nest on the preserve. Fall brings one of the largest Turkey Vulture migrations in North America. Even in winter, species in the valley number can over 200.

4. HUMMINGBIRDS - March through September, volunteers keep hummingbird feeders stocked near the picnic tables and also planted the hummingbird gardens below the feeders. These are used by nesting and migrating hummingbirds. Four species breed locally while two others are only seen in migration. The best time to view hummingbirds is during their migration in July and August.

5. WILDFLOWERS - These wild roses (Rosa woodsii) are found growing naturally throughout the preserve. Notice other types of wildflowers on the preserve. In spring, notice the beautiful, papery, prickly poppy (Argemone munita). In late summer through fall the preserve is awash with common sunflowers (Helianthus annuus). Yerba mansa (Anemopsis californica), is a low growing herb with large broad leaves. This plant grows in wet, alkaline places and sometimes forms large mats. Native Americans and pioneers used it extensively to treat ailments ranging from pinkeye to foot fungus. Scientists have examined it for its potential as a cancer treatment. This is also a good location to see Pacific chorus frogs.

6. NEST BOXES - Bluebirds, wrens, swallows, and other cavity nesters have declined across the nation due to loss of snags and old trees. Perching birds use natural cavities and old woodpecker holes to nest. Volunteers have placed dozens of boxes throughout the preserve. Four native species of birds use the boxes to rear their young. Volunteers monitor the boxes to keep them clean and free of pests. NOTE: next post ~200 yards.

7. NATURAL DIVERSITY - Rest a moment in the shade of a beautiful butterfly, the Great Purple Hairstreak. This "Pygmy Blue" utilizes saltgrass. Another interesting resident of the forest is the dusky-footed wood rat AKA "pack rat". It forages at night and hides from predators in its nest during the day. Look for large stick wood rat nests in clumps of green, fleshy mistletoe (Phoradendron macrophyllum) on branches of cottonwoods and willows.

8. RESTORATION - On the left is the Colt Restoration Site which had been cleared for agriculture use and cultivated for over a century. Replanted with native trees and shrubs in 1993, it again provides habitat for increasing numbers of native riparian species. The first major restoration effort on the Preserve was in 1986. Dedicated volunteers planted trees this 25-acre revegetation site. Since then natural grasses, shrubs, and trees have recolonized the understory. Thousands of trees have been planted on 550-acres around the preserve.

9. MAMMALS - Raccoons, black bears, beavers, bobcats, foxes, coyotes, mountain lions and mule deer, along with numerous smaller species, are attracted to the riparian forest. Food and water are plentiful here. Notice the tooth marks on this downed tree; the tree was felled by a beaver during the 1998 El Niño year. Another interesting resident of the forest is the northern coyote (Canis latrans) which is adapted to alkaline soils and can exude excess salts from its leaves. Native Americans harvested the salt from salt grass for use in food preparation. The smallest butterfly in the world the "Pygmy Blue" utilizes saltgrass.

14. SNAGS - Standing, decaying trees called 'snags' provide excellent places for woodpeckers and other cavity nesting birds to call home. Western Bluebirds, Tree Swallows and several species of wren nest in abandoned woodpecker holes. Large, rotting snags are not found in younger forests. Many rare birds are affected by a lack of suitable nesting cavities, caused by the loss of old-growth forest habitat.

15. AGRICULTURE - This view overlooks the newest part of the preserve. Notice the difference in vegetative cover on either side of the river. This section of the preserve will be managed with some seasonal cattle grazing, different land practices are sometimes needed to meet wildlife management goals. Grazing affects which plants are present, and can prevent young trees from becoming established. Grazing can have a positive impact as pastures provide valuable habitat and food to many species of wildlife. Agricultural areas act as buffers between the Preserve and areas with more intensive human uses, like housing and busy roads.

16. NATIVE FOREST - Across the fence on the right is the river
bottom and part of the Preserve. The fence has been left in place to help control stray cattle. The South Fork Kern River supports the largest remaining stand of riparian forest in California. Compare the natural forest on the right side of the fence to the restoration site on the left. The natural site is lower and floods more frequently; therefore there is a lot of natural regeneration of trees. The restoration site is a little higher and seldom floods. It could take many years for natural regeneration to occur here.

17. RIPARIAN TREES - Three species of trees dominate this riparian forest. Fremont cottonwood (Populus fremontii) is the large tree with heart shaped leaves. Black willow (Salix gooddingii) is the tall thin leaved tree with very similar appearing red willow (Salix exigua) only growing to 25’. Cottonwoods and willows are in the same plant family, SALICACEAE. Willow bark is the natural source of aspirin. Several species of moth and butterfly caterpillars eat the leaves; these larvae sustain many bird species. Cottonwoods and willows are “keystone species” that are the foundation for this entire ecosystem.

18. SOUTH FORK KERN RIVER - The South Fork Kern River originates high on the Kern Plateau of the southern Sierra Nevada in the Golden Trout Wilderness. The heaviest stream flow is during the spring snow melt. The river is often dry in summer and fall.

19. VIEWSHED - Two giant Fremont cottonwoods frame a view of the Prute Mountains to the south southwest. These deceptively dry looking mountains support a thriving Jeffrey pine forest at the higher elevations. To the southwest an island mountain, Breckenridge, towers 7500’ above the San Joaquin valley floor. To the west are the Greenhorns, named for the gold miners that sought their fortune in the 1850’s. The magnificent view to the north is the Scodies, an isolated range where several ecoregions intersect.

20. SHRUBS - Rabbit brush (Ericameria nauseosa) is the most common shrub in drier parts of the preserve. It is a plant common to the Great Basin Desert and blooms masses of golden flowers in the fall. Another common shrub, Fourwing saltbush aka shadscale (Atriplex canescens) is an important food source for seed eaters, including sparrows, quail, and rodents. The vegetation here, in this relatively dry area, is a mix of Mojave and Great Basin Desert species.

21. REPTILES - Many reptiles are found on the preserve. Most are secretive and/or nocturnal, making daytime sightings a rare treat.

Audubon Kern River Preserve
A Globally Important Bird Area
A proposed National Natural Landmark
California Riparian Habitat Joint Venture Flagship Project
KRP is owned and managed by National Audubon Society, a private, non-profit organization. We need your support. Donate to Audubon Kern River Preserve today.

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