

BEAR GULCH TRAIL GUIDE

The Six Bridges Nature Walk



Pinnacles National Monument



For your safety and enjoyment, and the consideration of others, Please...

- ☛ Stay on the trail, erosion scars the landscape.
- ☛ Don't litter, every little "butt" hurts.
- ☛ Report damage or problems to a ranger.
- ☛ Carry water in hot weather.
- ☛ Wear proper clothing and footwear.
- ☛ Take only pictures and leave only footprints.



THE NATIONAL PARK SERVICE IS CHARGED WITH THE MANAGEMENT OF THE NATION'S MOST PRECIOUS NATURAL AND CULTURAL resources. These resources are part of our national heritage, and provide opportunities for recreation, appreciation of beauty, historical reflection, cultural enrichment, and environmental education. It is the responsibility of those involved in park management and park visitors to ensure the protection of these resources.

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Illustrations © Chad Moore
Map by Gail Sleznick



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Pinnacles National Monument is a land dominated by stark volcanic rocks and dry chaparral-covered hills. In contrast, this trail takes you through a cool, green oasis where the Bear Gulch Creek gently murmurs along side the path, accompanying you on your walk.



TRAIL MARKER

The plants and animals that have adapted to and depend on this area form a riparian community (Latin *riparius* river).

You may start at the trailhead near the visitor center, lower Chalone parking area, or the Chalone Creek picnic area. (Refer to the map on the back of this booklet.) Follow the place descriptions and the numbered bridges given in the guide. Walk at a leisurely pace and stop frequently to enjoy the natural richness of this waterway.

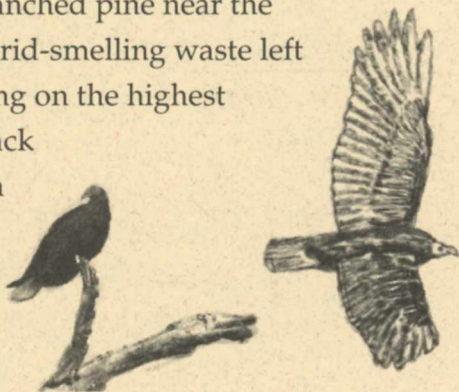
Between the trailhead near Bear Gulch visitor center and bridge #1, massive live oaks (*Quercus agrifolia*) and California sycamores (*Platanus racemosa*) tower above you. The furrowed and twisted trunks of red willows (*Salix laevigata*) grow below and in between the large trees, while dense tangles of wild blackberry (*Rubus ursinus*) grow along the banks of the creek. Blackberries are relished by many wildlings, so you



SYCAMORE LEAF

probably won't find a ripe one to savor.

Under the huge multi-branched pine near the trail, you may note the acrid-smelling waste left by turkey vultures roosting on the highest branches. These large, black carrion-eaters can be seen soaring over the High Peaks on warm afternoons looking for their next meal.



TURKEY VULTURES

The tall pines leaning over are called gray pines (*Pinus sabiniana*). During winter storms, when the ground is soaked soft and hard winds blow, their deep, strong root system allows them to lean without falling over. The delicious nuts

hidden in the cones are an important food source for many animals at Pinnacles.

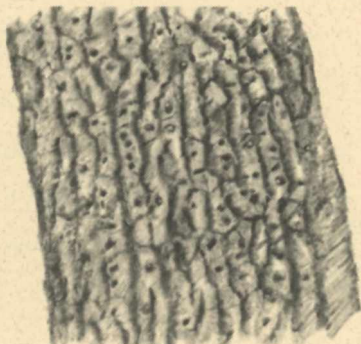
However, these heavy, sharp-scaled cones may cause damage if they happen to fall on your head (the chief ranger's wife needed ten stitches to close her wound).



GRAY PINE CONE

Do you see pines with many small holes in their trunks? These are "granary trees" for the acorn woodpecker. The soft bark of these pines make it easy for these industrious birds to peck holes just the right

size for them to stash a winter supply of acorns and pinenuts.



GRANARY TREE

Stop at Bridge #1 . Look carefully into the pool below you. You may be lucky enough to spot a small native fish called three-spined stickleback. Keep a keen eye out also for the threatened red-legged frog, or for insects such as water striders scooting across the pool's surface and boatmans using their oarlike front legs to swim beneath the water. Pools like this are good spots to observe wildlife coming to quench their thirst in the late afternoon and early evening.

