Welcome to Yaqui Well Nature Trail

For centuries, the resources along this trail have meant survival for plants, animals, and people.

Find out more as you hike the one and one-half miles to Yaqui Well, a hidden spring. You can return the same way or follow the dirt road back to the highway. It comes out just east of here.

1. A Salty Shrub

The woody, evergreen shrub with gray leaves and stems is called **Saltbush**. It can grow in salty soils because it passes the salt through its system and out onto tiny hairs on the surfaces of its leaves. The hairs die (from too much salt!) and leave salt crystals behind. These crystals reflect sunlight and help shade the tiny leaves.

Cowboys sometimes called this shrub Cattle Spinach. Even in dry years when there wasn't much grass for the cows to eat, the Saltbush would feed them.

2. Desert Pharmacy

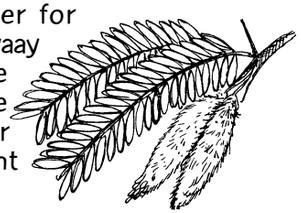
Creosote Bush is the most common shrub around. Look for tiny, dark green, shiny leaves. Spring flowers are small and yellow, followed by fuzzy seed balls that break apart and blow in the wind.

The local Kumeyaay Indians developed dozens of medicines from this plant. Creosote tonics cured colds, healed wounds, prevented infections, relieved pain, and even got rid of dandruff!

3. Honey Of A Tree

Honey Mesquite trees like this one bear clusters of yellow flowers in spring and long, skinny seedpods in early summer.

Have you ever eaten Mesquite-grilled chicken or beef? It's made by adding Mesquite wood to the barbecue. Mesquite was much more than a flavor enhancer for the local Kumeyaay people. The seedpods were one of their most important food sources.



Women ground parched pods into flour to make cakes and cereals. All parts of the plant were used to make food, beverages. clothing, tools, medicines and more.

4. Taking Advantage

If you've ever had houseguests who wouldn't leave, you'll appreciate the situation facing this **Catclaw** shrub.

Take a close look. Do you see the clumps of plants growing throughout its branches? This is **Desert Mistletoe**—a plant that is a parasite. It doesn't just grow **on** the host plant but **into** it. Mistletoe wouldn't survive without a host like Catclaw, Mesquite, or Ironwood to feed it.

Do you see any berries? Depending on the time of year, bunches of red, nearly see-through Mistletoe berries sparkle in the branches.

5. Land of Immigrants

Were your ancestors immigrants? If you look back towards the campground, you'll see something that looks like it would be more at home someplace else. The big **Tamarisk** trees there are actually from the Middle East. While Tamarisk are beautiful additions to the landscape, in Anza-Borrego™ they can be undesirable neighbors.

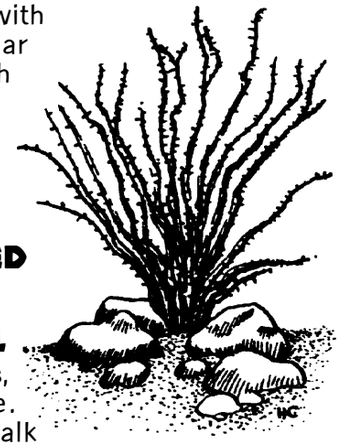
The Tamarisk trees at the campground, *Tamarix athel,* were planted in the 1930's. Back then, the campground was a prison camp for San Diego County inmates. This tree has mostly sterile seeds and spreads by root or stump sprouts. While great for shade and blocking wind, it drinks up more than its share of water. Its deep reaching roots absorb up to 200 gallons of water a day!

Some people consider the second species, *Tamarix ramosissima*, an evil plant Also called **Salt Cedar**, this shrub has an insatiable thirst. It spreads quickly and immediately absorbs so much water that the water table lowers. Native plants then die off. Eventually the Salt Cedar gets so thick wildlife can't even get through.

6. Hurry Up and Wait

Heavily armed, cane-like branches stretch skyward as if waiting for rain. The **Ocotillo's** shallow, widespreading roots absorb every drop of rain that soaks into the ground. After the rain, new leaves quickly sprout, grow and store much-needed energy. After a few weeks, the leaves fall and the plant once again begins its wait.

Hummingbirds depend on the ocotillo for their survival. When the Ocotillo's tips are aflame with red, tubular flowers, watch for the birds and their tiny nests.



