

The Mercury News

MercuryNews.com

Biking the newly completed Guadalupe River Trail, from Children's Discovery Museum to Alviso

By Lisa M. Krieger
Mercury News

Posted: 06/11/2009 12:00:00 AM PDT

Updated: 06/11/2009 05:28:01 AM PDT
A plump brown tadpole stirred.

"We saw its tail first!" she says proudly. "We find all kinds of stuff here." As proof, she reached into the water and pulled out a red claw, all that remained of a crawfish long gone.

The Guadalupe River is a place of contrast, best seen over handlebars along the newly completed River Trail. The trail snakes under five major highways and dozens of city streets, past homeless people, airport traffic and flocks of wild birds.

At its origin near I-280, it is an urban river route in the heart of San Jose, shadowed by high-rises and controlled by concrete. Twenty miles downstream in Alviso, where the Guadalupe flows into San Francisco Bay, it is a wilder ribbon of blue and green.

Late afternoon when I get my start, I park the car near the neat neighborhood of bungalows along downtown's Grant and Palm streets, then pedal up a small asphalt ramp to the entrance of the trail.

I follow a well-worn route along the river's flow to the bay. An Ohlone tribe arrived at these river banks

as early as 8000 B.C. By the late 1790s, the Spanish village el Pueblo de San Jose Guadalupe had begun to flourish. But as San Jose grew, development neglected the river as an important urban feature.

The nine-mile trail I'm covering, finally completed after years of work, helps restore the river to its rightful place as a focal point in the city's urban center. (A future connector to the Lake Almaden Park Trail will add two more miles, and eventually the Guadalupe River Trail will be part of a 25-mile corridor from the Bay Area Ridge Trail in the Santa Cruz Mountains to the San Francisco Bay Trail in Alviso.) There are stretches where I'm melancholic for what's been lost — once clear and cold as chilled gin, with bursts of unruly springtime flooding, most of today's Guadalupe is as mannered as a house pet.

But the hard work of South Bay river-lovers has succeeded in saving and restoring what remains — and built a trail, so that its spirit may be shared with others.

My trail ride starts smooth and fast, past riverbanks built of man-made rock walls called gabions to help prevent erosion. Fed by seasonal tributaries in the Santa Cruz Mountains and runoff from the surrounding valley floor, the river banks were once fertile with the rich soil carried down from the mountains. Now wire baskets hold bundles of rocks, arranged like a staircase up the river.

The trail rises and crosses San Carlos Street, then sweeps past a lonely fig tree and the manicured gardens of the Center for the Performing Arts. Near the Veterans Memorial, marked by elegant white flags, a feral cat darts across my path.

Soon the trail drops down again to the river. A typical western American river, the Guadalupe is often no more than a trickle in the summer. Here engineers have etched a small and deeper channel

Advertisement

Find local companies rated Highest in Quality

Read rating scores and survey comments of top rated companies.



Quality • Satisfaction • Trust

Go To www.DiamondCertified.org



Print Powered By FormatDynamics™

The Mercury News

MercuryNews.com

in the riverbed, a "low flow channel," which allows for fish movement during the dry months. Mallards feed in the shallow water.

At Park Avenue, you're briefly back out on the street, passing through heart-quicken waves of traffic. But once on the trail again, there's a chance to relax at the Park Avenue Overlook Plaza, which features one of many elegant signs by San Anselmo graphic artist Michael Manwaring. It describes the natural history of the river, when it supported the endangered yellow frogs, salt marsh harvest mouse and Chinook salmon.

On the north side of Park, an egret stands sentry at an outflow pipe, catching fish as they pour out. This outlet is a lovely spot to view diverted floodwaters that entered at Woz Way. Underground bypass channels at this site help carry floodwaters, reducing the need to control the Guadalupe with more concrete. These channels — an auxiliary river, in a sense — take in water that Los Gatos Creek cannot hold and carry it downstream into the Guadalupe River. They protect downtown San Jose from flooding by diverting the flow underground.

