

## **San Diego County Hiking and Backpacking Routes**

This article offers suggestions for selecting routes suitable for Scout hiking and backpacking treks in San Diego County. The objective is to provide a resource for Scout leaders seeking guidance for planning events for their Troop. It includes an overview of San Diego County backcountry trails plus recommendations for guidebooks and maps to obtain detailed information. It also includes suggestions for route selection strategies and tips for ensuring safety and enhancing enjoyment. The opinions expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of BSA or its staff.

### **Introduction**

Most Boy Scout Troops want to offer a vigorous outdoor program including long hikes and multi-day backpacking trips, and most Scouts will be proud to earn the Hiking and Backpacking Merit Badges. A safe and enjoyable program to achieve those objectives requires adult leaders with adequate knowledge and experience.

The Hiking and Backpacking Merit Badge Booklets are excellent primers for basic skills. Prospective adult leaders can upgrade their capabilities by taking advantage of convenient training programs in the San Diego area. Boy Scout focused training is available through outdoor courses offered by SDICBSA Council. Other valuable skills training is available from local outdoor stores (e.g., REI and Adventure 16) and outing clubs (e.g., Sierra Club).

A successful program also requires selection of safe and interesting routes that keep your Scouts eager to attend the next outing. This can be challenging for those with little personal experience exploring the San Diego County backcountry. This article offers suggestions to make route selection easy and fun.

### **San Diego County Backcountry Trails**

San Diego County has an extraordinarily broad variety of terrain and climate zones to provide interesting hiking and backpacking routes throughout the year. Attractive areas range from near sea-level deserts (ideal conditions in the winter) to forested mountains at 5000'–6500' elevation (ideal conditions in summer).

Route selection starts with a good map. The Tom Harrison Recreation Map of the San Diego Backcountry provides an excellent overview. This small-scale (1:100,000) map shows the eastern part of the County including Anza-Borrego State Park, Cuyamaca Rancho State Park, the Laguna Recreation Area, and the Cleveland National Forest. It does not include attractive areas in the western part of the County (e.g., Palomar Mountain), but it does cover a large area with hundreds of interesting routes.

The best known San Diego County hiking and backpacking trail is the famous Pacific Crest Trail (PCT). This 2650 mile long trail is one of the premier hiking and backpacking trails in the world. It bisects the County, starting at the Mexican border south of Campo and continuing north 133 miles to cross into Riverside County north of Warner Springs.

East and west of the PCT are hundreds of miles of trails and cross-country routes through mountains, chaparral-covered hills, grasslands, and deserts filled with fascinating natural and historic features. Especially notable is Anza-Borrego State Park, the 2<sup>nd</sup> largest State

Park in the continental United States This park allows open camping and hiking throughout its 600,000 acres (check the rules and Leave No Trace). There are few maintained trails in this desert wilderness, so route-finding and water management skills are imperative. The (usually) clear weather and open vistas make route finding much easier than in heavily vegetated areas. Off-trail hiking does require much more knowledgeable, experienced, and prudent adult leadership, but most Scouts are invigorated by the added challenge of finding their own way.

### **Guidebooks**

The best way to select suitable routes is to consult a good guidebook. There are many excellent guidebooks describing San Diego County trails. They can be purchased at local outdoor stores or via Internet booksellers.

For planning Boy Scout treks, there are two truly exceptional guidebooks that are highly recommended. They are:

*Pacific Crest Trail Southern California from the Mexican Border to Tuolumne Meadows* by Schifrin, Schaffer, Winnett, and Jenkins (“*PCT Guidebook*”)  
and

*Afoot & Afield in San Diego County* by Jerry Schad (“*Schad Guide*”)

The introductory chapters of these guidebooks have much interesting and useful information about backcountry travel.

*PCT Guidebook* provides details for planning interesting and safe (i.e., no surprises) routes in the 133 miles of San Diego County PCT and beyond. There are descriptions of trailside geology, botany, and zoology, as well as medium-scale (1:50,000) maps of the trail and adjacent areas. Water sources and recognizable landmarks (e.g., trail junctions, road crossings, ridge tops, etc.) are identified with their elevation and mileage from the previous landmark. So *PCT Guidebook* makes it easy to plan routes with known mileages, anticipated difficulty, and knowledge to enhance enjoyment.

*PCT Guidebook* is supplemented by two useful additions to your guidebook library:

*Pacific Crest Trail Data Book* compiled by Benedict Go (“*Data Book*”)  
and

*Day Hikes on the Pacific Crest Trail California* by George & Patricia Semb (“*PCT Day Hikes*”)

*Data Book* summarizes *PCT Guidebook* landmark and water source mileage and elevation data in a convenient tabular form. This compact presentation makes it easy to keep track of where you are and the distance and elevation change to the next landmark.

