

Emigrant Wilderness: A Profile

Stanislaus National Forest

ROG 16-25; 12/10



The 113,000-acre Emigrant Wilderness is located in the Stanislaus National Forest, on the upper western slope of the central Sierra Nevada mountain range. Bordered on the south by Yosemite National Park and on the east by the Toiyabe National Forest/Hoover Wilderness, this Wilderness measures roughly 25 miles long and 15 miles wide.

Major watersheds drain to the Stanislaus and Tuolumne Rivers. The area is entirely within Tuolumne County and is approximately 140 air miles east of San Francisco, 50 air miles south of Lake Tahoe.

General Characteristics

The Emigrant Wilderness is a glaciated landscape of great scenic beauty. The northeastern section of the Wilderness is characterized by volcanic ridgelines and peaks, with the remaining areas comprised of many sparsely vegetated, granite ridges divided by lakes and meadows. Elevations range from below 5,000' near the Cherry Reservoir to the majestic 11,750' Leavitt Peak. The range of elevation of the most popular high use areas falls within the 7,500'- 9,000' range. Precipitation averages 50" annually—80% of it in the form of snow. Snow packs typically linger into June—sometimes later following very wet winters. Summers are generally dry and mild—however, afternoon thundershowers occur periodically and nighttime temperatures can dip below freezing. Always be prepared for cold and wet weather!



History

Various Native American tribes (among them the Me-Wuk) populated this area for 10,000 years, spending the summer and early autumn months hunting game/gathering acorns in the high country and trading with other tribes (such as the Piute tribe of the Great Basin) on the eastern slope of the Sierra. Following the discovery of gold in 1848, large numbers of miners and settlers quickly descended on the area, causing a decline in native population and culture alike.

In September-October of 1852, the Clark-Skidmore Party became the first emigrant group to travel the West Walker route over Emigrant Pass and continue through a portion of the present-day Emigrant Wilderness. The next year, although several more groups were enticed by officials in Sonora to use this route, it was found to present a very difficult passage fraught with hardships for all who attempted it. The passage was later abandoned. Relief Valley was named as such because of the assistance stranded travelers received from the Sonora area.

Wilderness Management

In 1931, the Forest Service designated this area as the Emigrant Basin Primitive Area. The Wilderness Act of 1964 established the National Wilderness Preservation System "to secure for the American people of present and future generations the benefits of an enduring source of wilderness". On January 4, 1975, the Emigrant Basin Primitive Area was designated as the Emigrant Wilderness and became part of that system.

Wilderness stewardship means managing the effects of human activities on wilderness values, such as naturalness and solitude. Certain uses are allowed by the Wilderness Act, among them recreation and grazing. All such activities, however, must be carried out in a way that does not degrade wilderness values.

Recreation

Management of lands where visitors recreate is essential for the preservation of solitude and natural surroundings, those things that differentiate wilderness from other settings. Over 15,000 people visit the Emigrant every year, principally from June to September. Numerous lakes in the Wilderness are stocked with trout each year by the California Department of Fish and Game.

Grazing

Livestock grazing first came into the high country in the 1860's. The Wilderness Act allows grazing to continue where it was an established practice before the area was designated as wilderness. There are four grazing

allotments in the Emigrant Wilderness. Grazing management plans specify cattle numbers and length of time to graze in each feed area. Gates and drift fences control livestock movement to help prevent overgrazing and reduce potential conflicts with wilderness visitors. Please help by keeping the gates closed. If you are interested in planning a trip that avoids exposure to livestock grazing, suggestions can be provided for you by the Wilderness Rangers or by the front desk personnel at Summit or Mi-Wok Ranger Districts.

Wilderness Travel

There are approximately 185 miles of trails in the Emigrant Wilderness. Travel is by foot or horseback only. Mechanized transportation of any kind (including bikes) is prohibited. Popular trailheads are Kennedy Meadows, Crabtree Camp, Gianelli Cabin (Burst Rock), Bell Meadow, Waterhouse Lake, Coyote Meadow (Cooper Pocket) and Cherry Lake. Group size is limited to 15 people and 25 head of stock. Wilderness permits are required only for overnight stays, not for day hikes.

Walking

Stay on the trails and avoid the shortcuts between switchbacks. Shortcutting erodes the sides of trails and local vegetation. Walk carefully through meadows (and only if you must). Place feet on solid ground, rock or sand whenever possible. Watch where you are going and pay attention at all times. If you encounter horses on the trail, they have the right of way. Don't startle them with loud, sudden movements. Move to the safest side of them (usually the lower part of the trail) and let them pass. Keep your pets leashed/under control.

Fires

Check with the ranger for any restrictions when you obtain your wilderness/campfire permits. Most wilderness areas (including Emigrant) prohibit fires above 9,000 feet elevation and in sensitive zones (including within 1/2 mile of Emigrant Lake).

It is up to you to know the rules for the area where you are traveling. Most importantly, it is your responsibility to follow the rules. For instance, just because a fire ring is present in a restricted area does not mean it is appropriate or legal to use it. It's not just the

fire danger, but also the impact on the land and the effect on local wildlife habitat.

Bring appropriate clothing and dress in layers to help you stay warm. You should not even need a fire. If you do build a fire, use an appropriate campfire ring. Use only dead and downed wood you find on the forest floor to build the fire. When the fire is out, completely extinguish the coals with water and don't leave until you are positive the fire is out.

Camp

Choose a site that is at least 100 feet from any water. No digging water trenches. Be smart. Campsite choice depends on activity (e.g., if you want to have a fire, use an existing site; if you don't plan on a fire, pick a durable spot and "leave no trace").

Garbage

Pack it in—pack it out. Pack out eggshells, fruit/vegetable peels/cores, etc. Leave nothing but the beauty. If you find trash on the trail, pick it up and take it with you.

Cleaning

Soap and food can change water chemistry and damage wildlife that are dependent on water supplies. Perform personal hygiene well away from the water source, using biodegradable camp soaps.

Courtesy

Travel in such a manner as not to be noticed. Keep your group small and unobtrusive. Keep pets and children under control at all times. Destroying nature's splendor for the sake of fun or ignorance is inexcusable. Most simply seek the quiet, simplistic qualities found in pristine settings and nature's offerings. Treat the land and wildlife with appropriate respect.

When Nature Calls

Dig a hole 6-8 inches deep and 100 feet from any water source, campsite or trail. Cover hole with soil, pine needle duff or other decomposing matter. Take a little walk to find a suitable place, one that allows for proper decomposition and privacy. Be aware of where others may look to camp after you've departed.

"Leave No Trace"