

nature notes

VOLUME 10 • SUMMER 2021



CENTRAL COAST STATE PARKS ASSOCIATION

As the fog of the past year and half clears, we are now able to see the future unfolding in front of us! I am thrilled to announce that State Parks is able to reopen the Museum of Natural History, Spooner Ranch House and Oceano Dunes Visitor Center on July 1st. Once again, docents, volunteers, community members and visitors will be welcomed into these treasured spaces.



Kristin Howland

Sheri has been working hard to improve our volunteer communication and coordination efforts. We have joined Better Impact volunteer software so docents and CCSPA volunteers can easily sign up shifts with State Parks or us with ease and in one app! In addition to those efforts, Sheri has curated some beautiful and meaningful merchandise for our stores. You won't be able to pass up purchasing gifts from our nature stores for your friends and family!

In addition to creating an online store, one of the positive outcomes of COVID was being able to keep the Monarch Trailer open for a longer season to generate revenue to support our efforts. It was successful enough to warrant moving it to Grand Ave for the summer! The Monarch Trailer is in the shop for added security measures and will return to its new summer location at the Grand Ave parking lot in Grover Beach on June 11th.

We are thrilled to be planning our Monarch Masquerade Butterfly Ball in support of the educational efforts on the plight of the Western Monarch. We welcome you to join us in making this an impactful event. Funds raised from this event will support our efforts to advocate for the Western Monarch and educate through a multi agency collaboration to install unifying interpretive signage along the Western Monarchs migration path from British Columbia to Baja.

We have lofty goals and are excited to grow with our community visitors, donors and sponsors. Please join us in supporting State Parks educational efforts as we celebrate reopening and recreating in our parks and open spaces this summer!

Kristin Howland

CCSPA is an independent 501(c)(3) non-profit. We are one of 85 similar cooperating associations across the state who work in partnership with State Parks. Tax ID #: 51-0198869.

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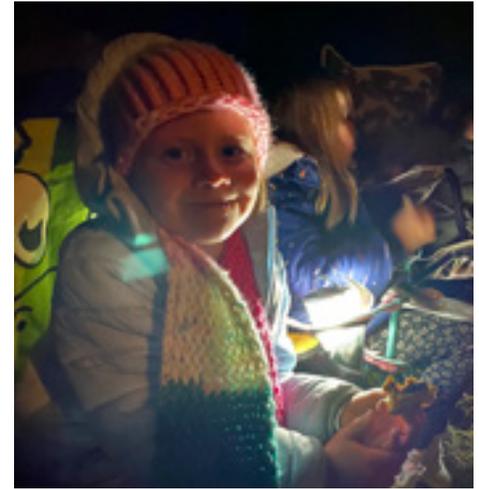
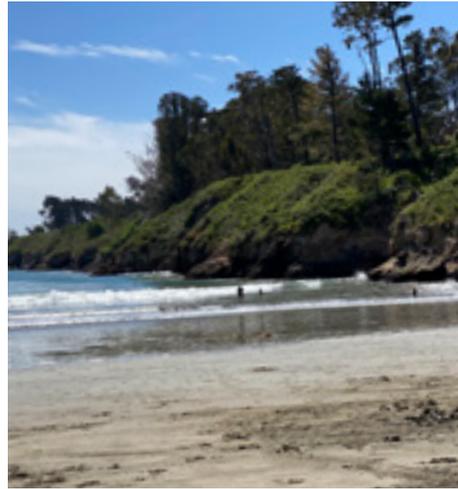
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MAKE A DIFFERENCE

Are you ready to make a difference? CCSPA is looking for new board members and volunteers! Contact us:
ed@centralcoastparks.org

QUICK FACT
700+

Number of campsites available between our two districts on the Central Coast



‘WE HAVE ARRIVED!’ THE JOYS OF FAMILY CAMPING

Hearst San Simeon State Park campground holds a special place in my heart. It hosted my husband’s and my maiden voyage in our remodeled “vintage” trailer with our first daughter, Abby, as a newborn. We returned again for Thanksgiving when Abby was almost two and had the best time making a feast in our camper and sharing it with some friends from Cayucos. The campground was quiet, green and peaceful. It felt undiscovered and a place we could escape the madness. So, fast forward six years later and it’s no surprise that we would want to revisit camping at San Simeon and relive some of the memories we had from previous excursions.

Camping has become ever more popular in the last ten years, but add a pandemic and it has become more popular than s’mores around a campfire! We managed to find the last reservation available in the second week of May. We invited our friends to join us with their two daughters who we haven’t seen in over a year and set the plans in motion. After homeschooling, not traveling and struggling to just make life normal again, we were excited for that fateful Friday to finally arrive!

