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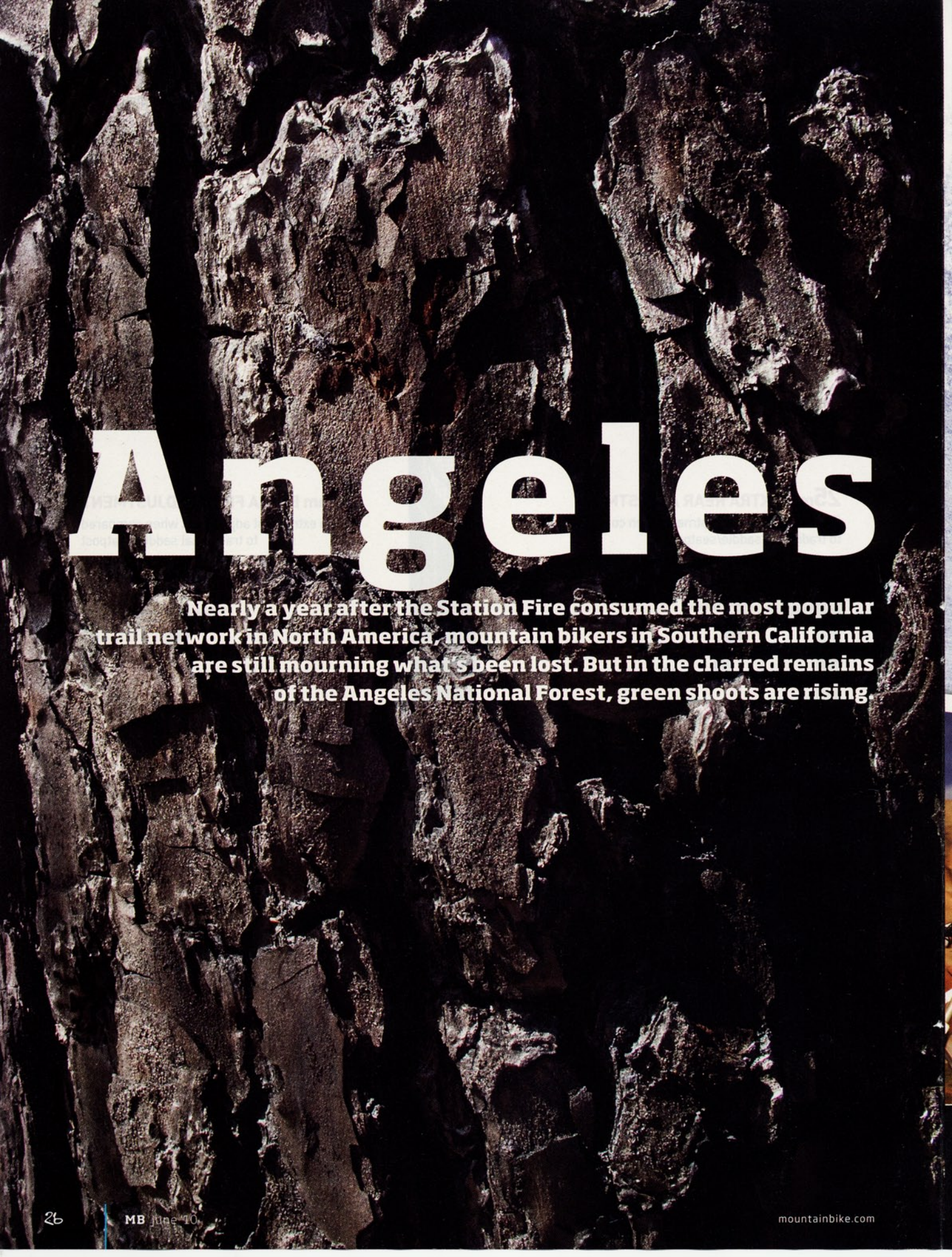


Angeles

Nearly a year after the Station Fire consumed the most popular trail network in North America, mountain bikers in Southern California are still mourning what's been lost. But in the charred remains of the Angeles National Forest, green shoots are rising.

Ashes

By Dan Koeppel
Photographed By Michael Darter

STEVE MESSER'S SELF PORTRAIT, FROM THE FIRST DAY OF THE STATION FIRE.