Santa Clara Street marks the confluence of the Guadalupe River and Los Gatos Creek, once considered a sacred site by American Indians because of the power of blended waters. Here at the Santa Clara Inlet Plaza, above the second inlet structure diverting water underground, there are benches to rest.

At St. John Street, a girl probes a small hole in the riverbank, holding two soft jellybean-sized eggs. Her father reaches for her hand, and gently chides her. "Come with me," he urges. "Maybe it's an alligator, or a snake."

No traces remain of what once was a dam here, just above the St. John Street Bridge. In 1912, a citizens

group raised \$3,000 to create Lake Monahan, named for Mayor Patrick Monahan. Their dream was short-lived. After two seasons of mosquitoes and flooding, the dam was demolished.

Past Julian Street, an aluminum tunnel designed to protect travelers from any debris carries me under the Union Pacific Railroad trestle. (A sign warns: "Dismount bicycle and horse." Horse?) I emerge on a trail landscaped with fragrant jasmine, then pedal past a homeless man and shopping cart. Liberated at Coleman Avenue, the waters empty out into a natural flood plain. A crowd of young men, music blaring, tosses breadcrumbs to a gathering crowd of mallards.

Entry to the Guadalupe River Park & Gardens offers welcome sanctuary. Twenty years ago, homes here were removed because of airport noise. The 150 acres now make for a wild riparian corridor.

I pedal past willows, elders, cottonwoods and cattails. The trees shade the river, keeping water temperatures cooler for fish and providing habitat for birds, insects and wildlife. The leaves and roots of the plants also help keep the water clean. Taking a break to peer into the clear water, I see a crawfish swimming through the reeds, propelling itself backward and swinging its orange claws. Bird watchers have counted 52 different species here, including such urban rarities as osprey, Townsend warblers and ruby-crowned kinglets.

Near Hedding, I rest at a concrete bench, constructed in memory of Vincent Zeppa and decorated with a photograph of his young, handsome face. The smooth trail turns to gravel as I approach Mineta San Jose International Airport, then climbs atop a levee. Keeping pace with buses and taxis, the atmosphere is redolent of urgency and drama. I'm joined by many others: racers, dressed like neon-colored beetles. On dusty bikes,

Advertisement

Find local companies rated Highest in Quality

Read rating scores and survey comments of top rated companies.



Quality • Satisfaction • Trust

Go To www.DiamondCertified.org



Print Powered By  FormatDynamics™

The Mercury News

MercuryNews.com

restaurant workers wear windbreakers over white dress shirts. Young women with plastic shopping bags hanging awkwardly off the handlebars.

Earsplitting planes swoop over our heads. Along Airport Parkway, we double back briefly, then cross the river using an underpass and bridge. The others continue on their way to city streets, while I follow the river past the airport's vast rental car parking lot. Then, just as quickly, the route is once again serene. The songs of goldfinches and red-winged blackbirds replace the drone of aircraft engines.

Swallows flit through the tunnel under Santa Clara's De La Cruz Boulevard. An egret wades in nearby rapids. Alone now, I pedal past a landscape of coyote bush and tall oak trees, flourishing in the rich alluvial soil. Past Bonaventura light-rail station and a baseball field, a lonely willet cries.

It's longer between urban interruptions here, as the trail transforms into a long seam of gravel behind apartments, condominiums and office parks. Nearby is the restored Ulistac Natural Area, a small wilderness sanctuary. But the river grows wilder. It has claimed the underpass at Montague Avenue, flooding my route. It also has intruded upon the Highway 237 underpass, forcing me through pools of shallow water.

Darkness is settling into Alviso. One by one, lights begin to glow. My only company is a chorus of river frogs, as I hurry home.

Contact Lisa M. Krieger at lkrieger@mercurynews.com or 408-920-5565.

Advertisement

Find local companies rated Highest in Quality

Read rating scores and survey comments of top rated companies.



Quality • Satisfaction • Trust

Go To www.DiamondCertified.org



Print Powered By  FormatDynamics™