I just have to laugh when I think about what our family must look like pulling into the campground. Most of the sites are filled with huge RVs and trailers with all the toys, trinkets and comforts. Don’t get me wrong, we still have a trailer, but let’s just say our fixer upper needs some fixing up! I picture us like the Clampetts moving into Beverly Hills. Our truck’s blue paint matches the strip on the camper, both fading, chips missing, exposing the stories of the life these vehicles have taken on. The truck’s engine’s roar sounds its protest pulling the weight of the loudly squeaking trailer. The kids and puppy are practically hanging out the windows squealing with excitement. It’s like we had a bull horn announcing, “We have arrived!”

It is always a task to prepare for camping and can sometimes lead you to ask yourself, “Is this really all worth it? Wouldn’t it be easier to just stay home?” I am here to tell you it IS

worth it...all of it. Once the madness of packing it all into the car or trailer, hauling it all to your destination, unpacking it and setting it all up is done, there is a peace that washes over you. If you are ready to accept it, nature seeps in and envelops you. Your senses are overcome by the smells, sights and sounds of the natural environment. That arrival with all the noise and excitement does not matter. What matters is this moment. I watch the girls run through the grass twirling and chasing with excitement. I hear their voices “this is the best day ever.” I see them watching the birds fly overhead and hear them observe the miracles of nature themselves.

After an exciting first night we awoke to the typical May gray morning. We enjoyed a walk around the campground and a hearty breakfast, and then made our way to San Simeon Cove. It was so windy and I doubted that we would escape it. Lo and behold, I had forgotten the treasures that Hearst San Simeon Beach holds. As we neared the far end of the protected cove, the wind stopped and the temperature seemed to rise. The girls jumped in the water and buried each other in the sand. The guys surfed and us moms sat back and took in the laughter, beauty and warmth that literally surrounded us.

We enjoyed our last evening under the stars with our bellies full from dinner. The guys told “scary stories” while the girls roasted their marshmallows. I sat back and observed how at ease everyone appeared. There was nothing to worry about, no fight over what to watch on the TV or stress about what had to be done tomorrow. We were in the moment ... and nothing else mattered.

That is the power of nature. If we allow it, it allows us to unplug and embrace its beauty and peace. Whether you prefer to glamp or dirtbag camp doesn’t matter. Escaping our routines and finding respite in nature is healing. I hope to see you all out there camping, glamping, hiking, strolling, observing and connecting with our most precious resource... nature! - Kristin Howland

SHARING AND EXPLORING MORRO BAY NATIONAL ESTUARY

It was just an ordinary Tuesday morning. I launched my rowing shell in Baywood Park, dipped my oars in the water, and glided silently across the glassy waters of Morro Bay's back bay. But here's the thing: it's never ordinary. It's always extraordinary.



Paul Irving (@thebaysidelife)

This particular morning, as I slowed down to take a sip of my hot coffee, I noticed a large bat ray swimming right by me - the tips of its wings gently breaking the water's surface and disappearing - over and over as it made its way toward the main channel. Then in back of me, a curious harbor seal popped his head out of the water to see what I was up to. A pair of Canada geese flew overhead, and the other shorebirds started to gather in the shallows as the tide dropped enough for them to start fishing for breakfast. A lone otter floated on his back, relaxing and enjoying the sunshine as the oyster farmers' boat made its way to work. The reflection of the white, puffy clouds on the water was nothing short of awesome.



Every time, I feel so fortunate to experience this amazing place. I'm continually fascinated by the countless changes unfolding in the bay: the slight shifting of the channels, varying bird migration patterns, eelgrass beds receding and making a comeback, and so much more. Every day is a new experience and there is always something new. It never gets old.



Discovering Los Osos in the winter of 1986 ignited a life-long love affair with all the creatures, plants, and ever-changing vistas of the bay and surrounding dunes. I have spent 35 years and well over 5,000 miles exploring the bay. Over the past 25 years, I have been honored to share my passion for the bay with our community and beyond.



Back in the mid-1990s, while living on a moored sailboat, I decided to take an active role in getting people out on the water and seeing all this natural beauty around me. I took over the Sailing Center Of Morro Bay and for five years taught sailing and took hundreds of people out on sightseeing and bird watching tours. I was out on the water every day, regardless of conditions. Wind, calm, day, night, fog, sun, dry, wet, cold, warm, heavy or light currents - it didn't matter. I learned to love all the conditions, and I sailed every day.



Although I sold the sailing school in 2000, ever since, I've made it a point to get out on the bay as much as possible. I still row, kayak, or sail almost daily! I've also discovered a love for photography by capturing the ever-changing moods of the bay and sharing them with an international community on Instagram and through my wall calendars.