It was August 27, 2009, and local rider Steve Messer was grinding up his favorite trail. The lower Sam Merrill is one of the most challenging–but direct–in the front range of the San Gabriel Mountains, just north of Pasadena. It is the first trail along a 4,000-foot climb that is as grueling as it is spectacular, with multiple switchbacks and high exposure. Messer's progress was made even more challenging by his pack full of maintenance equipment. His destination was a segment of trail that, a century ago, was home to an improbable, nearly vertical railway. It now leads to the wreckage of the hotel that was one of the trolley's stops. From there, riders traverse a canyon along a narrow ledge, then pass a quartet of 5,000-foot peaks before topping out on 5,710-foot Mt. Wilson, the highest peak in Los Angeles County, just 25 straight-line miles to the skyscrapers downtown.

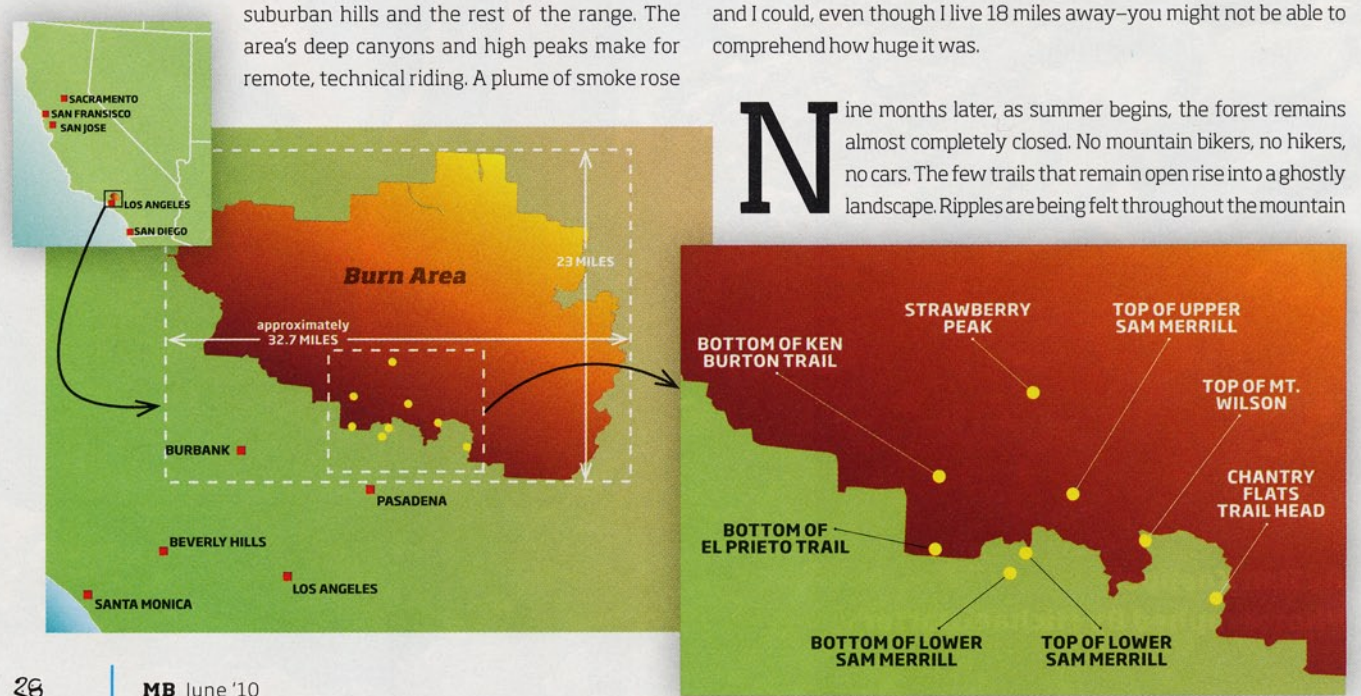
Messer looked up, toward the high ridge that rises above the front range in the direction of California Highway 2, which is also known as the Angeles Crest and marks the boundary between the forward, suburban hills and the rest of the range. The area's deep canyons and high peaks make for remote, technical riding. A plume of smoke rose from a ridge between the road and Messer's position. He stopped and snapped a few pictures. His shots showed a dark gray haze, rising in the near distance, tinted orange by the flames below it.

