

GO THERE

Arana Gulch: a pocket of nature amid sprawl

Greenbelt
By GARRETT MCAULIFFE

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✓ Just off the slow grind of traffic winding east out of Santa Cruz along Soquel Avenue lies a quiet belt of amber and green. Arana Gulch is one of the last pockets of California's coastal terrace prairie, a small sanctuary for native plants and critters amidst the city's sprawl. Ancient oak trees stud the trail, and tall bunchgrass, thistles and wild plantain reach shoulder height, swaying in the summer breeze. In spring wildflowers appear in mini bursts of white, pink and purple.

The vast meadow that dominates this preserve is largely

open to the sun and ringed in part with fragrant eucalyptus. Kestrels and meadowlark pace the air; chirped melodies mingling with the barks and clangs from nearby yards. Most come here to run or bike or walk their dog, skimming along the hard-packed dirt

JUST GRAND FOR: easy hikes, commuting by bike, running sweatily along with your panting pup, botanical snooping, birdwatching and stargazing. It's one of the few spots in Santa Cruz where you can catch sight of the Milky Way

or a shower of shooting stars (it's technically closed at night, but ...).

BE WISE AND: slather on some sunscreen before and check yourself for ticks after wading around in all that grassland.

trails. But if you're just here to wander, the occasional coast live oak offers shade for a picnic and thick, gnarled branches to climb and lounge in.

Two main trails cut through the 68-acre greenbelt. The primary route runs between the two entrances, a half-mile

IF YOU GO

ARANA GULCH

CREATURE COMFORTS:

confined to a slightly fishy bathroom and water fountain just outside of the harbor entrance to Arana Gulch along the docks.

GET THERE: Entrance at Agnes Street or on the west boundary of the harbor storage yard

path from Agnes Street on the north side to the upper Santa Cruz Small Craft Harbor on the south. At the southern end, a picturesque footpath circles the prairie and skirts the park's western boundary.

Near the head of the yacht harbor, an unmarked

110.14
side trail drops down into the floodplain of Arana Creek, where you can seek out natural treasures along the muddy banks. (Fun fact: Arana Creek once flowed into Woods Lagoon, the natural marsh where construction on the harbor began in 1962. Together, Woods Lagoon and neighboring Schwan Lagoon formed the "Twin Lakes" for which the popular nearby state beach is named.

Extend your walk by continuing a mile south along the harbor's western edge, past swinging Seabright Beach and out along the jetty to the lighthouse.

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