

Stevens Creek: From the mountains to the bay

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Meandering through acres of asphalt and concrete, just a thin blue trace on a map, is a creek that profoundly shaped our valley.

The 20-mile-long Stevens Creek, rich with wildlife and history, is one of the most natural creeks in the Bay Area, a lifeline to an arid land. It springs from the flanks of the Santa Cruz Mountains and flows down Stevens Canyon, then trickles through Cupertino, Los Altos, Sunnyvale and Mountain View on its way to join the bay.

Along its banks, attracted by its cold clean waters and rich alluvial soil, once lived the Tambien, a tribe of Ohlones. In 1776, the creek was the campsite for the expedition party of Juan Bautista de Anza en route to San Francisco. They named it Arroyo San José de Cupertino, in honor of the patron saint of Copertino, Italy.

But early farmers called it Stephens Creek, due to the adjacent ranch of Elisha Stephens (the spelling of the creek name was later changed, but no one knows why). A South Carolina-born blacksmith, Stephens led the first successful passage of wagons over the Sierra Nevada in 1844, without a single casualty. He homesteaded 160 acres in what is now Cupertino. His Blackberry Farm was then sold to George McCauley and William McClellan when he felt

the area was "too darn civilized," according to the Cupertino Historical Society.

Here we follow the creek's route from its headwaters to the bay.

Monte Bello Open Space Preserve

<http://www.openspace.org/preserves/>
www.openspace.org/preserves/pr_monte_bello.asp

The creek is created by several finger-like tributaries that flow near the switchbacks on the Stevens Creek Nature Trail. Here at the headwaters, the flow depends on the season and amount of winter rain, but the creek becomes truly perennial at the site of the trail's bridge.

Clean and gurgling, a maternity ward for fish and California newts, the creek descends Stevens Creek Canyon and can be followed by hiking Canyon Trail from Monte Bello to the 1,092-acre Upper Stevens Creek County Park. This trail is a geological journey as well: The creek flows along the San Andreas Fault, at the junction where plates of the Earth's crust collide.

This scenic stretch of the creek also can be viewed from the south, simply by driving up the 3 1/2-mile-long Stevens Canyon Road from Mount Eden Road to the gate. Here, along the narrow road and several bridges, "the creek is wild and beautiful, almost like something out of the Sierra," says Bob Power, executive director of the Santa Clara Audubon Society (www.scvas.org).

Notably, this stretch of creek is home to a remnant run of the federally listed steelhead trout, of ancestral stock and not from hatcheries, according to Mondy Lariz of the Stevens & Permanente Creeks

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Phat Fong, of Emeryville, left, and Maureen Fan, of Burlingame, hike along the Stevens Creek Nature Trail at Monte Bello Open Space Preserve in Santa Clara County, Calif. on Saturday, June 19, 2010. The waters from these hills are where Stevens Creek, to the right, begins. (Jim Gensheimer/Mercury News) (Jim Gensheimer)

Watershed Council (www.spcwc.org).

Stevens Creek Reservoir

www.sccgov.org

The creek empties into Stevens Creek Reservoir. This serene 95-acre lake is located in the beautiful 1,077-acre Stevens Creek Park, managed by the county. The reservoir, completed in 1935, releases water to restore the valley's aquifer.

The lake is stocked with thousands of pounds of rainbow trout every year, making it a popular fishery. (Fish in the corners; it's easier to land them there than off the 120-foot dam face.) The lake also holds bluegill, black crappie, largemouth bass and channel catfish. One angler reportedly landed a sturgeon weighing more than 50 pounds, perhaps illegally planted by local residents. But due to mercury and PCB contamination, follow recommended guidelines on fish consumption (www.oehha.org/fish/so_cal/stevens.html).

The lake also offers shoreline picnicking and non-power boating. Dogs can be walked on a leash; horses can be rented at nearby Garrod Stables. On weekdays, beware of trucks from the adjacent quarry. Drive cautiously around cyclists.