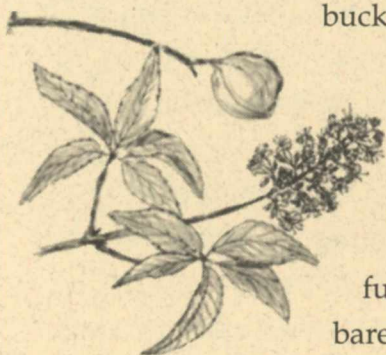
Bridge #2 is surrounded with poison oak (*Toxicodendron diversilobum*). This colorful plant crawls up trees, vines over shrubs, and grows as a bush. In spring, it emerges coppery red; in summer, bright green; in fall, gold and scarlet. Avoid suffering the consequences of touching this deceitfully gentle plant by remembering the phrase, "Leaves of three, let it be." Surprisingly, deer readily browse poison oak with no adverse effects.

As you walk between Bridge #2 and Bridge #3, a dramatic change occurs. Everything looks much drier here. The topography of the canyon widens and

levels out, causing the creek to slow and deposit sediments. This porous material called alluvium allows the creek to flow underground much of the year. The lack of surface water and the addition of more sun prohibits the growth of shade- and water-adapted plants.

You may notice the scarred remains of past fires. Almost every year this area is intentionally burned to reduce fire-prone vegetation. Frequent, fast-burning fires actually refertilize the soil and clears dense thickets allowing other plants to prosper.

Between Bridges #3 and #4, a most interesting tree thrives—the California buckeye (*Aesculus californica*). In late-spring, this small multi-trunked tree produces a profusion of fragrant flowers, which are toxic to bees. By mid-summer, when other trees are glorying in their full foliage, the buckeye enters its ugly duckling phase. In order to conserve water during the long summer drought, the



buckeye's once lush leaves wither and turn brown, making the tree look dead. All this time the fruit has been growing. By fall, the old leaves have fallen and the full-grown fruit hangs on the bare branches like pear-shaped

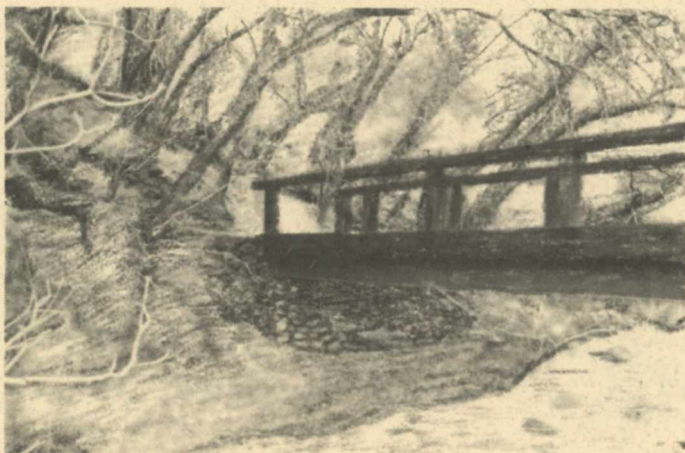
Christmas ornaments. The ugly duckling has become an elegant swan. Finally, the outer skin of the fruit splits open to drop its large seed or "buckeye." Like the flowers, the fruit is toxic.

Just below Bridge #4, the canyon steepens and a superb rock formation rises above your head. The small canyon wren favors sheer cliffs such as this. Listen for its exuberant descending trill, that once heard is never forgotten.



CANYON WREN

The jumble of fallen rocks, or talus, begins the creek's steep descent below Bridge #4. The creek becomes a roaring cascade during rainy seasons with heavy runoff. It is short lived however, as the water quickly percolates beneath the surface after the rains have ceased.



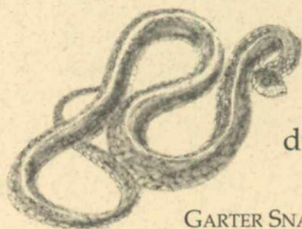
The steep section of trail between Bridge #4 and Bridge #5 enters a deep riparian woodland dominated by coast live oaks and California sycamores. Stop a moment and listen to the quiet. The dense canopy of trees and the thick leaf-litter muffle sound, and the deep shade seems to intensify the stillness. The layers of leaves give a carpet effect that is inviting to walk on, but the leaves release acids that suppress the growth of many plants. High in the trees you may hear the song of a warbler, a vireo, a sparrow, or the raucous call of a Steller's jay. This is a birdwatcher's heaven.