Sam Merrill is one of more than 200 trails in the Angeles National Forest, along with thousands of miles of dirt road. The forest is just a hair smaller than the state of Rhode Island and sits entirely within the confines of Los Angeles County, making it the largest urban wilderness in the world. And the region is more than just vast; it boasts riding that, if you factor in challenge, variety and opportunity, may make it the most attractive place on the planet to mountain bike. Shuttle-able trails offer high exposure and high-speed descents down rowdy, switchback-laden trails, while XC riders get climbs with grades of up to 20 percent, best characterized by the 12 miles of fire road that lead to the Mt. Wilson summit.

You don't even need a car to access this play land–$5 buys a pass that's good on the new Gold Line light rail and a connecting bus, both of which accommodate bikes and will get you from downtown LA to the trailhead in under an hour. And the Angeles National Forest is also home to the world's largest mountain bike community: A 2006 Forest Survey found that 3.1 million visitors each year accessed the trails on two wheels (another 4.5 million explored them on foot). The forest was the first place I ever rode a mountain bike–more than 25 years ago–and it is where I've introduced dozens of friends to the sport. Though I'd never ridden with Messer, he's been riding in the area as long as I have, and there's no doubt we've passed each other hundreds of times.

On that afternoon, Messer didn't realize the significance of what he was looking at. "It looked like a small fire," he recalls. "I had no idea it would be my last ride up there." He pedaled a little more, then headed home, figuring the blaze would be snuffed by nightfall. Instead, the flames took firm hold of the forest that evening, and kept burning for a full six weeks, until the natural disaster now known as the Station Fire pretty much destroyed every living thing for more than 235 square miles–an area almost the size of San Francisco. If you didn't see the fire–and I could, even though I live 18 miles away–you might not be able to comprehend how huge it was.

Nine months later, as summer begins, the forest remains almost completely closed. No mountain bikers, no hikers, no cars. The few trails that remain open rise into a ghostly landscape. Ripples are being felt throughout the mountain



STEVE MESSER

bike community. In the Santa Monica Mountains, 30 miles to the west, toward the coast, trails are crowded with overflow. Bike shops closer to the San Gabriels have reported decreased sales. Many riders have simply stopped pedaling. And everyone–no matter how they move through the forest–is waiting. The publicly available Forest Service map has been revised with a thick red boundary, the forbidden zone that contains nearly the entire area. And the future? It feels, at the moment, like there might not be one. Every rider, no matter how big or small their local territory, can imagine how hard it must be to try to come to grips with the effects. What if your trails–all your trails–suddenly disappeared?

The day that Steve Messer rode for the last time in the Angeles National Forest–the day the Station Fire was born–he made a classic loop, crawling up the lower Sam Merrill, crossing over the Mt. Lowe Toll Road, to the Sunset Ridge trail, up Brown Mountain and then finally letting gravity pull him back down a trail known as El Prieto. If these urban mountains symbolize the sport's essential formula–rugged adventure mixed with technology mixed with convenient access–then no trail better represents what mountain bikers crave than El Prieto (the name translates as both "dark" and "narrow"). And because this descent is so good, with 2.5 miles of drops, creek crossings and switchbacks–and so close to so many businesses that make and design bikes–it has also been a proving ground for many significant mountain bike breakthroughs. From Easton's then-revolutionary Ultra Lite handlebars to Santa Cruz's Blur, a few decades' worth of technological innovations had their public make-or-break on daily runs along the canyon trails. If mountain biking was born in "Norcal," it went through many of its growing pains and became an adult here, on El Prieto, right outside Pasadena.

El Prieto wasn't just popular as a bike-industry test area. The essential character of this trail and of the Angeles is that it's close to a huge swath of urban dwellers. The eight-lane 210 Freeway is just a mile away. Riders park in a lot that overlooks NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory. At the top of the climb, the entire city comes into view, but once you start descending, all traces of the modern world are left behind. Parking becomes tough on weekends–this is Southern California, after all–but the trailhead becomes an all-out tailgate party and swap meet, with riders giving and receiving real-time DIY product reviews; post-ride beverages are sometimes shared incognito and, more openly, so are directions to any of the dozen burrito shops within a five-minute drive. El Prieto is also spectacularly democratic. Department store rigs are as common as multi-thousand-dollar machines. I've ridden all over the world, but I can say without hesitation that if you have only one hour, there's no better trail–or trail community–anywhere.

