

The Santa Margarita River

Overview

The Fallbrook area is fortunate to have two rivers that are nearly completely in their natural state over most of their courses: The Santa Margarita River (SMR) and the San Luis Rey River. The SMR is by far the wildest, grandest, most scenic, and most accessible by the public of the two, with large portions of it protected. Unfortunately, the San Luis Rey River near Fallbrook is entirely private property, with development all along it. Perhaps some day some of the land along it will be acquired for conservation and public enjoyment.

The SMR is formed by the junction of Murrieta Creek and the Temecula River just west of I-15 in Temecula, just south of SR79 South. It immediately cuts a beautiful [gorge](#) through the southern end of the Santa Ana Mountains. The gorge is protected by the [Santa Margarita Ecological Reserve](#). Although the Reserve is normally closed to the public, the [Friends of the Santa Margarita River](#) sponsor a public walk to the gorge once a year, and the Reserve is currently training docents that will allow more frequent public access.

The gorge is the upper canyon of the river, ending below Gavilan Mountain. Below this point, the SMR and its tributaries Sandia Creek and De Luz Creek have carved a large bowl into the Santa Ana Mountains. The bowl has clearly-delineated steep sides north at the Santa Rosa Plateau and west at the Santa Margarita Mountains. A less steep cliff bounds the bowl on the south at Fallbrook, just north of Mission Road. The eastern side of the bowl is less clearly defined, being spread out over a larger area.

This lower canyon is widely considered the most beautiful spot in the Fallbrook area, with expansive scenic views of a pastoral community and surrounding mountains. There is a public [hiking trail](#) along much of its course here.

Below De Luz Creek, the SMR has mostly finished its erosion, creating a large floodplain as it flows through Camp Pendleton. The River is mostly protected there as well by the Marines.

The SMR, along with neighboring open land, is the largest regional ecosystem near the coast south of the Santa Monica Mountains. About 345,000 acres, 539 square miles, are contained in the river corridor, the adjacent Cleveland National Forest, the Santa Rosa Plateau, and Camp Pendleton.

