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## Wanderlust: Following Los Gatos Creek

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Posted: 11/02/2011 12:00:00 PM PDT

Updated: 11/02/2011 04:35:28 PM PDT

There's an autumnal chill to Los Gatos Creek as it pours out of the dark and brooding Santa Cruz Mountains, down the northwestern flank of Loma Prieta peak.

But along its 24-mile route onto the bed of the Santa Clara Valley, it turns inviting -- as relaxed, domestic and as beloved as a house pet. Stretching across Los Gatos, Campbell and San Jose, it links several parks, three reservoirs and many ponds, playing an important role in our environment and recreation.

We are deeply linked to this chameleon-like creek, named after the land grant Rancho Rinconada de Los Gatos ("Corner of the Cats"). For generations, it slaked our thirst and watered our orchards. It powered the sawmills that cut virgin forests and built our cities. Happy families exercise on its trails.

Here we follow the creek's route from its wild headwaters through an urban landscape, where it meets the Guadalupe River and empties into the bay:

Born deep within the watershed of the San Jose Water Company, the headwaters of Los Gatos Creek are inaccessible to the public. Tiny tributaries tumble into

Lake Williams, an old reservoir and illicit swimming hole of mountain locals. From there it flows down to a second larger reservoir, the beautiful

Lake Elzman.

But it's possible to peer into its pristine waters from the bridge at the site of the long-gone Los Gatos railroad town of

Wrights Station. In the 1800s, city

dwellers came here to splash at Sunset Park, a picnic grove.

Then it bubbles downstream into the community of

Chemeketa Park, where it is still used as a backup water source. As the creek empties into

Lexington Reservoir, look for messy wooded beaver nests and ospreys.

Los Gatos owes its creation to this creek. In the 1860s, its water helped drive the sawmills in the now-flooded villages of Alma and Lexington. When the reservoir is low, a 1926 concrete bridge over the creek is seen.

At Lexington Reservoir, follow the steep and rocky 1.5-mile climb up to the 1,250-foot summit of

St. Joseph's Hill Open Space Preserve, where there are dramatic views of the creek and valley.

Or you can follow the flow downstream, picking up the smooth and wide

Los Gatos Creek Trail on an old railway bed on the creek's west side. On the east side of the creek is

Jones Trail, calm and woodsy.

As the creekside trail approaches downtown Los Gatos, look under the Main Street Bridge for a lovely mural of Ohlone life. Or take a break at the history museum inside the 1854

Forbes Mill, which once ground flour.

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Oak Meadow Park, a 12-acre site featuring a large grass field, playground, bocce ball courts, carousel, the Billy Jones Wildcat Railroad and a decommissioned Air Force T-33 jet that kids can crawl on.

All along this stretch of the creek you will see our valley's groundwater recharge in action. A system of gates releases water downstream to

Vasona Lake County Park -- a perfect place to picnic or rent a sailboat, kayak, or pedal boat. (Beware of goose poop!) Visitors seeking solitude can hike the Viola Anderson Native Plant Trail.

Creek water also fills percolation ponds at

Los Gatos Creek County Park and Budd, Camden, McGlincey, Page and Sunnyoaks streets, where it seeps into the ground. The park's northernmost pond, stocked with rainbow trout, can be fished. Casting ponds, with targets, are also available. There's even something here for Fido: a 1-acre off-leash dog park, decorated with fake K9Grass.

Follow the trail into

Campbell on a flat, slightly downhill route. You'll pass behind the Pruneyard Shopping Center; access it via the northwest corner.

Leaving Campbell, the trail can feel dull -- and gets crowded on weekends. The creek seems modest here. But in the 1800s, it was so powerful that the San Jose Water Company diverted its waters to supply city water. A farmers association created Kirk Ditch to water their orchards.

The creekside trail ends at Meridian Avenue in San Jose's

Willow Glen neighborhood, a lovely destination with on-street bike lanes. Access it from Blackford Elementary School, near Leigh Avenue and Willow Street.

There's another short stretch of Los Gatos Creek Trail deeper in the urban core of the city, picking up at Lonus Street, where the creek slowly meanders over silt, broken concrete, past homeless encampments and the occasional shopping cart. There's history here: Near Auzerais Avenue, admire the remnants of the old

Del Monte #3 Cannery; its water tower still shadows the trail. But it's a bit dodgy at night; don't wear your iPod.

The trail finally concludes at West San Carlos Street, not yet linked to the

Guadalupe River Trail.

But the creek continues on its journey. From the St. John Street bridge, you can see

Confluence Point, near where Los Gatos Creek merges with the mighty Guadalupe River -- strengthening as they flow to the bay, once again wild and rich with life.

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