



# Vaca Creek Trail in July

Round Trip - 1- 1/2 Miles  
Elevation Change - 300 Feet

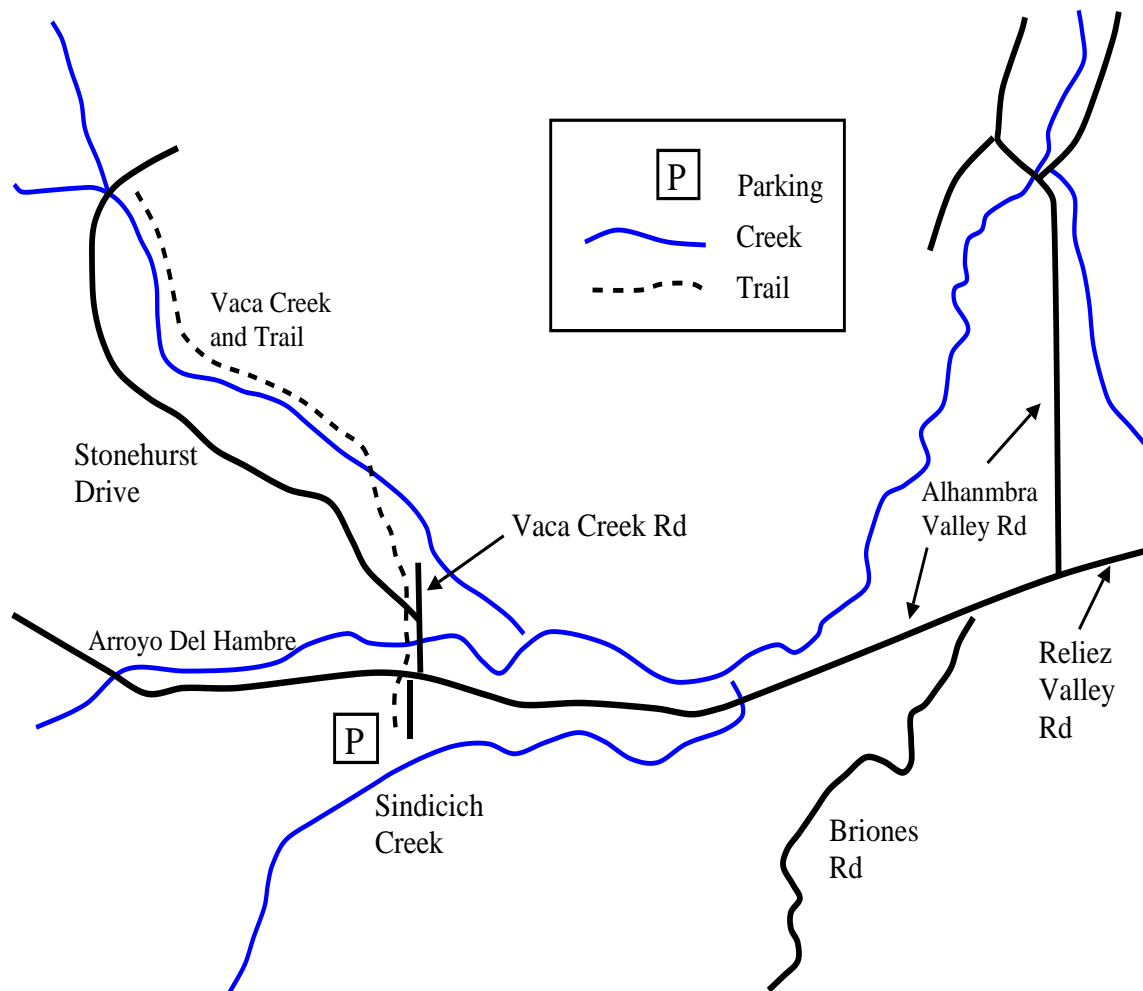


Go south on Alhambra Ave., one half mile past the train trestle, turn onto Alhambra Valley Road. Proceed 1-1/4 miles to the "T". Reliez Valley Road goes to the left. Continue on Alhambra Valley Road by turning right. Eight tenths of a mile after turning right, there will be a pear orchard on the left. At the country mail box at 5355 Alhambra Valley Road, turn left into the drive. This is the East Bay Regional Park. Drive a short distance to the end of the public road (do not cross the creek) and park under the Walnut trees.

After parking, return up the drive and cross Alhambra Valley Road. Walk along the trail to the left of Vaca Creek Road and cross over the Arroyo Del Hambre. The creek

banks are covered with Himalayan Blackberry. It is easy to distinguish this introduced invasive berry from the native Blackberry farther up the creek. The Himalayan canes are covered with vicious prickles with wide bases and slightly curved shapes. They can rip holes in the strongest jeans. The native berries have canes covered with prickles that seem to be little more than stiff hairs. As compensation for the nasty sharp pointed projections, the Himalayans produce loads of large delicious berries over much of the summer.

After crossing Stonehurst Drive, two small signs, one from the East Bay Regional Park District and one from the Muir Heritage Land Trust, mark the trail. The next few hundred





Leaves and blossoms of Coyote Tobacco *Nicotiana attenuata*

feet are mostly bare ground. Then the trail reaches Vaca creek and the way becomes shaded by Bay Laurel trees. The creek is on the right with the bank covered with *Vinca major* (Periwinkle). Like most trails in California, this trail has an abundance of Poison Oak. If the hiker can not recognize Poison Oak, it is best to stay on the trail and out of the undergrowth. The trail is as wide as a single lane road.

As the trail moves into a dryer zone, some of the Bay Laurels give way to Oaks and the shade becomes dappled. At one point, there are Coastal Redwood trees and California Pepper trees. These are horticultural plantings by local property owners. At this same place, in mid-summer, the hiker will find a dark green herb, growing from 2 to 5 feet high, with long white tubular flowers. The plant is sticky and has an ill-smelling odor. This is Coyote Tobacco (*Nicotiana attenuata*), one of several western tobaccos used by Native Americans. At this same place, the trail crosses over the creek which runs through a culvert. Warning to dogs and other bare footed creatures, the trail is sunny and Puncture Vine *Tribulus terrestris* is abundant here.

About two thirds of the way up the trail, a paved drive crosses the creek. A truly impressive Valley Oak is found here. The trail ends a short distance at the main road. Hikers return by the same path.

The Vaca Creek Trail is short. It is more suited to a leisurely walk, stroll, or ramble than a backwoods hike. Yet in this short distance, the stroller can see the impacts of our changing use of the land. The neatly plowed pear orchard comes from

the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries' agricultural uses of the land. Along the trail, the Himalayan Blackberry, dry European grasses and Italian Thistles are likely the results of disturbances from early 20<sup>th</sup> century ranching. The Periwinkle and Redwood trees come from residential landscaping that started in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. Today, the trail is the result of government agencies that protect our natural resources, the developer and the land owners who donate their properties, the East Bay Regional Park District and the Muir Heritage Land Trust.



Blue Elderberry (*Sambucus mexicana*) on the banks of Vaca Creek