

Hike #150

Season: All year
Recommended map: Angeles
National Forest
Topo: Mt. Wilson



Mt. Wilson Toll Road

Altadena to Henninger Flats

6 miles RT; 1400' elevation gain

10/28/92

@ 0930

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Consider the conifers.

A wind-bowed limber pine clinging to a rock smelling grove of incense cedar. The deep shade and primeval gloom of a big cone spruce forest.

Where do these trees come from?

I know, I know. "... only God can make a tree."

Keep your Joyce Kilmer. Hold the metaphysical questions. Our inquiry here is limited to what happens in the aftermath of a fire or flood, when great numbers of trees lie dead or dying. Fortunately, for California's cone-bearing tree population—and tree lovers—there is a place where trees, more than 120,000 a year, are grown to replace those lost to the capriciousness of nature and the carelessness of man. The place is Henninger Flats, home of the Los Angeles County Experimental Nursery.

Perched halfway between Altadena and Mount Wilson, Henninger Flats is the site of southern California's finest tree plantation. The holiday season, a time when many of us are trimming the Christmas conifer (often a Douglas fir), is an ideal time to trek up to Henninger Flats. On the flats you'll be able to view trees in all shapes and sizes, from seedlings to mature stands. A museum with reforestation exhibits, a nature trail, and the Los Angeles County foresters on duty will help you understand where trees come from.

The Flats have a colorful history. After careers as a gold miner, Indian fighter, and first Sheriff of Santa Clara County, Captain William Henninger came to Los Angeles to retire in the early 1880s. While doing a little prospecting, Henninger discovered the little mesa that one day would bear his name. He constructed a trail over which he could lead his burros.

Atop the flats he built a cabin, planted fruit trees, raised hay and corn. His solitude ended in 1890 when the Mount Wilson Toll Road was constructed for the purpose of carrying the great telescope up to the new observatory. Captain Henninger's Flats soon became a water and rest stop for the hikers, riders and fishermen who trooped into the mountains.

After Henninger's death in 1895, the flats were used by the U.S. Forest Service as a tree nursery. Foresters emphasized the nurturing of fire- and drought-resistant varieties of conifers. Many thousands of seedlings were transplanted to fire and flood-ravaged slopes all over the Southland. Since 1928 Los Angeles County foresters have continued the good work at Henninger Flats.

A moderate outing of just under six miles roundtrip, on good fire road, the trail up to Henninger Flats is suitable for the whole family. The Flats offer a large picnic area and fine clear day city views.

Directions to trailhead: From the Foothill Freeway (I-210) in Pasadena, exit on Lake Avenue. Turn north on Lake and continue to Altadena Drive. Make a right on Altadena, continue about ten blocks, and look closely to your left. Turn left on Pinecrest Drive and wind a few blocks through a residential area to the trailhead. (If you speed by Pinecrest, don't despair; make a left off of Altadena onto Crescent Drive, which quickly leads you to Pinecrest.) The trailhead is found in the 2200 block of Pinecrest. You'll spot a locked gate across the fire road that leads down into Eaton Canyon.

The Hike: Proceed down the fire road to the bottom of Eaton Canyon. After crossing a bridge, the road begins a series of switchbacks up chaparral covered slopes. Occasional painted pipes (i.e., 1 up, 2 down) mark your progress.

The Pasadena and Mt. Wilson Toll Road Company in 1891 fashioned a trail to the summit of Mt. Wilson. Fees were 50 cents per rider, 25 cents per hiker. A 12-foot wide road followed two decades later. Long time Southland residents might recall a somewhat hair-raising Sunday drive up the steep grade. During the 1920s, the road was the scene of an annual auto race, similar to the Pikes Peak hillclimb. In 1936 the Angeles Crest Highway opened and rendered the toll road obsolete. For the last half century the Mt. Wilson Toll Road has been closed to public traffic and has been maintained as a fire road.

Henninger Flats welcomes the hiker with water, shade, and two campgrounds where you may enjoy a lunch stop. Growing on the flats are some of the more common cone-bearing trees of California mountains including knobcone, Coulter, sugar, digger and Jeffrey pines, as well as such exotics as Japanese black pine and Himalayan white pine.

Holiday and weekend visitor center hours are 8 A.M. to 10 P.M.

After your tree tour, return the same way.

Ultra-energetic hikers will continue up the old toll road to Mount Wilson; the journey from Altadena to the summit is 9 miles one way with an elevation gain of 4,500 feet.