

# Emigrant Wilderness: A Profile

ROG 16-25 12/2019



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 Hoover Wilderness on the Toiyabe National Forest, 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. Driving distance is approximately 138 miles from San Francisco and 125 miles from Lake Tahoe.

The Emigrant Wilderness is a glaciated landscape of great scenic beauty. The northeastern section of the wilderness is characterized by volcanic ridgelines and peaks. The remaining sections are sparsely vegetated granite ridges, with lakes and meadows scattered around the area. Elevations range from below 5,000 feet near the Cherry Reservoir to the majestic 11,750-foot Leavitt Peak. The range of elevation in the most popular high use areas lies between the 7,500-foot to 9,000-foot levels. Precipitation averages 50 inches annually; 80 percent is in the form of snow. The snowpack typically lingers into June, and sometimes even later after a very wet winter. Summers are generally dry and mild, but 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 and gathering acorns in the high country. They traded with other tribes, such as the Piute tribe of the Great Basin, on the eastern slope of the Sierra. After gold was discovered in 1848, large numbers of miners and settlers descended on the area, causing a decline in the native population and their culture.

In the fall of 1852, the Clark-Skidmore party was the first emigrant group to travel the West Walker route over Emigrant Pass. The following year, while several more groups were enticed by officials in Sonora to use this route, it was a very difficult passage with hardships for all who attempted it and it was later abandoned. Relief Valley got its name from the assistance stranded travelers received from the Sonora area residents.

## Wilderness Management

In 1931, the Forest Service designated the 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 Jan. 4, 1975, the Emigrant Basin Primitive Area was designated as the Emigrant Wilderness.

Wilderness stewardship means managing the effects of human activities on wilderness values like 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, things that differentiate wilderness from other settings. Over 29,000 people visit the Emigrant every year, principally from June to September. The numerous lakes in the wilderness mean there are excellent fishing opportunities.





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### Grazing

Livestock grazing first came into the high country in the 1860s. 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 how many cattle and what length of time they are authorized 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 Groveland 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

When you obtain your wilderness/campfire permits check restrictions in the area you plan to travel in. Most wilderness areas (including Emigrant) prohibit fires above 9,000 feet elevation and in sensitive zones (including within 1/2 mile of Emigrant Lake).

Please read your Wilderness Permit and follow both the regulations and "Leave No Trace" principles provided for you. Just because a fire ring is in a restricted area, it is still prohibited to use. 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 safety gear for low temperatures, especially at night. Leave No Trace ethics ask that you avoid using fire, however if you must build one, use an established campfire ring that is at least 100 feet away from all water. Please do not make new campfire rings. Keep fires small, use only dead and downed wood you find on the ground. At night and when you leave, put the fire out. Insure that it is extinguish completely with water using the drown, stir and feel method and is cold and wet to the touch.

### Camp

Choose a site that is at least 100 feet from any water. No digging water trenches. Campsite choice depends on activity. If you want to have a fire, use an existing campfire ring; 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, please 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 holes 8 inches deep and 100 feet from any water source, campsite or trail. Cover with soil, pine needle duff or other decomposing matter. Be aware of where others may want to camp after you've departed. "Leave No Trace".

Please feel free to contact us with any questions you may have at

### Stanislaus National Forest

Supervisor's Office  
19777 Greenley Road  
Sonora, CA 95370  
(209) 532-3671