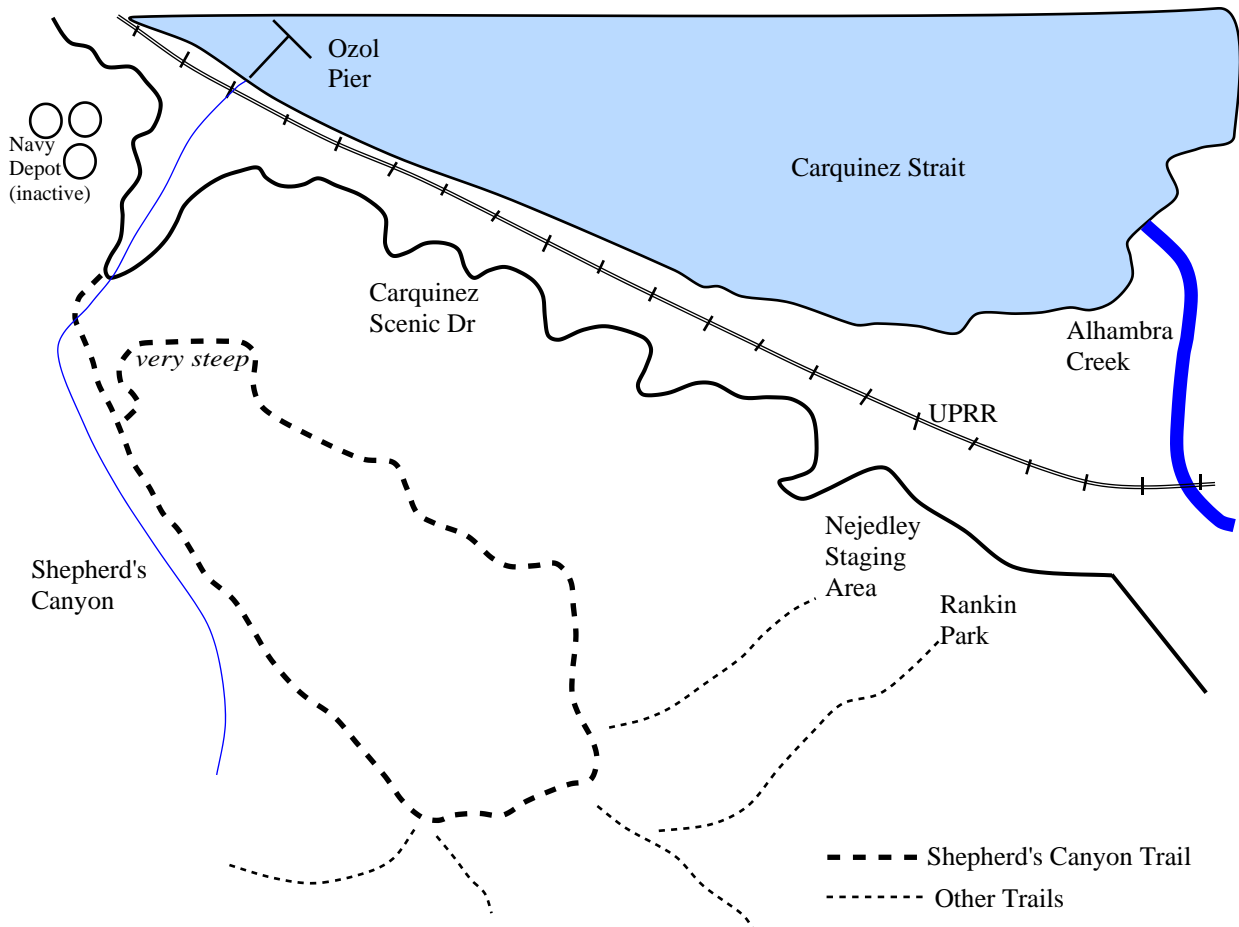


Shepherd's Canyon in May

Round Trip - two and a quarter miles

Elevation - 600 foot climb

Shepherd's Canyon is west of Martinez, on Carquinez Scenic Dr, at Ozol, the Navy's inactive fuel depot. There is parking outside the fire gate. On the other side of the gate is a tiny meadow, wet and marshy in winter-spring, dry adobe hard as a rock in the hot summer. The meadow is covered with Narrow-Leaved Milkweed and Spiny Clot bur by late summer. Directly across the meadow from the gate is a utility pole with hundreds of holes drilled into it. These holes are the work of local Acorn Woodpeckers. In the fall, the woodpeckers push and poke acorns into to holes they have made. The rest of the year they pry the nuts out. This pole has been a larder for generations of birds. They store their booty at other locations too, but this pole seems particularly favored. Who knows why: maybe it is the clear space round the pole; maybe it is its proximity to oaks, or maybe the kind of wood. Who knows? One can only hope that someday, when the utility company decides to replace the pole, the company considers leaving the old one in place because it is so important to the local community.





The fire road crosses the seasonal creek and follows the creek up the canyon. Not far up the road, a second road comes in from the left, down a steep hill. This second road is the return loop. Late in the summer, hikers sometimes prefer reversing the loop direction and hiking up this steep hill rather than hiking down. As the summer heat dries out the soil, a layer of loose soil forms over the hard clay below. The loose soil acts like little ball bearings. This slope then becomes very slippery, despite being bone dry.

Continuing up the canyon, the road slopes upward as it approached the head of the canyon. The rounded slopes of the ridge are on the left side. The tree covered creek bed is below the road on the right. The canyon is small, the watershed is tiny, and the run of the creek is short. The winter water does not last long enough to support a riparian environment. Oaks, Bay Laurels, and Buckeyes shade the creek. If there were enough year-around moisture for a ri-



Milk Thistle *Silybum marianum*

