

Taking a Stroll Past the Baldwin Hills Oil Wells

From a distance, the Baldwin Hills appear to have little attraction for the walker. Oil wells dot the hills, whose slopes have been scarred by roads and bulldozers. But the oil is petering out, the hillsides are being ecologically rehabilitated and a park is in the making.

Located in the west/central part of Los Angeles, Baldwin Hills State Recreation Area (developed and operated by Los Angeles County) takes in hills and canyons between La Brea Avenue and La Cienega Boulevard. As a result of the passage of Proposition 70 (the California Park and Wildlife bond issue), \$10 million will be spent to purchase adjacent oil-well-dotted slopes and expand the park to about 1,300 acres.

Few Southern Californians seem to know about a park in Baldwin Hills, but the clean, well-kept, developed part of the park is no secret to nearby residents, who enjoy weekend picnics and barbecues on the expansive lawns. Anglers cast for catfish in the pond, which is stocked every couple of weeks.

A highlight for hikers of all ages and abilities is a path that leads through the park's Olympic Forest. The forest includes at least one tree for each of the 140 nations that participated in the 1984 Olympic Games. Los Angeles also hosted the Olympics in 1932, at which time the Baldwin Hills park site served as the Olympic Village that hosted the athletes. An interpretive display near the forest describes the trees and gives some history of the Olympic Games.

Walkers will enjoy viewing sea hibiscus from Seychelles, oleander from Algeria, sweet bay from

Greece and the Cajeput from Papua New Guinea. You'll probably be able to figure out which countries are represented by the Italian stone pine and the Cedar of Lebanon.

The Baldwin Hills offer one more attraction for the walker: great clear-day views of the Santa Monica Mountains, the whole sweep of Santa Monica Bay, the San Gabriel Mountains and much of the L.A. metropolis. While the Baldwin Hills are only 500 feet high, they offer dramatic, unobstructed views of the basin. If you want to get the lay of the land, take a city or county map along on this hike.

Directions to trail head: From the Santa Monica Freeway, exit on La Cienega Boulevard and drive south a few miles to the Baldwin

Hills State Recreation Area. Park in the lot signed "Olympic Forest."

The Hike: From the interpretive displays posted at the edge of the parking lot, take the path into the Olympic Forest. The forest is divided into a half dozen habitats, including desert, tropical and temperate environments. Contemplate the paper mulberry from Toga, the carob from Cyprus, the date palm from Egypt. The forest is yet another proof of the oft-repeated adage that "anything can and does grow in Southern California."

After your around-the-world tree tour, ascend on a path leading toward some rather forlorn palms. Here at a man-made oasis, you'll find a waterfall cascading into a little grotto. From the palm oasis, you'll continue your ascent by trail and dirt road to a picnic ramada perched on the hilltop. Near the ramada is a pine grove planted by Top Teens of America, Inc.

The view from the summit includes the Wilshire corridor, Century City, Westwood and the Hollywood sign. You'll spot sailboats tacking this way and that as they head out to sea from Marina del Rey. And you'll get an air traffic controller's view of the amazing number of jets zooming in and out of Los Angeles International Airport.

A dirt road crosses the hilltop plateau and passes two more picnic ramadas. Enjoy the striking views of Palos Verdes Peninsula and Catalina Island. The road, now a footpath, follows a fence beside some high-tension power lines.

Rabbits and quail are frequently sighted in the hills, which are covered with California sagebrush, black mustard, coyote bush and prickly pear cactus. The native plant community has been greatly altered by the hand of man, so much so that botanists describe Baldwin Hills flora as being in a condition called "disclimax." Introduced "weeds" such as castor bean and milk thistle have invaded the canyon bottoms. The hills host a number of domestic plants gone wild, including agave, hottentotfig, nasturtium and lantana.

The trail passes near the old Baldwin Hills Dam, which failed a quarter century ago. Overlooking the empty reservoir back of the dam is an observation tower that resembles a castle from the Middle Ages. Fennel, chamise and dandelions have pushed through the cracked cement bottom of the reservoir. The county has plans to convert the reservoir into parking and picnic areas.

Near the dam, you'll meet a road coming up from the developed part of the park. Join a paved path, which parallels this road, and descend a newly landscaped hillside to the main picnic area. Improvise a route past the pond, bubbling brook and picnic grounds back to Olympic Forest and the trail head.

Baldwin Hills Trail

3-mile loop through Baldwin Hills State Recreation Area; 300-foot elevation gain.