*PCT Day Hikes* divides the PCT into day-hike segments between trailheads easily reached by car. It is especially useful for its directions to the trailheads. The authors divide the San Diego County PCT into 13 day hikes with lengths ranging from 2.3 to 23.9 miles. There are many other options for short PCT segments, but *PCT Day Hikes* is a useful start.

Water is always a concern in our arid climate. The current status of PCT water sources is compiled by Bill Jeffrey and published at [www.4jeffrey.net/pct/a.htm](http://www.4jeffrey.net/pct/a.htm). The water sources include “water caches” established and maintained by PCT “Trail Angels” to support

hikers embarked on multi-month treks on the PCT. DO NOT use or otherwise disturb the water in these caches.

The *Schad Guide* describes a wide variety of hikes throughout San Diego County. The third edition (published 2004) includes descriptions of 222 hikes grouped into four major zones (Beaches and Bays, Coastal Strip and Foothills, Mountains, Deserts) and 38 local areas. Hike descriptions include distance, elevation/gain, a difficulty rating, USGS topographical map identification, and other information to help select the appropriate season. Hikes range from easy walks requiring less than an hour to very strenuous multi-day backpacking routes. Earlier editions include many hikes not included in this third edition, so the total number of hikes explored and described by Schad is much larger.

The *Schad Guide* describes specific routes in areas with many other attractive options. With this guide, experience, and good maps, route planners can meet their objectives and preferences by designing alternate routes in the same area.

## Maps

Scouts and adult leaders should never enter the backcountry without a compass and good map. The following is a list of useful maps and map sources:

- Tom Harrison *Recreation Map of the San Diego Backcountry* -- as mentioned earlier, this 1:100,000 map provides a broad overview of much of San Diego County backcountry. However, the small scale limits its value for hike navigation.
- *PCT Guidebook* maps -- these 1:50,000 maps are adequate for navigation along the very well maintained and marked PCT. Their primary disadvantages are that they are not in color, the scale is rather small, and they only cover a strip a few miles wide along the trail. A cottage industry has grown up to provide alternative PCT maps. Those interested can find many suppliers by an Internet search for "PCT maps."
- USGS maps – the *Schad Guide* lists the relevant USGS 7.5 minute topographical map(s) for each hike. These large-scale (1:24,000) maps are usually the best available, and they provide the foundation for other high-quality maps with specialized annotations (e.g., alternative PCT maps mentioned above). They are available on paper or CD-ROM from the USGS (purchasing instructions at [ask.usgs.gov/to\\_order.html](http://ask.usgs.gov/to_order.html)) or local map and outdoor stores. Some locations have map printing devices that allow printing of maps centered on a selected point.
- Specialized local area maps – outdoor stores and park headquarters have excellent maps with much detail about popular areas such as Anza-Borrego and Rancho Cuyamaca State Parks.

## Trip Selection Strategies

With the information described so far, trek leaders will quickly find tens or hundreds of areas they would like to explore. But leaders must decide on specific trips for specific dates. Here are some suggestions for larger strategies to guide that selection.

Expected weather obviously plays a role in planning. Most of us live in coastal San Diego with its small range of weather variation during the year. But there are much larger variations in the local backcountry. Some aspects are obvious. Summer is very, very hot

in the low altitude deserts, and it often rains or snows at high elevations in the winter. Reliable predictions of the range of likely conditions are available on the Internet, as are short-term local weather predictions. But the latter are too uncertain to trust. For planning, it is better to prepare for the full range of possibilities. It can be reduced to two simple rules:

- There is no need to be overly concerned about wet and cold weather if all participants have adequate clothing and shelter for safe trekking in the worst conditions possible. Trekking in the rain and modest amounts of snow can build skills and confidence (it is routine in less blessed areas of the U.S.).
- Avoid areas with excessive heat. Nothing can allow trekkers to continue safely when heat stress is extreme.

With this in mind, avoid the low-altitude deserts in the hot months (May through September). The high-altitude mountains are fine almost anytime (albeit with more gear in the winter). In other areas heat can be a problem in the summer and it might rain in the winter. But excessive cold and snow almost never occur.