parian environment, Alders, Sycamores, and Fremont Cottonwoods (Poplars) would also be found. There is one large Cottonwood just inside the gate at the start of the trail. It may have been growing before the railroad altered the shore, and before the highway builders created the auto road, and before the Navy developed its fuel depot. This tree certainly hints that at one time the meadow area was wetter.

At the top of the canyon, the hiker turns left. There is a sort of cross roads at this point. Continuing straight or turning right, the hiker will be stopped by the boundary of the East Bay Regional Parks. On the left is a large patch of Milk Thistle. It is an invader from the Mediterranean with the unlikely Latin name of *Silybum marianum*. In the spring it has large leaves, with spiny tips and white veins. By June it is 3 to 5 feet high and the large fuzzy purple-blue flowers appear. The bracts under the flowers look like a whorl of spines. The flowers are beautiful, but the leaves and bracts make this a very unpleasant trailside plant. It is one of the many plants that rob the rancher of his grazing land, along with Italian Thistle, Yellow Star Thistle, Poison Hemlock, Purple Star Thistle and many more.

After a short distance, the hiker comes to yet another crossroad. To the right, the trail heads south with branches going to Rankin Park, "F" Street, the Stone Throne, the John Muir home, Highway 4, and Mount Wanda. To the left, heading west is the return loop to Shepherd's Canyon. Along this leg are views of the Carquinez Strait, Benicia, and Suisun Bay. On the right, a single-track trail leads down a steep slope towards the Carquinez Strait, leading to the Nejedley Staging Area. The return loop passes through grassland slightly below the ridge. Whereas the canyon side of the loop has warm still air, this side of the loop is exposed to the offshore winds blowing out from the great central valley. It is usually cooler than the canyon, but exposed to the direct sun with no shade in sight (carry water and wear a hat on hot days). Just before dropping down again into the canyon, the adjacent hills have rather strange looking flat round shapes; these are the Ozol fuel depot tanks, now empty. After joining the original road, a right turn will take the hiker back to the starting gate.