

Old Neighbors and Newcomers

Walk this trail and you'll pass two kinds of plants. Some are native: they grew in Cache Valley long before settlers arrived, and the animals here depend on them. Others are introduced: people brought them from other continents, on purpose or by accident. Learning to tell them apart is one way to read the land.

Willow crowds the creek banks because its roots need steady water. The Shoshone name for Cache Valley, Sihiviogoi, means Willow River. For generations, the Northwestern Band of Shoshone used willow branches for baskets and as windbreaks during winter.

Chokecherry produces dark, tart berries that were a staple food for many Native nations. Shoshone families dried them, made them into syrup and pudding, and pounded them into pemmican, a high-energy trail food. The pits and leaves contain a compound that can be poisonous, which is why traditional recipes involved careful preparation.

Utah juniper survives where little else can: on dry, rocky, alkaline slopes. The juniper on this trail is about 200 years old, which means it sprouted before Utah was a state. Utah junipers can live 650 years or more, and birds depend on their berry-like cones for food in fall and winter.

Native

willow
chokecherry
Utah juniper
milkweed
big sagebrush
maple
aspen
narrowleaf cottonwood

Introduced

sweet-briar rose
St. Lucie cherry
smooth brome

Words to Know

native: grew in a place before settlers arrived

introduced: brought to a place by people

staple food: a main food people depend on

pemmican: a dried, high-energy trail food

graft: to join part of one plant onto the roots of another

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MORE NATIVE PLANTS

Milkweed is the only plant monarch caterpillars can eat. Without milkweed, monarchs can't survive.

Big sagebrush, maples, and aspen fill out the native community. Sagebrush roots reach deep for water. Maples turn the canyons red in fall. Aspen, Utah's state tree, usually grows in groups connected by one shared root system, so a single aspen is often one part of a much larger living thing.

Narrowleaf cottonwood is the creek's other native tree. Its dark, furrowed bark looks nothing like aspen's smooth white bark, but the two are close relatives: both belong to the poplar family, *Populus*. Cottonwoods need water near their roots, so they grow along creeks and canyon mouths, often next to willows. In early summer, their seeds float through the air on fluffy white fibers, which is how the tree got its name.

THE NEWCOMERS

Sweet-briar rose came from Europe. Crush a leaf and you'll smell apples, which come from tiny sticky glands on its underside.

St. Lucie cherry has a stranger story. Orchards used it as the root system for grafted sweet and sour cherry trees. Sprouts growing from those roots produced fruit, birds spread the seeds, and the tree escaped into Utah's valleys, wherever there's water.

Smooth brome is a grass that people planted for livestock feed and to hold soil in place. It spreads easily and can crowd out native plants.

A TREE THAT IS STILL WORKING

The old decaying tree may look finished, but it's busy. Insects tunnel through it, fungi break it down, and birds hunt for food in its bark. Over many years, it becomes soil that feeds the next generation of plants.

READ THE LAND

Newcomers aren't always "bad." Some feed wildlife, and some just blend in. But when introduced plants spread fast, they can crowd out the natives that animals depend on. Look around: which plants are winning on this trail? What might happen if nothing changes?



BACK TO YOUR I WONDER FOLDABLE

Did this reading answer any of your questions? Next to each question, write what you learned. Circle any questions still unanswered to research later.