



[Roam-O-Rama](#)

Los Peñasquitos Canyon

By [Jerry Schad](#) | Published Wednesday, April 16, 2008

Crickets sing and bullfrogs groan. A hawk alights upon a sycamore limb, then launches with outstretched wings to catch a puff of sea breeze moving up the canyon. A cottontail rabbit bounds across the trail, and stops to take your measure with a sidelong stare. Los Peñasquitos Creek, rejuvenated by this year's generous if not torrential rains, slips silently through a sparkling pool and darts noisily down multiple paths in the constriction known as "the falls."

Despite the miles of suburban development surrounding it, Los Peñasquitos Canyon Preserve still retains its gentle, unselfconscious beauty. The preserve's 3000 acres of San Diego city- and county-owned open space stretch for almost 7 miles between Interstates 5 and 15, encompassing much of Los Peñasquitos Creek and one of its tributaries — Lopez Canyon.

At the east end of the preserve, off Black Mountain Road, stands the refurbished, 1862 Johnson-Taylor adobe ranch house. A section of the house is thought to be the remains of an 1824 adobe cottage erected by Captain Francisco Maria Ruiz, a commandant of the Presidio of San Diego.

Farther afield, hikers, joggers, and equestrians have the run of the preserve. Mountain bikers are welcome too, but they must stick to the main six-mile-long dirt road along Los Peñasquitos Creek. Probably the best springtime hike (or bike ride) in the preserve — and the one offering significant shade — is the ramble toward the falls from the east, 6.5 miles round-trip.

Start at the preserve's main staging area on the west side of Black Mountain Road, opposite Mercy Road. From there, follow the main dirt road hugging the base of the canyon's steep, chaparral-covered south slopes. Mileposts along the roadside help you gauge your progress. You wind in and out of dense oak woodlands (draped with poison oak in places) and across meadows dotted with small elderberry trees.

At the three-mile marker, the road winds up onto a chaparral slope in order to detour a narrow, rocky section of the canyon. Near the top there's a wide spot, with racks for securing bikes, and a foot trail descending north to the falls area, where the stream has carved a narrow constriction into the bedrock. Even though our rainy season is basically over, water still cascades through here. Polished rock ten feet up on either side testifies to its maximum depth. The outcroppings of greenish-gray rock, just in this one small area, are a type called Santiago Peak volcanics; they're typical of the metamorphosed volcanic rock found on Santiago Peak in the Santa Ana Mountains. Keep an eye out for rattlesnakes around the area of the falls.

This article contains information about a publicly owned recreation or wilderness area. Trails and pathways are not necessarily marked. Conditions can change rapidly. Hikers should be properly equipped and have safety and navigational skills. The Reader and Jerry Schad assume no responsibility for any adverse experience.

Los Peñasquitos Canyon

Popular Los Peñasquitos Canyon Preserve offers a respite from San Diego's busy city life.

Distance from downtown San Diego: 20 miles

Hiking/biking distance: 6.5 miles round-trip

Difficulty: Moderate