In the months following the fires, and the subsequent rains that tore into now-unanchored earth, I was afraid to find out what had happened to El Prieto. But with spring approaching, that fear turned to anxiety–I *had* to know what happened. On a Sunday morning this past spring I drove to the parking lot, hoping to pedal in. Within a few minutes, I was stopped by a ranger. I asked if he had cited large numbers of riders. "No," he replied, "because even the ones that get through come up here and see that there's nothing left to ride, so they don't come back."

At home, I looked for secondhand information. A quick online search instantly produced news that was worse than what I'd expected. "Unrecognizable and destroyed," said a post on a local riders' forum. "All I can say is it looks like a bomb dropped in the canyon. Debris piled at least head-high, landslides, mass erosion."

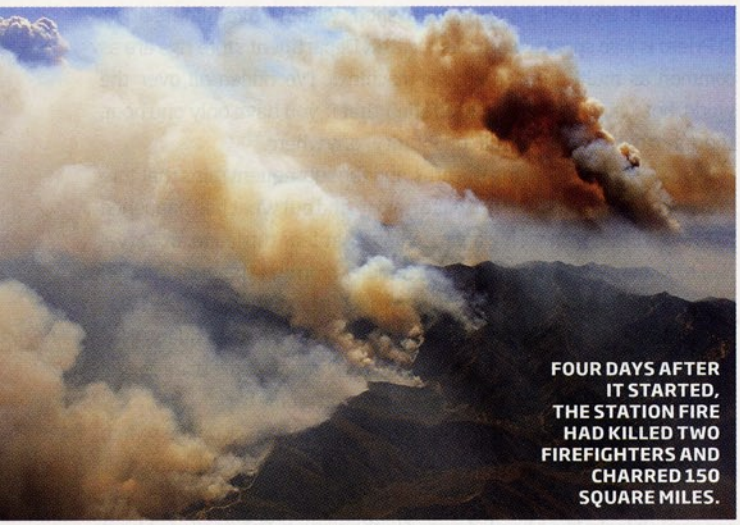
BEFORE THE FIRES, ON AUGUST 27; TODAY A NEARBY SEGMENT IS TORCHED BLACK–AND CLOSED.

LEFT: STEVE MESSER

The forest is home to the world's largest mountain bike community, with 3.1 million riders each year.

If El Prieto is hallowed ground for mountain bikers, then the climb to Mt. Wilson–20 miles straight up the Angeles Crest Highway, measured from the traditional start point where the road splits northward from the Foothill Freeway–is a rite of passage for local road riders. The asphalt is smooth and curved, becoming steeper and steeper. At mile marker 29–five miles into the ride–there once stood a small turnout. Shady oak trees made it a perfect place for an early breather.

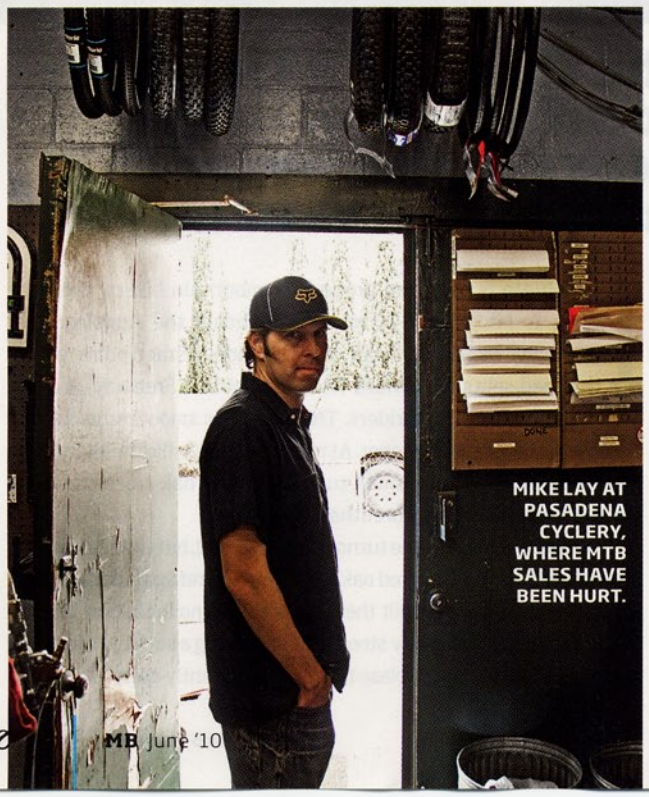
The highway around the turnout has collapsed, but the marker itself remains, with a bit of charred oak to indicate the refuge it once offered. When the highway is rebuilt there will likely be no indication that, on August 20, 2009, somebody stood here and, using a so-far unidentified flammable substance, lit a blaze that almost instantly spread across 20,



