

6/12/97



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Season: All Year

Cheeseboro Canyon Trail

NPS Parking Lot to Sulfur Springs

6 miles round trip; 100-foot elevation gain

NPS Parking Lot to Sheep Corral

9 1/2 miles round trip; 200-foot elevation gain

It's the old California of the ranchos: Oak-studded potrerros, rolling foothills that glow amber in the dry months, emerald green in springtime. It's not hard to imagine vaqueros rounding up tough Mexican range cattle.

But today this last vestige of old California, a canyon called Cheeseboro, faces an uncertain future. Though partially protected by the Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area, part of the canyon and much of the surrounding countryside may go the way of the ranchos; that is to say—sold, subdivided and paved over.

County Government is considering the construction of a four-lane boulevard in the lower reaches of Cheeseboro Canyon and a developer wants to build a suburb and a golf course on land bordering the park. If pro-development forces have their way, the last wildlife corridor connecting the Santa Monica Mountains to the open lands of the north will become part of Thousand Oaks Boulevard. If subdividers are successful, this little bit of parkland perched on the western rim of the San Fernando Valley will soon be an island facing the tidal wave of development sweeping the Simi Hills.

When walking beneath a canopy of oak and sycamore in the bottom of Cheeseboro Canyon, it's possible to leave people and politics far behind and enjoy this Southern California of old. But ascending the canyon's north wall on the Modello Trail brings you to a confrontation with modernity—the sight of bulldozers making molehills out of mountains.

In times past, the Chumash occupied this land. The Indians came to gather acorns, a staple of their diet. A family required about 500 pounds of acorns a year, anthropologists estimate. It was quite an operation to gather, dry, and grind the acorns into meal, then leach the meal to remove the bitter tannic acid.

From the days of the ranchos to 1985, Cheeseboro Canyon was heavily grazed by cattle. Grazing altered canyon ecology by displacing native flora and allowing opportunistic plants such as mustard and thistle to invade. As you walk through the canyon, you'll see signs indicating research areas. The National Park Service is attempting to re-colonize native flora and eradicate nonnatives.

Cheeseboro Canyon—for now—is a pleasant walk, gentle enough for the whole family. Weekdays it's an especially tranquil locale.

Directions to trailhead: From the Ventura Freeway (101) in Agoura, exit on Cheesebro Road. Loop inland very briefly on Palo Comado Canyon Road, then turn right on Cheesebro Road, which leads to the National Park Service's gravel entrance road and parking lot.

The Hike: Note your return route, Modello Trail, snaking north up the wall of the canyon, but follow the fire road east into Cheeseboro Canyon. The fire road soon swings north and dips into the canyon. You'll pass a signed intersection with Canyon Overlook Trail, a less-than-thrilling side trail that leads to a knoll overlooking the Lost Hills landfill.

After this junction, the main canyon trail, now known as Sulfur Springs Trail, winds through valley oak (*Quercus lobata*)-dotted grassland and coast live oak (*Quercus agrifolia*)-lined canyon. Watch for mule deer browsing in the meadows and a multitude of squirrels scurrying amongst the oaks.

The old road crisscrosses an (usually) all-but-dry streambed. About 3 miles from the trailhead, your nose will tell you that you've arrived at Sulfur Springs. You can turn around here or continue another 1 3/4 miles up a narrowing trail and narrowing canyon to an old sheep corral.

Return the way you came on Sulfur Springs Trail to a junction 3/4 mile from the trailhead. Join signed Modello Trail which ascends the west wall of the canyon. From the ridgetop you can get a good view of Cheeseboro Canyon and can ponder the future of what is one of the finest remaining oak woodlands in Southern California.

At a signed junction, stay with Modello Trail, which loops around the head of a ravine, then descends to the trailhead.

Coast live oak (*Quercus agrifolia*)