

Animals Along the Trail



Photo by ramalm

Checkerspot butterfly
Medium-sized butterflies with orange and black or brown markings. Their caterpillars feed on rabbitbrush.



Desert horned lizard
Their mottled coloring and flattened bodies help them hide in crevices. Their favorite food is ants but they will eat other insects.



Black-billed Magpie
Related to crows and jays, magpies are smart and adaptable. The black and white markings and long tail are easy to recognize.



Photo by Lanny Holmes

Mule Deer
Named for their large ears. They usually travel in small bands and are most active near dawn and dusk. They like to eat shrubs and flowers.

Woolypod milkvetch
Pink flowers in spring with white, fuzzy seed pods in the summer. Often growing around rocks or between large shrubs.



Snowy thistle
Native thistles up to 6 feet tall with bright pink flowers and fuzzy, white stems and leaves. Grows on rocky hillsides in June and July. Pollinated by butterflies and hummingbirds.

Giant blazingstar
Large yellow flowers on a plant up to 3 feet tall. Flowers open at dusk and close during the day. Grows in roadsides and bare slopes.



Photo by Emma Wynn

Prickly Poppy
The large, white flowers with a yellow center resemble fried eggs and can be seen along roadsides all summer. The stem, leaves, and fruits are covered in prickles.

Carson Valley monkeyflower
A rare, tiny, annual plant with yellow flowers up to 1" wide. Found only from Washoe Valley to Carson Valley. Grows in sandy soils near Stop 1.



Small onion and blue butterfly
Early spring flower with pink petals that attract butterflies. Grows in sand or clay soils in gaps between shrubs.

Sulphur-flower buckwheat
Bushy buckwheat with yellow flowers. Up to 1 foot tall and 3 feet wide. In many different habitats. Food plant for many butterflies and bees.



Daggerpod
Bright purple flowers in early spring. Stems with long, pointy fruits turn brown by summer. A fungus can turn the leaves yellow.

Wildflowers Along the Trail

Trail Overview

This guide features 12 stops with activities ranging from wildlife viewing to a short hike. Each stop has information about the natural history of the area including wildflowers, animals, geology, and human history.

The trail follows the easiest route up to McClellan Peak and then down to Virginia City. The roads near the gravel pit and Jumbo Grade are well maintained but other sections can be rough and rocky. The trail is passable with a 4WD high-clearance vehicle. The trail follows city streets in Virginia City. Please use care on the steep and narrow streets - they can be very busy in the summer.

Before you start the journey up to Virginia City, you may want to check out some of the wildlife habitats within Washoe Lake State Park.

Contribute your wildlife observations along the trail through iNaturalist.org.

This trail passes through both private and public lands, along with sensitive habitats for rare species. Please stay on the established roads and trails to keep this route open to the public.

The trail is 14.5 miles long. It takes about 45 to 60 minutes to drive the route with no stops. Plan an additional 2-3 hours to explore all of the stops. There are no restrooms or potable water along the route.



Scan this code to access online versions of this map with extra stops and information.

heritage.nv.gov/off-road-naturalist



Washoe Lake State Park

Presented by:

 Nevada Division of Natural Heritage
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 Nevada Off-Highway Vehicles Program
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Ride Smart - Ride Safe

Nevada Off-Road Naturalist Trail

Washoe Lake State Park to Virginia City

Nevada Off-Road Naturalist Trail — Washoe Lake State Park to Virginia City

Stop 1
 39.231°N, -119.759°W

Carson Valley Monkeyflower

This small valley may not look special most of the year, but during the spring it's filled with the yellow flowers of a rare endemic plant. The Carson Valley monkeyflower is a small wildflower with out-sized yellow flowers bearing bright red spots. Their seeds can lie dormant in the soil for years until the right combination of soil moisture and temperature bring them to life. From the top of McClellan Peak, you can see this species' entire known range from southern Carson Valley to northern Washoe Valley.

Stop 2

39.236°N, -119.743°W

Goni Canyon Springs

Water is a precious commodity in the desert. The Virginia Range is quite dry and rocky with only a few small springs and vernal pools where animals can drink. If you sit quietly at a distance, you may see mule deer, chukar, and horses visit the springs for a drink. The horses are rather destructive at watering holes so the source areas of the larger springs are fenced off to protect them from trampling. The fenced areas are thick with riparian plants – those that grow along streams and rivers – including native roses and willows.



Wood's Rose by Lomny Holmes

Stop 3
 39.242°N, -119.738°W

Lake Tahoe

To the west of the Carson Range lies Lake Tahoe, which started as a deep valley that originally drained directly north toward Truckee. Several lava flows from Mt. Pluto blocked this route, forming the lake and making it deeper and deeper until it finally found an outlet in the valley where the Truckee River flows today.