FOUR DAYS AFTER IT STARTED, THE STATION FIRE HAD KILLED TWO FIREFIGHTERS AND CHARRED 150 SQUARE MILES.

100, and by day's end, thousands of acres. Early on, a suspect was named–a man who'd been caught a few days earlier as he attempted to start a blaze–but charges weren't filed, and the investigation continues.

There's no doubt that if there is a culprit, he or she ought to be brought to justice. But there's also no doubt that a big fire was coming. "In the mountains of San Gabriel," naturalist John Muir wrote in 1918's *Steep Trails*, "Mother Nature is most ruggedly, thornily savage." Muir might have added another adjective: regularly. A look back at the precarious lifecycle of human-made recreation in the Forest reveals as much. Prior to the Station Fire, a 50-mile drive up the Angeles Crest would get you to Kratka Ridge, the remains of an old ski resort. The lift is still there–a single chair and a motor house–but it burned to near-charcoal in 2001. Even closer to Los Angeles, an all-out, swooping downhill leads to the Switzer picnic area. Once, a resort stood here. Fire destroyed it in the 1920s. Rusted detritus breadcrumbs a path up Mt. Lowe; it's what remains of a public tramway that opened in 1893 and made 127 hairpin turns as it crossed 18 trestles, a roller-coaster ride as thrilling as anything human-powered on two wheels. A hotel and restaurant once crowned the plateau. The resort was twice destroyed by fire and subsequent mudslides, finally closing for good during the Depression, in 1936. One of the railway's flat spots connected two major singletracks. Riders crossed the oddly placed ties that are a cryptic remnant of the former tourist attraction.



MIKE LAY AT PASADENA CYCLERY, WHERE MTB SALES HAVE BEEN HURT.

This fiery history of man-made structures in the San Gabriels hasn't come without a helping hand from nature. Those who don't live in Southern California may not know exactly what chaparral is (the word comes from the Spanish *chaparra*, a particular breed of oak), but they likely recognize it. The scrubby landscape has been the backdrop for hundreds of Westerns shot in the surrounding hills. From a distance, chaparral looks almost dull, pure brown. But up close, it radiates with nearly magenta Manzanita, a half-dozen species of grass and, in the spring, fragrant purple lupines.

Oil is what makes chaparral live; it is also what makes it burn. A greasy vascular system is a major advantage for a plant living in dry terrain, but years of fire suppression meant that the overgrown Angeles was like an open can of gasoline. In fact, just days before the Station Fire broke out Forest Service officials were developing an official "fuels reduction program," basically a forest-wide, pruning agenda. Unfortunately we'll never know whether such a plan would've worked. Instead, according to a report by the Chaparral Institute, we experienced what has been classified as a rare "megafire." Only eight have occurred in modern history. Richard Halsey, director of the institute, commented that, "...huge wildfires will occur in Southern California regardless of how the government 'manages' its lands...they are an inevitable part of life here."

The roads through the forest reopened, briefly, in November, before winter rains and mudslides shut everything down again. In that interim between waves of destruction I took the opportunity to return to a place that, if Mile 29 is destined to become a monument to infamy, will likely become hallowed ground. I had ridden Mt. Gleason Fire Road three years before the conflagration, and it was incredible. (The "fire road" designation is itself, telling; the rugged, vehicle-accessible arteries crosshatch every Southern California mountain range, as well as most mountain ranges from the Rockies to the Pacific. They were built to allow emergency equipment to quickly reach burning areas, and water is often stored in towers or along the roads in house-sized cisterns.)

