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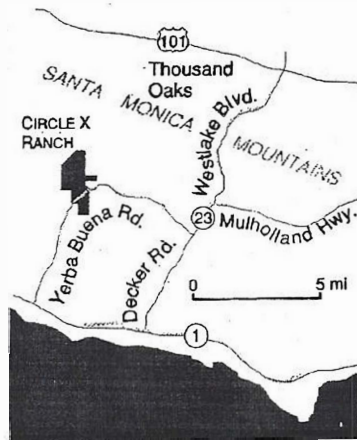
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(SAVE: Sat. Oct. 21st for Africa Safati Show and Pot-Luck at The Thomases)

## Full circle in the Santa Monicas

*Wildflowers and red rock are exposed after fire at Circle X Ranch*

**L**ITTLE MORE THAN A year ago, disaster transformed Circle X Ranch. In October 1993 the Green Meadow fire swept over the old ranch's hillsides and raced through its glens. Long one of the most beautiful pieces of the puzzle known as Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area, Circle X was left lifeless and charred.



Then came the winter rains, and the land's capacity to endure became apparent. Green shoots pushed through the black ash, while shrubs like chemise and mountain mahogany sprouted new life among their twisted and singed branches.

Spring had the quality of a miracle, as the recovery exemplified the extremes of life and death that make up the natural cycle in these mountains. By April, blue, purple, yellow, orange, and red blossoms sparkled in the sun. Plants that were adapted to the fire cycle, such as star lily and phacelia, bloomed on the hillsides in a display unseen for years. The backdrop of deep red and black soils heightened the flowers' hues, while rock formations long hidden by brush loomed over canyons, adding new textures to the land.

### A ROCKY HIKE IN PARADISE

Most of the trails closed to prevent accidents and limit erosion are now open again at Circle X, providing your first chance to see certain recovering areas in full bloom. While the display won't match that of last year, the land will still have a look vastly different from before the fire, says Suzanne Goode, associate resource ecologist with the California Department of Parks and Recreation.

Seedlings of shrubs such as ceanothus and laurel sumac will continue their growth after sprouting from burned plants, reaching about 2 to 4 feet tall. It will take five or six years for the canopy to close. Along slopes once dominated by chaparral and coastal sage scrub, wildflowers will again blanket hillsides, although not in the same numbers as last year, says Goode. The display should begin in late March.

A major benefit of the reduced vegetation is that one of the area's most beautiful features, its red volcanic rock,

will be much more visible, especially along *Mishe Mokwa Trail*. The trail edges along a canyon at an elevation of about 2,400 feet, offering views of the Santa Monicas and Triunfo Pass. Nearby slopes have an assortment of deep red outcroppings, including the seemingly precarious, but actually quite stable, Balanced Rock.

The trail dips down into a forested glen, the site of Split Rock, a volcanic boulder with a deep gash down its middle. If you turn around from here, the hike is about 3/4 miles, but a series of paths will take you to 3,111-foot Sandstone Peak, the Santa Monicas' highest, for a 7-mile round trip.

To reach Mishe Mokwa Trail from Pacific Coast Highway (State 1), take Yerba Buena Road 5 miles north. Stop in at Circle X Ranch (on your right) for a trail map, then continue another mile to a parking area on the left. Walk up the fire road about 1/4 mile and look for the trailhead on the right.