



McKittrick Canyon



McKittrick Canyon is one of the best places to witness the diversity of life found in the Guadalupe Mountains. This is an extremely scenic hike through a canyon that contains a year-round spring fed stream. It will introduce hikers to the extremely unique riparian woodland ecosystem. It is especially beautiful in fall when the big-tooth maples are turning various shades of red, orange, and yellow. This normally occurs in the last two weeks of October to the first week of November.

This is a moderate hike with minimal elevation gain. It will take from 2 to 6 hours to complete the round trip hike, depending on how far up the canyon you choose to go. The hike to Pratt Cabin is a 4.8 mile round trip that will take from 2 to 3 hours to complete. The hike to the Grotto is a 6.8 mile round trip that will take from 4 to 6 hours to complete.

The trail starts at the McKittrick Canyon Visitor Center. Take Hwy 62/180 about 7 miles northeast of the Pine Springs Visitor Center (towards Carlsbad). The turn off to McKittrick Canyon is well marked. It is about 3 ½ miles from Hwy 62/180 to the visitor center and trailhead.

The hike from the McKittrick Visitor Center to the first stream crossing is an open desert hike. Beyond the first stream crossing, the trail begins to enter a riparian, or streamside, woodland ecosystem. Here you will find trees that you probably wouldn't expect to find here in the desert; big tooth maples, chinkapin oak, and Texas madrone. Beyond Pratt Cabin, where geologist Wallace Pratt made his summer vacation home, the trail continues through a dense riparian woodland alongside the stream that makes this canyon so unique. The Grotto provides a beautiful spot to have a picnic lunch alongside the stream. Several old historic stone tables and benches make it a comfortable spot to take a rest break. Just a short walk beyond the Grotto is the historic Hunter Line Cabin.

Hikers will also have the option of continuing a bit further beyond the Grotto to the Notch. Beyond the Grotto, the trail begins to climb in elevation, getting quite steep below the Notch. The Notch is approximately 1 ½ miles beyond the Grotto with an additional elevation gain of 800 feet. The Notch provides fantastic views of South McKittrick Canyon.

McKittrick Canyon is a day use area. Gates open at 8:00 am and close at 4:30 pm in winter and 6:00 pm in summer.

Safety Concerns

- Hikers should carefully monitor the weather. Afternoon thunderstorms are common through the summer months.
- Much of the canyon is in the open desert and can be extremely hot during summer months. Bring plenty of water. Also come prepared with sunscreen, a hat, and protective clothing.
- Although they are not considered a danger, rattlesnakes are often encountered in McKittrick Canyon. Stay on the trail at all times, and keep alert. If a rattlesnake is sighted, give it plenty of room.

What To Bring

- 3 quarts of water per person (2 quarts of water per person if only going to Pratt Cabin)
- comfortable footwear
- light jacket/rain jacket (even in summer)
- lunch/snacks
- plastic bag for trash (be sure to pack out all litter)
- sunscreen
- hat (for sun protection)
- warm, layered clothing/hat/gloves (for cooler months)
- first aid kit/band aids/mole skin for blisters (at least one per group)
- trail map (at least 2 per group – these are available at the visitor center)

Milages

Trailhead at McKittrick Visitor Center0.0 miles
First Stream Crossing1 mile
Pratt Cabin 2.4 miles
The Grotto3.4 miles

Map