

## Summer in the Chaparral

Don't forget water and sunscreen

By **Kat Avila, Contributing Writer** | Published on LatinoLA: August 25, 2012



Walking down the sidewalk, I pick up a plastic shopping bag, a deflated green balloon with a long ribbon tail, and an eco-poisonous cigarette butt. I throw it all into the trash receptacle at the bus stop before I enter the wilderness preserve.

A cicada-like clicking from the dry brush surprises me. I've heard it often before, but I haven't pinpointed which cricket or katydid makes that sound. I know how field crickets sound, and that isn't it. It could even be a snake's warning rattle. I turn off the audiobook I'm listening to and go on rattlesnake alert.

It's been years since I've seen a rattler, but California has six species. They can be distinguished from their nonpoisonous cousins by their very wide pyramid-shaped heads and tail rattles. I try to be careful where I step, and I stomp hard when approaching thick brush or shade to give them fair warning.

I brush sweat off my upper lip and reapply sunscreen with an SPF-50 sport stick. It's pretty quiet out here as I follow fresh shoeprints and mountain bike treads, just the soft scuffling of my athletic shoes on the dirt trail.

Hidden in shriveled vegetation is the large funnel web of a grass spider. I wonder what the miniature monster in the hole looks like. Getting a wee too close, I end up rolling sticky traces of telegraph line from my fingers.

A honey bee attracted by my exotic perfume of sweat and generic sport sunscreen buzzes around me. Its prolonged curiosity triggers unexpected shivers through me, more from the weird sensation of being circled than fear.

Up ahead is a dried-up and cracked pond bed. Lifeless plant stalks are scattered about. Just over a small ridge it's surprising to see a natural dam shoved into place by a once-upon-a-time stream. I browse my way up the dry channel to a semitrailer-sized pond where flame skimmers hover and chase each other. Toads hop away like skipped stones into the pool mirroring a cloudless blue sky and a sheltering hill of green and brown scrub.

Back on the main trail, I watch a mountain biker slowly pedal his way upslope. Should I turn back toward the cool comforts of home or pursue the biker up the hill? I take off my left shoe to look for an elusive spur. Now I'm picking bits of twigs and grass from both socks and shoes.

Water. People die without water. I have several mouthfuls left in my bottle. At the top of the hill, on the other side of the barbwire fence, there is an affluent community. I'm on the wrong side of the border. There is no water on this side. But on that side, there are swimming pools and garden hoses and a water reservoir.

The wind is a noisy spirit as it sweeps through the dry brush and grasses. My heightened senses jump at the wind's whim. The wind is in front, now it's behind, then it's running beside me.

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In the air are turkey vultures. I count three. Their thunderbird shadows move swiftly and smoothly across the backs of the brown hills. Then a ground squirrel pops across the path, making my heart almost stop.

"The heat makes me sloppy," I scribble in similarly deteriorating handwriting. Not a good sign. Gotta stop for a water break in the shade, but not without first checking for poison oak and rattlers. I rinse, spit, and bless the thirsty ground with my first sip, then greedily swallow the last of some very warm water in my bottle. My body reluctantly moves out of the shade.

I almost stumble as the path turns downhill. My ear canals are dry and feel plugged up, because I have been mouthbreathing since huffing and puffing my way up the first steep hill. I renew my footsteps toward ice, and ice water, and a cold shower, and more ice at home.

As I exit the preserve, I meet another hiker coming in. She has a map in her hands. It's her first time here, so we discuss the trails and their relative safety. "I hope you have a lot of water. It's hot out there," I say and wish her a good hike.

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