

THE SESPE WILD

The Newsletter of the Keep the Sespe Wild Committee

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BIGHORN SHEEP IN THE SESPE HOTSPRINGS CANYON

DECEMBER 2019

We took our annual Sespe Hotsprings hike into the middle of the Sespe Wilderness in late October this year. This location provides access to the middle reaches of Sespe Creek for the purpose of locating and eradicating tamarisk, an exotic invasive tree species that KSWC has systematically removed from the Sespe watershed over several decades.

As usual, we take the shortest of the three trailheads that lead to the Sespe Hotsprings, which starts at Mutau Flat, about 12 miles down a Forest Service dirt road from Lockwood Valley to the north. This trail is eight miles long but beware - fully half that distance is a 2,500 foot hill. Down the hill to the hotsprings, uphill on the way back to your car. Take plenty of water on the uphill!

The Mutau Flat trailhead is seasonally closed from Nov. 01 through April, which happen to be the best months to visit the Sespe Hotsprings. In summer it is a hot canyon with little shade, and no cool water to dip in.

So our hikes there are either the first weekend of May or the last weekend of October. As often happens, we were the only party camping in Hotsprings Canyon that first night. We must mention that one can camp only a few steps away from the hotsprings creek, which emerges from the bedrock upstream at something like 160 degrees, but by our camp is a more enjoyable 105 degrees. A magical river of hot water.

We have often seen Desert Bighorn Sheep at the Sespe Hotsprings Canyon, more usually in the fall than in spring. If they are around, the canyon floor is covered with their droppings.

As we walked up the canyon the next morning, we soon noticed two small groups of six bighorns, separated by a few dozen yards. We were only a similar distance from the closest group grazing on the canyon floor. This group began leisurely moving away from us, towards



Photo of Bighorn Sheep taken by Christine Thompson, bighorn sheep staff for the CA. Dept. of Fish & Wildlife, during a helicopter survey of the Sespe Hotsprings vicinity in 2018.

the other group of six on the steep scree slope that forms the east canyon wall. There we saw some shenanigans as the boss ram had to chase off the young male that was getting very close to the adult females in his herd.

John Muir wrote of the Sierra Bighorn that "the wild sheep ranks highest among the animal mountaineers of the Sierra." To see how gracefully they can run and leap across or up an almost vertical slope of rock or scree is an amazing sight. The rams weigh up to 220 lbs., the ewes up to 155 lbs.

Their population was extirpated in this general area by 1914, until they were reintroduced from the San Gabriels in the late 1980's. Their numbers continue to grow, despite a number of wildfires that have burned across their territory in that time. In fact these fires have improved grazing for the herds.

The total Desert Bighorn population in the Sespe Wilderness is not precisely known, but the reintroduction is considered a great success, with their numbers perhaps over 100 in total by now, throughout this area.



*A Bighorn ram takes a graceful leap - likely away from the helicopter participating in a population survey, October 2019.
Photo courtesy of Christine Thompson, CDFW.*

On our recent trip, we returned to our camp by the hotsprings creek late in the afternoon. At that point the groups of bighorns were moving east over the steep canyon wall in front of us. Yet one ram remained stock still atop the cliff, silhouetted in the evening light, watching over the canyon below for maybe twenty minutes.



Camp in Hotsprings Canyon is right next to 105 degree creek!

TRAIL REALIGNED AT MUTAU FLAT

After leaving your vehicle at the Mutau Flat trailhead, it takes about one half hour to reach the headwaters of Piru Creek as this muddy little creek exits Mutau Flat to the east. At this point the Mutau Flat private property fence, which for at least a decade has been in tattered disrepair, has been sturdily repaired. This requires a return to the old Forest Service trail which heads up a short steep hill a few minutes after you step over the muddy creek. From here there is a bit of up and down as the trail stays to the east of Mutau Flat adjacent to you. We had a hard time finding this old trail at its southern end, on our way back to the car.

THANK YOU FOR DONATING TO KSWC!

We thank all our supporters who have donated generously to KSWC this past year. You provide almost all of our operating budget (which includes no paid staff, as you may know).

Donations are not tax-deductible.

PARADISE ROAD KIOSK FEES

As we have written before, the Parks Management Company concessionaire kiosk on Paradise Road, off the San Marcos Pass north of Santa Barbara, still requires almost all passing vehicles to pay an access fee.

This is in violation of PMC's operating permit from Los Padres Forest, which allows a fee only for the use of developed sites, which means day-use areas and campgrounds, including trailheads situated within those campgrounds.

All other parking along the many miles of Forest Service roads past the kiosk, including at other trailheads, is required to be fee-free. We have been bringing this up with Los Padres Forest administrators for several years now.

But recently, the agency seems to be paying attention. In October, KSWC and the Los Padres Chapter of the Sierra Club wrote a joint letter to the forest supervisor asking that action be taken to require the concessionaire to abide by their permit. KSWC has offered to pay for a clear sign at the kiosk - "DAY-USE FEES NOT REQUIRED for roadside parking outside of developed campgrounds or day-use areas."

