

Italian and Lower Chaparral Loop numbered interpretive posts

#1 Mixed Evergreen Forest

The soil and light conditions here meet the requirements of plants such as coastal live oak, madrone and douglas fir. On the other side of the trails stand of coast redwoods provides the year-round shade conditions needed by members of the redwood forest such as trillium, a perennial herb that grows from rhizomes and sorrel, a slender herbaceous perennial plant about 24 inches high with arrow shaped leaves.

#2 Common Trees of Mixed-Evergreen Forest

Trees include the coast live oak with green leaves with sharp edges and which can live up to 250 years, Pacific madrone, which has large green leaves and a smooth reddish trunk with bark that peels off in thin sheets, and California bay laurel - nicknamed "pepper tree" due to its spicy smell of its leaves can live to 200 years.

#3 The Italian Trail

Near this spot two Italian brothers, Fred and James Bonnetti had their now destroyed cabins in the early 1900's. The trail you are walking on and the seasonal "Bonnetti Creek" behind you were named as tributes to these early Quail Hollow pioneers. As you climb the Italian trail note the gradual changes in vegetation from mixed-evergreen to chaparral type plants.

#4 Sandy Soil

If you were standing in this spot 10 million years ago you would have been at the bottom of a vast shallow ocean that was home to many marine animals, including prehistoric whales, rays, sea cows, and the megalodon, a 60-foot shark. Over millions of years deep layers of silt, sand, and mud formed at the bottom of the ancient ocean. As the Santa Cruz Mountains formed, these sandy ocean deposits were pushed above sea level to where they are today. Over time these deposits became the rock formations now known as Monterey Shale (silt), Santa Margarita Sandstone (sand), and Santa Cruz Mudstone (mud). Fossils of ancient marine life are on display in our museum.

#5 Chaparral Plants

Here you are surrounded by chaparral plants such as chemise, ceanothus, and manzanita. Chaparral plants have small, thick leathery leaves that protect them from water loss during summer days. Underground, their roots can grow up to 10 feet, enabling them to reach water throughout the long dry months. Manzanita has a smooth red bark and thick leathery leaves. The bell-like white to pink flowers turn into small berries that were part of the food source for early Native American inhabitants. Chemise, also known as greasewood, is in the rose family and produces clusters of small white flowers. The leaves of the chemise are very small and needle-like. Ceanothus is a chaparral plant with leaves that are thick and glossy. Flowers of the ceanothus are tiny and produced in clusters that are fragrant. Ceanothus is sometimes called buckbrush or California lilac.

#6 Oaks and Lichens

The oak branches provide lichens (pronounced "like-enz") with an elevated surface to grow on, making it easier to find sunlight. Lichens, in return, capture moisture and nutrients, such as nitrogen, from the surrounding air which then drips down, enriching the earth below. The lichen you see hanging here is called "Old Man's Beard". There are more than 1,500 species of lichen in California alone.

#7 Fire Can Be Restorative

Native plants have evolved to depend on periodic wildfires occurring every 30 to 100 years. Knob-cone pines have cones that require the heat of a fire to open and disperse its seeds. While a fire is passing through, the seeds are protected inside the tightly closed cone, but triggered by the heat, the cone slowly opens and seeds fall into a bed of ash and mineral rich soil left by the fire. Some species of ceanothus have leaves coated with flammable resins because their seeds require intense heat for germination. Fire is one of the most natural and restorative processes that happens in nature.

#8 Meadow Land

Look around at the lay-of-the-land in this area and notice it appears to be more open than other areas in the park. This is a meadowland environment studded with pines such as the Santa Cruz Mountain pine (a subspecies of Ponderosa Pines), and fields of forest ferns and sky lupine in springtime. This environment furnishes a slightly more open area to allow maximum sunlight that allows different plant species to grow here.

#9 Subsurface Water

Although you may not see water flowing above ground, it can be found just below the surface, within reach of the roots of the plants that are growing here. Rain drains down from the surrounding hillsides and collects at the bottom of Quail Hollow's basin-like shape and seeps through the ground and gets held in the pores and cracks of the sandstone rocks below. Quail Hollow has several naturally occurring springs, two wells, a pond, and many seasonal creeks. Here you see Pacific rush - an evergreen plant that has dark green, erect rounded stems that grow 18" to 30" tall and spread eventually forming dense clumps. Basket Sedge has 1 - 3 ft. tall bright green sharp blades with oval shaped tufts of small reddish-brown flowers at the top of the stems. You will also notice arroyo willow trees and bushes with slender and erect leaves and in the spring the flowers (catkins) appear before the leaves do.

#10 Signs of Civilization

As we leave the surrounding denser woodlands and enter into the old ranch fruit orchard area, take a look around at the remnants of past owner's projects. On the far side of the orchard notice the eucalyptus blue-gum trees planted many years ago to protect the wheat crop once grown on the other side of that stand. On the south of this trail, and in the area where sedges grow thick from near-the-surface water, you may spot large, exotic looking fern plants, occasional familiar home garden flowers, and large, spring flowering, western azalea bushes. This area was once thought to be the location of an early Sunset Magazine flower garden between 1937 and 1954. Behind us and on the south side of the trail, under the canopy of large catalpa and black locust trees, is the fallen-down remnants of an old, metal covered redwood water storage structure, perhaps dating to the early part of the 20th century. As you enjoy this wonderful park it is fun to remember the long history of civilization and the attempts to try to tame some of this wilderness to help the ranch families survive and prosper.