Mission: "To inspire a passion, awareness and respect for the environment, and to preserve and protect for future generations the history and ecosystem of Placerita Canyon."

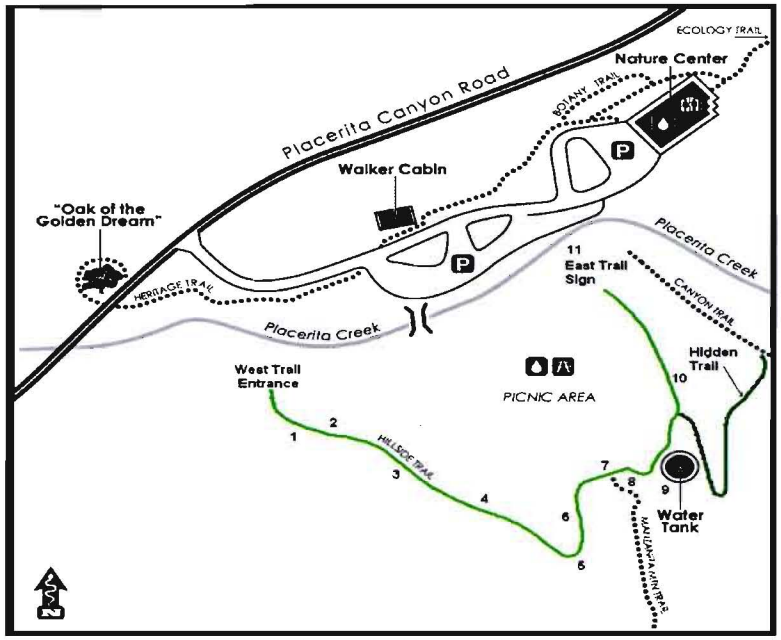
NOTES

Placerita Canyon Natural Area and Nature Center

Brochure provided by
The Placerita Canyon Nature Center Associates

KAREN M. PEARSON HILLSIDE TRAIL

SELF-GUIDED NATURE TRAIL
Length: Approximately ¼ Mile
Time: Approximately ½ hour



19152 Placerita Canyon Road
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The Hillside Trail is designed as a short, pleasant, yet educational hike. It journeys across the hillside behind the picnic grounds. Within an altitude rise of approximately 150 feet, the hiker will see and enjoy a few of the natural features of Placerita's oak woodland, chaparral and geology. This hike is sure to instill a basic understanding of our local environment. When you enter the Hillside Trail from the west end of the picnic grounds, you will have an easy grade to the top and a fairly steep downgrade, but the trail should present no problem if taken slowly.

This trail is **not** designed for ADA compliance or bicycles.

Please take memories, photos, and **trash** away with you, but nothing else – no plants, animals, sticks, stones or leaves. All features are protected. (*L.A. County Code 17.04.340 & 17.04.470) Enjoy* your visit and allow others to enjoy theirs.

WEST TRAIL ENTRANCE (see map)

You are surrounded by an oak woodland plant community. The dominant species in this habitat is the coast live oak (Quercus agrifolia). These trees supply food and shelter for western scrub-jay, acorn woodpecker, and subterranean creatures such as California ground squirrels and Botta's pocket gopher.

THINGS TO LOOK OUT FOR ON THE TRAIL

As you hike this trail, watch for scat (animal droppings) and funnel webs. Some animals, especially the gray fox, may deposit their scat in a conspicuous place on the trail or on rocks.
The funnel web spider's web is composed entirely of dry silk. At the back of the web is a small funnel-shaped opening that forms a retreat in which the spider typically rests. Look for funnel webs along the trail among tree roots, rocks, logs or in the brush.

#1 POISON OAK *(Toxicodendron diversilobum)*

The cool, damp environment of the oak woodland is ideal for growth of poison oak, a western North American native. There are several patches of the plant along the lower part of the trail. Leaves normally consist of three leaflets. The stalk of the central leaflet is longer than those of the other two. Poison oak flowers March through May. Contact with any portion of poison oak at any time of year can cause a severe skin rash in many people. In California, the number of working hours lost because of poison oak makes it the most hazardous plant in the state.

#2 DECOMPOSITION/COMPOST

In nature, dead animals and plants break down slowly as a result of various natural biological and chemical processes collectively known as decomposition. This is nature's way of recycling and depositing nutrients back into the soil. The process of accelerating natural biological decomposition rates by controlling such factors as the moisture content, temperature, oxygen levels, particle size, shape and size of the compost pile, pH, and carbon to nitrogen ratios is called composting.

#3 EXPOSED TREE ROOTS/ANIMAL BURROWS

The coast live oak (Quercus agrifolia) is an evergreen oak with an extensive root system. The roots of all plants not only supply minerals and water to the plant, but also must be able to anchor the entire tree. This is a glimpse of a portion of the oak's root system. You will see burrows of all sizes, not only from the ground squirrel but from burrowing insects, moles and other animals which you seldom see. The root system protects the burrowing animals by making it very difficult for predators (such as the gray fox or raccoon) to dig after them. Many of these burrows are taken over by other creatures, such as spiders and snakes, when the original resident leaves.
The soil here is fully developed. It can be burrowed into by animals and easily supports plant life.

