

The Aiken Canyon Preserve

by Dave Cooper



The Aiken Canyon Preserve is home to a diverse ecosystem-small.jpg

One of several nature preserves in Colorado managed by the Nature Conservancy, the Aiken Canyon Preserve is, quoting from Nature Conservancy literature, “one of the last high-quality examples of the southern Front Range foothills ecosystem. The preserve is composed of a mosaic of habitat types, including shrublands, tallgrass prairie meadows, pinyon juniper woodlands and mixed coniferous woodlands.”

The Preserve offers visitors an opportunity to walk along a well-maintained trail that passes through grassland and forested canyons bounded by scenic red rock formations. Wildlife abounds here. The area is especially popular among birdwatchers, so bring along your binoculars to observe the more than 100 species of birds that have been identified in the Preserve. There are information boards at the trailhead and at points along the trail.

Note that the preserve is open only on Saturday, Sunday and Monday.

Getting to the Trailhead: The entrance to the Aiken Canyon Preserve is located off Highway 115. To reach the Preserve, take the South Academy Boulevard exit from I-25 (Exit 135) in Colorado Springs and drive west for 1.9 miles to the intersection with Highway 115. Follow Highway 115 south for 11.9 miles. Turn right (north) on the Turkey Canyon Ranch Road. Drive through the gated entrance and look for the entrance to the Aiken Canyon Preserve parking area on the right, 0.1 miles from Highway 115.

Hike Description

From the parking area, take the trail towards the visitor center, which seems to be open only sporadically. Information signs mark the start of the trail, which initially heads east. Follow the trail as it winds its way through dry washes and across open grassland. After 0.7 mile you'll reach a signed trail junction. We followed the right branch as it curved around to the north side of a rock outcropping. At mile 1.6 there is another trail junction. For a shorter hike, take the left branch and complete the loop trail. To extend the hike into a pleasant side canyon with an old ruined cabin near its head, turn right and follow the trail as it trends northwest. The canyon eventually narrows as this rougher trail climbs up through pine forest, reaching the ruins of a cabin at mile 2.5. A scrappy trail continues up the canyon for another 0.1 mile where it ends, marked appropriately with a sign saying “End of Trail”.

Hike Statistics: With the extension to the loop described here, the trail gains a total of 980 feet in 5.2 miles round trip.

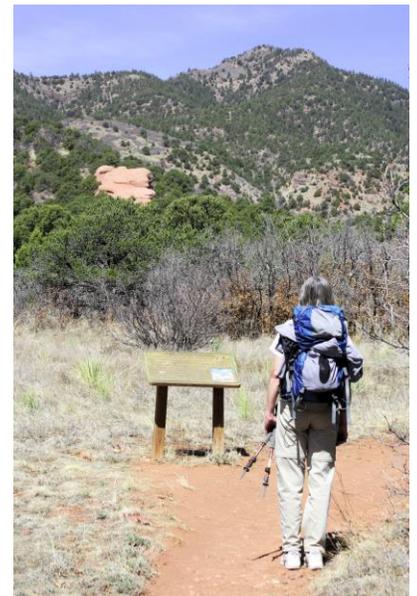
Difficulty: An easy trail hike.

USGS Quads: Mount Big Chief, CO; Mount Pittsburg, CO (marginally)



Information signs along the trail provide insight into the flora, fauna and geology of the canyon.JPG

End of Trail.JPG



According to Nadia Brelje, author of the excellent “Southern Front Range Trail Guide - Trails Within 50 Miles of Pueblo, Colorado”, there is a small waterfall just before the trail ends. On our visits to the canyon, this has been dry, though during the spring runoff I imagine it would be flowing nicely.

Return to the trail junction with the main loop at mile 3.6, turn right and continue around the loop as it first climbs on switchbacks to a small saddle, then starts dropping down towards a small drainage. The trail follows this wash southeast and reaches the start of the loop trail again at mile 4.5. Continue the last 0.6 miles back to the parking area.