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As a musician and event promoter, I've created lots of fun ways to respectfully enjoy the beauty of the bay, including The Annual Zongo Yachting Cup - an offshore sailing race from Morro Bay to Avila Beach; the Baywood Lighted Boat Parade, an annual summer event celebrating boating and music; and ClimateFest, where over 250 boats formed a peace sign in Baywood in support of the US signing of the Paris Climate Accord; and many other music events by the bay.

Keeping the bay clean and healthy for all of us to enjoy takes a big community effort. I do my part by keeping an eye

out for trash and debris, injured wildlife, and teaching people to treat this fragile ecosystem with care. I am so grateful to the Central Coast State Parks Association for its amazing stewardship of our beloved local State Parks. There are so many ways for you to get involved - connect with them at CentralCoastParks.org to find out how.

If you've never been out on the bay, I consider it a "bucket list" activity. Do yourself a favor and get out there, whether you rent a kayak or SUP, take a guided tour, borrow your friend's boat, or buy your own. Check out my Boater Resource Guide at FriendsOfTheMBHD.org. If you want to see my daily adventures, follow me on Instagram at [@thebaysidelife](https://www.instagram.com/thebaysidelife). - Words and photos by Paul Irving



OSO FLACO LAKE: A BIRDER'S PARADISE



Osprey (*Pandion haliaetus*)

Oso Flaco Lake, the southernmost part of the Oceano Dunes District, is known for its beautiful landscapes and amazing birding opportunities. Avid birders come from all over the world to view year-round and migratory bird species along the Oso Flaco Lake trail.

The trail is about one mile in length, from trailhead to overlook. You begin by walking through the riparian corridor, a shady, wooded area with arroyo willows and wax myrtles. While strolling through the willows you may hear the birds before you spot them! Look for the Common Yellowthroat (year-round), Song Sparrow (year-round), Townsend's Warbler (winter) and the Golden-Crowned Sparrow (winter).

Moving along the trail, you will see the bridge over the lake. This is one of the highlights of the trail and a great place to pause and observe dabbling ducks and White Pelicans. Use your binoculars to look closely in the reeds around the lake and you might see a Marsh Wren, a plump little rusty brown bird with a thin bill and black barring on the tail. Double-crested Cormorants are a common sight to see drying their wings on perches over the water. You may even see an Osprey sitting there scoping out the lake and estuary for its next catch.

Oso Flaco Lake is home to rare and unique bird species, one of those being the California Least Tern. The endangered California Least Tern nests along the shoreline in the sand. They are one of the smallest of terns with a black cap and a black streak extending through their eye to their yellow beak. Least terns dive for fish and can be seen along the railing of the Oso Flaco Lake bridge. July and August are the best time to see the young Least Terns on the railing.

To get to Oso Flaco Lake, three miles north of Guadalupe, turn west onto Oso Flaco Lake Road. This road leads to a small parking area at the trailhead. The gate to the parking lot is unlocked just after 7 am and is locked again at sunset. There is a \$5 day use fee. For questions about Oso Flaco Lake day use, or to let us know what special birds you spotted, please call State Park staff at 805-474-2664. - Mallory Claassen

LOW-IMPACT WILDLIFE PHOTOGRAPHY TIPS

One of the greatest things about the Central Coast is the abundant diversity of wildlife. The local wildlife and dramatic views draw visitors from near and far to enjoy and appreciate the Central Coast's incredible beauty. As wildlife and nature photographers, these are some of the reasons we make the trek to the Central Coast several times each year.

There is a profound gratification observing and photographing wildlife through the lens of a camera. You have an opportunity to witness an animal's natural behavior without disrupting their daily routines for survival. As wildlife photographers, we want our images to evoke emotion and capture the natural behavior of our subject, but never com-

promise the welfare of the animal. Digital cameras and smartphones have allowed more people to pursue encounters with wildlife, and we want to encourage people to use best practices when photographing any type of wildlife. We always need to remember we are guests in their home!

If you are fortunate enough to discover an animal's den, a bird's nest or even a raft of peacefully sleeping otters, it will be tempting to spend hours photographing them. If your lens is not quite long enough there will also be the temptation to inch a little closer to get a better shot. Both of these actions can cause undue stress for animals, so we need to make that difficult decision to do what is best for wildlife and not stay for an extensive amount of time nor get too

close to our subject. It is also important to ask yourself if your presence is causing a change in the animal's behavior; if so, then you are negatively impacting the animal and causing them to waste precious energy to avoid a human encounter.

Social media is a blessing and a curse for wildlife. We recommend not listing the location where you discover wildlife, and if you have found a den or nesting site please wait until baby season is over before posting your images. The animals will thank you!

We believe spending time with wildlife is sacred time, and the goal for every photographer should be to be a voice for all animals and never compromise their welfare.

