

Cows gone wild: Feral cattle scaring hikers in Chino Hills State Park



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CHINO HILLS STATE PARK >> Experienced hiker Frank Turcaz knows what to do when encountering a wild animal.

He's spotted coyotes while hiking the park's popular Telegraph Road Trail. On another occasion, while he waited for friends to catch up, a bobcat poked its tufted ears above the ridge of golden hills.

But when he saw a feral cow on the same trail a few months ago, Turcaz was unable to shoo the beast. He uttered loud noises. He made himself appear larger. But methods that would scare away a predator didn't work with a 2,000-pound bull and its harem of about 20 cows.

"I started slapping my hiking stick and the calves and the females took off running but the bull turned toward us. I had never encountered mean cows. When he finally retreated up the hill he never stopped looking at us," Turcaz, 42, recalled.

Like something out of the Wild West, grazing cattle are breaking through fences and roaming the 14,000-acre state park, scaring hikers, mountain bikers and campers and trampling sensitive riparian habitat.

State rangers have hired cowboys to lasso the cows with limited success. Dozens remain hidden in the park's corners, leaving open the possibility the next encounter between the wild bovines and a hiker could result in an injury or death.

"I am aware there is the potential for dangerous interaction between cattle and park visitors and I am doing everything I can," said Kelly Elliott, supervising ranger at Chino Hills State Park, a unique collection of rolling hills and walnut-and-oak-filled canyons located on the four corners of Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside and San Bernardino counties.

Park visitors have tweeted and emailed the rangers and environmental groups of several close encounters with cows during the last two years, Elliott said.

In November, one old-time cattle rancher, Bill Friend, 82, died trying to intervene between a bull and his harem, said Claire Schlotterbeck, co-founder of Hills For Everyone, the group that formed the park nearly 30 years ago.

"I think it was two bulls fighting over a female and he got kicked. He was in his 80s. He eventually died from this injury from the cow," Schlotterbeck said.

The park can't shake its cattle grazing past.

For 100 years or more, ranchers raised beef cattle on these hills and on nearby lands in Chino, Chino Hills, Brea and Diamond Bar. For more than 30 years, though its impossible to estimate exactly, beef cows have broken loose from grazing lands to devour the greener grasses in the protected preserve.

Elliott and Schlotterbeck believe some of the animals are feral, meaning they were born in the wild recesses of the sprawling park. Some don't know about living behind a fence. Some cows and bulls seen on park lands have never been tagged, they said.

"It seems no matter how many fences are put up, there is really no stopping a cow if it is hungry," Elliott said. "In the park, the grass is literally greener."

In late September, ranger Kim Sawyer spotted a bull while on his patrol on Telegraph Road, the same spot where Turcaz saw the bull and his harem. This time, Sawyer pulled his truck close to the large animal but it didn't move. He honked his horn. Finally, he got out of the pickup and the brown and white bovine wandered away.

Sawyer said he's seen the younger bulls head butt each other, typical behavior in which a male tries to exert dominance in order to attract a mate.

"Some of them haven't been around humans a lot. Apparently this bull is very dangerous and very big," Schlotterbeck said.

Ed Loritz, a salesman with a local packing materials company, likes to hike the trails of Chino Hills State Park. In February, he was heading down Rimcrest Trail where it meets Telegraph when he saw a bull.

"This cow had this look in his eye like he was going to kill me. He weighs 2,000 pounds. I wasn't about to mess with him," Loritz said.

Loritz, a regular visitor to the park, said he's seen feral cows for the past two or three years. "I thought I'll throw a rock and he'll back off. But he came two feet closer. I started walking toward him and as soon as I did he was now running toward me," Loritz described. "I should have brought my 9mm with me."

In February, Loritz counted 15 head of cattle in one spot in the park. One hiker emailed Schlotterbeck and Elliott and said his 10-year-old daughter was terrified. Both still get emails and Facebook posts from startled hikers.

"Some of the bulls have lived in the park their whole lives," Elliott said. "Some have never been caught and tagged."

The problem may be unique to this inland state park with a history of cattle ranching that is taught by rangers to visiting school kids. More than 60 miles to the west in the Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area, cattle occasionally wander into the hills between the ocean and Thousand Oaks, but the problem is not endemic, said Joseph Edmiston, executive director of the SMMC.

"We have not had feral cows but if some cows come from their ranches, we call the people up and say 'Hey you have a week to go get them or we're having a barbecue,'" Edmiston said.

In winter, the wayward cows in Chino Hills hug the ridgelines. During hotter months, and as recently as early October, cows drink from the creeks. Earlier this month, cow droppings and matted patches of grass led to Telegraph Creek, a sure sign the cows are roaming within the park.

Under the canopy of willows and sycamores, someone had put out several plastic watering bins fastened to tree barks by twine. The bins were still damp with fresh water. Sawyer didn't know what to make of the contraptions. They were either put there by sympathetic hikers trying to ensure the parched cows had water, or equestrians to water their horses.

Elliott said she's begun legal proceedings against cow owners through the Legal Services Division of the California Department of Parks and Recreation. She would not elaborate on the nature of any legal action, citing exceptions for pending litigation to the state open records law.

She also is asking the public to help her identify the wayward cows by sending her photos "so I can document where these cows are," she said. "Part of my job is to find out who owns those cows and who is responsible for them."

Bob Kelley, foreman at El Rodeo Stables on Carbon Canyon Road near the park's main entrance, said he often enters the park by horse to round up cows. He said some cows belonged to Bill Friend, the rancher who died in November.

He denied that the cows in the park are feral. He said they just enter the park when the fences get knocked down, often by mountain bikers. "We just bring the cows back," he said.

The park has hired cowboys during the past two years to round up cows. Recently, a wrangler from Bishop was contracted by Elliott but canceled, saying the amount he'd collect for a cow and the long trip made it unprofitable, she wrote in an email.

The wranglers are not paid, but can keep every captured cow. They can be auctioned for several hundred dollars for beef. But it takes a skilled wrangler to lay traps for the cows, usually consisting of piles of hay, then ride their horses and wrestle the cows into their trucks.

Rangers are not trained to wrangle cows. “That is not in their job description,” Elliott said.

Because the state has no budget for ridding cows from the park, she must cajole freelance cowboys, who’ve removed about 20 cows in the last few years, she said. But their ilk are rare in urban Southern California.

“Here we are in the middle of Orange, San Bernardino, Riverside and Los Angeles counties and we are wrangling cows,” she said with a chuckle.

Bottom line is the cows damage plants, creeks and can cause a safety hazard. Even though they’ve been around these parts long before the park came into being, they are not permitted.

“The cattle are trespassing within the state park,” she said.