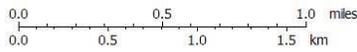
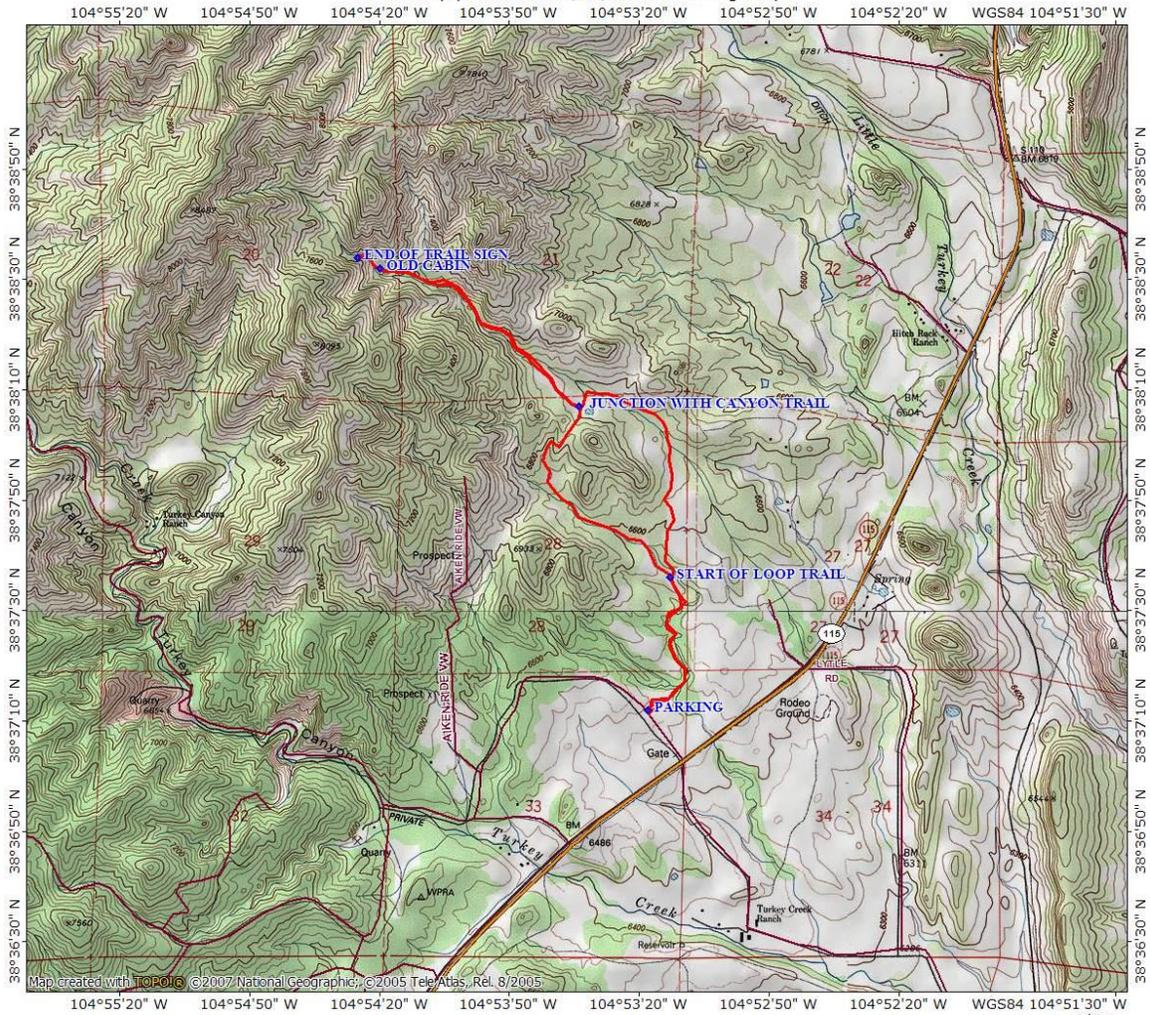
On one of our visits to the canyon we were reminded of the fragility of this area when helicopters could be seen dropping water on fires in the Fort Carson Military Reserve, across the highway. Take care!



The canyon is bounded by scenic red rock walls.JPG

Helicopters fighting a wildfire on nearby Fort Carson Military Reserve.jpg

TOPO! map printed on 05/19/08 from "merged.tpo"



TN MN
9°
05/19/08

GPS Latitude / Longitude NAD83 (Deg., Min., Sec.)
 PARKING: 38,37,12N / 104,53,18W, 6483 feet
 START OF LOOP TRAIL: 38,37,36N / 104,53,13W, 6549 feet
 JUNCTION WITH CANYON TRAIL: 38,38,7N / 104,53,34W, 6837 feet
 OLD CABIN: 38,38,32N / 104,54,20W, 7172 feet
 END OF TRAIL SIGN: 38,38,34N / 104,54,25W, 7351 feet



