



San Mateo Canyon Trail

Forest Road 7S01 to Fisherman's Camp

3 miles RT; 300' loss

Forest Road 7S01 to Lunch Rock

8 miles RT; 400' loss

Forest Road 7S01 to Clark Trail Junction

14 miles RT; 500' loss

Season: All year, except
times of very high water
Recommended map: Cleveland
National Forest
Topo: Sitton Peak

12/8/93
@ 0930

Two hundred-year-old oaks, tangles of ferns, nettles and wild grape, and the quiet pools of San Mateo Creek make the bottom of San Mateo Canyon a wild and delightful place. This section of the Santa Ana Mountains is steep canyon country, sculpted by seasonal but vigorous streams. San Mateo Creek, a cascading waterway in winter, slows to a gurgle in summer and flows above ground only sporadically in fall.

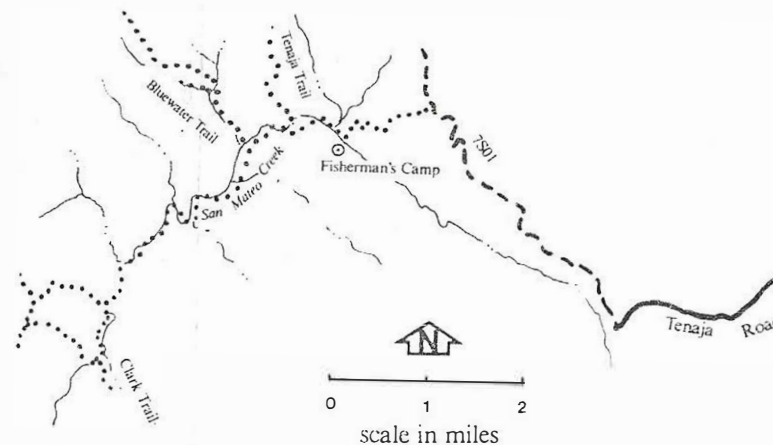
San Mateo Canyon Wilderness, set aside by Congress in 1984, protects 40,000 acres of the Cleveland National Forest, including the headwaters and watershed of San Mateo Creek.

San Mateo Canyon takes its name from one of the padres' favorite evangelists and holy men. It's the crown jewel of the Santa Ana Mountains, a relatively untouched wilderness of oaks, potrerros, and cattail lined ponds. It's a haven for turtles and rabbits. Spring brings prolific wildflower displays. The canyon drops from 3,500 feet to the coastal plain at Camp Pendleton.

This day hike plunges through the southern part of San Mateo Canyon, easily the wildest place in the Santa Ana Mountains. The San Mateo Canyon Trail and other riding and hiking trails in the wilderness have been in use since the turn of the century. Orange County Sierra Clubbers have worked on the trail, but it's often in rough shape. Creek crossings are sometimes difficult to spot.

You can journey almost as far down the canyon as you like in one day. It's 9 miles from Fisherman's Camp to the marine base, with a hundred ideal picnic spots along the way.

Directions to trailhead: Take either Highway 74 or Interstate 15 to Lake Elsinore and from there, drive southeast on I-15 to Wildomar and exit on Clinton Keith Road. Proceed 7 miles southwest to the Tenaja turnoff, forking right on Tenaja Road (7S01). You'll pass Tenaja Fire Station and adjoining Tenaja Campground. Drive another 3 miles on 7S01 until it intersects Forest Road 7S02. Park here.



The Hike: Walk down the fire road, which is lined with wildflowers in spring. 1½ miles of travel brings you to Fisherman's Camp, now abandoned. Once, many "fisherman's camps" lay along San Mateo Creek. In the 1930s, anglers were attracted by superb fishing for steelhead and trout. San Mateo Canyon Trail was the favorite route to the fishing holes. Steelhead ran into the forest up San Mateo Creek as late as 1969.

Cross the creek to the oak shaded former campsite and begin hiking through ceanothus to a ridge offering a commanding view down San Mateo Canyon. The trail soon switchbacks down to the creek.

Along the creek the trail may be indistinct; simply continue down creek. About a mile after reaching the creek, you'll come to a small potrero dotted with oaks and sycamore. Here Bluewater Creek flows into San Mateo Creek and the Bluewater Trail leads off 3 miles to the Clark Trail and Oak Flat. You can picnic under the oaks near the trail junction and return, or continue down the canyon.

Option: San Mateo Canyon to Lunch Rock. Continue down the creek on the San Mateo Canyon Trail, which follows the right side of the canyon, now and then dropping to wide sandy beaches along bends in the creek. The boulders get bigger, the swimming holes and sunning spots, nicer. One flat rock, popular with Sierra Clubbers, has been nicknamed "lunch rock." A cluster of massive giant boulders form pools and cascades in the creek. It's a nice place to linger.

Option: To Clark Trail Junction. The trail takes you under ancient oaks and sycamores and along the cattail lined creek. As you near the Clark Trail, San Mateo Canyon Trail utilizes part of an old mining road. Beyond the Clark Trail junction San Mateo Canyon Trail soon peters out and the route down-canyon is trailless to Camp Pendleton, 9 miles from Fisherman's Camp. The Clark Trail, if you're game, ascends very steeply 1½ miles to Indian Potrero.

Return the same way.