The San Diego County PCT goes through the high mountains (over 6000') and dips fairly low (2500') into the desert. But with careful consideration of elevation and the range of likely weather conditions, enjoyable PCT hikes can be done in every season. The PCT is very easy to follow (well-maintained with frequent sign posts), and the *PCT Guidebook* information should prevent unpleasant surprises. The primary threats are excessive heat and dehydration, and leaders must use planning and good judgment to mitigate them (some tips are given below).

When using the *Schad Guide*, take careful note of Schad's "Difficulty Rating." These are Jerry Schad's ratings calibrated by his vast experience, but trek leaders must calibrate themselves and their Troop. Some will find his "Strenuous" to be an exaggeration, while others will think it minimizes the difficulty. Leaders should know their group capability.

Integrating your treks into a program that includes larger objectives may enhance troop enjoyment and enthusiasm. Most troops will want to organize their planning around the Hiking and Backpacking Merit Badges while providing good experiences for those who aren't pursuing these MB's. The Hiking MB requires 70 total hiking miles (five 10-mile hikes plus one 20 mile hike). The Backpacking MB requires 75 miles of hiking with backpack (three 15-mile trips plus one 30 mile trip). So the two together require 145 miles of trekking. There are many ways to organize those miles around some larger objective. Some possibilities:

PCT Challenge – Hike the *PCT Guidebook* Section A (110 miles from the border to Warner Springs), or the San Diego County PCT (134 miles to first road crossing in Riverside County), or some shorter continuous section (e.g., 51 miles from I-8 to Hwy 78 – S2 junction at Scissors Crossing).

Afoot and Afield Challenge – Do one trek in each of the ten Mountain areas in the *Schad Guide*, or one trek in eight of the ten Desert areas, or every hike in one or more of the areas in the guide, or some other variation.

There are endless possibilities for organizing this type of approach. A big advantage is that progress can be shown on a map posted in the Troop meeting room. Most Scouts

(and parents) will gain enthusiasm as the map changes from one filled with routes shown in the color indicating “planned” to one with all routes shown with the color indicating “completed.”

### **Tips for Ensuring Safety and Enhancing Enjoyment**

Here are a few tips. These are obvious for experienced trekkers who have learned them out over time. But this list may shorten the learning curve for new leaders. Most are focused on two related and critical safety concerns – water and heat management.

#### Trip Selection – Know Your Scouts

Do not take Scouts on trips that are beyond their current physical and mental capabilities. Assess their capabilities on easier trips before progressing to more difficult trips. “Difficulty” is a complex concept integrating distance, terrain, and weather conditions.

#### Trip Selection – Gear Checking

Do not take Scouts into the backcountry without verifying that they have appropriate and adequate gear. This is a huge, but common, mistake that has ruined many trips. Make a checklist of the minimum gear needed and ensure that it is followed. “Minimum” means those items (mainly clothing and shelter) required to preserve life and health. There is much room for differing preferences for food and comfort, but basic safety considerations cannot be compromised.

#### One-way trips

Route options are greatly expanded by eliminating the requirement that the group start and finish at the same place. Preposition enough cars at the finish to shuttle drivers back to the start to pick up their cars. Alternatively, form two groups that hike the route in opposite directions.

#### Water Management – Know Your Source

San Diego County has plenty of natural water sources (many more than most people realize). But the water flow and quality is hard to predict. The best rule is: *never rely on a water source without current information.* “Current” means that you have checked it recently yourself, or you have talked to someone who has. If possible, it is best to visit the source a week or so before your trek. It requires some time and effort, but the peace of mind makes it a worthwhile investment.

#### Water Management –Caching Water

Most routes occasionally cross roads accessible by motor vehicles. A good strategy for ensuring adequate water is to cache water at appropriate crossings. Be careful to hide it well enough to avoid detection, but not so well that you can’t find it yourself. Be sure to return immediately after your trek to collect anything left – Leave No Trace!

#### Dealing with Excessive Heat

Excessive heat is a serious safety hazard. The first rule for coping with heat is to stay hydrated. Even with adequate water, high temperature is a danger. If it is encountered, the best strategy is to find a shady spot and wait out the heat of the day (generally from noon to about 4).

#### Prepare for Worst Likely Conditions

Cold and wet can also be a safety hazard (hypothermia), but it is easy to manage with proper gear. Always carry the gear required for the worst conditions you are likely to encounter, so your trip won’t be ruined by rain, some snow, and cold nights. Large

amounts of snow are rare, but can occur in the high elevations. This would be time to activate the bailout plan.

Bailout Plan

Always have a bailout plan. Don't rely on cell phones to call for help. Know how to get to the nearest road. When traveling away from roads in threatening conditions, make and enforce a turnaround time to allow retreat before retreat becomes too difficult.

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