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Climb to South Fortuna Mountain in Mission Trails Regional Park via Oak Canyon and its trickling stream.

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In the aftermath of 1998-'99's anemic and spotty rainfall, the pale green sheen now covering San Diego's wildlands surely won't last long. By June the natural vegetation of the coastal region may look uniformly brown and gray. Still, you can try out the following hike in Mission Trails Regional Park during the next couple of weeks to appreciate decent if not stunning displays of wildflowers, plus sage-scrub and chaparral looking more alive than dormant. The destination of this hike, if you care to ascend far enough, is South Fortuna Mountain, perched some 1000 feet above Mission Gorge.

Start at the Old Mission Dam parking area, along the paved Father Junípero Serra Trail, 0.8 mile west of Mission Gorge Road in Santee. From the parking lot, walk west (downstream) on a wide, smooth trail past the old dam. Then go across the San Diego River on an iron footbridge. Double back east for 0.1 mile along the far bank, curve left across a hillside, and continue north (upstream) on a rough path along the bottom of shallow Oak Canyon. The canyon's stream barely trickles this year.

At 1.2 miles into your hike, the canyon pathway intersects a dirt powerline access road. Turn left and follow this road for 0.5 mile up along a ravine (very steep near the top) and attain a 910-foot saddle on the ridge between North Fortuna Mountain and South Fortuna Mountain. Bear left at the saddle, and follow a wide, rocky path southeast to the rounded South Fortuna summit, 2.3 miles from the start. There you can look northwest toward North Fortuna's summit and southeast over a row of lesser summits toward Cowles Mountain (highest elevation in the city of San Diego), which is distinctly marked with a cluster of radio antennas. It's easy to see why the diminutive range of mountains you stand upon was once called "Long Mountain" on century-old maps.