

Lava Bluffs Trail

The Lava Bluffs Trailhead wanders along the south-facing side of the Stanislaus River Canyon, where temperatures on summer days can exceed 90 degrees. The trail is moderately difficult, with steep grades, areas of loose rock and lots of switchbacks. It is best saved for cooler days.

The trailhead parking lot is about 5 miles down the Walter W. Smith Memorial Parkway from the park entrance. The trail makes a long, winding ascent. On warm days, the mountain misery along the way emits a strong fragrance. Patches of poison oak lie in wait along the trail for unwary passersby. Creeping myrtle, morning glory and milkweed border the path.

About one-quarter of the way around the loop, seepage from a spring provides water for a wide clearing covered with common monkey flowers, bunch grasses and other flowers where it flows over the exposed rock of ancient lahars, or volcanic mudflows, that created the bluffs for which the trail is named.

At about the midpoint of the 3-mile loop, there is another track that leads a short distance to the Lava Bluffs Viewpoint.

Returning to the main trail, the hiker descends into a more shaded habitat. In places, the trail travels within a ditch that was once was part of Union Water Company's 250-mile system of ditches, canals and flumes that carried water to Murphys.