

HIKE 26 FEB 92
 DRINKARD 310-370-1752
 COLD CREEK TRAIL

By JOHN MCKINNEY

Cold Creek Canyon is one of the secret treasures of the Santa Monica Mountains. A year-round stream and a protected north-facing canyon nurture a rich variety of plants and wildlife.

Both creek and canyon are protected by Cold Creek Canyon Preserve, owned and managed by the nonprofit Mountains Restoration Trust. Visitation is by permit only. No more than 30 hikers a day are allowed inside the 600-acre preserve.

Despite visitation restrictions, the preserve only reaches its limit on rare days when the Sierra Club arrives en masse. Undoubtedly, the preserve hosts fewer visitors than any other area in the Santa Monica Mountains.

If you arrive at Cold Creek Canyon—the only privately owned land in the Santa Monica Mountains that is open to the public—on a weekday, you'll probably have the preserve to yourself.

The canyon was once part of a ranch, homesteaded in the early years of this century. It later served as a ranch/retreat for the Murphy family. In 1970, the Murphys donated their family ranch to the Nature Conservancy with the stipulation that Cold Creek be forever preserved in its natural state.

The natural world of Cold Creek Canyon is diverse. Lining Cold Creek are ferns, flowers and cattails. Winter rains swell the creek, creating a dozen small waterfalls.

A hundred species of birds have been sighted within the preserve, including golden eagles. Hikers may encounter a squirrel, raccoon, deer or bobcat.

Wildflower lovers will find much to admire in the preserve. Early bloomers (February to April) in the reserve include the white blossoms of the milkmaid. Later in spring, look for the bright yellow canyon sunflower and the yellow-orange spotted Humboldt lily.

Remember that this is an up-

HIKING / Santa Monica Mountains

Cold Creek Trail

- **WHERE:** Cold Creek Canyon Preserve.
- **LENGTH:** 5 miles round trip; 900-foot elevation gain.
- **TERRAIN:** Steep canyon.
- **HIGHLIGHTS:** Ferns, many flowering plants, waterfalls.
- **DEGREE OF DIFFICULTY:** Easy to moderate.
- **FOR MORE INFORMATION:** Call (213) 456-5625.

side-down hike; the elevation gain occurs during your return to the trail head. Save some energy.

To visit Cold Creek Canyon Preserve, open every day of the year, you must call the Mountains Res-

ervation Trust three or four days in advance of your visit and request a free permit, which will be mailed to you. Be sure to inquire about docent-led tours of the preserve.

way, turn east and continue to Stunt Road. Turn right and drive 3.38 miles (watch the road paddles for mileage indicators) to the signed Cold Creek Canyon Preserve entrance on your left. Park

A hundred species of birds have been sighted within the preserve, including golden eagles. Hikers may encounter a squirrel, raccoon, deer or bobcat.

Directions to trail head: From the Ventura Freeway (101) in Calabasas, exit on Las Virgenes Road. Head south to Mulholland High-

carefully in one of the turnouts near the entrance. Display the required permit on the dashboard.

If you're heading for the preserve from the Santa Monica area, take Pacific Coast Highway to Malibu Canyon Road, drive inland to Mulholland Highway, then follow the above directions.

The hike: Head through the gate and down the trail. Pause for a moment at an information board and sign the visitor's register.

One of the first shrubs you'll encounter along the trail is red shank, a floral cousin to the far more prolific chamise. You'll recognize it by its characteristic peeling bark. It's a late bloomer—August.

The serious student of botany will note differences between hairy and redheart ceanothus, and Eastwood and bigberry manzanita. Less botanically inclined hikers will have an easier time recognizing three members of the sumac family that thrive in Cold Creek Canyon: sugar bush, laurel sumac and poison oak. Every hiker should be able to recognize the latter . . . and avoid it.

An old pickup truck mired in the middle of the trail suggests that the path used to be a road. Occasional breaks in the brush offer views of Calabasas Peak dead ahead, and a sandstone formation to the right known as Fossil Ridge.

As the path, shaded by oak and bay, nears the canyon bottom, the vegetation becomes more lush. Woodwardia and bracken ferns thrive along Cold Creek. The towering sandstone walls that form Cold Creek Canyon absorb rainfall, then slowly release water throughout the year.

A bit more than a mile from the trail head is the remains of an old house. Sandstone boulders formed the walls of the structure. Quite an ingenious use of materials at hand.

Beyond the rock house, the trail drops steeply into a marshy world of ferns and Humboldt lilies. You'll cross Cold Creek on a wooden footbridge and spot a fern-surrounded waterfall. The trail leads uphill for a time, then returns to the creek.

The trail forks. The right fork heads a short distance up-creek to a small waterfall, while the left dead-ends at the preserve's lower gate on Stunt Road.