

The Backbone Trail

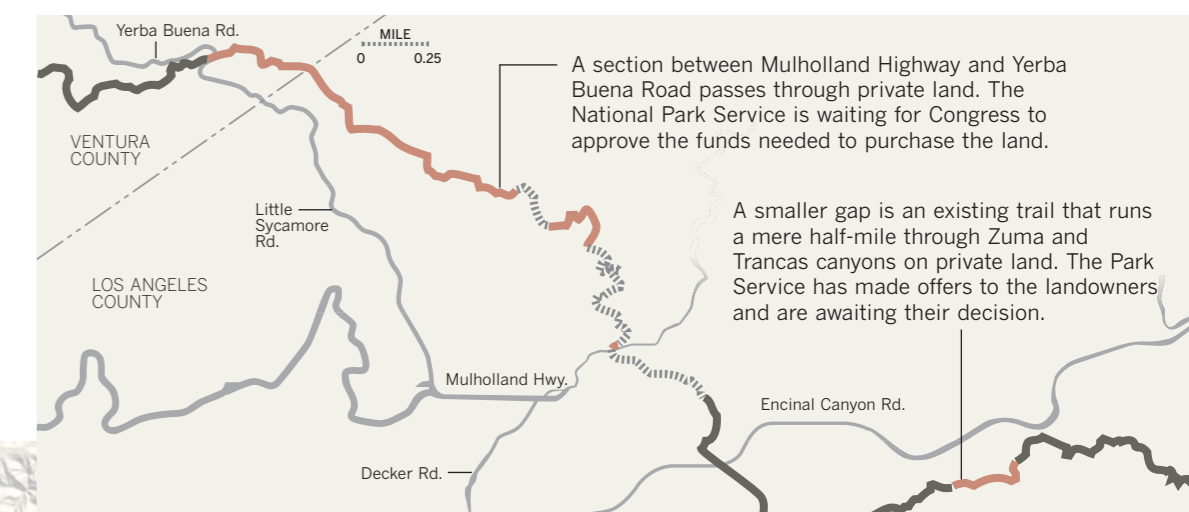
It's 59½ miles of canyons and ridges stitched together with a few urban seams. And it's not done yet.

Missing links

Currently the Backbone Trail is missing about five miles that straddle the border of L.A. and Ventura counties.

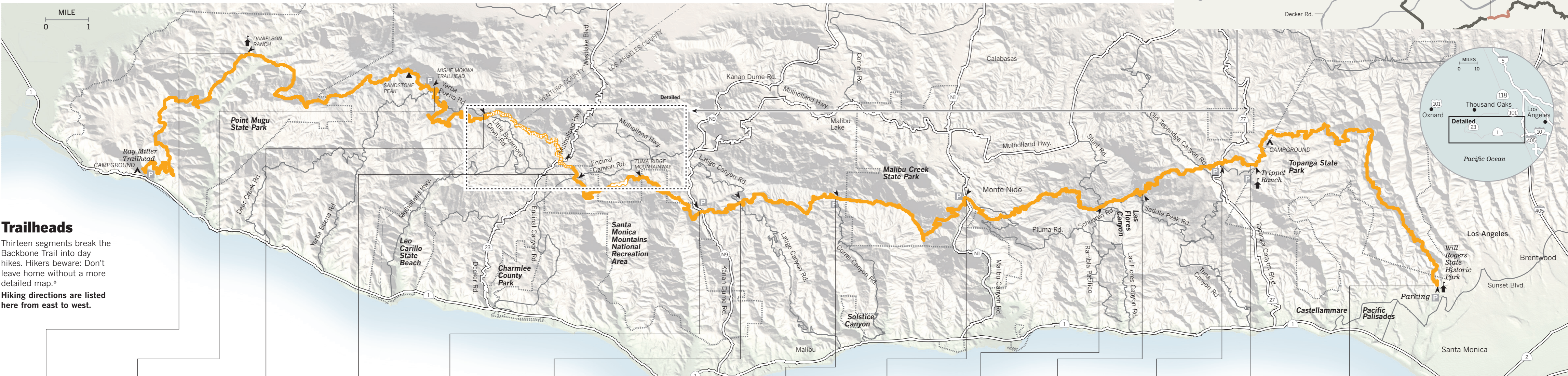
KEY

- Trail exists, but public right-of-way needs to be secured
- Trail construction required
- Trail open to the public



A section between Mulholland Highway and Yerba Buena Road passes through private land. The National Park Service is waiting for Congress to approve the funds needed to purchase the land.