COAST LIVE OAK

At Bridge #5, you experience the riparian world at its best. A lush garden of giant chain ferns (*Woodwardia fimbriata*) and broad-spreading bracken ferns (*Pteridium aquilinum*) lie at your feet, while huge California sycamores tower above. The area is reminiscent of a primeval swamp in the Jurassic Period. Of course there are no dinosaurs, but you may spot a rare western pond turtle or a garter snake.

There are many ferns along the Bear Gulch Trail. Most depend on cool, moist places, but some are quite drought-tolerant by going dormant during the long dry season.



GARTER SNAKE

The chain fern's fronds emerge in a tight curl called a "fiddleneck," which was a favored food of the native people of this area. The astringent bracken fern was used to tan leather. In the spring, the delicate maidenhair fern (*Adiantum jordanii*) grows along the banks of the trail. It can be recognized by its small, fan-shaped leaflets.



Tracking through the water and forming small cascades are the root systems of the California sycamores. It takes a long time (until mid-summer) for their leaves to reach full size, which can be as much as one foot across. The ghost-white, mottled bark of these trees is striking, especially in the winter when their branches are bare of foliage.

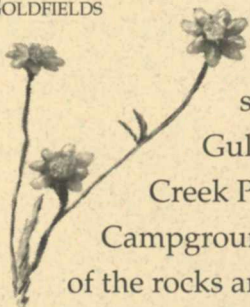
The trail between Bridge #5 and Bridge #6 rises fifty feet above the creek and the riparian plants below. The direction and the steepness of the slope here provide shade and, consequently, more moisture than the open areas. A community of plants called moist-phase chaparral dominate here. Holly-leaved cherry (*Prunus ilicifolia*), toyon (*Heteromeles arbutifolia*), big berry manzanita (*Arctostaphylos glauca*) and scrub oak (*Quercus berberidifolia*) grow here and provide an abundance of food for wildlings. Look for scat with large round seeds in it, and you'll know that some critter had a cherry feast.

At Bridge #6, a glade of Santa Barbara sedge (*Carex barbarae*) fills the creek below. The leaves of this riparian plant have strong fibers and were used by the native people of California to weave beautiful and useful baskets.

Do you see the parallel lines of holes circling the trunk of the tree near the bridge? They're the work of the red-breasted sapsucker. This woodpecker drills into the tree's conductive tissue causing sap to ooze from the holes. The sapsucker then returns to act out its name.

You will also notice other markings, some of them resembling crude letters of the alphabet, on the trunks of several sycamores along the Bear Gulch Trail. These marks are caused by the invasive species *Homo dimwitius*. If you see this destructive species at work, please identify them to a ranger.

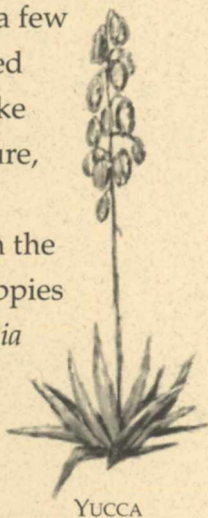
As you walk between Bridge #6 and the lower end of Bear Gulch Canyon, look down at the pools and ledges carved into the hard volcanic rock. Watch your step—it's a long way down. Water rushes over the resistant rock carved ledges, while the softer rock is scoured into the pools. Water is a master sculptor, and its power and creativity can be seen throughout Pinnacles.



A broad alluvial wash surrounds the sign marking the junction of the Bear Gulch Trail and the trails to the Chalone Creek Picnic Area and the Pinnacles

Campground. Note the many colors and textures of the rocks and gravel, which are fragments of the Pinnacles Volcanic Formation. They represent a variety of minerals, and they hold the clues to the physical and chemical processes of their creation. Red-toned rhyolite, chocolate-brown andesite, greenish pumice tuff, and gray-flecked Granite are some of the igneous rocks in this area.

Much of the year this landscape is desert-like. The depth and the porous nature of the sediments allow water to quickly seep below the surface. Only a few drought-tolerant plants, such as the deep-rooted gray pine, or quick growing annuals, which take advantage of the brief period of surface moisture, can grow here. The tall-stalked yucca (*Yucca whipplei*) enhances the desert ambiance, and in the spring blooms of the desert, like California poppies (*Eschscholzia californica*) and goldfields (*Lasthenia californica*), colorfully decorate the wash.



YUCCA

For those who have walked down from the visitor center, the trail junction sign marks the end of the self-guided trail. For those walking up to the visitor center the trail junction sign marks the beginning of the Bear Gulch Trail.

Bear Gulch Trail Map