What I'd remembered about Mt. Gleason was that the climbing was steep to the point of ridiculousness–and I'd done it in 90-degree heat. I was preparing for a multiday trip that would take me and a group of friends up and over the peak; we'd camp two nights. The problem was water. The forest is mostly dry, so I hitched a trailer, loaded a dozen jugs, and pedaled the fire roads intersecting our route, making deposits. But a week later, when we arrived at the drop sites, we found that the intense heat had caused the bottles to swell. Every drop of liquid had evaporated via tiny gaps between the jugs and their caps.

Now, as I pedaled toward Mt. Gleason there were no sycamores in the canyon below, no football-sized pine cones scattered at the trailhead. Below, the landscape was an endless expanse of matchsticks, hugging the hillsides and dropping into canyons. Streaks of flame retardant, still present, created splatters of crimson across the rocks and pavement.

Visitors to Mt. Gleason are often surprised to see that there's a prison camp just before the trailhead. Inmates volunteer to be housed

TOP: KEVORK DJANSEZIAM/GETTY IMAGES

STEVE MESSER AND OTHER CORBA MEMBERS HAVE ALREADY BEGUN WORK REBUILDING L.A.'S EXPANSIVE TRAIL SYSTEM.

ALTERNATIVE L.A. RIDES

WITH THEIR LOCAL TRAILS CLOSED, SAN GABRIEL RIDERS HAVE HAD TO BROADEN THEIR RANGE. HERE'S A SELECTION OF NEARBY ALTERNATES. REMEMBER, OUR PRESENCE PUTS EXTRA STRESS ON THESE ALREADY BUSY TRAILS. NEIGHBORLINESS IS GOOD.

The **SANTA MONICA MOUNTAINS** are, amazing as it sounds, L.A.'s second, massive swath of urban backcountry, and stretch for 40 miles along the Pacific coast. From the west side of the city, hit Sullivan Canyon–a legendary 10-mile loop that functions as the "El Prieto" of this range–and the Backbone trail, which features killer climbs, high-velocity singletrack and unbelievable ocean vistas as it loops above the suburbs and into Will Rogers State Park. From the north side of the range–accessible via the San Fernando Valley and the 101 Freeway–try the Los Robles Switchbacks. It's an out-and-back, as far as you want, and ultimately leads to beginner-friendly Sycamore Canyon trail and the beach.

The **VERDUGO HILLS** are a small mountain range that sits at the foot of the San Gabriels. It offers mostly stiff, fire road climbs and one spectacular singletrack: the nearly vertical, twisty La Tuna Canyon trail, which loops from the 210 Freeway exit of the same name.

CHANTRY FLATS is one of the few remaining open trail systems in the Angeles. There isn't a lot of trail mileage here, but there is a crown-jewel–the very technical, rocky, lower Gabrielino Trail.

CHESEBRO CANYON has a pocket-sized network. The area is north of the Ventura Freeway, about an hour from downtown. The good: miles of singletrack and fire road with multiple loop and skill options. Less good: potential for heinous en-route traffic jams that could double your drive time.

OTHER CHOICES include killer summit rides to the top of 8,847-foot Mt. Pinos and 8,600-foot Mt. Baldy . A less stout grind heads up Glendora Mountain Road.

GRIFFITH PARK: Equestrians have so far blocked access to mountain biking in what could be the most democratic, diverse urban jewel of a trail network in America. To help, visit la-bike.org.

ON THE TRAIL, ABOVE CHANTRY FLATS.

"It may have taken a disaster, but everyone knows they have to rebuild the trails."

there; learning firefighting is considered to be excellent rehabilitation. On August 31, 2009, supervising county firefighters Ted Hall and Arnie Quinones were in charge. As flames climbed, the pair led the inmates to the protection of the facility's cinderblock dining hall. Then the two firefighters jumped into a truck to descend the Mt. Gleason road, looking for an escape route. Halfway down, in thick smoke, their vehicle slipped off the road and fell 800 feet, landing upside down. The inmates survived, waiting out the fire. Last November I wasn't actively looking for the spot where the tragedy occurred. But it was hard to miss with the slopes so bare. I turned away, not wanting to look into the canyon below, where their truck, burned black, must have lain. Hall left two sons; Quinones, a pregnant wife. We've lost much more than trails, much more than fun.

L.A. TRAFFIC INVADES THE CHANTRY FLATS TRAILHEAD.

