

PENA BLANCA CANYON

Pena Blanca Canyon is located northwest of Nogales in the Pajarito Mountains and is accessed via Ruby Road (State Route 289). The canyon received its name from the white limestone bluffs that line the east side of the canyon south of Ruby Road (Pena Blanca means white rock in Spanish).

Mining Activity: Miners were one of the early users of the canyon. The lure of gold and silver led to the establishment of the Morning and Sunset Mines, the Big Steve Mine, the St. Patrick Mine and the White Mine. The town of Noonville was established at the junction of Alamo Canyon and Pena Blanca Canyon to support the mining operations. The miners used mercury to process the ore and extract the gold and silver. This use of mercury was to cause future problems in the canyon. All that is left of Noonville today is the foundation of a building and the Pena Blanca Spring that provided fresh water for the town.

Pena Blanca Lake: In 1957, the Arizona Game and Fish Department decided to establish a multi-use recreation area in Pena Blanca Canyon and created a 49 acre lake by constructing an earthen dam across a narrowing of the canyon north of Ruby Road. The recreation area was opened to the public in March of 1958. The lake was stocked with largemouth bass, bluegill, red-ear sunfish, channel catfish and black crappie and soon became a fisherman's haven. Support facilities were built and for 40 years you could stay in motel accommodations and eat in the restaurant at the Resort Lodge. Fishing, boating, hiking and bird watching were all popular activities at the lake. Over the years, mercury-laden silt from the mines upstream began to cause a problem. A survey conducted in 1994 determined that the mercury level in the largemouth bass was 1.44 parts per million, almost 5 times the level considered to be safe. High levels of methyl mercury were determined to be present in all of the fish species present in the lake. As a result the Arizona Department of Environmental Quality issued a warning that fish caught in the lake should not be eaten and recommended a policy of "catch and release". Also during the 1990s, the motel and restaurant were closed and the buildings removed.

In 1999, the old mine tailing ponds were dug up and 1000 tons of contaminated soil were hauled away in an attempt to prevent additional heavy metal contamination. Subsequently, the Forest Service developed a plan to clean up the lake itself. On 6 October 2008, the area was closed and the draining of the lake commenced. With the draining of the lake, a wide range of debris was exposed. Three boats, motors, batteries and garbage were found in addition to the large quantity of mercury-laden sludge. About 200,000 cubic yards of mercury-contaminated soil were removed from the lake bottom and buried in cells in an area to the west of the lake. This part of the project was completed in July 2009 and the preparation of the lake bottom commenced including the fabrication and positioning of numerous fish shelters. The area reopened to the public on 3 September. It was estimated that it would take three or four years of rainfall to refill the lake but the heavy rains of January and February 2010 surprised everyone when they refilled the lake. The cost of the project was paid for by the Federal Superfund program and amounted to approximately eleven million dollars. The restocking of the lake

commenced on 10 February when 2,000 rainbow trout from the fish hatchery in Sedona were delivered and released into the lake. In addition to the trout, largemouth bass and catfish are also being considered. As of February 2010, there are no provisions for launching boats. The old launching ramp area is closed and plans have been completed to construct a new ramp and dock in a different area.

In the future, it's anticipated there may be a convenience store, a restaurant, a ramada-covered picnic area, a tent camping area, an RV camping area, and possibly some small rental cabins added.



*Lake bottom after Sludge Removal and
Fish Habitat Installation*

Summary prepared by Tom Johnson, February 2010. Photo by T. Johnson

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