

A Shady Retreat, In the Middle of Town

By Joan Zimmerman

Are you looking to escape the heat of the asphalt jungle? I know a place where there are more than 2 miles of cool, shady paths to walk, right here in the heart of Fallbrook. Birds chirping, breezes blowing, ducks splashing - you can immerse yourself in nature without ever leaving town.

The 43 acre Los Jilgueros Preserve is the Fallbrook Land Conservancy's (FLC) most popular and most convenient open space preserve. Along South Mission Road, across from the Fallbrook Airpark, it's easy to get to from just about anywhere in Fallbrook or Bonsall. This is not a county park! The FLC maintains Los Jilgueros Preserve entirely through donations and grants, permitting the community to enjoy nature, close to home. Restored native habitat, lots of trees, and abundant wildlife make Los Jilgueros Preserve a great place to visit year round. But as the summer heats up and the sidewalks sizzle, the shady trails beckon...

From the south parking lot, the gently rolling paths lead you past a large open meadow. Live oak, sycamore, and other native trees are abundant, with benches placed to take advantage of their shade. Recent tree plantings by FLC volunteers along the western edge of the meadow, will add even more shady retreats during hot afternoons. Many birds - more than 100 species have been recorded here - visit the meadow area, including various hawks, falcons, and other birds of prey. Even owls can be spotted by those who venture out early in the morning or just before dusk.



An expanse of wetlands borders the meadow area along the western side. Ponds and a seasonal stream attract water fowl and other wildlife and support a large stand of sycamore, willow and cottonwood trees. A trail along the west side of the preserve skirts this wetland and is shaded by the canopy of trees along its entire length. A boardwalk takes you over the wetland area to the trail. During winter rains, the water flows in a wide swath under the walkway.

Back to the main trail...once past the meadow, the path leads down into a tunnel of trees. It's always cooler here than anywhere else in the preserve. Old farm equipment can be spotted - implements left behind when the FLC acquired this property in 1990. Native growth is overtaking these relics - but they're good places for lizards to lounge or birds to perch. Up a short rise and along a levee you'll pass the preserves northern most pond. Ducks, coots, ibis, herons, and egrets frequent these waters. More cottonwoods and willows offer shade as you make your way around the pond. You'll cross a cement wash, often filled with rushing water during winter rains that flood the pond. The trail leads up a gentle hill to the highest and northern most part of the preserve. Here, there are several short trails that wind around the open hillock and down through a lush firescape garden. The garden area offers year round color, with a mix of native and non-native flowering shrubs and trees. Spring is the most colorful time, of course, but in fall the yellow leaves of the sycamores highlight the walk. If you plan to walk to the preserve from the north side, there are two additional entrances here.



Leaving the garden, you'll walk through a corridor of large black walnut trees, reminders of the property's agricultural past. They attract many birds in the late summer and fall, especially crows and ravens, whose raucous chatter can be heard long before you get there. This shady trail leads you down through wetlands where you'll cross a small bridge over a year round creek.

You can then choose one of three trails to return through the preserve past the meadow or wetlands. Enjoy the songbirds along the way, or perhaps spot a long tailed weasel. Although rare here, the weasels are an important part of the ecosystem of Los Jilgueros, which includes coyotes, desert cottontail rabbits, reptiles, amphibians, and the many bird species.

Meandering among the many trails, it's easy to walk more than 2.5 miles without retracing a step. But you can circle the entire preserve in just over a mile if you wish.

Remember, this preserve is not a county park. The FLC is a non-profit organization whose private ownership and stewardship of Los Jilgueros has made it available for our use. Walkers, joggers, and bicyclists are welcome. No motorized vehicles please. Dogs must be leashed and picked up after for the benefit of all who use the preserve and for the critters that live there. Bring water to drink and pack out your trash! To find out how you can help support Los Jilgueros Preserve with a tax deductible donation, or to find out more about the wildlife and habitat there, please visit the FLC website at www.fallbrooklandconservancy.org or call (760)728-0889. Or join The Friends of Los Jilgueros Preserve, a group of FLC volunteers that help maintain and raise funds for the preserve. Come enjoy this special place, meet new friends, get in shape, or escape the city heat. I hope to see you there!