A smaller gap is an existing trail that runs a mere half-mile through Zuma and Trancas canyons on private land. The Park Service has made offers to the landowners and are awaiting their decision.



Trailheads

Thirteen segments break the Backbone Trail into day hikes. Hikers beware: Don't leave home without a more detailed map.*

Hiking directions are listed here from east to west.

Danielson Ranch to Ray Miller Trailhead/ Point Mugu State Park

Distance: 8.1 miles

Parking: \$5 fee at Ray Miller Trailhead

Locating trailhead: Backbone Trail designated at west end



Mishe Mokwa Trailhead to Danielson Ranch

Distance: 7.9 miles

Parking: At Mishe Mokwa Trailhead on Yerba Buena Road; no car access at Danielson Ranch

Locating trailhead: Rerouted to continue from Mishe Mokwa to a connector route that leads to Sandstone Peak Trail. This segment is not signed at each end as Backbone Trail.

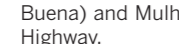


Trail gap to Mishe Mokwa Trailhead

Distance: 4 miles

Parking: Limited on Yerba Buena Road on narrow turnouts; parking lot at Mishe Mokwa

Locating trailhead: Hard to find at Yerba Buena Road. Look for a small hiking sign (no mention of the Backbone) 1.7 miles from the intersection of Little Sycamore Canyon Road (which becomes Yerba Buena) and Mulholland Highway



Encinal Canyon Road to Mulholland Highway

Distance: 2.2 miles

Parking: None at either end

Locating trailhead: Unmarked at both ends, trail is hard to find. West end is a half-mile from the intersection of Decker Canyon and Mulholland Highway; look for hiking sign and gate just off the highway.



Kanan Dume Road to Zuma Ridge Mountainway

Distance: 2.5 miles

Parking: Only at Kanan Dume Road

Locating trailhead: Well-marked trail ends at unfinished segment. Walk north less than a half-mile to Encinal Canyon Road (no parking) or return to Kanan Dume Road.



Latigo Canyon Road to Kanan Dume Road

Distance: 2.3 miles

Parking: Limited on Latigo Canyon Road; parking lot at Kanan Dume Road

Locating trailhead: Trail is signed at Latigo Canyon Road, but hard to see from road. Look for trail 2.8 miles from the intersection of Kanan Dume Road and Latigo Canyon Road.



Corral Canyon Road to Latigo Canyon Road

Distance: 4.1 miles

Parking: Limited on Latigo Canyon Road to turnout on shoulder

Locating trailhead: Trail is signed, but in the brush several feet off Latigo Canyon Road.



Malibu Canyon Road to Corral Canyon Road

Distance: 5.4 miles

Parking: At either end

Locating trailhead: Trail is signed but not visible at Malibu Canyon Road. Look for a lot south of Pluma Road intersection.



Stunt Road to Malibu Canyon Road

Distance: 2.1 miles

Parking: Limited on Stunt Road; lot at Malibu Canyon Road

Locating trailhead: Trail is unsigned as it leaves Stunt Road. Look for it 2.8 miles from intersection of Mulholland Highway and Stunt Road.



Saddle Peak Road to Stunt Road/Schueren Road

Distance: 4.7 miles

Parking: On Saddle Peak Road; limited parking on shoulder along Stunt Road

Locating trailhead: Unmarked as it continues west of the Saddle Peak trailhead. Look for it climbing steeply at intersection of Schueren and Stunt roads; sign for a connector trail from Stunt Road is obscured by brush.



Topanga Canyon Blvd. to Saddle Peak Road

Distance: 5.2 miles

Parking: \$3 fee at Dead Horse Road; parking at Saddle Peak Road

Locating trailhead: After crossing Greenleaf Canyon Road bridge and before the road takes a sharp right turn, look for a trail that goes up the hill to the left. Trail is signed as it comes down to Saddle Peak Road.



