

ZION Natural Park Background Information

Zion National Park located on the western edge of the Colorado Plateau in southern Utah is an oasis amid the surrounding arid landscape. The massive, colorful sandstone cliffs rising from the desert floor can be seen from over forty miles away and draw even the modern traveler in for a visit. One can imagine how such a sight also lured the first inhabitants and generations thereafter to visit and even settle a land of surprising diversity.

This diversity of the land lends its hand to biodiversity. Elevation within the park boundaries range from approximately 2,700 feet to 8,700 feet above sea level. The 6,000 feet elevation difference allows varied ecosystems ranging from desert grasslands at the bottom, wetlands near the river, hanging gardens along cliff walls seeping spring water, a mid-elevation pygmy forest, to a towering forest aspen and ponderosa trees. When there are many ecosystems there are also great numbers of organisms maintaining their niche for survival.

An example of the biodiversity found within Zion National Park is the number of birds that call it home for at least part of each passing year. Over 290 different bird species have been documented in Zion's 232 square miles. Since first designated in 1909 as Mukuntuweap National Monument, visitors and park naturalists have taken an interest in the birds living in the canyon and beyond. We are fortunate these birders left us with field notes, sketches, letters, and specimens we continue to learn from as they are still held within the park's natural history collections. Birds have a reputation for being both sensitive and adaptable to environmental changes. For these reasons, they are a good choice for exploring interwoven concepts such as environmental change, adaptation, use of past and present data, and sharing scientific information with the general population.

The Zion National Park Museum Collection contains over 300,000 cultural history items and approximately 22,500 natural history objects, including study skins, preserved plants, and paleontological specimens. In addition, Zion's museum staff manages collections for Bryce Canyon National Park and Cedar Breaks National Monument. Zion has a permanent exhibit focused on cultural history and a revolving gallery that sometimes features natural history displays such as wildlife and herbarium specimens.

Today park scientists continue to use study skins, photographs, and other historic natural objects in their research. These objects not only tell the story of the past but enable us to better understand the ecological story of today and foreshadow what may come in our collective future.