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Mount Gower Open Space Preserve, outside Ramona, rises from the ashes of the Cedar Fire.

By [Jerry Schad](#) | Published Thursday, Dec. 1, 2005

The 1574-acre Mount Gower Open Space Preserve was hard-hit by the Cedar Fire of October 2003. Today, after the extraordinarily wet 2004-05 rainfall year and after a first wave of precipitation in the current rainy season, Mount Gower's post-fire shade of gray and black is well on its way to being completely erased.

Some of the larger live oak and sycamore trees hunkering down along the ravines have seen several fire cycles. They promptly bounced back in the months following the Cedar Fire, a bit more gnarled-looking than before. The chaparral, which dominates the preserve, had to start from scratch. Species such as chamise, sugar bush, and Lord's Candle yucca did so almost immediately, bootstrapping upward from undamaged root systems with brave displays of fresh, green foliage.

The Mount Gower preserve property, formerly a tract of surplus federal land under Bureau of Land Management jurisdiction, was transferred to San Diego County's parks and recreation department about two decades ago. Eight miles of trail were unobtrusively cut into landscape here in the early 1990s, for use by hikers, equestrians, and mountain bikers. In the next few years -- before the regrown chaparral reaches head height again -- these trails will likely offer unobstructed views in a variety of directions. Pick one of the crystalline, sunny days characteristic of much of December and January for best results.

To reach the Mount Gower preserve, follow either Wildcat Canyon Road or San Vicente Road into the San Diego Country Estates rural residential community. Turn left (north) on Gunn Stage Road and continue 1.8 miles to the preserve entrance. Drive another one-quarter mile on a gravel road to a fenced staging area and trailhead.

The trail system has two main branches. The meandering west trail, 1.8 miles long, leads to a 2310-foot viewpoint on top of a barren ridge. This is worth the effort on the clearest days, when the vista includes the Coronado Islands, Point Loma, the San Gabriel Mountains behind Los Angeles, and a long roster of San Diego County high points.

The more difficult, rambling trail into the south part of the preserve extends about 4.5 miles. If a short hike is your preference, a mere mile of easy walking on the start of this trail takes you to a pleasant rest area overlooking oak-lined Swartz Canyon. From there, you may follow a short spur trail up to a 1976-foot peaklet perched over San Diego Country Estates and San Vicente Valley.

Onward on the main, south trail, a series of Sisyphean ascents and descents takes you across a small stream in Swartz Canyon and then northeast along an undulating ridgeline. After a definitive turn to the south, that same trail crookedly and tediously makes its way to the southernmost corner of the preserve, where you can look straight down on San Vicente Valley and the low-density suburban sprawl that fills it. Well shy of that

southernmost destination, however, you'll notice three summits -- all just over 3100 feet in elevation -- looming in the east on lands under the jurisdiction of Cleveland National Forest. The south summit is designated Mount Gower, 3103 feet. Adventurous peak baggers have made their way eastward over granite bedrock slabs to reach all three of these viewful high points.