Trippet Ranch to Topanga Canyon Blvd.

Distance: 1.1 miles

Parking: \$5 parking fee at Trippet Ranch; \$3 parking fee at Dead Horse Trailhead on Entrada Road

Locating trailhead: Unsigned and difficult to find at Topanga Canyon Blvd. Look for it across from the Greenleaf Canyon Road bridge.



Will Rogers State Historic Park to Trippet Ranch

Distance: 11.5 miles

Parking: \$5 parking fee at either end.

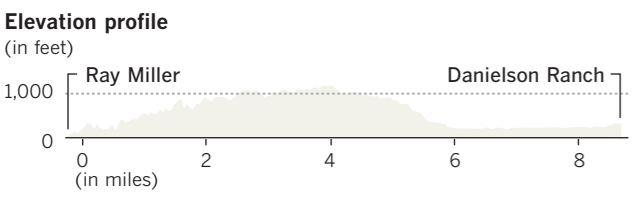
Locating trailhead: Signed at both ends.



Three standouts

Ray Miller Trailhead at La Jolla Canyon to Danielson Ranch

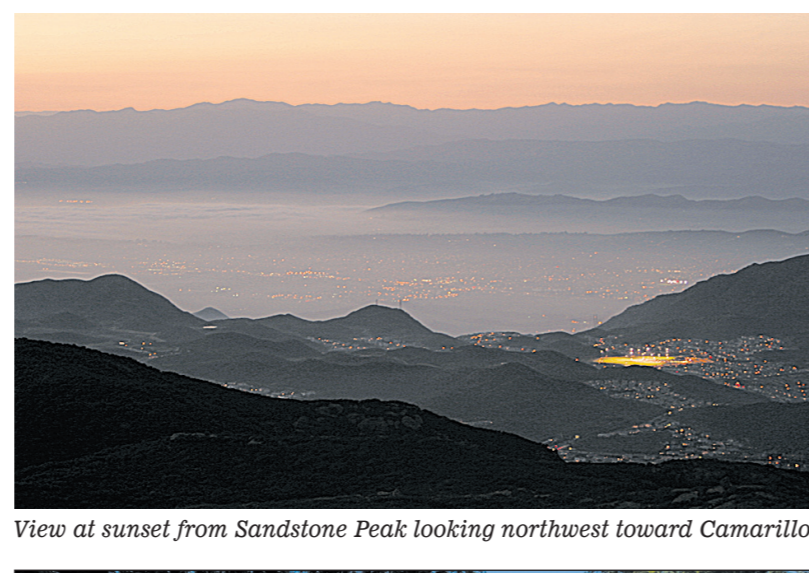
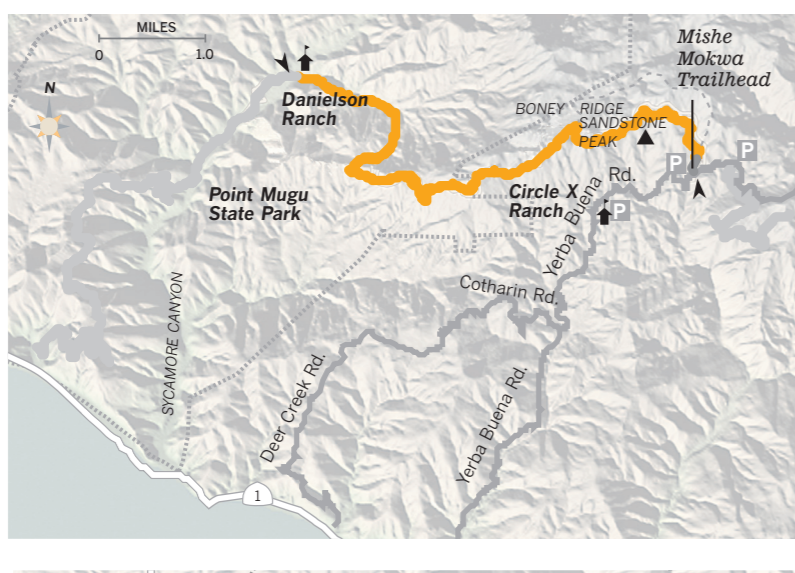
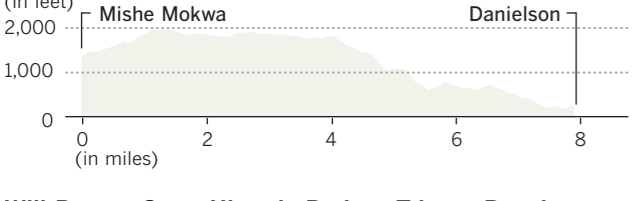
For insatiable viewmongers, the Backbone saves the best for last. The western end of the trail starts at sea level from La Jolla Canyon then climbs quickly along a quiet path where you can gaze at the Pacific and debate which Channel Island is which or look inland toward grasslands and 1,266-foot Mugu Peak. Mountain bikers, allowed on part of this stretch, are diverted through Sycamore Canyon under a canopy of trees that cover the fire road. After 8.1 miles, you can stop for water and shade at Danielson Ranch. Load up your pack with camera gear and binoculars — it's well worth the weight.



