

Take a Hike: Hellhole Canyon Preserve

By Priscilla Lister
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VALLEY CENTER — Hellhole Canyon Preserve in Valley Center is a lot more inviting than its name suggests. The 1,907-acre open-space preserve features a flowing stream in its center complete with mature oak and sycamore trees, views across an undeveloped valley, and for the peak baggers, 3,886-foot-high Rodriguez Mountain, where you might even see the ocean.



The preserve. Priscilla Lister

The 13.5 miles of trails here are open to hikers and equestrians, as well as dogs on leashes (no bikes allowed).

The main trail descends from the staging area into the riparian habitat of that stream, where little cascades flow over boulders most of the year and oaks and sycamores provide the only shade you'll encounter.

It's a drop of several hundred feet down to Hell Creek, as it's called, in about three-quarters of a mile. That fairly steep descent, of course, requires the ascent on this same trail back up, but that's the only difficulty; the rest of this trail is flat and easy.

The first part of the trail also features several plant identification signs, which were the work of Nate Brown earning his Eagle Scout badge in 2007. Learn to distinguish the white flowers of the California buckwheat from chamise, two of the most abundant bloomers during spring and summer in our native chaparral habitats. The buckwheat's blooms form rounder little bouquets, while chamise's white flowers cluster more conically on the ends of its evergreen stems.

The first placard reports the effect the disastrous fires of October 2003 had on Hellhole Canyon Preserve. The Paradise fire, which occurred at the same time as the huge Cedar fire of 2003, burned 95 percent of the preserve. The Poomacha fire of 2007 burned part of the preserve again. The placard notes that oak woodlands are fire-adapted, meaning they often survive fire.

Once the trail leaves the Hell Creek riparian area, it continues along a ridge where there are no trees for shade but lots of chaparral shrubs and wildflowers, including yellow/orange deerweed, red monkeyflowers, purple Cleveland sage and so many yellow wallflower shrubs they often obscure the narrow trail.

Hell Creek, the centerpiece of Hellhole Canyon, is part of the San Luis Rey Watershed, one of 12 major watersheds in San Diego County, reads another placard along the trail.

A little ways past the watershed placard, the trail intersects with the Horse Thief Trail loop, which I took to the right. Almost immediately is another intersection; head left to continue on the Horse Thief Trail loop. The trail to the right heads uphill to both the Paradise Trail and Rodriguez Peak Trail, both harder climbs, which I didn't take.

The loop continues to wind along the ridge overlooking the valley. It's hot here during the summer, so bring lots of water.

Another placard showcases photos and foot-track renderings of mountain lions, coyotes, deer and bobcats. "Hellhole Canyon Preserve is surrounded by undeveloped land and facilitates animal movement in all directions," it says.

Friends of Hellhole Canyon Open Space Preserve, a volunteer, nonprofit land trust and educational organization, continues work to enlarge this preserve to protect its wildlife connectivity. The group

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Before you go: The preserve is open Friday through Monday; closed Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday, as well as from Aug. 1-Sept. 4 because of extreme heat. Download a trail map at the county parks' page, <http://www.co.san-diego.ca.us>. Go the Friends' page, www.hellholecanyon.org, to download a copy of the self-guided trail guide of the flora found here.

Trailhead: From Interstate 15, exit at Valley Parkway, heading east about 5.5 miles (follow Valley Parkway signs through downtown Escondido, since you'll be on Grand Avenue, then Second Avenue before joining Valley Parkway again), turning right onto Lake Wohlford Road. After about 6 miles, turn right onto Paradise Mountain Road; after about 3.5 miles, turn left onto Kiavo Road, following signs to the preserve, turning uphill onto Santee to the parking area.

Distance: The 1.3-mile (one-way); Hell Creek and 1.5-mile Horse Thief Loop trails combine for about a 4-mile round trip.

Difficulty: Easy to moderate.

succeeded in securing funds to buy an additional 190 acres in the preserve's center, along Hell Creek, in 2005. "The canyon has over 3 miles of creek bed and provides a critical, but threatened habitat and wildlife corridor connecting Rancho Guejito, Cleveland National Forest, Bureau of Land Management and southern inland areas of the county ... The area represents the last inland connection between the north and south parts of the county west of the inland mountains," it says.

Just behind that placard about wildlife linkages, I noticed a clear wildlife trail through the grasses.

The last placard points to the cut along the ridge you see above Hell Creek. It's not a trail but a path where the old wooden Escondido Flume built in 1895 used to carry water from the San Luis Rey River to the reservoir at Lake Wohlford. When a steel siphon was constructed here in the early 1900s, still in use today, the wooden flume was removed.

Docents lead hikes (sometimes horseback rides) through Hellhole Canyon Preserve the third Saturday of every month except August; Meet at 9 a.m. at the staging parking lot. Check the Friends' calendar on its website, www.hellholecanyon.org.

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