7. Armed For Survival

Spines, spines, everywhere. As you walk along the trail, notice that not all spines are alike. Spine help protect the plant from nibbling animals, but they also create shade for the plant's stems. Some, like the Barrel Cactus have large spines that practically cover the whole plant. Others, like the Beavertail Cactus have such tiny spines you need a magnifying glass to see them. The Catclaw's spine is curved (like a cat claw). Look closely at the Ocotillo and you may be able to see how the first new leaf of each segment curls and hardens to form a wicked spine.

8. A Cowboy Paradise

Back in the late 1800's, ranchers and cowboys discovered the resources of Yaqui Well. Thanks to the spring, there was plenty of forage as well as water to drink. Someone developed access to the well, and several ranchers in the area took advantage of it.

In 1872, John McCain was one such rancher. A former stagecoach driver with the Butterfield line, he and his brother built a road from the Scissors Crossing

area east over the hill, through Plum Canyon and over to this spring.

In 1909, Paul Sentenac, a French-American, built a cabin and a string of watering troughs near here. Imagine hundreds of cattle roaming where you're standing now.

9. The Amazing Agave

The **Desert Agave** plant was just one reason why this was an excellent campsite for the Kumeyaay people. This succulent, gray-green plant has sharp spines on the tips of its leaves.

Leave, blossoms, and seeds were eaten but the best part was the flower stalk. Each plant blooms once in its lifetime, when it's about 75 years old. A large stalk shoots up from the base of the plant, growing several inches each day. The Kumeyaay people harvested young tender stalks and roasted them in special pits.

If there are any dead leaves around, notice the fibers sticking out. The Kumeyaay used the fibers from these leaves to make bow strings, brushes, shoes, and snares.

10. Changing Habitat

Take a moment to look around. You've descended an alluvial fan and have dropped into San Felipe Wash. The water table here is closer to the surface, can you tell? The plants are more abundant and the foliage more lush. There should be more signs of wildlife as well. Can you find them?

11. Berry-Eatin' Bird

Remember the Desert Mistletoe from #4? Although it's a parasite for the plants, it has a helpful relationship with a local bird.

The **Phainopepla** feasts on the red mistletoe berries. The seeds pass through the bird and out in its droppings. If a seed lands on the branch of a Mesquite, Catclaw, or Ironwood, it's found a new host.

The male Phainopepla has a glossy black body and crest. (see cover photo). White patches on its wings show only when it flies. Females are gray with pale wing patches. Listen for its call, a single "wurp."

12. Kumeyaay Home

For the resourceful and independent **Kumeyaay** people, this was a great place to live. Their ancestors used the resources of the desert floor and mountain slopes for thousands of years and had created a rich culture. Here at Yaqui Well, there is evidence that the Kumeyaay set up seasonal camps.

Explorers today may find signs of the Kumeyaay presence. Pottery shards, bits of charcoal, and flakes of obsidian are still found by park visitors. Please leave all artifacts in place so that others may see and experience these links to the past.

13. Life Under Cover

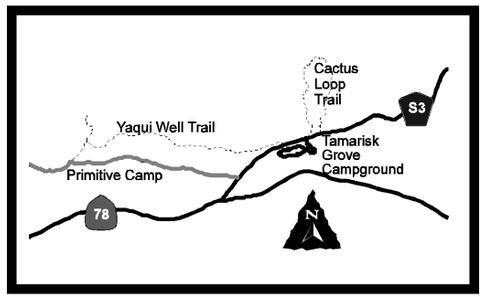
Water, food, cover and space, the essentials for life are all provided here. Watch for tracks, feathers, holes, fur, and nibbled plants, all signs that wildlife is all around us.

Places like Yaqui Well where there is year-round water are rare in the desert. Animals visiting this drinking hole include squirrels, rabbits, coyotes, bobcats, owls, quail, mountain lion and dozens of others.

14. The Source of Life

Yaqui Well is a naturally occurring spring that has supported plant growth, wildlife, centuries of Kumeyaay people, pioneers, ranchers, and travelers of all kinds

Without water, the stories and signs of life mentioned and experienced along the trail never would have existed. Water is the crucial link in the chain of life in the desert.



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DESERT STATE PARK

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cover photo (Phainopepla) courtesy Rob Pavey

Nature Trail Guide

YAQUI WELL TRAIL

Explore life at a year-round spring on this one and one-half mile hike to Yaqui Well.