

Dearing Mountain Trail

Wilacre Park to Coldwater Canyon Park
2 1/2 miles round trip; 500-foot elevation gain

Wilacre Park to Fryman Overlook
6 miles round trip; 700-foot elevation gain.

Wilacre Park and Fryman Overlook, Coldwater Canyon Park and Franklin Canyon Ranch—these four recreation areas comprise Cross Mountain Park. Individually and collectively, they contribute some much-needed breathing room to the San Fernando Valley side of the Santa Monica Mountains.

Betty P. Dearing Trail—or Dearing Mountain Trail as it's usually called—connects Fryman Overlook with both Coldwater Canyon Park and Wilacre Park. The trail honors a determined conservationist for her efforts to create a trail across the Santa Monica Mountains from Los Angeles to the sea.

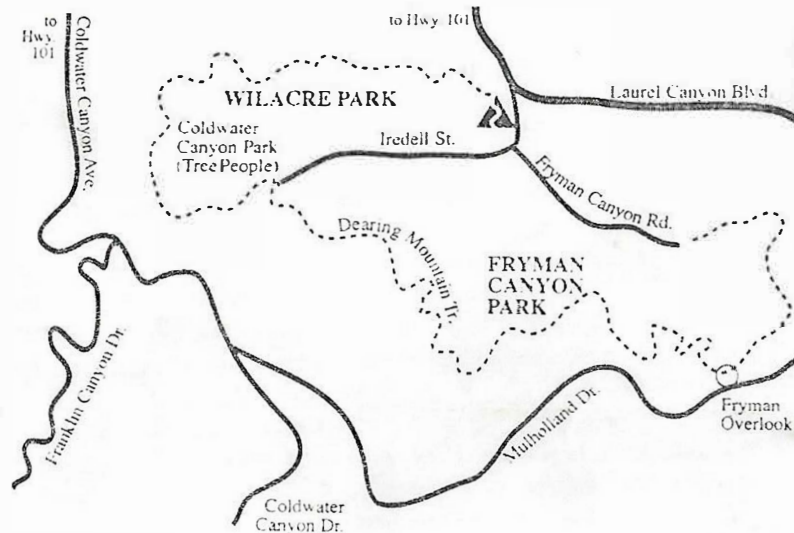
The trail begins in the wilds of Studio City in Wilacre Park, the former estate of silent movie cowboy Will Acres. The land was saved from the bulldozer by environmentalists and the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy in 1982. From the park's high points, great clear-day vistas of the San Fernando Valley await the urban mountaineer.

The trail continues to Fryman Overlook on Mulholland Drive, where the aforementioned valley vistas are even more terrific. From the overlook, you can follow a footpath and a suburban street back to Wilacre Park.

Between the panoramic viewpoints is Coldwater Canyon Park, headquarters of the TreePeople. The group's well-publicized tree-planting campaign has contributed a great deal to the greening of Los Angeles. You can learn about the TreePeople's work by visiting their exhibits, landscaping display, nursery and headquarters. And you can learn about the trees themselves by taking Magic Forest Nature Trail, which winds through the preserve. Benches and drinking water welcome the weary hiker.

Along Dearing Mountain Trail, you'll observe two man-made alterations of the landscape. One alteration is botanical; many exotic trees and shrubs grow on the steep slopes of Coldwater and Fryman canyons. TreePeople Headquarters was once Fire Station 108, built by the Los Angeles Fire Department in 1923. During the years the firemen were in residence, eucalyptus, pine and many other kinds of nonnative trees were planted in the area.

may 9 '90



Another alteration is the terracing of hillsides to create pads for the construction of homes. Building on steep slopes is, of course, prevalent in canyons all around Southern California, but in the Coldwater-Laurel Canyon area it has reached ridiculous heights. The hiker looks up at some truly astonishing residences—homes on stilts, homes built stairstep-like down precipitous canyon walls, homes that seem certain to slide down to Ventura Boulevard after the first good rain.

Directions to trailhead: From the Ventura Freeway (101) in Studio City, exit on Laurel Canyon Boulevard and drive south 1 1/2 miles to Fryman Canyon Road. Turn right and park immediately. The unsigned trail begins at a yellow vehicle gate.

The Hike: Ascend the asphalt road past bay laurel and towering toyon, walnut trees and assorted planted pines. The road retires to dirt and soon proffers terrific clear-day vistas of the San Fernando Valley.

At a wide spot in the road, a bit more than a mile from the trailhead, you'll intersect Coldwater Canyon Park's Magic Forest Trail. You may continue on Dearing Mountain Trail, still a dirt road at this point. If you want a little break, detour right on the park's nature trail. Ascend one of the handsome stone staircases, built by the WPA in the 1930s, to the domain of the TreePeople. After learning about the group's tree-planting efforts, rejoin Dearing Mountain Trail.

A half-mile descent on the trail brings you past the backside of some homes, a yellow vehicle gate, and down to Iredell Street. Walk 50 yards on the street and rejoin Dearing Mountain Trail at another yellow gate. After a hundred yards the trail junctions. Stay left and begin a short, but very

steep ascent up a terraced slope. The trail then descends to the head of a ravine that's watered by a seasonal creek and shaded by towering eucalyptus. Frogs provide musical accompaniment to the path, which traverses the canyon wall, then dips again to the bottom of another ravine. Unfortunately, this ravine and its tiny creek is located below one of Mulholland Drive's "Deadman's Curves," and has become the final resting place for a dozen wrecked autos. Minus the junkyard, this fern-lined little dell would be a pretty spot.

The trail ascends moderately up the chaparral-covered south wall of Fryman Canyon to Mulholland Drive and Fryman Overlook. From the overlook, much of the San Fernando Valley is at your feet. Beyond the valley, smog-free views also take in the Verdugo, Santa Susana and San Gabriel mountain ranges.

Fryman Overlook displays two commemorative plaques. One praises Mulholland Drive, brainchild of William Mulholland, chief engineer of the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power, who in 1913 proposed a 55-mile scenic road through the Santa Monica Mountains. Betty P. Dearing (1917-1977) is honored for her efforts to "create a nature walk from Los Angeles to the sea."

Road-builders have been more successful than trail-builders in the Santa Monicas. While Mulholland Drive was constructed in the early 1920s "to take Angelenos from the city to the ocean," the Backbone Trail across the spine of mountains has yet to be completed, despite more than twenty years of work.

Physical fitness freaks not content with the workout afforded by this hike will proceed to Fryman Overlook's exercise course for a round of hip flexor stretches, side bends and gluteus stretches. The less-energetic will head for home.

Return a short distance on Dearing Mountain Trail to a junction; instead of descending the way you came, keep straight and follow the sage- and toyon-lined path as it heads east below Mulholland Drive. The trail turns north then east again and soon junctions. Take the left fork and descend steeply down a mustard-cloaked hillside to a dirt fire road. Turn left on the fire road, which after a hundred yards continues as a cement path and descends to a yellow gate at the corner of Dona Maria Drive and Fryman Road. Follow Fryman Road 3/4 of a mile to the trailhead at Wilacre Park.