

The Time Is Ripe for Climbing Strawberry Peak

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On the ridge up Strawberry Peak

Dick Worsfold

By JOHN MCKINNEY

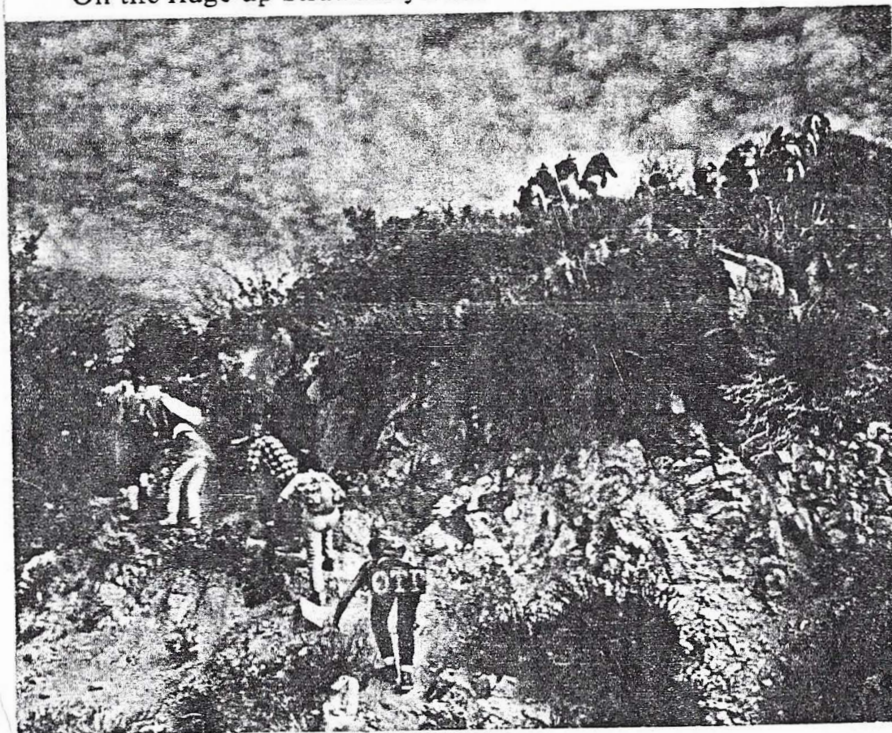
Named by mountaineers of a century ago, who imagined an upside-down strawberry, Strawberry Peak challenges rock-climbers and hikers. The challenge comes from the final approach to the peak, which involves some boulder-climbing when tackling the west slope or a vigorous hike along a firebreak when ascending the east slope.

At 6,164 feet, Strawberry Peak just tops its neighbor across the Angeles Crest Highway, San Gabriel Peak (6,161 feet), for the honor of being the highest peak in the front range of the San Gabriel Mountains.

Strawberry Peak is a good distance, about 130 miles, from the Big Bear area, which suffered damage in last Sunday's earthquakes. According to Jim Spencer, a volunteer trail boss working in the National Forest Service's Arroyo Seco District, as of press time Wednesday there had been no reports of slides or other damage around Strawberry Peak that would impede hikers or climbers.

Actually, Strawberry Peak seems more back country than front range. It offers summit panoramas, not of the city but of the Arroyo Seco and Big Tujunga watersheds, and of the crests along Angeles Crest Highway. Compared to the sometimes smoggy air clinging to other city-facing front-range peaks, the air around Strawberry Peak is positively alpine.

Some hikers like Strawberry Peak because reaching the top



requires more than the usual "walk-up" common to most San Gabriel Mountain peaks. The stony ramparts, where woebegone Coulter pines cling to life, really look like a challenge when viewed from below.

And, in fact, the last mile to the summit is no walk in the park. The route is along an old firebreak, a very steep—and sometimes very hot—climb. On warm days, get an early start.

Directions to trail head: From the Foothill Freeway (210) in La Canada, drive 14 miles on Angeles Crest Highway (2) to Red Box Station. At the turnoff is a picnic area and parking lot; park at the easternmost (farthest) end of the

lot.

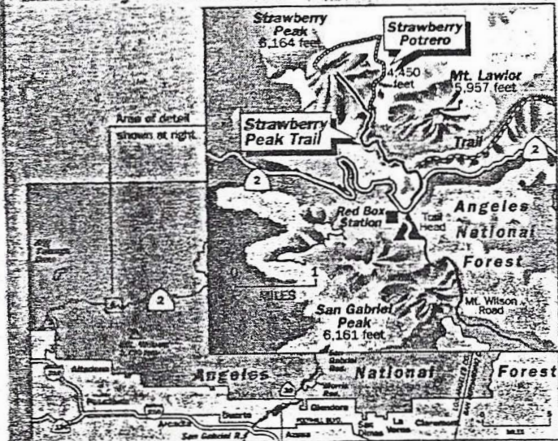
The hike: From the end of the picnic area, cautiously cross Angeles Crest Highway and walk 50 yards east (to the right) along the highway shoulder to a yellow-gated fire road. Follow this now-retired road, which narrows to a trail.

Half a mile from the trail head, you'll join a signed trail on your left, which switchbacks sharply up steep, chaparral-covered slopes. After providing hikers a brief workout, the trail levels and contours around Strawberry's other neighbor, Mt. Lawlor.

A bit more than two miles from the trail head, you'll descend to a saddle. There you'll leave the maintained trail and ascend along

San Gabriel Mountains

Strawberry Peak Trail



Where: Angeles National Forest.
Distance: 6.75 miles round trip with 1,300-foot elevation gain.

Terrain: Chaparral-smothered slopes, rocky peak.

Highlights: Alpine air (usually); highest peak in front range of San Gabriel Mountains.

Degree of difficulty: Moderate to strenuous.

Precautions: Get an early start on a hot day. Wear good boots; last mile of trail is steep and rocky.

For more information: Contact the Angeles National Forest, Arroyo Seco District, at (818) 790-1151.

an unsigned but nevertheless distinct firebreak. Your up-to-now mellow hike goes ballistic here, as the brushy path shoots steeply north toward Strawberry's summit. Alas, along the way, two disheartening dips mean the hiker loses hard-won elevation.

The firebreak at last angles left and you ascend west over a rocky ridge to the summit. From among wind-battered big cone spruce and pines, enjoy the Angeles National Forest panorama.

McKinney is the author of a new edition of "Day Hiker's Guide to Southern California" (Olympus Press).

Tom Frye