

BLUE SKY TRAIL TO LAKE RAMONA 26

IN BRIEF

Oak woodland, riparian habitat, coastal sage scrub, and chaparral lend variety to this oasis near the suburbs of Poway. The first 1.5-mile stretch is a flat walk through dappled shade in woodland recovering from fire, which makes the Lake Ramona trail fork a logical turnaround point for anyone not wanting an uphill hike.

DESCRIPTION

Park in the lot and head south along the street for a few yards before turning to the left (east) down the dirt road that begins this trail. Very close to the trailhead, old oaks that once allowed only small patches for a view of the sky—and made one wonder about the reserve's name—are now recovering from fire, so give off less shade. On this nice flat stretch, enjoy the stately oaks' regenerative powers as they more fully recover from the fires over time.

At approximately 0.25 miles, you'll notice the "Oak Grove" marker sign for a narrow trail descending on the left side of the wide main trail. Take the side trail down toward the creek that runs along the north side of the trail. You will see an ancient grove of oaks to the left. Sunlight filters through the canopy in glints of gold, producing a hazy, enchanted atmosphere. Baby oaks stand like spindly weeds, while their towering parent trees reach with outstretched

Directions

From I-15, exit at Rancho Bernardo Road and travel east for 3.5 miles. Note that the road becomes Espola Road at the Summerfield intersection. Watch for the Blue Sky Ecological Reserve sign on the left, and turn into the nearby parking lot. The trailhead is to the right.



KEY AT-A-GLANCE INFORMATION

LENGTH: 4.5 miles

CONFIGURATION: Out-and-back

DIFFICULTY: Easy

SCENERY: Views of Lake Ramona, distant Lake Poway, birds, creek lined with sycamores, oak forest, and a variety of flowering plants along the upper trail

EXPOSURE: Shady with some dappled sunlight on entry trail; full sun on trail to lake

TRAFFIC: Heavy

TRAIL SURFACE: Packed dirt, leaf litter on creekside trail

HIKING TIME: 2.5 hours

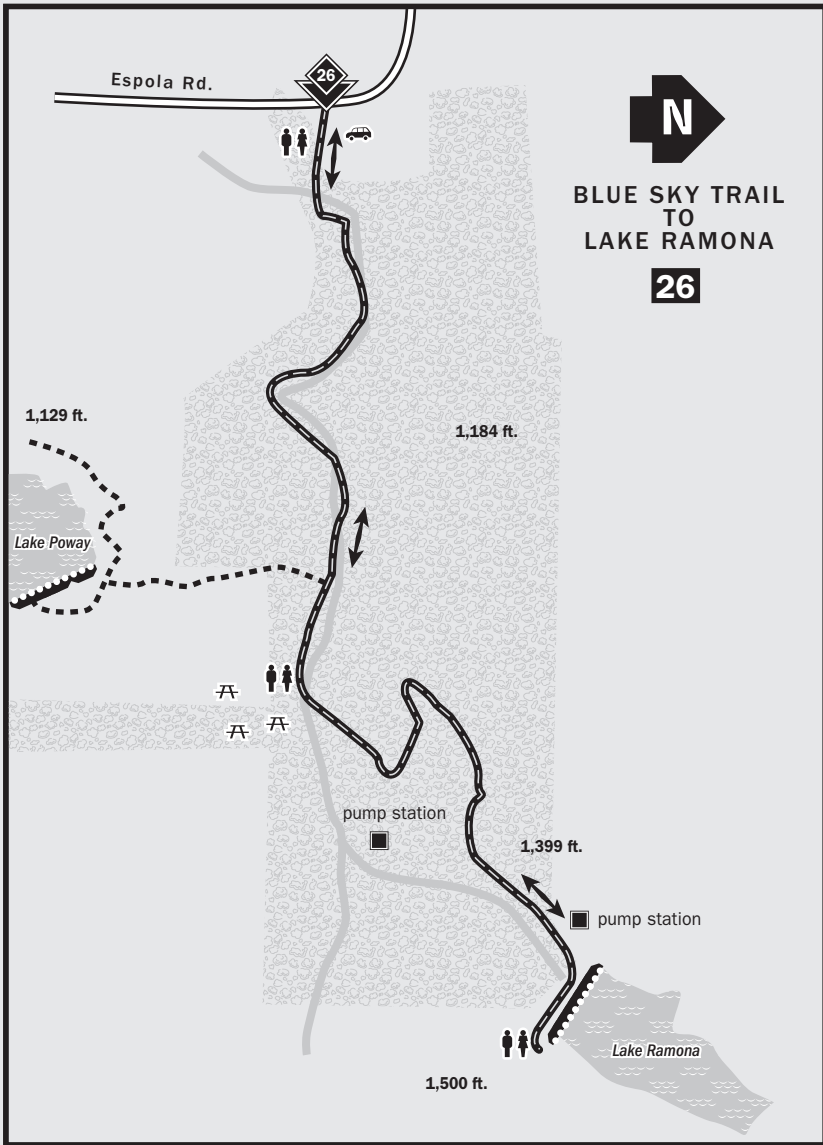
ACCESS: Free

MAPS: Free at kiosk beyond trailhead; also viewable at www.blueskyreserve.org

FACILITIES: Portable toilets near entry, in picnic area, and above Lake Ramona

SPECIAL COMMENTS: Leashed dogs are permitted (on main trail only, not the creekside trail). No bicycles or motor vehicles are allowed. Horses permitted on the main trail only—not on the streamside trail. For recorded information, phone (858) 668-4781.