The western end of the trail from La Jolla Canyon climbs steeply.

Mishe Mokwa Trailhead to Danielson Ranch

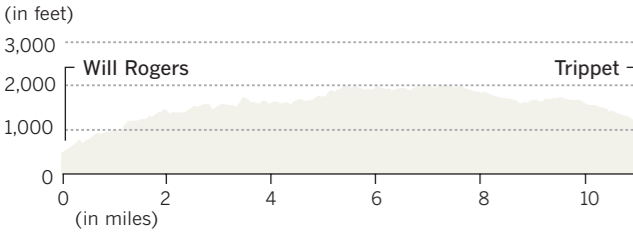
Solitude seekers and rock hounds take note: This may be the least-traveled section of the Backbone because the trailhead is remote and not well signed. Here, the trail meanders through meadows of shoulder-high grass, climbs toward Sandstone Peak, the highest point in the Santa Monica Mountains, and traverses Boney Ridge, offering wide views of the ocean and the Oxnard Plain. But the towering rocks and dramatic crags really define this landscape. You can hike 7.9 miles west on the Backbone or, if you want to explore, take a spur trail to Sandstone's 3,111-foot summit or do a 5-mile loop that includes a big-picture stop at Inspiration Point.



View at sunset from Sandstone Peak looking northwest toward Camarillo.

Will Rogers State Historic Park to Trippet Ranch

This eastern-most stretch is 11.5 miles of Backbone bliss. You can peer into cha parra-studded canyons from rocky ridges, scramble to the top of a hulking sandstone slab called Eagle Rock (no, not that Eagle Rock) or take refuge from the heat under sun-shielding oaks. But be prepared to share. Hikers sometimes bristle when mountain bikers appear on the narrow and steep single-track portion that starts near the beginning at Will Rogers. Don't expect solitude — the masses flock to this well-signed, accessible segment.



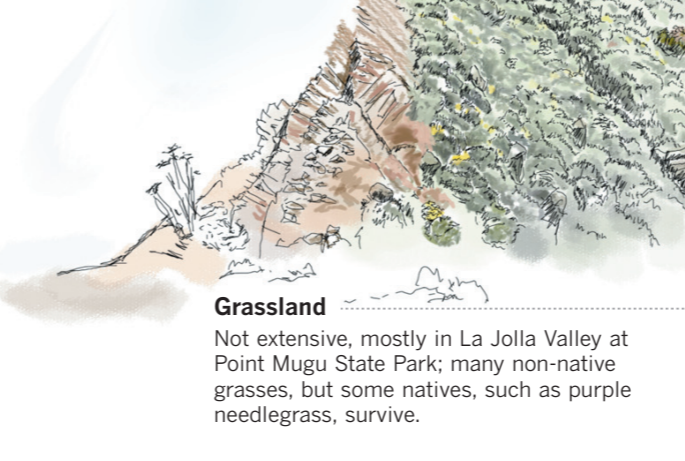
Oaks provide shade along a stretch of the trail near Trippet Ranch.

