

The Irish Inquirer

17 March 2015

Almaden Quicksilver County Park, San Jose, California

WEARIN'

O' THE

GREEN



Two American deer of doubtful Irish ancestry in deep grass at the start of the trail.

WEARIN' O' THE GREEN

Hikers and dogs descending the southwest side of the ridge on Guadalupe Trail

On the eve of the greenest day of the Celtic calendar, I took a hike yesterday over the ridges of the McAbee Road section of Almaden Quicksilver County Park, which is just six miles from my house.

The gray sky looked like winter, which for the next few days it will be, and the mountainsides were green and spring-like (for an East Coast resident) – the season soon to come.

Yet if you live in California, you know this grass is soon to die because winter is our only time of rain and snow.

By April's end, the realistic chance for more precipitation will have evaporated and nothing but meteors and (hopefully not) embers from forest fires will fall from the sky until Halloween.

Since I wrote my Nov. 30 newsletter about the first drops of our rainfall year, which begins July 1, (archived on my website at http://media.wix.com/ugd/7854ef_b94e715b3c674138880c742367e833fd.pdf) San Jose has received 104 percent of its normal precip: 13.6 inches.

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But elsewhere in California – particularly in the Sierra Nevada, whose snowpack is the largest reservoir of surface water in the state – water is in perilously short supply.

There was no ski season to speak of this winter, and at the beginning of March, the composite average of the water content of Sierra snow from all 109 reporting locations was 19 percent of normal. The lowest, Phillips Station near Echo Summit above Lake Tahoe, was 5 percent of normal.

Last week a NASA scientist said California has only a year's supply of water left in its lakes, and that the subsurface water table continues to sink.

Our drought is entering its fourth year.

Some of the oaks in this gulch, weakened and brittle from consecutive years of drought, didn't survive the winds of last winter.

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My newsletters will return occasionally this year to this vantage point in the park 300 feet above the Guadalupe Reservoir – and about 900 feet above sea level – to monitor the lake's shrinkage. It has filled since last fall but is still below full pool. The view is to the northwest. While the reservoir provides a visual gauge of drought conditions, it's not a source of drinking water. Built in the 1930s, this lake and nearby Almaden Reservoir are polluted by mercury from the mines that honeycomb these mountains and were once the largest mercury mines in the Western Hemisphere. The mercury was mined as part of the process for separating Mexican silver from its ore and later during silver mining from the Comstock Lode in Nevada. The mines closed in 1976.