

# THE SESPE WILD

The Newsletter of the Keep the Sespe Wild Committee

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## SUMMER 2019 HIKE DOWN SESPE GORGE SEPTEMBER 2019

Our annual tamarisk survey deep in Sespe Creek's Gorge down towards Fillmore is always a midsummer affair, taking full advantage of the longest hours of daylight.

As in any canyon, the light is always shifting on the cliff walls, which here may stretch around a thousand feet above the creek, an ever-moving display of sun and shadow. With no sign of civilization other than the frequent passage above of aircraft lining up and beginning their southerly descent towards Burbank Airport, day and night.

Day one of this four day trip is generally taken up with just getting down to the lower Sespe. One of our party has generally hiked this trail solo, starting in summer at 4:00 a.m. We usually leave the trailhead more like 9:00 a.m. On hot days in mid-July like this year's, you really want to get the better part of these 8 miles of trail before..... well, before sun up really would be good. Maybe next year we'll take a vote on that.

The first night, I awoke late to sounds made by a ringtail cat looking to try some of the bagged goods in my pack. As soon as I turned on my flashlight, it scampered off.



*Enjoying a pool on day two. Photos are in chronological order.*

So, on to day two, the first of three days with no trail whatsoever, only a sea of rocks, giant boulders, sand and water to thread your way downstream through. What a delight that is. There's almost no

vegetation to struggle through in the Sespe Gorge, especially after a wet winter like our last one, as the storm flows rise up in the narrow canyon and blast away most of the trees, shrubs and cattails, carrying them downstream maybe as far as the ocean.

The air temperature was 92 degrees today, and the creek water a balmy 80. With slow flows in summer, and no tree shade as grows nearer the headwaters, the shallow water gets to a lovely temperature for swimming. Which we do, a lot. Every time there's a beautiful pool, that is. It's a tradition. We often dip in with all our clothes on, as hiking in wet clothes is a wonderful way to stay chill for a while. In summer there is a constant upstream breeze all day long, down in the Sespe Gorge, which helps keep one cool when near the water.

It's even a little warm for the native rainbow trout and steelhead. They can sometimes be spotted in lower Sespe Creek hanging out wherever cooler water seeps into a warm pool from some spring. But the fact that they can survive at all in these warm summer waters of Southern California's creeks and rivers (whose high temperatures would be lethal to more northerly West Coast trout and steelhead) makes our southern trout and steelhead the most important species to protect. In a world of ongoing global heating, the southern steelhead's warm water genes may be needed one day to colonize river systems far to our north.



*A long, shallow wade this year is more often too deep for that.*

## TAMARISK AND SEDIMENT

Very few tamarisk plants in the creek all day. The seeds carried downstream from Hotsprings Canyon with post-Day Fire (2006) sediment flows have now nearly all been carried further downstream by storm flows - as with the larger vegetation, so with tiny seeds, maybe all the way out to the ocean.

Hotsprings Canyon was the site of the Sespe watershed's mother of all tamarisk infestations. We were lucky enough back in 1991 to recognize the young tamarisk in Hotsprings Canyon, and realize the risk of them becoming the predominant vegetation throughout the lower Sespe from there down to Fillmore.

You may have seen tamarisk run rampant in other areas of the Southwest, such as at Lake Havasu, the Grand Canyon, and Canyonlands, to name just a few. Each tamarisk plant can grow to a tree thirty feet tall or more, with a trunk over 18" in diameter, and their density eventually leaves no room for other plants or trees to grow.

Their thirst for water would have long ago greatly depleted the Sespe's summer creek flows, reducing the amount of water required by any number of aquatic species. Not to mention the Sespe Creek water that is used to replenish overdrafted aquifers beneath the Oxnard Plain. The U.S. Geological Survey calculated that around two thirds of the water diverted for this purpose at the Freeman Diversion downstream on the Santa Clara River originates in the Sespe.

Luckily for the Sespe, tamarisk locally are almost entirely limited to growing in riparian areas where they may reach their roots down to damp sand. If they'd thrived in their hundreds further up the hot, dry creek banks, we may never have nearly eradicated them from the Sespe, as we have, 28 years and close to 80 tamarisk survey and removal hikes later. Not that anyone has to force us to go back there and spend some time digging in the sand and cutting tamarisk roots in that beautiful canyon.

As to all that post-Day Fire sediment. We keep thinking that the most recent winter storm events will surely have got to the end of the loose sediments that eroded from fire-burned slopes down into Sespe Creek. It's now thirteen years already.

Instead, the sediment was deeper than ever this year in the Sespe Gorge. Pools that most times you'd have to swim (with your backpack on a 36" pool floatie) were only inches of water in depth. At the one deepest spot you could just wade through with the water up to your chin, and your backpack carried over your head - for only maybe ten steps on the sandy creek bottom before the water got shallower again. Maybe next year will be the sediment washout year....and we'll see deeper water in many of our favorite pools again. Or maybe not. All this sediment is destined to one day become beach

sand, its flow constantly rebuilding our beaches from the ongoing natural forces of beach erosion.

Day two came to rest in a lovely, sandy campsite facing a magnificent, thousand feet high cliff face, too steep for much vegetation. Though some greenery is visible below a series of seeps hundreds of feet above the creek. One time we noticed a rock falling from near the top of the cliff. It took over two minutes to bounce its way all the way down to the creek.

Day three is the day where some swims are usually required to get past three deep pools, but as stated above, this year the sediment build up in these pools meant we didn't have to use the floaties we carry to float our backpacks as we swim.



