

Vistoso Trails Nature Preserve

Welcome to Oro Valley's Newest Park!

By Debra VanDeventer

It's 6:30 in the morning when the desert greets me. The sun has barely topped the Catalina Mountains and I'm on the trail early to take advantage of cooler morning temperatures. A family of Gambrel quail dashes across the path in front of me. Mother, dad, and six, seven, make that eight chicks scurry into the foliage. Doing its morning aerobics, a Zebra-Tailed lizard pauses for push-ups on the warm concrete trail. A sharp cry pierces the morning silence and I glance up to see a Gila woodpecker perched on a Saguaro cactus bursting with creamy white blossoms. I pause at one of my favorite spots on the trail to gaze at the remains of another Saguaro. Its sun-bleached skeleton is a striking landmark, a reminder of the strength these iconic cacti contain under their prickly exterior.

Along the way I greet walkers, bicyclists, dog walkers and stroller pushers. It's a beautiful, peaceful way to start my morning. And the best part? The Vistoso Trails Nature Preserve is only a few steps from my home. In fact, there are 17 neighborhoods bordering the property and 13 neighborhoods nearby. Besides being within walking distance of hundreds of residents, it is a park that all Oro Valley residents can enjoy.

The six-mile path winds around 202 acres that were home to the Vistoso Golf Course from 1995 to 2018. Though natural desert habitat is reclaiming the land, you can see relics of its former life. Signs etched in stone mark the names of the former holes and you can still make out tee boxes and the driving range. On my walks, I occasionally notice a stray golf ball or tee along the trail. So how did a golf course become a nature preserve? It's an amazing story of community effort, municipal support, teamwork, and perseverance.

The Vision

When the Vistoso golf course closed in 2018 and a buyer could not be found to take over, a group of community members formed Preserve Vistoso to explore the possibility of turning the property into a nature preserve. In place of manicured, watered greens and fairways, they envisioned a landscape rich with natural desert vegetation and wildlife. The eight-foot wide golf-cart trails and tunnels that run under the major roads would make the trail safe and accessible to all. Teachers and students of the nearby Innovation Academy could use the nature preserve for environmental education. The ancient petroglyphs at the

site of the former 5th hole would add archaeological interest for trail users. The visionaries at Preserve Vistoso imagined park benches positioned to take advantage of the sweeping views of the Catalina and Tortolita Mountain ranges and enthusiasm for the project gained momentum.

It takes a Village

But in March 2020, before fundraising efforts could begin, the owners of the property proposed to rezone the land for development. Plans included a senior living facility or building hundreds of homes on the property. In response to the rezoning proposal, the town of Oro Valley asked for community input. Members of the community overwhelmingly opposed the development plans, voicing their opinions through emails and zoom meetings.

Unwilling to let go of their vision, founding members of Preserve Vistoso contacted The Conservation Trust, a national non-profit organization that works with communities to create ways for people and organizations to protect their natural resources and save the places that matter. After visiting the site and seeing its potential, the Conservation Fund made an offer on the property intending to donate it to the Town of Oro Valley.

By the end of the summer, Preserve Vistoso had collected member pledges of 1.5 million to The Conservation Fund to assist with the purchase. Unfortunately, the property owner rejected the bid. The vision of a nature reserve was in jeopardy.

Undeterred, the community persevered. In an amazing feat of teamwork, the Town of Oro Valley, Preserve Vistoso, and The Conservation Trust put together a plan where The Conservation Fund would purchase the 202 acres zoned for recreational uses while the 6 acres zoned for residential use would be sold to a local developer. When the parties reached an agreement in October 2021, Preserve Vistoso initiated a fundraising campaign and raised nearly two million dollars in a six week period. The three and a half year effort was successful. In his March 21, 2022 Town Talk release, Mayor Joe Winfield declared, “The preservation of the Vistoso property is a huge win. This is truly a time for celebration.”

The first order of business was to select a name. Continuing with a commitment to community involvement, the Town of Oro Valley created a “Name OV’s Newest Park” contest. Residents submitted 1,500 original names. A committee of council members narrowed it down to the top ten and around 500 OV residents voted again. Out of the top three, the city council selected the name “Vistoso Trails Nature Preserve.”

Plans for the future

At the time of this writing, The Conservation Fund continues to own the property and is working to put a Conservation Easement in place that will protect it from development in the future. In addition, The Conservation Fund has already been working to clear vegetation and overhanging tree branches that were obstructing the trails. They plan to transfer ownership of the property to the Town of Oro Valley after July 1, 2022. To mark the occasion, a ribbon cutting will be announced.

An April 2022 news release stated that the Town of Oro Valley will include funding in the FY22/23 budget for immediate safety improvements on the property, including repairs and upgrades of paved pathways, reopening the restrooms and general maintenance of the open space. The town intends to develop a master plan for the property with input from the community. Plans may include public parking, more visible access, and opportunities to volunteer.

It's in our Nature

In making the Vistoso Trails Nature Reserve a reality, the residents of the Town of Oro Valley and its leaders lived up to the town's motto and have provided one more reason to love living here. Though I prefer to take my walks in the morning, I might be enticed to hit the trail some evening when the Catalina Mountains glow crimson. The views will be breathtaking. I hope to see you on the trail!

To learn more about the Vistoso Trails Nature Reserve and keep up with updates on the property visit: <https://www.orovalleyaz.gov/Government/Departments/Parks-and-Recreation/Parks/Vistoso-Trails-Nature-Preserve>

<https://www.preservevistoso.org/>

Debra VanDeventer is a local freelance writer and author of *Out of the Crayon Box: Thoughts on Teaching, Retirement, and Life*

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