Lyndon Canyon and Ranch Lake, Sanborn County Park

Trip highlights: San Andreas Rift Valley, Ranch Lake (site of 1906 earthquake damage)

The hike to Ranch Lake via Black Road is a scenic and easy walk (an unusual "flat hike" in the Santa Cruz Mountains). The trail basically follows the scarp of the San Andreas Fault to Ranch Lake, a modified sag pond that straddles the pass between Lyndon Canyon on the south and Sanborn Creek on the north. The lake has two dams, one on each drainage at opposite ends of the lake. The hike, and the drive to get there, offers views of the San Andreas Rift Zone and provides a wilderness-like feel for a park relatively close to the greater urban San Jose area.

To get there, take Highway 17 south toward Santa Cruz. Exit at Bear Creek Road (about 3 miles south of Los Gatos). At the top of the highway ramp continue straight (north) along the highway frontage road about 0.2 miles and turn left (north) on Black Road. Black Road winds northward (uphill) and eventually connects with Skyline Boulevard (Highway 35) that runs along the crest of the northern Santa Cruz Mountains. About two miles south of the intersection with the frontage road, Black Road crosses and then basically follows the San Andreas Fault Zone for a couple of miles. Although the landscape has been heavily modified by past and recent human activity, it is still possible to pick out landscape features that probably reveal the trace of the fault. Look for sag ponds (wet areas with cattails), isolated hills and linear ridges, straight stream valleys, steep escarpments (fault scarps), and changes in vegetation.

The trailhead for the John Nicholas Trail to Ranch Lake is located about six miles from the intersection of Black Mountain and the frontage road along Highway 17. The trailhead is located by a small parking area on the north side of the road about a mile downhill from the intersection with Skyline Boulevard. The hike to Ranch Lake is 1.4 miles. The trail basically follows the uphill side of the San Andreas Fault scarp that follows Lyndon Canyon Creek (and is responsible for its linear valley). About 0.5 mile along the trail are two large redwoods that escaped the era of heavy lumbering of this region of the Santa Cruz Mountains at the close of the 19th Century. A small spring-fed stream flowing past the redwoods produces a slight sulfur smell ("rotten eggs").

The trace of the San Andreas crosses through low earthen dams at both ends of Ranch Lake. The area experienced surface rupture during the 1906 (see picture below). An additional 0.5 mile takes you to the south end of the lake where one of the headwater tributaries of Sanborn Creek descends from Castle Rock Ridge on the west. This stream probably flowed into Lyndon Canyon Creek in the past, but migration of Castle Rock Ridge northward (on the west side of the fault) relative to El Sereno Ridge (on east side of the fault) resulted in the formation of the straight valley of Lyndon Canyon Creek and then stream capture of the headwater stream by Sanborn Creek.

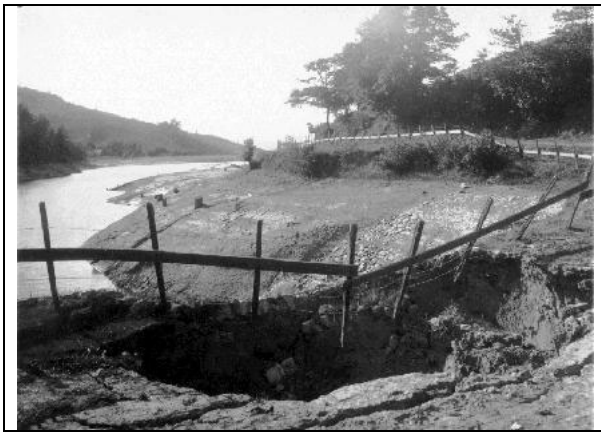

Figure 5-1. Ranch Lake as it appeared shortly after the 1906 earthquake. Ground failure in the foreground is the result of slumping of the earthen dam at the south end of the lake. Local lore is that a large quantity of water splashed out of the lake as a result of the earthquake. Note the high water line that existed at the time of the earthquake. Also note the comparative lack of forest in the photo as compared to the modern image below. The main trace of the fault runs along the base of the hill on the left, but the whole lake is within the fault zone. (Photograph from the Lawson report, 1908.)

Figure 5-2. Ranch Lake as it appears today. The lake was originally used as a reservoir, but was abandoned after the 1906 earthquake for fear of flood disaster should the dam rupture during an earthquake. After nearly one hundred years coniferous forests have returned to the hillsides west of the fault. Oak, bay laurel, madrone, and chaparral dominate the hillsides east of the fault. The difference in vegetation reflects both hillslope orientation (west-facing slopes tend to be warmer and dryer) and soil characteristics (bedrock characteristics influences soil development and moisture retention).