Flora and fauna

The Backbone Trail cuts across seven of nine plant communities in the Santa Monica Mountains. Wildlife includes coyotes, mule deer, coast horned lizards, Southern Pacific rattlesnakes, bobcats, mountain lions, gray foxes as well as birds such as red-tailed hawks, California quail and golden eagles.



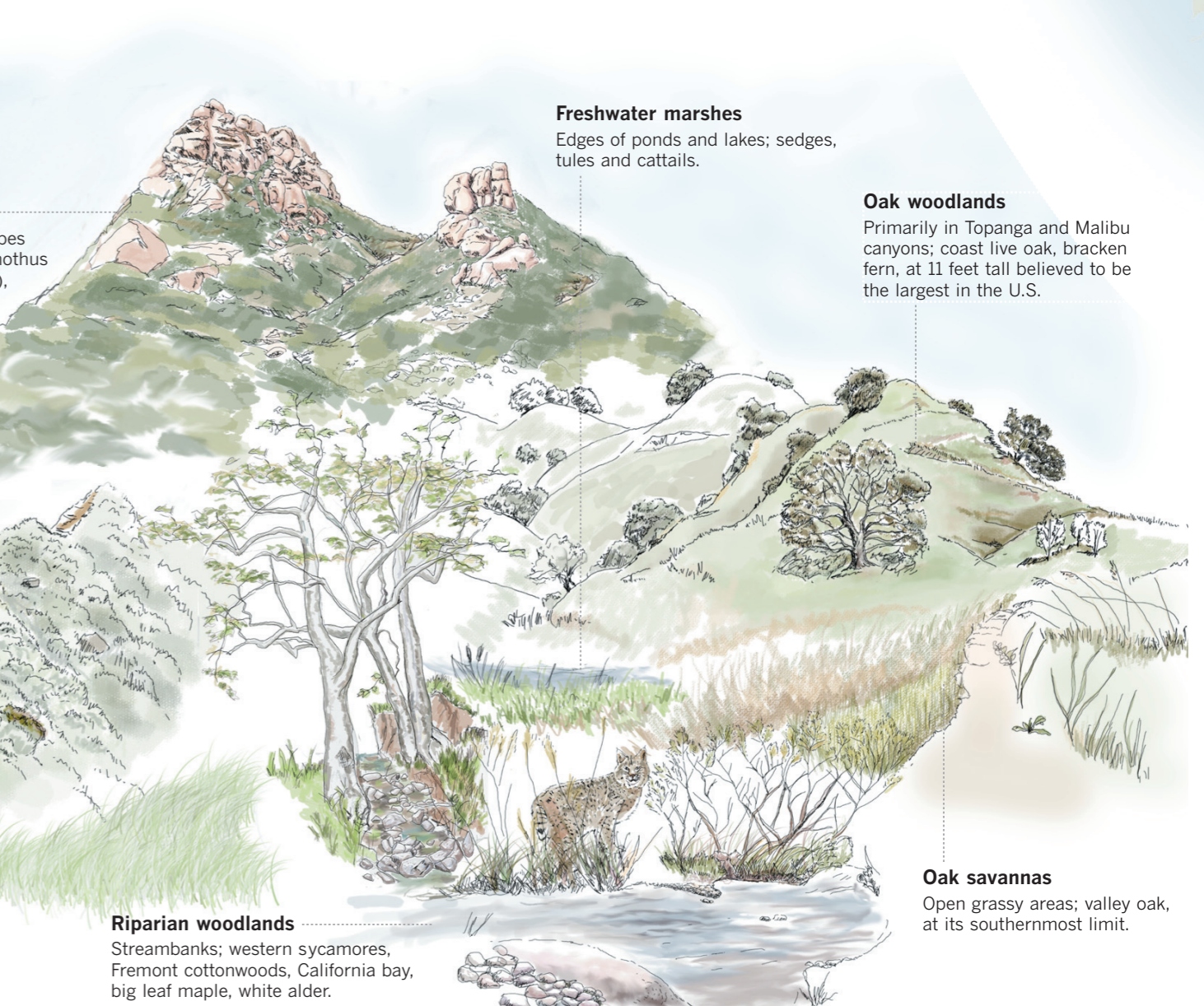
Chaparral
Widespread on inland slopes and ridges; chamise, ceanothus (known as California lilac), scrub oak, toyon.



