

# KEEP THE SESPE WILD & FREE

The Newsletter of the Keep the Sespe Wild Committee

PO Box 715, Ojai, CA 93024

(805) 921-0618 • [www.sespewild.org](http://www.sespewild.org)

SUMMER 2012

## FOUR LOCATIONS IN

## THE SESPE WATERSHED



*The view west over Coltrell Flat, from the hill above where Hotsprings Canyon joins Sespe Creek, which is looking dry for the month of May.*

Our May tamarisk removal trip to the Sespe Hotsprings Canyon started with a hike in from Mutau Flat on a pristine trail – it was the first day in six months that the trail had seen human footsteps, marking the end of the newly-instituted six month annual closure of the Forest Service dirt road in from Lockwood Valley Road (Nov. 01 to April 30). The wildflowers were fantastic.

The Sespe Hotsprings were as invigorating, healing and relaxing as ever, but our mission was to survey for and to eradicate tamarisk in the canyon. This canyon had once, nearly 20 years ago, been the location of the densest thickets of tamarisk in the Sespe watershed; it took many years of two work-parties a year to clear the canyon with hand tools from above the hotsprings source, downstream to the first creek crossing on the trail towards the Sespe.

Nowadays the work is easier on the back – it consists of surveying for occasional tamarisk that have sprouted from seeds left in the sandy soil from long ago, and then digging them up and cutting their roots below the crown. You have to be careful with this part, as the crown can be buried as much as 24 inches below ground level, since sediment flowing down the canyon can pile up around mature tamarisk trunks and stems.

The main tamarisk target this trip was one spotted a year or so before, up the side canyon to the east, upstream of the hotsprings source, a canyon that carries a delightful little cold-water creek all year long. It was located just where our careful notes indicated, and dug out from the wet stony hillside, about twenty feet above the canyon floor, near a small spring. No others were found nearby.

The rest of the day was spent carefully checking the Hotsprings Canyon itself for tamarisk in the creekbed – of which quite a few were noted. They will be eradicated on our next work-trip.

### THE SESPE GORGE DOWN PAST DEVILS GATE

The next official tamarisk hunting trip of the year was our annual trip down the lower Sespe Gorge from Alder Creek towards Fillmore. This year we had permission from the van Trees family to exit the Sespe at their ranch, which straddles the creek just downstream of the forest boundary below Devils Gate, an impressive set of cliffs on both banks of the Sespe that mark the south end of the Sespe Gorge.

It was the first time in around 20 years that we had been granted permission to hike out past Devils Gate. Because of this, there was a great deal of tamarisk in this stretch, enough to warrant a later day-trip to eradicate.

The most amazing thing about this year's hike down the Sespe Gorge was the quantity of trout and other, smaller native fish such as arroyo chubb. With all the fish to feed on, there were also large numbers of mergansers. They look and swim and fly like ducks do, but where ducks eat vegetation and bugs, mergansers have bills with saw-tooth edges and live on fish. We saw dozens of them, including many groups of young. While the parents flew off loudly, to distract us, some of this year's young would hide quietly in the reeds, but others did not seem to mind our presence, and we watched them swim for a minute underwater, in the clear pool right below us, darting around like fish do. Of course, they have to swim like that to catch their food.



*A tamarisk-hunting hiker leaps into a pool that the mergansers had vacated.*

The Sespe below Alder Creek was also pretty well stocked with tamarisk. Young ones had grown up since last year from seeds carried downstream with sediment originating in the Hotsprings Canyon, having been deposited there after the Day Fire.

As this sediment moves slowly out of the watershed, the tamarisk seeds sprout up all the way down the Sespe Gorge. Fortunately, they are small, not yet seeding, and easy to pull up out of the damp sand they grow in along the creek. Still, there were many hundreds of them, and it is easier to bend down and pull them with your backpack still on, than to stop and take the pack off each time. Eventually, though, your hands get a little raw from the pulling.

It was a great pleasure to hike once again that magnificent stretch of the Sespe between Tar Creek and Devils Gate. There are many beautiful pools there, and several fields of enormous boulders to clamber over.



*A quiet September morning at one of the few pools remaining on the upper Sespe after a dry winter.*

### **THE UPPER SESPE NEAR ROSE VALLEY**

This part of Sespe Creek sees the most foot traffic of all, being close to the Piedra Blanca trailhead, though it is surprising how few people spend the night close by, even in summer. There are some choice spots within a short stroll of the trailhead, but most of those who stop by for a quick swim are on their way further downstream.

This September, following a very dry winter, there is only a 30-foot diameter, three-foot-deep puddle left at Ten Foot Hole and Bear Creek's pool is quite dry. In between, there remains one refuge for the upper Sespe's native trout.

