

PALOMAR MOUNTAIN OVERVIEW LOOP

13

IN BRIEF

A variety of mountain landscapes include thick conifer forest, creekside vegetation, and a pond, making this loop a pleasant one for viewing the Palomar Mountain area. Opportunities to see wildlife are abundant—if you're quiet and look closely.

DESCRIPTION

From the parking area, you'll see an asphalt maintenance road winding northwest into the trees. Head up this road about 0.1 mile till you spot the Chimney Flats Trail marker on the right. Turn into the dense shade of the forest where the earthy smells of decaying leaves and fresh pines engulf you.

The trail leads down a gradual slope where fallen twigs snap and crackle under eager feet. Dry limbs intermingle with thriving greenery as dappled sunlight dances with shade like gracefully rendered strokes on a painter's canvas. Boulders set among the trees seem artfully arranged—clusters of large and small ones, with ferns growing up between them like tiny gardens within the bigger landscape.

After about 0.5 miles, the forest opens to a meadow of ferns. The trail then narrows to a single-trek path and continues southeast



KEY AT-A-GLANCE INFORMATION

LENGTH: 4 miles

CONFIGURATION: Loop

DIFFICULTY: Moderate

SCENERY: Forest, pond, wildlife

EXPOSURE: Mostly shady

TRAFFIC: Moderate

TRAIL SURFACE: Leaf- and needle-littered soil

HIKING TIME: 2.5 hours

ACCESS: Free

MAPS: Online on the State of California Web site at

www.parks.ca.gov/parkindex

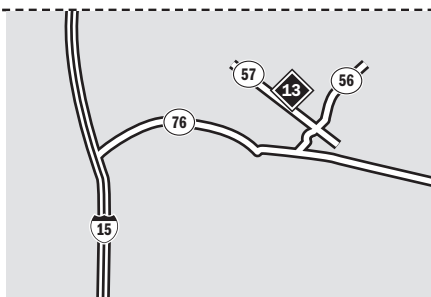
FACILITIES: None

SPECIAL COMMENTS: Be aware that the air is thinner on this mile-high trail, increasing exertion levels. Check weather advisories and be prepared for snow in winter months.

Directions



Take I-15 to the Pala/CA 76 exit and turn right, heading east for about 21 miles. Go left on County Route 56, and drive along the steep, winding road for 6.7 miles. Turn left on East Grade, then make another immediate left (almost a U-turn, really) on County Route 57 (also marked Palomar State Park Road). Drive 2.6 miles and park in the small asphalt lot on the right.





into even denser forest. Squirrels may skitter through drifts of fallen leaves alongside the path where towering, rough-barked trees play host to pale-green moss—growing on the north side, of course.

At 0.8 miles, the narrow trail becomes a steep downhill, like nature's offered an invitation to run. Be aware that rocks cross the path in spots, and smaller trees have sprung up in the path's center. If you're going fast, you may trip or smash into an unforgiving surface. The trail soon narrows to little more than the



As the sunbeams penetrate the leafy canopy, “Star Trek” fans may say, “Beam me up, Scotty!”

width of your foot for a short distance, slanting downhill and making slow the only way to go. The trail bears right, zigs and zags, then moves north and crossing seasonal Doane Creek.

A short distance ahead, at 1.3 miles, the trail splits. Take the left path, Thunder Springs Trail, which heads northwest, gradually gaining elevation. The thin mountain air may make the slightly upward trek difficult. In the late afternoon, the canopy hides the sunlight.

At a little more than 1 mile from the start, the trail flattens, heading through open meadow where the grass is golden in fall. As the meadow joins the forest, you’ll cross a boggy area where mule deer like to hang out. If you’re quiet, you may get a glimpse of them before they see and hear you and bound off—boing! boing!—into the woods.

The route briefly heads uphill again, perhaps with gnats often buzzing about, then somewhat steeply downhill again with the creek in view. Doane Pond soon enters your vision ahead. Often, people stand with fishing poles, or meander along the bank. Frogs escape into the water with a splash, then resurface in groups, seemingly as curious as those who stoop to look more closely at their buggy eyes staring back from the murky water. There’s a picnic table just past the pond—a convenient place to rest or eat.

To the left of the pond, you’ll spot the trail marked “Cedar Trail to Scott’s Cabin.” Take this steep trail uphill for about 0.1 mile until it levels out in an area thick with ferns. The route remains level just long enough for you to catch your breath.

Tread quietly and watch for deer that sometimes graze just a few feet from the path.

Individually, the trees may look gnarled, bruised, and bent. But viewed from a distance, as a whole, the forest looks flawless, as if every tree weathered the storms of nature (fire, wind, lightning) without a mark.

At 2.6 miles, nature's imperfect perfection opens to an area heavily charred by the 2007 wildfires that licked through the area. As of writing this in mid-2008, majestic oaks are recovering nicely. Amid this blazed section, some cedar trees looked completely untouched, demonstrating the chaotic nature of blazing fire, fed and tossed by wind.

At the top of the hill, you'll note Scott's Cabin Trail. Turn left, continuing steadily uphill for about 0.25 miles until the trail again levels out briefly. You may notice some small offshoot paths to the left, but stay on the main path that now heads southeast. Fallen twigs crunch underfoot. Previous to the 2007 fires, Scott's Cabin appeared as a few rough logs forming the base of the once-tall walls of an early homesteader's residence—and is virtually unidentifiable now. What you will be able to see more easily now are adjacent residences saved by firefighters and previously hidden by thick forest.

Pass the side trail that marks the way to the Ranger Station and continue toward Chimney Flats. The leveling route moves through a small meadow dotted with cedars before it splits. Either trail will take you back to the asphalt road you came in on. Follow it the short distance back to the parking area. Keep an eye out for wildlife. On a recent visit, a bobcat turned to look back at us as he slowly and confidently made his way across the road.

NEARBY ACTIVITIES

As you head back down, look on the right side of East Grade about 0.2 miles from the top: spigots protrude from a stone wall. Visitors routinely stop to fill their bottles with the artesian water.