*Second Narrows usually needs to be swum - not this year.*

The next major feature of this day's hike is West Fork Sespe, the major tributary coming in from the west between Alder Creek and Fillmore. This side canyon carries an enormous volume of water in winter storms, so that Sespe Creek below this point has very little sediment build up, and the larger pools become quite deep again.

West Fork Sespe has not been infiltrated by the exotic invasive species that have now populated most of the mainstem Sespe. These include bluegill, bullhead catfish, bullfrogs and green sunfish. All of these prey on young trout, and they compete with the trout for habitat space.

Most of them arrived in the Sespe from the Rose Valley lakes, where they were introduced by anglers seeking to catch them there later. The problem arises whenever high water caused the lakes to overflow, whereby the exotics are carried into Rose Valley Creek, then into Howard Creek and the Sespe. They have all spread downstream by now along the entire creek. But they do not readily enter tributaries and colonize them upstream.

Meaning that West Fork Sespe is a refuge for our native trout, as can be seen in the photo at the top of the next page, taken there this past July.





Our third night's camp was on a small beach opposite West Fork Sespe. Day four sees us hiking all the way down to the orchards north of Fillmore, where our vehicles were parked at a friend's house. This part of the Sespe is where oil seeps become more frequent.

In the early 1900's oil exploration and production took place on the west bank of Sespe Creek here, downstream of West Fork Sespe. However, Congress created the Sespe Condor Sanctuary in 1947, which at 53,000 acres straddles Sespe Creek and was the first measure to attempt to stabilize the then shrinking numbers of our nation's largest bird species. This led to the abandonment of the oil industry's infrastructure here. Many of these oil seeps locally may be natural, but many may also persist from surface leaks dating from the early days of oil extraction nearby.

This day also saw our team spend an hour or so digging up some large tamarisk specimens that we recently noticed on the east bank a mile below West Fork Sespe. It's funny how our group watches for tamarisk year after year, but only after somehow missing these tall plants for many, many years did we spot this cluster two years ago.

Another issue with sediment requires us to put more time and effort into uprooting tamarisk in these parts. As winter storm flows speed along, young tamarisk stems get flattened downstream, and often end up buried inches below ground, only to send up new vertical shoots the next summer. This means that when you're digging them up, you have first to dig up the buried horizontal stems, and then be prepared to dig further straight down to get to the root juncture, where you must cut off the tamarisk with a small saw. Cutting above the root juncture means the tamarisk will resprout - so in a future year, our team will have to dig up the same spot once more.

And fresh deposits of sediment mean more sand to dig through to get to tamarisk roots. Often we are digging 18" below ground level to reach and then cut the roots of large tamarisk. But the creek can help as well - two years ago high creek flows

washed away about half of this particular stand of tamarisk. That saved us hours of work.

About two hours hiking time below West Fork brings us to Tar Creek, where the trail of the same name starts, which is now closed to public use because of its proximity to an important traditional condor roosting spot.

Just downstream of Tar Creek is the Sespe boulder field, a jumble of giant house-sized boulders of purple Sespe sandstone. It helps to know how to thread your way through this maze, without having to venture up the bank into the poison oak zone.

We always stay to the west side, though other routes may be found. The most fun, without a backpack, is just to follow the water underneath all the boulders.



*A wonderful swimming hole surrounded by purple Sespe sandstone boulders that have sat here for ..... a very long time.*

Some of our party spotted several condors circling far above, for a few minutes. We may well miss many such condor sightings while hiking down this trail-less gorge, which requires constant attention to where and how you step.

We reached Devil's Gate, a set of cliffs that mark the southern boundary of Los Padres National Forest, as evening fell. From there it's about one hour to our vehicles. We traverse this stretch with the permission of the private landowner.

### **REP. JULIA BROWNLEY LETTER**

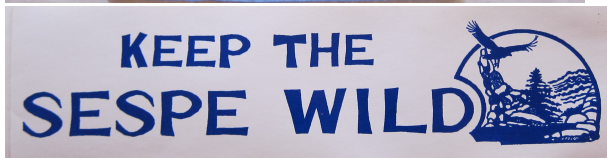
Congresswoman Julia Brownley wrote to the National Marine Fisheries Service in July, seeking an update on efforts to design and construct adequate fish passage at the Freeman Diversion dam on the Santa Clara River. This proposal has dragged on for two decades now, with United Water, who operate the diversion dam, trying every delaying tactic on the books, and then some, in order to reach their goal of the whole question just going away. Since last year, however, federal judge David Carter has imposed a tight timeline on United Water, meaning they are actually comparing various engineering options. One must be selected soon for modeling.

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### **PLEASE SEND US A DONATION**

Your donations cover all of our costs. Please continue to support KSWC and our operating budget (which is pretty minimal.) All labor is volunteered.

Donations are not tax-deductible, as we are a 501 (c) (4) non-profit. Thanks as usual to all those who have donated so far this year. We could not do what needs our work without your support.

### **FEWER MARIJUANA GROWS IN LOS PADRES FOREST**

Ventura County Sheriff's Dept. officials say that the number of illegal marijuana grows they find in Los Padres Forest locally took a drop last year to only one third as many plants as in previous years. The reason is unclear.

### **STATE BOARD SUPPORTS STEEL- HEAD AT LAKE CACHUMA**

In a ruling that has been in the works for two decades, California's State Water Resources Control Board ruled that water released for the endangered southern steelhead into the Santa Ynez River below Bradbury Dam and Lake Cachuma has been inadequate for the species' recovery. Studies will evaluate how much more water will be needed, as well as how to provide fish passage past the dam, to allow steelhead access to the 48 miles of river upstream where the fish have historically spawned and reared their young. Sounding familiar?