Against this backdrop, it might seem irrelevant to talk about the uncertain future mountain biking faces in the forest. But the discussion is necessary. In January, a hopeful trail crew, including Messer, returned to Sam Merrill for a symbolic rehabilitation effort. The forest was still closed, and it had taken some negotiation and planning to allow the activity. Of the 70 participants, 50 identified themselves as riders. They were delighted to find that on this particular spot, damage had been moderate, and in an afternoon, the trail was looking something like its old self.

The work was destroyed by the rains that came a few weeks later. Dozens of miles of trails that likely survived the fire were also denuded, wrecked in torrential downpours that swept through the area for the following eight weeks. Even sunny days offered no respite. Snow, mostly above 4,000 feet, melted. Floods and waves of mud buried most of what had survived. El Prieto, already scoured clean of vegetation and root systems that might have held the hillsides, became a debris dump, filled to its rim with fallen trees. What the trail crew's effort did do, though, was stake a claim. Riding has to return to the San Gabriels.

There are several hopeful notes. The Mount Wilson Bike Association–the region's oldest trail-building group–announced that its annual fundraising pancake breakfast will go on as planned. The location will be at the foot of the Sam Merrill trail, and Mike Lay, the event's organizer, says he expects up to 500 attendees. Lay, who also manages Pasadena Cyclery, says that one positive effect of the fires has been to mobilize riders who might otherwise have never participated in trail building: "There are tons of people who've told us they're ready to get involved." It may have taken a disaster to build such interest but, Lay says, "with things now totally different, everyone knows that they have to build."

Local riders have also begun to find new places to pedal–in the Santa Monica mountains, in the more northerly hills above Ventura County (see "Alternative L.A. Rides," left). I've discovered new places to ride, and reconnected with friends who live farther away. That's led to a few more adventures. "It really has prompted me to explore all kinds of new places," says Danny Green, a rider who works at the Arcadia REI store, at the foot of the San Gabriels. (A store manager there told me that sales of Adventure Passes, required for parking in the forest, were down; at Lay's shop, sales have also been affected, with fewer people buying staple items like 26-inch tubes.)

There's been some consternation at the crowding created by displaced San Gabriel riders, but even that has a bright side: It has led, says Hans Keifer, a member of the board of CORBA, the local trail group, to an understanding by local politicians that the mountain bike community needs to be accommodated. One possible result could be allowing riders back onto the trails of L.A.'s massive Griffith Park. Mountain bikes have been banned there for more than 20 years, but a proposed city bike plan may put the issue back on the table.

As of early spring, 2010, the opening date for Angeles hasn't been announced, but Forest Service officials informally say it won't happen until September; the summer is likely lost. Trails like El Prieto have an uncertain future, because they were built prior to strict environmental regulations. Rebuilding will require bureaucratic and regulatory approvals that could radically alter its character.

The best hope comes from nature itself. When I talked to Messer, we both remembered the burning of Sycamore Canyon, located at the northern end of the coastal Santa Monica range. The trails there, 60 miles from Pasadena, are probably the best place in Southern California to bring a beginner. A nearly flat trail extends 4 miles inland from the Pacific Ocean. The famous Backbone trail switchbacks above it; opening the trail to cycling was a huge, early victory in local advocacy. In the autumn of 1993, Sycamore burned. Reporting the story for this magazine (MOUNTAIN BIKE, February 1994), I wrote that, "I felt as though we'd arrived on the moon, and that the moon was so utterly surprising and unfamiliar–beyond what we'd been led to expect–that we were all stunned."

I still remember pedaling up the trail and coming upon the remains of a coiled rattlesnake. It sat there, as if it were ready to strike. One touch and it atomized into a puff of ash. But even then, as I wrote, "signs of life were already beginning to arise... green shoots emerged from otherwise scorched yucca trees. Tiny flowers bloomed." Almost two decades later, the only sign of that burn are the remains of a scorched tree. The 1993 fires consumed an estimated 50,000 acres, and a few dozen miles of trails. But those trails have returned, bringing riders with them.

Trail work has at last begun in the San Gabriels, and nature's healing process is underway–nearly invisible as it is, folded within what's been lost. The mountains are still there; the singletrack will return, and with it, mountain bikers, and what will again be the biggest, best urban-accessed trail network in the nation, home to more riders than anywhere else on earth. MB