We had the teenagers fishing for catfish and bluegill at this spot, and over a couple of weekends they removed about a hundred of these invasive, exotic species from the water, leaving the limited food and habitat space for whatever trout were lurking in the depths, refusing the lures. A dry summer like this is the perfect time for fishing to restore the Sespe for the native trout, chubb and dace that are the historic inhabitants of these waters. Reducing the population of exotics is easiest when they are already limited to only a few pools. We know there are also exotic

bullfrogs around, but they chose to remain silent the most recent time we were there.

We saw three ducks flying upstream at dusk, looking as if they knew where they were headed, though we could not picture a likely wet spot in that direction.

### **CAR CAMPING AT PINE MOUNTAIN**

This being the rim of the Sespe watershed, it is about as far as you can get from the creek. Car camping at 6,500 feet elevation is limited in Los Padres National Forest. There are amazing views to all the northern Channel Islands when the coast is not fogged in, and the stars at night are wonderfully clear.

Reyes Peak, at 7,000 feet, is only a short hike away, and on the north side of the ridge you could once occasionally see all the way to the Sierras, when the air was clearer, or so we've heard. Condors sometimes soar overhead, though hang-gliders are more common.

Mistletoe is gradually diminishing the magnificent Jeffrey pines on this ridge, giant trees that have almost all been shorn off by violent winter winds. White-headed woodpeckers and white-breasted nuthatches hang out close to camp, the latter having the curious habit of running in groups down the tree trunks, in search of bugs in the bark.

Climbers love to visit here for the sport of bouldering, and the hundreds of enormous sandstone boulders up here offer a wide range of different rock faces for different skill levels. It is fun to watch climbers hanging on by their fingertips, and finding the tiniest of cracks to grip, all the while only a few feet off the ground.

### **SESPE TO BE SURVEYED PRIOR TO LIKELY CLOSURE TO FISHING**

The Ca. Dept. of Fish and Game are planning to survey the upper Sespe this fall, to confirm that there are no barriers that might impede steelhead migrating upstream to the rich spawning and rearing grounds on the Sespe upstream of Alder Creek.

Back in 1997, the Ca. Fish & Game Commission closed to fishing all rivers that steelhead could access to spawn. The steelhead were then already listed as a federal endangered species. For some reason, referred to as an administrative oversight, Sespe and Sisquoc Creeks were omitted from these closures.

In late 2011, the Commission met in Santa Barbara, with the closures of both these creeks to fishing on the meeting agenda. The Sisquoc was seen as a clearcut case, as no barriers to steelhead migration are known to be present.

The Sespe also has no known migration barriers for steelhead, but the Commission and Ca. Dept of Fish and Game staff were not convinced of this. Matt Stoecker of Stoecker and Associates, a steelhead researcher, published a report on the Sespe, based on comprehensive on-the-ground surveys, finding no steelhead barriers. It seems some agency staff misunderstood two symbols on the report map to indicate steelhead barriers. The survey's on. As we know from our own hikes, there are no barriers.



## **WILDERNESS BILL STALLED IN HOUSE**

Rep. Elton Gallegly's bill for increased wilderness and wild river protection in Ventura and Santa Barbara Counties' Los Padres Forest has stalled in the House Resource Committee, under Republican control, which has yet to move any legislation on wilderness creation in the past 20 months of this session of Congress. Not bad work for a Committee whose job includes responsibility for all of America's wilderness.

We believe that Rep. Gallegly, due to retire in Jan. 2013, will do his best to move his bill along this fall. But even if it passes the House on a floor vote, it still must be matched by a Senate version before being signed into law by the President. This being an election year, the chances of all this falling into place for Rep. Gallegly are less than slim. California's two Democratic Senators have so far not been engaged in the legislation.

## **PLEASE KEEP SUPPORTING KEEP SESPE WILD!**

Your donations are the only support for our newsletter and other efforts – and our costs have recently increased. We cannot really complain: our family-owned printer in Ventura retired a number of years ago, and the person who bought the business never raised his prices for us either.

Our checkbook shows in fact that our newsletter costs, for a stable number printed, never increased at all over the past decade! We hope this was not the reason that our Ventura printer suddenly went out of business last year.

But the new reality is that our printing costs for each edition of our quarterly newsletter have jumped from \$340 to \$540. That means we have to bring in an additional \$800 per year.

Thanks again to all of you who contribute to keeping KSWC going.

## **ANOTHER CLEANUP AT CHERRY CREEK IS SCHEDULED FOR SAT. NOV. 03.**

Last fall KSWC helped provide people-power for a four hour cleanup of the completely trashed Cherry Creek shooting site adjacent to Hwy. 33. The cleanup was arranged and organized by our colleagues at Los Padres ForestWatch, based in Santa Barbara, in collaboration with the Ojai Ranger District. A 20-foot roll-off bin was completely filled with bags of trash by over 70 volunteers. Thanks are also due to E.J. Harrison for donating the bin and the hauling and disposal fees.

