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DAVID ZAITZ



Savoring a green island in a suburban sea, double-decker day-hikers explore the Puente Hills above La Habra Heights.

# How green were my hillsides

The Puente-Chino Hills are among the most beautiful in Southern California. Will they stay that way?

By Matthew Jaffe

As a late winter storm breaks up, remnant clouds move across the Puente Hills, casting fast-moving shadows on a rolling landscape of Irish green.

For a moment, it is easy to become lost in the scene, to imagine perhaps that you are in the middle of some Celtic countryside. The reality is that you are dead center in the Southern California megalopolis, in a low-elevation mountain range that local usage usually divides into the Puente and Chino Hills.

Combined, the Puente and Chino Hills run 30 miles across the Los Angeles Basin, never rising more than 1,800 feet or spreading wider than 10 miles across. They are in many ways islands besieged: Homes creep up their slopes, freeways and boulevards skirt their edges, and industrial build-

ings spread out from their bases. The pressures these inland, in-city ranges face are obvious.

As you continue hiking, your eyes begin to skip over the urbanization to take in one of Southern California's great views: On a clear, midwinter day, it encompasses the snowcapped San Gabriel Mountains, Malibu, Camp Pendleton, and the Santa Ana Mountains in Orange County. Hidden from view are the secluded canyons and creeks that provide critical habitat for wildlife.

Most people don't know much about these hills. Those who do are trying to save what's left.

## Above the fray?

As you climb Hacienda Boulevard into La Habra Heights, there's a sense of stepping back into an earlier

Southern California. With its citrus and avocado groves, the community comes close to preserving a lifestyle lost long ago in most of the region.

The community atmosphere is no accident. Residents have fought hard over a 60-year period to hold on to the vision of Edwin G. Hart, who first developed the area as a rural residential community.

Civic activism has played a big role in attempts to preserve open space in these hills. So have the efforts of residents in nearby Whittier and the involvement of agencies, including the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy and the Trust for Public Land. Bit by bit the hills are being saved.

## A canyon preserved

One of the most beautiful spots in the Puente-Chino Hills is Powder Canyon, a wooded fissure with a little creek that serves as a vital corridor for wildlife. At 517 acres, the recently acquired canyon may seem modest in size. But if it can be combined with privately held properties and land under lease to oil companies, it will provide a bridge for wildlife to travel from the Cleveland National Forest through these hills and ultimately up the San Gabriel River into the San Gabriel Mountains.

"The fact that Powder Canyon exists at all is extraordinary," says Jill Kowalik, a UCLA literature and philosophy professor, who along with her husband, Bill, has been active in local open-space-preservation efforts.

For more than a decade, Kowalik has also been battling breast cancer. Early on, her prognosis wasn't good and Kowalik decided to put her energies into the local environment rather than into a planned book on the psychological impacts of the 30 Years' War in 17th-century Germany.

"I had to decide whether I should try to finish a book that maybe 50 people in the world would read or try to help set up something that would have an impact on a lot more

people for a long time," she says. "I had read an article that described how people who live a long life often have a social purpose that helps their longevity. I thought maybe if I do something socially useful, it would help me live longer. And it did. Now I'm finishing the book that I started before."

While preservation of the Puente-Chino Hills may seem mostly a backyard issue, the area has a

greater global significance. (In fact, Bill Kowalik points out, it's visible from space as a great dark patch in nighttime satellite imagery of the sparkling Los Angeles Basin.) According to Alissa Ing, associate resource ecologist at Chino Hills State Park, because the biodiversity of the Southwest region is so high, the biological issues playing out here are no

less significant than those of a tropical rain forest. Acquisitions like a recent purchase of Coal Canyon, adjacent to the 12,400-acre Chino Hills State Park, help preserve connections all the way down into Mexico.

"Keeping these connections intact will ensure the health of an incredibly diverse isthmus of native habitat smack dab in the middle of the L.A. basin,"

Ing says. "This is an absolutely fabulous patch of biology."

## Puente-Chino Hills travel planner

While the fate of several critical open-space parcels remains undecided, there are numerous areas with established public access in the Puente-Chino Hills wildlife movement corridor.

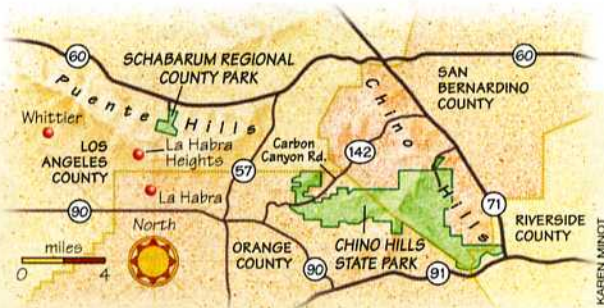
### Chino Hills State Park

The recent acquisition of Coal Canyon expanded Chino Hills State Park to about 13,000 acres, making it the largest single preserved parcel in the hills. Coal Canyon is a critical link in the Puente-Chino Hills wildlife movement corridor.

The main park entrance is located off State 71. Take the Soquel Canyon Pkwy. about 1 mile to a signed left turn at Elinvar Rd., which turns sharply left. Look immediately for a signed gravel road—Bane Canyon Rd.—that leads to park headquarters in 3 miles. Park entry is \$2 per vehicle. For information call (909) 780-6222.

### Hills for Everyone Trail

**WHERE:** From park headquarters, walk back down Bane Canyon Rd. and turn right on Telegraph Canyon Trail. Follow this trail for about 1/2 mile, then turn right on the utility road and look for the interpretive sign that marks the Hills for Everyone trailhead on the left.



**DISTANCE:** Including the stretch on Telegraph Canyon Trail, round trip is 3 1/2 miles. You can return via the Hills for Everyone Trail or Telegraph Canyon Trail.

**HIGHLIGHTS:** The trail winds through a beautiful riparian woodland with oaks and native walnut trees; there are a few short, steep sections.

**DIFFICULTY:** Easy to moderate.

### Water Canyon Trail

**WHERE:** From the campground, walk south down the fire road for about 1 mile, then look right for the signed trailhead.

**DISTANCE:** Round trip is about 5 miles, 3 of which are on Water Canyon Trail.

**HIGHLIGHTS:** Probably the most beautiful of the park's canyons and one of the nicest spots in all of the Puente-Chino Hills.

**DIFFICULTY:** Easy to moderate.

### Powder Canyon

While the trail system is still being finalized in the canyon and the 2,900 surrounding acres (some public land, some private), there is an easily explored informal network of trails here, with connections to Sky-

line Trail and Schabaram Regional County Park (see below). There are three signed access points off Fullerton Rd. south of State 60; the best is at Skyline Dr. just off the inter-

section of Fullerton Rd. and East Rd. From here, a path leads into the canyon. For more information contact the Puente Hills Landfill Native Habitat Preservation Authority at (562) 699-7411.

### Schabaram Regional County Park

This multiuse park includes an extensive area of open space with good hiking.

### Schabaram Trail

**WHERE:** From State 60, take Azusa Ave. south to Colima Rd. Turn left; the park entrance is on the right. At the kiosk go straight; the trailhead begins behind the rest rooms on the right (access is also available from a few points within the park). The trail edges along developed portions of the park, then reaches a junction where you go right. It continues to climb; at Skyline Trail bear left to finish the loop.

**DISTANCE:** 5-mile loop.

**HIGHLIGHTS:** Especially in winter, impressive views following storms, with the snowcapped San Gabriels in the distance.

**DIFFICULTY:** Moderate. ♦