#4 YERBA SANTA *(Eriodictyon crassifolium)*

The tall grayish, fuzzy leafed plant you're looking at is called yerba santa, which means "saint's herb" in Spanish. This plant was believed to have medicinal qualities by early Spaniards and many American Indians such as the Tataviam (the tribe that settled in our area about 450 A.D. when the Spanish arrived). Brewed into a strong tea, it was believed to cure many minor complaints from stomach aches to headaches. The Tataviam made tea from the leaves to relieve cold symptoms. The leaves may also have antiseptic properties. April through June yerba santa produces beautiful lavender blooms.

#5 CHAPARRAL HABITAT

Facing the bench, look into the dense growth of the shrubbery above you. You have left the oak woodland habitat and have now entered the chaparral, the dominant plant community of the hillsides of southern California. Here you will see closely growing ceanothus, chamise, scrub oak, black sage, sagebrush and many other plant species. The steady build-up of dead leaves, twigs and branches from these plants fuels the brush fires which intermittently occur here. The plants in this community have water-saving strategies to survive the hot summers.

#6 TREE-TOP CANOPY

As you look out and see the fire-ravaged tree branches. Notice that some of them have crown sprouted (new growth). Plants regularly exposed to fire tend to have features that help them recover following a fire. Some chaparral plants that cannot crown sprout need ash or smoke to aid in seed germination.

#7 MANZANITA MOUNTAIN TRAIL

This trail offers a greater view of Santa Clarita, but be prepared for a much longer and steeper hike to the top. Stop here and take a look to the hillside beyond the road. Do the plants appear different from the hillside where you are standing? They are. Except for the canyon bottoms, the plant life is smaller, thinner and lacking trees and shrubs. The slopes you are looking at are facing south, as compared to where you are standing now, which faces north. South-facing slopes receive more direct sunlight than those that face north. The intense sunlight rapidly evaporates the soil moisture, making plant life sparse.

#8 EXPOSED BEDROCK

This portion of the trail (continuing towards the water tank) shows the underlying bedrock. This is composed of metamorphic rock (a rock that has undergone transformation by natural agencies such as heat and pressure). The soil is less developed here and plants use the crevices in the rock to root themselves. Dudleya, moss and lichen thrive here due to the northern exposure and seepage from the rock. When this rock eventually breaks down due to weathering, it forms the coarse sandy soil characteristic of Placerita Canyon. Plant roots also help break down rock by steadily pushing the layers apart as they grow.

#9 THE WATER TANK

This large water tank is no longer in use but was, at one time, a source of water supply to parts of the canyon. Looking to the west is Santa Clarita Valley and off to the east is Placerita Canyon. If you look behind the tank, you will find the dominant plant is chamise (*Adenostoma fasciculatum*), an evergreen shrub with dry-looking, stick-like branches that have very small shiny leaves (1/4 in) with flammable oils. The branches terminate in bunches of white tubular flowers from February through December. In front of the water tank is deerweed (*Lotus scoparius*) whose stems are green, erect, and somewhat branched with small leaves. The plant flowers March through August. Now look to the far right of the benches. There are a few Ceanothus species. The seeds of this plant can lie dormant for hundreds of years, typically dependent on forest fires to trigger germination of its seeds. Just before you start down the trail to Saddle Ridge (# 10), on the left is a sugar bush (*Rhus ovata*) which has reddish twig branches. The leaves are dark green, leathery and folded along the midrib with berry-like flowers March through May. Its fruit was used by the Tataviam as a drink sweetener.

#10 Saddle Ridge

You find your self on a small saddle ridge. This type of geologic formation occurs when two or more resistant rock formations are left after the erosion of the intervening soil. In this case a vein of granitic gneiss has formed the northern end of the saddle and still protrudes as a sharp pinnacle of rock (which you should see to the right of the down hill trail). Note how the gneiss has broken in an irregular fashion. These rocky pinnacles are favorite roosting spots for birds of prey. Keep your eyes on the sky and you may witness a red-tailed hawk or a turkey vulture soaring overhead – a frequent sight in the sky. Look east and you will see Placerita Canyon as it continues through the steep-sided "narrows."

The Hidden Trail

You now have the choice of either traveling down toward the picnic grounds or backtracking 20 feet and take the Hidden Trail on the left. The Hidden Trail is shaded by oaks. The basket bush (*Rhus trilobata*), a poison oak look-alike, is found along this stretch. The Tataviam used the leaves and small twigs to make black dye. March through July, bush monkeyflower (*Mimulus aurantiacus)* blooms in this area. This trail will join up with the canyon trail, turn left on the Canyon Trail and you will end up at the same point as if you went straight down the Hillside Trail.

East Trail Sign (see map)

You may enter the Hillside trail from this direction. You will have a steep uphill grade, but it presents no problem if taken slowly. Just read the numbers in reverse order (by the way #11 is behind you).

#11 California Buckthorn (*Rhamnus californica*)

This plant is commonly known as coffeeberry or California buckthorn. It is an evergreen shrub with dark red branches. The flowers are small and greenish-white and bloom May through June. The fruit is a berry which turns red, then purple and finally black over the summer. The Tataviam used the bark and berries of this plant.