Tennessee Hollow Watershed Walk
Summer 2016
Twelve Tales of Water in a Two Mile Trek

A watershed is an area of land that catches rain and drains into a body of water. Tennessee Hollow is the Presidio’s largest watershed, encompassing 20 percent of the park. It begins with a natural spring, which is eventually fed by two joining creeks. The waters then flow north to Crissy Marsh through a variety of habitats where native plants, birds, and other wildlife thrive, and ultimately join the bay and ocean.

For centuries, people have used this creek system as a water source, beginning with the native Ohlone and later Spanish settlers. The U.S. Army substantially altered where and how it flows, pushing its waters underground in many areas in order to build on the land above.

This self-guided, two-mile walk traces a large section of the creek system where, for the past 15 years, restoration projects have brought habitats back to life. Along the way, you’ll learn about some significant people and moments in Presidio history.

Note: this hike is moderate, with a variety of terrain. The loop takes approximately two hours.

Walking Directions (map inside)

Start in front of the Presidio Officers’ Club (50 Moraga Avenue). Facing the bay, which is to the north, walk east, or to your right, toward the Inn at the Presidio. At the corner of Funston and Moraga, turn right and seek the trailhead for the Ecology Trail towards the back of the parking lot. About 50 feet from the trailhead sign look to the left and stop when you can see a field of woodchips and planted slope.

1 The Western Stream (at Pop Hicks Playing Field)
Pop Hicks Field was first built in 1955 as a Little League field and was named in honor of Master Sergeant Calus “Pop” Hicks, who served at the Presidio’s Letterman Hospital and was instrumental in establishing youth recreation leagues in the Presidio. The Army built the playing field on top of a landfill of garbage and building debris. In 2011 this landfill was remediated to protect the nearby creek and make this site safe for a future athletic field. There is a seasonal stream channel (out of view) on the right edge of the site as you cross the wood chipped area. This is the western tributary of the watershed. Continue to left on the Ecology Trail, amidst towering eucalyptus trees and occasional redwood trees (about a five minute walk uphill). Just past a small footbridge on the Ecology Trail, stop where a trail connects from a grove of redwood trees to the left.

2 Serpentine Grasslands
As you are winding up the path, look to your left. Did you notice the change in habitat from the dense trees to open meadows? The hillsides to your right feature a rare California habitat, serpentine grasslands, that shelters at least one species found nowhere else on our planet in the wild, the Franciscan Manzanita. The Presidio Clarkia, an endangered wildflower, also finds home here. Green serpentinite, our state rock, has naturally occurring heavy metals that are toxic to many plants. The native plants here have evolved to thrive in its harsh soils. These and other grasslands around the Bay Area naturally “brown” for the seasonal six-months of drought (May through October). They quickly green again with regular rains. Continue uphill on the Ecology Trail (passing a sign with a Great Horned Owl). When the fence on the left ends, turn right to ascend the stairs to the overlook.

3 Inspiration Point
From this view, scan the contours of the park and imagine how water would travel in a heavy rainstorm, recharging the creek and spring you’ll soon discover downhill. In the distance you’ll notice a large construction site. Today an athletic field is being renovated, but during the late 1800s, the U.S. Army built wells and other structures here to collect water for human use. Demand eventually exceeded the supply, and the Army abandoned this water source for the more prolific one at the Presidio’s Lobos Creek. At the downstream edge of the ballfield is the revival of the Tennessee Hollow Watershed’s eastern stream. When you’re ready, return to Stop 2 near the redwood trees and turn right to go downhill. Keep right on the trail and at the next trail crossing, stay straight since the trail narrows after you cross. You will travel under Monterey pine and cypress trees until you descend a staircase to arrive at El Polin Spring.

4 El Polin Spring
Pause at the picnic tables to try to notice wildlife (of any size) in the ponds. Just five years ago these creek-fed ponds formed after the removal of a large underground pipe (a process known as “daylighting” a creek). Today, much of the El Polin Spring area is in the midst of an ecological renaissance. It also has a rich history, told in part on the signs near the adobe walls. As you walk around the loop, be sure to find the source of the spring near the “Water of Life” sign. When you’re ready to continue your journey, head downstream towards the picnic area and stop at the drinking fountain. (The drinking water is tapped from another Presidio watershed that feeds Lobos Creek on the southwest corner of the park). Find the nearby manhole cover and you’ll hear the creek water flowing below, awaiting its “daylighting.” Take the sidewalk to the end of the street and then cross at the field. Follow the sidewalk to the right to stay MacArthur Ave.

5 MacArthur Meadow
This area is named for Lieutenant General Arthur MacArthur who commanded U.S. Army forces during the 1898 Philippine-American War. This was once a naturally wet meadow, where all three streams of the watershed came together. It was filled in by the Army so it could build here on dry land. Today, that seasonal wetland is being recreated. The area will be a rich habitat for water-loving plants because the water is so close to the surface of the soil. Next winter, staff and volunteers will plant 23,000 plants representing 60 species native...
to San Francisco. Use the sidewalk to walk to the tall cypress tree with a view of a small brick bridge to the left.

6 Lovers’ Lane Bridge
The historic brick bridge before you, part of the Lovers’ Lane Trail, was built over the creek by the Army in 1885. The trail got its name because soldiers would stroll along this pathway on their way to romantic pursuits in San Francisco. Lovers’ Lane, which runs for one mile from the Main Post to Presidio Gate, is considered the oldest footpath in the Presidio. Soon a new boardwalk will be constructed over the future wetland meadow to invite up-close observations of nature. Continue on the sidewalk to the end of MacArthur Avenue. Crossing Presidio Boulevard, note the Tennessee Hollow Trail sign to your right and follow the trail to the wooden benches (made from fallen cypress trees in the park).