UNITED WATER'S PROGRESS TOWARDS FISH PASSAGE AT FREEMAN DIVERSION DAM

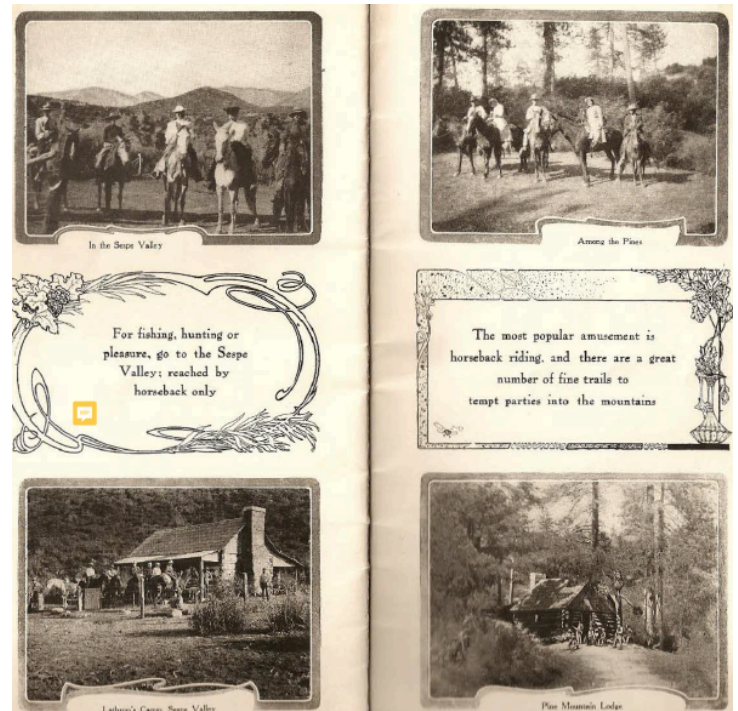
Under tight deadlines imposed on United Water by the federal court in Los Angeles, the water agency is attempting to complete designs for the most appropriate solution to allow the endangered southern steelhead to migrate upstream over the Freeman Diversion dam in winter storms. This will allow the steelhead migrating up the Santa Clara River from the ocean to reach their ancestral spawning grounds in creeks such as the Sespe, Santa Paula and Piru, which flow out from Los Padres Forest.

United Water has with a tedious passion fought, argued and delayed this moment for well over two decades now, and only the federal court deadlines have stimulated any real action towards fish passage at the Freeman Diversion dam, which facility they operate.

January 31st. 2020 is the deadline for United Water to complete 100% engineering construction designs for the two fish passage options under consideration.

The next deadline is April 30th. 2020, for United to select one of the two fish passage options to actually be built. This comes after constructing professional warehouse-size scale models of the two options, to see how they actually function.

After that comes another deadline of June 30th. 2020, for completed applications by United Water to the state and federal agencies that must approve the fish passage project. Not much time here for delay.



The above is a page from a 1910 brochure from Nordhoff, as Ojai was then named. It offers trips into the backcountry:

“On the Sespe River, over the mountains by trail, is Lathrop’s Camp. Telephone, log cabins, good table, trout fishing, quail and deer in season.” (Telephone? Surely not.)

Lathrop’s Camp was more recently Rainbow Valley Ranch on the Sespe in Rose Valley, now accessed on your left just past the Gun Club property. 1910 trail access was likely over Gridley or Horn Canyon, as Hwy. 33 was not built.

The above photos are, clockwise from top left, “In the Sespe Valley”, “Among the Pines”, “Pine Mountain Lodge”, and “Lathrop’s Camp, Rose Valley”.

What a wonderful window into the past of our local backcountry. Clearly, back in the days when horseback was still a primary form of transportation, the lure of roughing it back in the Sespe was attractive to many of Ojai’s visitors.

Pine Mountain Lodge is long gone now. Even in 1936, its roof and walls were derelict.

Lathrop’s Camp still stands beside Sespe Creek in Rose Valley, the original three cabins now a designated Ventura County Landmark, number 94.



A picture of an adult steelhead netted by United Water staff, that could not pass their Freeman Diversion dam.

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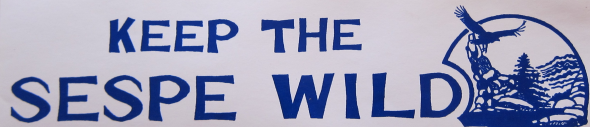
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REP. CARBAJAL BILL PASSES HOUSE COMMITTEE

H.R. 2199, the Central Coast Heritage Protection Act, which would increase wilderness areas and Wild & Scenic River miles in Los Padres Forest (including Sespe Creek), passed the House's Natural Resources Committee. After a floor vote in the House, it will move next year to the Senate, where Republican leadership has allowed hundreds of House bills to languish in limbo this year. The bill will create 245,000 wilderness acres and 159 miles of Wild & Scenic Rivers in the forest and in the Carrizo Plain.

KSWC SECURES \$5,000 DONATION TO MATILIJA FALLS TRAIL PROJECT

We wish to extend our thanks to the founder of Nutiva, an organic foods company specializing in hemp and coconut products, who lived in Ojai, for a generous \$5,000 donation to trail work across private land on the way to Matilija Falls. This new trail follows a trail easement securing public access to the falls in perpetuity.

REMEMBERING TOM WOLF

OK, so we are a year late on this, as Tom died last December. He was an Oxnard teacher who owned Pine Mtn. Inn, later Wolf's Grill. A good man and a hospitable inn keeper. We miss you.