limbs as if gathering the seedlings under protective wings. Be careful to stay on the trail to avoid trampling the young oaks. You'll note the 2007 fire's devastation, which has thinned the canopy, but the enchantment remains.

Listen to the frogs' chorus rising from underlayer of fallen leaves and limbs tangled with the vines of wild roses and poison oak. Alongside the narrow trail strewn with acorns and decaying oak leaves, clusters of fat toadstools sprout from a fluffy orange carpet of leaves, dropped in the fall by the Western sycamores

growing immediately adjacent to the stream. Look for toadstools on the other side of the trail, too. A variety of them grow here in the cool forest shade. Flattened and with fluted edges, or round as buttons, or shaped like a beanie cap, they burst from the ground, making the moist dirt clump form a tiny earthen fence around the fleshy stems.

At approximately half a mile from the hike's start, the 0.3-mile streamside trail reconnects with the broader main route, where horses are allowed. Pass the side trail, marked Lake Poway, off to the right. Another 0.2 miles brings you to an area that, prior to the fires, held picnic tables—at the time of this writing not yet replaced. You've come 1.1 miles from your car. When you reach the sign pointing left to Lake Ramona, turn left. (The main trail leads to a water tower and pump station, and beyond that a private residence—none of which are public areas.)

After turning left at the Lake Ramona fork, emerge into sunlight. Bring drinking water, even in moderate spring and fall weather. You'll hear the roar of the pump station, which comes into view as the trail begins its gradual, 400- to 500-foot ascent to Lake Ramona to the northeast. The trail gets steeper for a short distance, switching back to the west. Don't let the somewhat barren, wide dirt trail fool you into thinking this will be a dull hike. As the path switches back, climbing steadily and gradually to the east, surprisingly delightful foliage awaits. Blooming with tiny white flowers well into autumn, wild cucumber twines up into the branches of laurel sumac growing along the trail. Bright-orange clumps of parasitic California dodder, more commonly called "witch's hair," winds around both the cucumber and the laurel sumac. The knotty orange tangles thrive at lower elevations, disappearing as the trail climbs higher. Lupine and a variety of mint begin to appear in bushy tufts along the inner edge of the trail, resting against the rocky face where the road has been cut into the mountain. This hiking route is actually the old Green Valley Truck Trail but is no longer open to motor traffic.

At just shy of 2 miles, asphalt replaces the dirt road. Getting closer to the lake, a wall of rock rises ahead to the east. Here, closer to the water, tree tobacco grows. Its narrow yellow flowers seem to drip from the ends of spindly stalks. The road becomes asphalt where Blue Sky Ecological Reserve land ends and the Ramona Water District begins. Pause and look to the southwest, where the trail etches down the mountain. Lake Poway, about 2 miles away, sparkles in the sunlight. Turkey vultures circle overhead, giving parents an opportunity to tease any children who are tuckered out from the hike—maybe those vultures are circling above a weary hiker who collapsed! You will pass another pump station on the left before the asphalt road bends to the south. Avocado groves growing above the road come into view and, as you reach the top, the plumed branches of commercially grown palms line the hillsides to the southeast.

To work out a different set of muscles, or just for fun, walk backward on this last, smooth stretch of asphalt. Once at the top, enjoy a view over the vast

blue waters of Lake Ramona from the guardrail. You'll have come 2.25 miles. The dense quietude is interrupted only by the quack and flutter of ducks gathered near the lake's shore, or by an occasional small airplane heading east to the airstrip in Ramona.

The trip back down feels entirely different than the climb, which can be tiring, especially in warmer weather. But passing breezes will cool your damp shirt as you make your way back down with the help of gravity. My family likes to stop at the picnic area on the way out of the Reserve, eating the lunch we pack for the trip.

NEARBY ACTIVITIES

A treat for both the eyes and the taste buds can be found at the Hamburger Factory Restaurant. Old-fashioned memorabilia, a friendly neighborhood atmosphere, and an inexpensive menu that includes barbecued chicken, ribs, and much more than the name implies offers diners an experience sure to satisfy. From Blue Sky Ecological Reserve, turn left onto Espola Road. Drive for approximately 3 miles and turn right on Twin Peaks. At about 0.8 miles, turn left on Midland. The restaurant is about 0.5 miles down on the right at 14122 Midland Road, Poway. Call (858) 486-4575.