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NATURAL HISTORY ROUTE OF THE TRAMWAY

PALM SPRINGS, CA – Traveling from the Valley Station at 2,643 feet above sea level to the Mountain Station at 8,516 feet above sea level, visitor’s travel through the same flora and fauna that you would if you took a road trip from the Sonora Desert of Mexico to the Transitional Zone of Alaska. During the 10-minute ride you gain an elevation of 5,873 feet. The Mountain Station is the threshold of the 14,000-acre recreational area, the Mount San Jacinto State Park and Wilderness Area. Following is a description of the natural history route from Highway 111 to the Mountain Station.

HIGHWAY 111 TO VALLEY STATION (Elevation 2,643 ft):

Off the road to the left and just before the second gate, is a green area called a “cienega” (Spanish-marsh). Here, there are cottonwood, sycamore, wild grape, mesquite and scattered Washingtonia filifera palm trees (native to the Palm Springs area). Water flows to the “cienega” by underground springs.

FAUNA: Desert Bighorn Sheep, kit fox, gray fox, bobcat, coyote, ringtail raccoon.

FLORA: Barrel cactus, cholla, prickly pear and yucca. In springtime many wild flowers, including lupine, canterbury bells and various species of sunflower bloom profusely.

VALLEY STATION TO TOWER TWO (Elevation 2,643 to 4,100 ft):

Sonora Zone –

FLORA: Hillsides – Whipple yucca, creosote, lavender, burrow brush, croton, wild apricot. Canyon floor – sycamore, cottonwood, elder, black maple, wild grape. A well-watered area cooled by winds from upper elevation.

FAUNA: Desert Bighorn Sheep are seen around station and at the “cienega”.

GEOLOGIC FORMATIONS: Primarily metamorphic rock; gneisses and schists produced when ancient sandstones, shales and older granites were altered by heat and pressure accompanying intrusion and rise of granite masses forming core of Mount San Jacinto.

TOWER TWO TO TOWER THREE (Elevation 4,100 to 5,773 ft):

Upper Sonora and Lower Transitional Zones –

FLORA: Scrub oak and mountain mahogany, wild lilacs and apricot, manzanita, ribbonwood, first junipers. Continuation of other species from lower regions and desert floor. Chaparral growth on flats; ferns under trees and wild grapes. First nolins, similar in appearance to whipple yucca in Sonoran Zone.

FAUNA: Deer, mountain lion, fox, bobcat, Desert Bighorn Sheep.

GEOLOGIC FORMATIONS: Granite, much fractured and intruded by lighter (quartz, feldspar) and darker (iron materials) bands and blocks.

TOWER THREE TO TOWER FOUR (Elevation 5,773 to 7,576 ft):

Lower and Upper Transitional Zones –

FLORA: Chaparral, Pinyon pine, juniper, yellow pine (flat or round top), scrub oak, wild apricot, scattered coulter or big cone pine, white fir (young ones are like Christmas trees, older ones have cones like candles on top). Chinquapin (dense growing, low and matted with pinecones), lupines and poppies.

FAUNA: Same as in lower canyon, but no bighorn sheep. California Gray Squirrel.

GEOLOGIC FORMATIONS: Granite core of Mount San Jacinto. The mountain is not volcanic but rather it is granite batholith, a mass of granite solidified below earth's crust and forced upward to form the mountain.

TOWER FOUR TO TOWER FIVE (Elevation 7,576 to 8,102 ft):

Alpine Zone –

FLORA: All varieties of evergreens, firs, oaks that thin out as the peak (10,834 ft.) is approached.

FAUNA: Same as in the preceding zone.

GEOLOGIC FORMATIONS: Upthrust granite ridges heavily fractured by winter freeze-thaw cycle.

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