7 YMCA Reach
Just a few years ago, you would have found yourself standing in the middle of a large parking lot at this site. Here too, the Army once channeled the creek’s water into a pipe underground. In 2014, the pipe was removed and the water was brought back to the surface. Following the seasonal rains, water flows through this area, which volunteers and staff have restored with 16,000 native plants in 2015, including yerba buena, Indian paintbrush, and seep monkey flower. How many colors are in bloom on your visit today? Continue north on the Tennessee Hollow Trail and turn left when you reach Lincoln Boulevard. Cross Lincoln Blvd at the stop sign and then cross again at Girard Avenue heading towards the palm trees and stone walls. Stop at the sign that reads “Bringing a Creek Back to Life.”

8 Thompson Reach
More than a century ago the Army built the Thompson Reach at Marshall’s Beach in order to protect the Presidio. Just a few years ago, you would have seen the remains of a building on your right. Now these buildings were demolished and many volunteers and staff have restored with 100,000 plants representing 110 native species. Now Great Blue Herons and other spearfishing birds grace the site daily with their presence.

[Note: Sites 10 – 12 are not on the walking route due to construction activities. In the next few years this route will become accessible!]

10 Marsh Expansion Area
Look beyond the end of The Narrows to the north. The recent replacement of the Doyle Drive highway with the redesigned Presidio Parkway has created an exciting opportunity to expand Crissy Marsh. In late 2016, concrete will be removed from beneath the new parkway you see in the distance. Then, an additional 800-foot length of the creek will be returned to the surface. As a result, freshwater from the creek and saltwater from the marsh will come together, creating five acres of rare “brackish” habitat that will provide new habitat for plants, fish, and bird life. A new section of the Tennessee Hollow Trail will then be built for an immersive experience of this forthcoming oasis of nature.

11 Crissy Marsh
Just beyond the overpass, the fresh water that flows through the Tennessee Hollow Watershed ultimately meets the salty waters of the bay, creating Crissy Marsh, a vibrant destination for more than 100 bird species including many who stop for food and rest as they make their long journey along the Pacific Flyway. It wasn’t always this idyllic. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the marsh was filled in to make room for the 1915 Panama-Pacific International Exposition and later an airfield. Crissy Field’s resurrection began in the late 1990s, when 40 acres of pavement were removed and wetland and dune habitats were recreated. Volunteers helped plant 100,000 plants representing 110 native species. Now Great Blue Herons and other spearfishing birds grace the site daily with their presence.
The Narrows
At this site, the creek flows through a very narrow area with buildings on each side. The water in front of you is an accumulation of all three streams, seeping ground water, plus the salt water tide from Crissy Marsh. The water flows here can be very high in a storm event, so a channel was specially designed to manage the volume. The slopes along “the narrows” were recently planted. To get a sense of what it will look like in just a few years, look back at Thompson Reach south of the bridge.

San Francisco Bay and the Pacific Ocean
In addition to the Tennessee Hollow Watershed’s creek, sixteen major California rivers drain into San Francisco Bay. Their conjoined waters flow beneath the Golden Gate Bridge into the Pacific Ocean. This area has been an important resource for centuries, and features myriad habitats and species. It is a biodiversity hotspot identified nationally by the Nature Conservancy and internationally by Conservation International because of the diversity of geology, soils, waters, and vegetation habitats.

Thank you!
You’ve just explored a watershed in a dynamic state of change. These kinds of efforts are not unique to this national park site. Many cities around the planet are pursuing similar projects, large and small, to make a place for nature in our increasingly urban world.

To find your way back to the Presidio Officers’ Club, cross the bridge and turn left on Halleck Street. At the corner, cross to Funston Avenue and walk south on the sidewalk and turn right at the Inn at the Presidio.
Fun Facts

PRE-HISTORIC LENGTH OF THIS WATERSHED’S WATERWAYS
6,409 FEET

CURRENT LENGTH OF DAYLIGHTED AND REMNANT CREEK HABITAT
2,440 FEET

FUTURE ADDITIONAL LENGTH TO BE RESTORED
912 FEET

The Nature-Culture Connection

Chances are, just a few hundred years ago, your ancestors were living much closer to the land. The changing landscape of places all over the world is influenced by changing human needs and values.

The restoration of native plant communities in this watershed not only sustains our natural heritage, but also provides opportunities for renewal of ancient cultural practices. In the past, Ohlone people gathered plants from this watershed for many purposes, and today there is a designated ethnobotanical gathering site at Crissy Field marsh. If you return to the Presidio Officers’ Club, look for this traditional basket on display in the Mesa Room. It was recently made by Ohlone descendant Linda Yamane using indigenous California plants similar to those being restored in the Presidio.

Get Involved

The ecological restoration of this watershed is a community-based effort. Drop-in volunteer programs take place regularly. Activities include planting, invasive species removal and rare plant monitoring. For more information, visit www.presidio.gov/volunteer. Please share any wildlife photos you captured on your walk today via the free citizen science app iNaturalist. Download from www.inaturalist.org.

To learn more about the Presidio’s conservation efforts visit www.presidio.gov. Share your favorite photos at #PresidioSF.