

Day Hike 8/21/91 9:30 am

# Sycamore Canyon: Where the Butterflies Flutter By

By JOHN McKINNEY

Every fall, millions of monarch butterflies migrate south to the forests of Mexico's Transvolcanic Range and to the damp coastal woodlands of Central and Southern California. The monarchs' awe-inspiring migration and formation of what entomologists call overwintering colonies are two of nature's most colorful autumn events.

"All monarch butterflies west of the Rockies head for California in the fall," explains Chris Nagano, an entomologist with the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County. "One of the best places in Southern California to observe the arriving monarchs is near the campground in Big Sycamore Canyon at Point Mugu State Park."

The monarch's evolutionary success lies not only in its unique ability to migrate to warmer climes, but in its mastery of chemical warfare. The butterfly feeds on milkweed—the favored poison of assassins during the Roman Empire. This milkweed diet makes the monarch toxic to birds; after munching a monarch or two and becoming sick, they learn to leave the butterflies alone.

Sycamore Canyon Trail takes you through a peaceful wooded

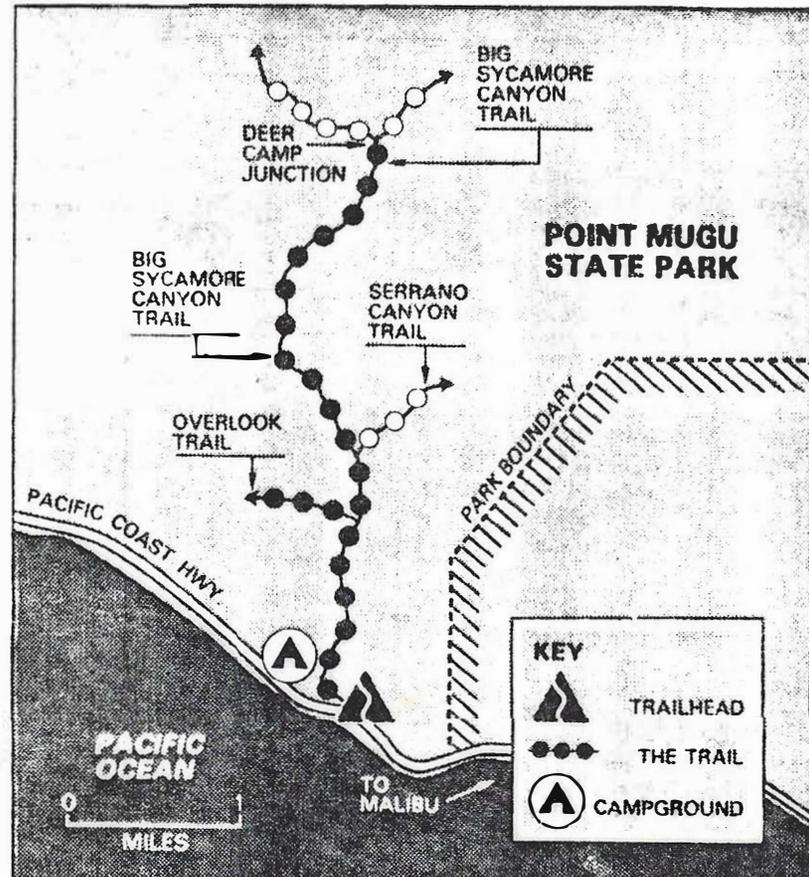
## Big Sycamore Canyon Trail

*Big Sycamore Canyon to Deer Camp Junction: 6 miles round trip, 200-foot gain in elevation.*

canyon, where a multitude of monarchs dwell, and past some magnificent sycamores. The sycamores that shade the canyon bearing their name are incomparable. The lower branches, stout and crooked, are a delight for tree climbers. Hawks and owls roost in the upper branches.

The trail follows the canyon on a gentle northern traverse across Point Mugu State Park, the largest preserved area in the Santa Monica Mountains. During October and November, Sycamore Canyon offers the twin delights of falling autumn leaves and fluttering butterflies. (Ask park rangers where the monarchs cluster in large numbers.) Bring your swimsuit; when you finish this hike, you can take a plunge into the ocean.

**DIRECTIONS TO TRAILHEAD:** Drive up Pacific Coast Highway



JOHN SNYDER / Los Angeles Times

(Highway 1), 32 miles from Santa Monica, to the Big Sycamore Canyon Campground. Outside the campground entrance there's a dirt area where you may park. Walk past the campground entrance through the campground to a gate. The trail begins on the other side of the gate.

**THE HIKE:** Take the trail up-canyon, following the creek. Win-

ter rains cause the creek to rise, but now in fall it's almost dry. Under-ground water keeps much of the creekside vegetation green year around—so this is a fine hike in any season.

One-half mile from the campground you'll spot the Overlook Trail, which switchbacks to the west up a ridge and then heads north toward the native tall grass prairie in La Jolla Valley. As you

pass, make note of this trail for another outing.

A second half-mile of nearly level canyon walking brings you to another major hiking trail that branches right—the Serrano Canyon Trail. Serrano Canyon is a steep-walled rock gorge that features some seasonal waterfalls.

Another easy mile of walking beneath the sycamores brings you to a picnic table shaded by a grove of large oak trees. The oaks might be a good turnaround spot for a family with small children. The total round-trip distance, then, would be a little over four miles.

If you continue up the canyon, you'll pass beneath more of the giant sycamores and soon arrive at Wood Canyon Junction, the hub of six trails which lead to all corners of the park. Bear left on the signed Wood Canyon Trail and in a short while you'll reach Deer Camp Junction. Drinking water and picnic tables suggest a lunch stop. Oak trees predominate over the sycamores

along Wood Canyon Creek; however, the romantics prefer the sycamores, some of which have large clumps of mistletoe in the upper branches.

As you hike down the canyon back to the campground, the large and cranky blue jay population will continually scold you, but don't let them stop you from enjoying one of California's finest sycamore savannas.

**MEANDERINGS:** The County Museum of Natural History is featuring an exhibit entitled "A Multiplicity of Monarchs." You can view monarch-inspired art and a monarch video, and learn about the fantastic migration of this butterfly. This exhibit runs through Nov. 30. Phone (213) 744-3466.

Anyone wishing to obtain a list of those California state parks frequented by monarchs can send a self-addressed stamped envelope to the Monarch Project, 10 Southwest Ash St., Portland, Ore. 97204.

Following hike you are invited  
to use the pool, spa, etc.

@ Pepperdine University in Malibu,  
courtesy of Heidi Bernard.

- Please:
- (a) Bring towel & swimsuit
  - (b) Indicate desire to participate with Bob Bernard
  - (c) No liquor