

What's Growing On in the Field—Spring 2007--by Jason Lopez, Resources and Trails Manager



Del Dios Gorge Trail during the “clearing and grubbing” stage of construction.

Although we prefer the rain, one benefit of an underachieving Old Man Winter is that our trail maintenance responsibilities were a little less intense this year. Which was very convenient because what was growing on in the field was trail construction. Two projects, Bernardo Mountain Trail and Del Dios Gorge Trail, dominated the time and effort of field staff and Dust Devil volunteers Rich Weir and Jerry Rockwell.

The Bernardo Mountain Summit Trail (BMST) project was as much of a habitat project as it was a trail project. Much of the land on the 329-acre Bernardo Mountain Preserve is set aside for wildlife habitat for the purpose of mitigation. The health of the habitat here is a crucial component of the management goals of the Preserve.

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Obliterated section of trail/road on Bernardo Mountain – Soil was recovered from the downhill side of the old road cut and returned to the roadbed then planted with native species. Rocks were redistributed in order to shade soil and plants and provide habitat for reptiles and insects.

West of where the Lake Hodges North Shore Trail crosses Felicita Creek, the BMST paralleled the North Shore Trail for approximately ¼ mile and both trails had severe erosion issues. The general area contains sensitive species such as California gnatcatcher and cactus wren. Many shortcut trails existed between the BMT and the North Shore Trail that cut through sensitive habitat. Over the years, Park Rangers attempted to control the shortcutting by installing signs and barriers but having the trail in clear sight must have been too tempting because it became evident that the problem would require more effort and resources. The Park created a better connection between the two trails and restored the old trail, therefore increasing the amount of continuous sensitive habitat, alleviating the need for extensive and expensive fencing, and providing enhanced access for recreation.

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Senior Ranger Dave Hekel struggles to get the mini-excavator back on track.

Del Dios Gorge Trail construction project represents the historic first project, west of the Lake Hodges Dam, where San Dieguito River Park Field staff got really dirty. In the past we worked on planning projects, clean up, and even some construction projects but this project was the first for us in terms of actual trail construction, erosion control, and restoration. A connection was made from the Santa Fe Valley Trail, which passes close to the Crosby estates development, and the Del Dios Gorge Bridge ([click here for related article](#)). Field Staff constructed the connection from an old farming road to a SDGE road and then a second connection to another SDGE road that leads to the 182-foot bridge.

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Park Rangers work diligently to finish the crossing before it rains. This drainage contains heavy water flows and much effort was made to create a sustainable crossing. Culverts were installed along with erosion control mechanisms and native plants. The plentiful rock that was excavated during trail construction was used to create check dams to slow the flow of water. The work was tested by a decent winter storm and faired well.

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Mule Fat (*Baccharis salicifolia*) was densely planted near the trail and will be nurtured through the summer months. These plants will help to control erosion next rainy season and will eventually develop a dense matting of roots that are a essential component of permanently stabilize the crossing. Additional planting will also occur as needed. The site will be carefully monitored and maintained until the area is deemed stable. In the past, ranchers piled huge boulders into the eroded drain.

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This seamless transition from SDGE road to trail is the result of a great deal of effort. Large rocks had been piled up along the road and were moved in order to get the trail through. In addition, several water drainage issues were resolved. The rocks lining the trail near the lodge pole fence are actually a drainage mechanism called drainage lenses where the dirt trail rest on a bed of rock covered by a fabric therefore allowing water to drain or seep under the trail.