Coastal sage scrub
Western slopes above beaches; coastal sagebrush, coyote brush, buckwheat and three different sages.



Grassland
Not extensive, mostly in La Jolla Valley at Point Mugu State Park; many non-native grasses, but some natives, such as purple needlegrass, survive.



Freshwater marshes
Edges of ponds and lakes; sedges, tules and cattails.

Oak woodlands
Primarily in Topanga and Malibu canyons; coast live oak, bracken fern, at 11 feet tall believed to be the largest in the U.S.

Riparian woodlands
Streambanks; western sycamores, Fremont cottonwoods, California bay, big leaf maple, white alder.

Oak savannas
Open grassy areas; valley oak, at its southernmost limit.

Birth of the Backbone

Early baptism: Early in the 20th century, the area is known as the Devil's Backbone Trail.

Grand plan: Notion of a foot trail across the Santa Monica Mountains that spans two counties takes hold by early 1970s. Proposed Ridge Trail is expected to run roughly west from Griffith Park to the Pacific Ocean at Point Mugu State Park.

Getting a spine: In 1974, California Legislature approves early version of (and funding for) what is now being called the Backbone Trail.

Goodbye, Griffith: Development of private property around Griffith Park in the mid-'70s causes plans to shrink. Easternmost point is changed to Will

Rogers State Historic Park in Pacific Palisades.

The U's turn: In 1978, Pepperdine University sells the state 145 acres in Topanga Canyon, the first parcel earmarked for the Backbone Trail.

Politicians on the hill: Backbone gets a higher profile when Congress creates Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area in 1978.

Another engine: Plans pick up steam when the land-buying Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy is formed in 1980. Its No. 1 priority? You got it.

The good book: Milt McAuley, known as the father of the Backbone, borrows against his insurance policy to print his

"Hiking Trails of the Santa Monica Mountains" in 1980.

Foot patrol: With an eye toward plotting the route, about 10 hikers in 1983 begin walking the length of the proposed trail. Some ranching paths date to the days of Mexican land grants.

United, we dig: In 1986, Youth Conservation Corps builds the first segment of the trail on federal land, 1½ miles in Newton Canyon.

Is that in dog years?: There's a "good chance" Backbone will be completed within five years, a National Park Service official says in 1986.

Define "almost done": With 43 miles in place in 1990, "near completion" of trail

is celebrated. Half are newly built trails, half are pre-existing trails and fire roads.

Heard it all before: Campaigning for bond money in 1990, director of Santa Monica Conservancy "guarantees" Backbone will be completed within 18 months.

Master of this universe: Trail blazer Ron Webster, who designs and oversees building of many segments, is honored in 1992 for his work on the Hondo Canyon section.

Hello, Hollywood: In 1997, Gregory Peck makes a pitch to raise money to pay for the final 6-mile gap. Donors can buy it by the foot — at \$100 a pop.

Camp Backbone: In 1998, the Park

Service invites hikers to spend the night at campgrounds along the route.

Closer, closer: Closing of 3-mile gap in upper Zuma Canyon in 1999 creates 40 miles of continuous trails.

It's a wonderful trail: Ghost of Frank Capra joins the saga in 1999, when his heirs deed to the cause 160 acres the filmmaker once owned between Westlake Village and Malibu.

59.5 miles and counting: When will it be done? It's complicated. Easements, land buys and trail-building slow finish of planned 64-mile trail to a crawl. One official prediction: 2007.

Camp Backbone: In 1998, the Park

* Trail segments rounded off to the nearest 10th of a mile account for the discrepancy in total mileage. Sources: "Guide to the Backbone Trail"; National Park Service, "Flowering Plants: The Santa Monica Mountains, Coastal & Chaparral Regions of Southern California"; California Native Plant Society, Times files, Graphics reporting by MARY FORGIONE, LESLIE CARLSON Times staff writers, and BILL SHARPSTEEN for The Times