This site is now closed to target-shooting, though that does not mean that all shooting there has come to an end.

The next cleanup at this site – last year's did not finish the job by any means – is scheduled for Sat. Nov. 03, from 9.00 a.m. to 1.00 p.m. Carpooling will leave from the Nordhoff High School parking lot at 8.30 a.m.

Please look for us parked closest to Hwy. 33, and at the end of the parking lot closest to the Vons store (so as not to get mixed up with cars parked for soccer games, at the other end of the parking lot.)

Please contact us (921-0618) to join the cleanup!

## **FRACKING IN THE SESPE OILFIELDS?**

The topic of fracking, where water and chemicals are pressure-injected into the ground to force more oil and gas to the surface, has become a hot issue in recent years.

There are incidents of drinking-water wells being chemically contaminated in parts of the country, and a general aura of secrecy surrounds the matter, since there has been little publicity about fracking procedures, and even less about the nature and quantity of the chemicals injected into the ground.

A recent workshop on fracking was held in Ventura, one of seven statewide, by the Dept. of Conservation, which regulates oil and gas drilling in California.

According to reports from this meeting, fracking takes place at depths that are around ten times further underground than are water wells and aquifers – typically some thousands of feet below the surface.

While drillers are somewhat reluctant to divulge what constitutes their fracking blends, the State of California is now asking them to disclose this information. Chemicals used, depth and location of use, etc. In a purely voluntary fashion.

According to a State publication, common fracking compounds include salt, ethylene glycol (antifreeze), borate salts, sodium potassium carbonate, guar gum, and isopropanol. Though these may total only one part in two hundred of fracking fluids, the use of thousands of gallons of fracking fluids means these chemicals are building up underground.

Are the wells in the Sespe oilfields north of Fillmore using fracking fluids? We do not yet know.

## **ROSE VALLEY WORKCAMP TO BE REMOVED**

The Rose Valley workcamp between the lake and the Gun Club is slated for complete removal quite soon. The buildings are falling apart, and no interested users have come forward. The wells will be capped to County standards. The foundations will also be trucked away, and the site restored to a natural condition. All that will remain is a weather station amid a fenced-in area. Want a photo of the workcamp? Take one soon.

## **TAR CREEK PARKING TO BE LOCKED OUT**

In order to prohibit use of the closed Tar Creek trail to the lower Sespe, The Ojai Ranger District plans to berm the edge of the road at the former Tar Creek trailhead. Access to the two wide areas on either side of the road will be blocked by locked gates on both sides.

Endangered species concerns have led to these moves.

## **NEW ACCESS TO CAMINO CIELO TRAIL**

The Ojai Valley Land Conservancy has completed work on their Kennedy Ridge Trail, which links their Ventura River Preserve to the Camino Cielo Trail, long in disuse.

It is not yet suitable for horse traffic. Other groups are working on clearing Camino Cielo Trail to the west.

**Keep the Sespe Wild**  
**P.O. Box 715**  
**Ojai, CA 93024**

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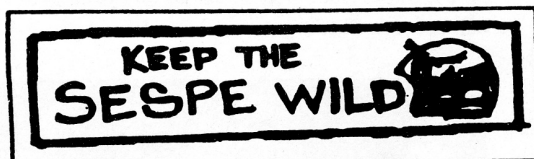
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### **HIKING AND BACKPACKING SANTA BARBARA AND VENTURA**

This very worthwhile new book, by Ventura resident Craig Carey, provides a great deal of new information about our local backcountry. Subtitled "A complete guide to the trails of the southern Los Padres Forest", it is divided into two sections. Part One is the Santa Barbara and western Mt. Pinos Ranger Districts, Part Two the eastern Mt. Pinos and Ojai Ranger Districts. Part Two includes the Ojai front country trails up to Nordhoff Ridge.

Chapter 14 covers the Sespe. The text has an incredible amount of detail; we are not sure we could have filled 9 pages of small print to describe the Sespe River Trail from the Piedra Blanca Trailhead in Rose Valley to the Sespe Hot Springs and on to the Alder Creek junction. There are descriptions of abandoned campgrounds that you can still locate with a bit of effort, sites where a picnic table and/or a metal camp-stove still remain. And we did not know that Johnny Cash started a 508-acre fire back in 1965 (his exhaust ignited dry grass) near Coltrell Flat, and was fined \$82,000 for doing so.

The Sespe Gorge, from Alder Creek junction down towards Fillmore, is not described in the book, likely because access at the south, downstream end is limited to two closed routes – the Tar Creek trail and the van Trees property just north of Fillmore. As we can attest from our annual tamarisk trips down there, the magnificent lower Sespe Gorge still gets some summer traffic, and occasionally we meet some of the intrepid rockhoppers who, like ourselves, love nothing better than to leave the trail behind at the Alder Gorge and travel through the wildest rocky river canyon in Ventura County.