

San Francisco Hot Springs Area

Watchable Wildlife

Site 42

Two hundred years ago, Southwestern rivers were lined by streamside 'oases' of lush vegetation -- green threads woven against the brown fabric of the desert.

These riparian zones were thick with native trees and plants, a haven for resident and migrant wildlife.

A VESTIGE OF LOST BEAUTY

Today, because of human alterations to the land, these fragile green ribbons have all but disappeared. In a few places, vestiges of the lost beauty remains. One such area is along the San Francisco River in southwestern New Mexico, between Pleasanton and the Arizona border. Other areas include the Box Canyon of the San Francisco River, located between Luna and Reserve; it is actually three separate box canyon areas, none of which is easily accessible and portions of which lie within private land.

Visitors may access a portion of the San Francisco River by heading south of Glenwood/Pleasanton along US Highway 180. About two miles south of Pleasanton, take the turn-off on your right (watch for a sign with the brown binoculars logo for Site 42) and take dirt road FR 519. Parking is limited along the road before the iron gate that denotes the beginning of private property. From this point, it's a quarter-mile hike to the river.

ANCIENT TREES

This area is especially lush and beautiful during April and May. June and July can be on the hot side for most hikers, and August and September are downright unbearable. Bring plenty of drinking water, sunscreen, a hat, and common sense.

Take note of the riverside trees. Far from being just 'any old trees', these ancient stands include uncommon, native cottonwoods, such as the Fremont and narrow-leaf. Although they resemble willows, they are true cottonwood species. The two often hybridize together. 'Hybrid' thickets are home to a diversity of insect species, thus drawing an equally high diversity of birdlife. Why do insects prefer the hybrid trees? Is it due to the 'hybrid vigor'? Answers are still out on this question.

Also, look for other trees: the majestic, spreading Arizona sycamore with its smooth 'cement' trunk; the lacy-leafed native walnut; and delicate foliaged mesquite tree. Other types of greenery embellish the majesty of the trees, river, and cliffs: woodbine, grapevine, and pink-blooming wild rose.

SOUTHWESTERN BIRDING

Mid-April through mid-June, and again during the fall, birds flock to the river's cottonwood stands.

Watch for the common black hawk which nests in the area. Despite its name, this medium-sized, dark raptor isn't common at all, but a much-sought species on Southwestern bird lists. Also keep an eye out for small owls, such as the elf, flammulated, and Northern pygmy.

Crows and jays are frequently seen in the area: common raven, American crow, Steller's, scrub, and pinon Jays.

You'll hear the sweet, liquid notes of wrens -- rock, Bewick's, and canyon -- each with unique intonation.

Watch for migratory grosbeaks: blue and black-headed grosbeaks, as well as the brilliant red Northern cardinal.

Other sweet singers, heard along the river, are vireos and orioles. Listen for the plaintive notes of Bell's, solitary, and warbling vireos, or the melodious song of the Scott's, hooded, and Bullock's orioles.

Look for small, bright flashes of color that identify the painted redstart, summer tanager, common yellowthroat, yellow-breasted chat, and lazuli bunting.

Less colorful birds are also in evidence: black phoebe, violet-green and cliff swallow, white-throated swift, Cassin's kingbird, common poor will, killdeer, and bushtit.

WILDLIFE WATCHING

With good luck and a keen eye, hikers may glimpse resident Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep. In 1964, bighorn sheep were transplanted from Banff, Canada, to southwestern New Mexico, into what was formerly desert bighorn sheep range. Desert bighorn had been extirpated from these ranges by the early part of this century. Ten sheep were released into the nearby Gila Wilderness, and 18 others were transplanted to the San Francisco River Canyon. The current San Francisco River population stands at about 80 bighorn.

Besides bighorn, watch for mule deer, rock squirrel, jackrabbit, and beaver. Look for common merganser and great blue heron along the river.

WALKING THE RIVER

Whether along flats or box canyons, hiking the San Francisco River is not for the faint of heart. It means walking, wading, swimming, and clambering over rocks -- very large rocks. The San Francisco River follows the Luna Valley through rugged yet picturesque, rolling mountains. It flows between Hellroaring Mesa (8,145 ft.) and Dillon Mountain

(8,740 ft.) to the north and the San Francisco Mountains (8,435 ft.) to the south. An important caveat in this country is the fact of flash flooding. A flash flood in a narrow box canyon is no joke; indeed, it can have deadly consequences. Flash floods can occur in July and August, so keep an eye on the weather. Since you must backtrack the river the same way you came in, it's important to keep track of the time. Plan accordingly.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Much of the land surrounding the San Francisco River is private property. Other stretches of the river are managed by the USDA Forest Service. For more information about public access along the San Francisco River, contact the Glenwood Ranger District, (505) 539-2481.