The creek continues along its route below the dam, fed by a bottom-release design which draws water from the murky filled lower levels of the reservoir. While this allows the water district to adjust flows to recharge groundwater during the dry months — it releases enough water to keep the channel wetted down to Fremont Avenue — the creek here carries much more sediment than upstream.

Despite its sediment, the creek creates a rich

riparian habitat that is home to crayfish, deer, more than 125 species of birds and other wildlife.

Stevens Creek Corridor Park

Along the newly restored Stevens Creek Corridor Park, it is possible to wander the creek banks along a nature trail at the 18-acre McClellan Ranch. In the mid-1800s, this rich floodplain supported cattle, horses and orchards, and the park still preserves the historic ranch structures. A popular birding hot spot, the park serves as headquarters for the Santa Clara Valley Audubon Society.

A 0.7-mile paved trail follows the creek downstream, connecting to Blackberry Farm. Elisha Stephens' site is now owned by Cupertino — and newly restored with beautiful native plants, picnic grounds and a wheelchair-accessible path.

Gray-green scaly Western sycamores stand as sentinels along the creek's entire course here. One is a maternity roost for used by a colony of native big brown bats — thought to be the largest known colony on the entire valley floor.

Stevens Creek Trail

www.stevenscreektrail.org

The creek turns lazy and dry as it meanders through the valley floor; Highway 85 follows its corridor. It is best appreciated along the Stevens Creek Trail, created through the efforts of Friends of Stevens Creek Trail.

Although it's an urban route — paved and too close to streets and highways to ever feel like a wilderness experience — the trail is flat, clean, landscaped and well-maintained, with easy access from many

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Stevens Creek is seen heading to the bay from a bridge along the Stevens Creek Trail in the Stevens Creek Tidal Nature Study Area, Mountain View, Calif. on Friday, June 18, 2010. (Jim Gensheimer/Mercury News) (Jim Gensheimer)



A white egret is seen from the Stevens Creek Trail in the Stevens Creek Tidal Nature Study Area, Mountain View, Calif. on Friday, June 18, 2010. (Jim Gensheimer/Mercury News) (Jim Gensheimer)

neighborhoods in Mountain View and Cupertino. It's easy to plan a route for a short or long run.

Its real joy is lack of car traffic: There are three bridges that span Highway 237, Central Expressway and Moffett Boulevard. All other major crossings — such as Highways 101 and 85 — are underpasses. (Beware of rush hour bicyclists from Google and Microsoft!)

Join the trail at Sleeper Avenue. The trail is popular enough to stay busy and safe. But if you run alone, keep your iPod volume low and stay aware of your surroundings. (Be sure to check out the Caltrain bridge, with a tiny bit of an incline that is fun to sprint up and down — with a fun wobble if you jump up and down.)

At Evelyn Street, the creek is influenced by water coming in from Permanente Channel. But below Fremont Avenue, it disappears into a thirsty landscape. But near the La Avenida trailhead, the groundwater is high enough to seep into the channel. Soon the creek feels the fierce influence of tidal flow.

Shoreline Nature Study Area

www.openspace.org/preserves/pr_stevens_creek.asp

Here it gathers momentum, as it empties into the bay at the Stevens Creek Shoreline Nature Study Area. This 55-acre preserve, just a narrow strip of marshland, was never used for salt production and has kept much of the character of the original baylands. This is home to the snowy plover, a threatened species. To the east is Moffett Federal Airfield.

Fishermen like Bob Schlick come here, beer in hand, to catch and release bat rays and leopard sharks. All around are shorebirds, waterfowl, wading birds and raptors. The air is vibrant.

Once again, emptying its waters, the creek turns wild and rich with life.

follow the creek

From its source in the Santa Cruz Mountains to its end point in San Francisco Bay, Stevens Creek affords urban dwellers a remarkable view of nature and history, and it's right at their doorstep.

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Ryan Barker, 13, of Cupertino, leads his brother, Damien Barker, 13, as they ride along the Stevens Creek Trail at Blackberry Farm in Cupertino, Calif. on Friday, June 18, 2010. (Jim Gensheimer/Mercury News) (Jim Gensheimer)