Unlike many of the rivers that flow from the Sierras to the Pacific Ocean, the water from Lake Tahoe drains east to Pyramid Lake and evaporates in the intense desert sun. From this spot, water on the north side of the hill drains north toward Pyramid Lake, while water on the south side drains east toward the Carson Desert.



Red Cinder Pit and the Carson Range

Stop 4

39.242°N, -119.723°W

Black and Red Cinder Pits

About 1.4 million years ago, the McClellan Peak volcano erupted basalt lava similar to the type in the Hawaiian Islands. The lava flowed southwest toward the airport and southeast toward Centennial Park. The lava contained gases that expanded into bubbles just before the rocks cooled. Where the lava erupted in fountains, the pieces cooled in mid-air, leaving a crumbly cinder cone instead of a large mass of solid rock.

The red cinders are an oxidized (rusty) version of the black cinders from the west side of the hill.

Stop 5
 39.251°N, -119.712°W

Pinyon Pines

On this hill we find pinyon pines, one of the most abundant trees in the Great Basin. The Washoe people, for whom the region is named, relied on the seeds of the pinyon pine as a crucial source of food for the winter. As summer progressed, the Washoe would leave their fishing grounds at Lake Tahoe and cross the valleys, gathering seeds and tubers where they were abundant. In early autumn, they met again in the Virginia and Pinenut Ranges to harvest pinenuts.

Stop 6
 39.259°N, -119.699°W

McClellan Peak

The top of McClellan Peak offers an expansive view from Highland Peak in the south to Reno in the north. This grand view makes it an ideal spot for radio and television broadcasting towers.

The top of the hill hosts a variety of wildflowers. The south-facing slopes are hotter, drier, and rockier with abundant sulfur buckwheat and rubber rabbitbrush. You may also find daggerpod, Bailey's buckwheat, and yellow-flowered buckwheat.

Stop 7
 39.259°N, -119.699°W

Aspen Grove

Aspen stands are home to many types of wildlife, from deer and elk to tiny tree frogs and hummingbirds. The short lifespan and soft wood of aspens makes it easy for birds such as woodpeckers and flickers to excavate cavities for their nests. Once the woodpeckers abandon their nest, other birds such as chickadees, bluebirds, or owls might move in.

Dead aspens might look like good firewood but one dead tree can be home to several families of birds.

Stop 8
 39.259°N, -119.699°W

5-Mile Reservoir

As Virginia City grew up around the mines of the Comstock Lode, the miners quickly started to run out of water. To supply the growing city with water, a long system of pipelines and reservoirs, including a 7-mile long inverted-siphon, was built to bring water from the Sierras to Virginia City. The water system, built in the 1870s, starts at Marlette Lake, which is now in Lake Tahoe Nevada State Park. The original system is a National Historic Civil Engineering Landmark.

Stop 9
 39.259°N, -119.699°W

Ophir Grade

In the 1860s one of the biggest silver mines in the Comstock was the Ophir. While the mine produced plenty of ore, there was no water to power a large mill for processing that ore into silver. The Ophir Mine owners built their own wagon road across the Virginia Range and down to Washoe Valley. The best place for the large mill was at the northwestern corner of the valley where a large stream ran down from the Sierras. To avoid a long trip around the end of Washoe Lake, they built a wooden causeway one mile long across the shallow end of the lake.

Stop 11
 39.259°N, -119.699°W

End of Ophir Grade

The large tanks above the Highway Department yard mark the end of the main Marlette Water System. From here, smaller pipes deliver the water to homes and businesses throughout the area.

Golden Eagles

If you look up to the slopes on Mt. Davidson, you may glimpse one of the golden eagles that nest in the cliffs. Golden eagles typically catch rabbits and ground squirrels but they're happy to take roadkill from the sides of the highway too.

Stop 12

39.259°N, -119.699°W

Altered Andesite Buckwheat

On a rocky slope near the entrance, you can find one old-timer that is specially adapted to the orange rocks in this area. The white and orange rocks in outcrops and tailing piles around the town are called altered andesite and they have been stripped of many minerals by super-heated water during the area's long volcanic history. They break down into poor, acidic soil that many plants struggle to grow on.



Altered andesite buckwheat

Stop 10

39.259°N, -119.699°W

Crown Point

Due east of this hilltop, you can see the Crown Point Mill and Mine and the upper and lower shafts of the Yellow Jacket Mine. These sites are the location of the deadliest mine disaster in the Comstock District. In 1896, a fire broke out 800 feet below-ground in the Yellow Jacket Mine. As the fire burned through supporting timbers and ignited mining explosives, sections of the mine collapsed and the fire spread to the Kentuck and Crown Point Mines. Between the three mines, at least 35 miners were killed by the smoke, poisonous gases, and rockfalls.