- Wendy Sparks & Jeff Torquemada



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STAFF SPOTLIGHT: K9 TEAMS OF THE SLO COAST DISTRICT

In 1969, State Park Rangers didn't have full police powers, nor were they armed, and they could only enforce park rules and regulations. Because of the extreme fire danger and resource damage by park visitors, and typical solo shifts at night by rangers, it was felt that a K9 would be a beneficial and protective tool for the rangers. - rangerk9.org

California State Parks currently has 20 K9 teams spanning from Clear Lake to San Diego. All dogs are German shepherds and are cross-trained for patrol functions as well as narcotics or explosives detection.

Tell us about the K9 Team at SLO Coast.

In the San Luis Obispo Coast District, we are fortunate to have four K9 teams: Chris Hendricks and Janko at Morro Bay State Park, Jason Rule and Kahn at Hearst Castle, David Dennis and Rocky at Hearst Castle, and myself (Iain Beveridge) and Storm at Hearst Castle.

What are the missions and goals of K9 officers?

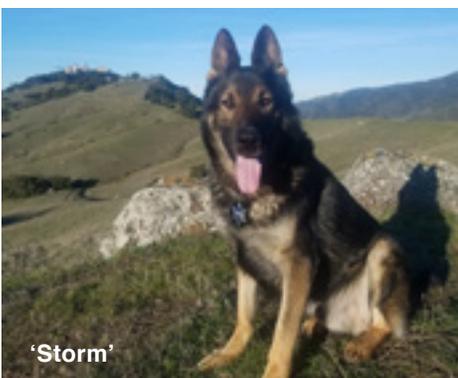
Our mission as State Parks K9 handlers is to protect the parks and the park visitors. But what does that mean? Every year thousands of visitors come to the State Parks in San Luis Obispo County, and our goal is to ensure they have the best time possible, while at the same time making sure the lands and museums stay in good shape for all to enjoy.

What does a typical day look like, and what does training look like?

One of the great things about being a Park Ranger is there is no such thing as a typical day. From moving elephant seals off the highway, to rescuing injured birds, to chasing down and arresting kidnappers. Every day is a different challenge. As K9 handlers, we work with agencies all over California assisting them with event security, bomb sweeps and narcotics detection.

Would you like to share any news or updates regarding the team?

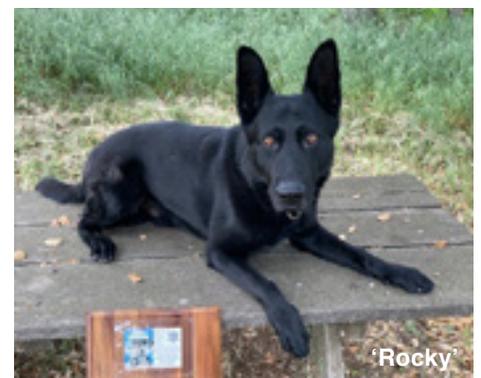
To stay qualified for the long hours of hard work, California State Parks K9 teams train non-stop. You are just as likely to run into a SLO K9 team training in Sacramento or Malibu as you are in San Luis Obispo. If you see us, please say hello. We love to meet people and tell them about our dogs. We always have trading cards and stickers for the kids. This year at our annual qualifications, David Dennis and Rocky won the Dave Graham Achievement Award (presented to the K9 team who demonstrates the most consistent improvement throughout the year), while Storm and I won the Top Dog Award (presented to the team demonstrating the best discipline, teamwork, and overall skills). This is the first time both awards have been brought home to Hearst Castle at the same time. - Interview by Monica Rutherford



'Storm'



Iain Beveridge and 'Storm'



'Rocky'



TRAIL ROVERS: OBSERVING, RECORDING AND PROTECTING

The multi-use trails of the San Luis Obispo Coast District are a popular destination for locals and tourists alike. On any given day or trail, pre-pandemic, there was a good chance a park visitor might have encountered one of the many State Park volunteers called “Trail Rovers.”

A Rover’s basic job is to be an additional visible representative of State Parks who interacts directly with the public and provides information. Serving as observers for park staff, Rovers often alert park personnel to trail problems and emergencies. Another important job is capturing statistically the many visitors who use park trails. In 2019 alone, 30 plus rovers put in almost 2,000 hours on the trails and interacted with over 35,000 visitors. Trail rovers also head up information tables at trailheads so visitors can learn more about what they might see when out enjoying the parks.

Efforts to slow the spread of COVID-19 have kept all of us indoors more than we might have liked, and Rovers off the trails. Yet, during this time, park trails continue to offer a wide variety of recreational opportunities to an increasing number of visitors. In addition to hiking, visitors come to enjoy sunsets, photography, tide pooling, beaches, horse-back riding, mountain biking and spring wildflower blooms.

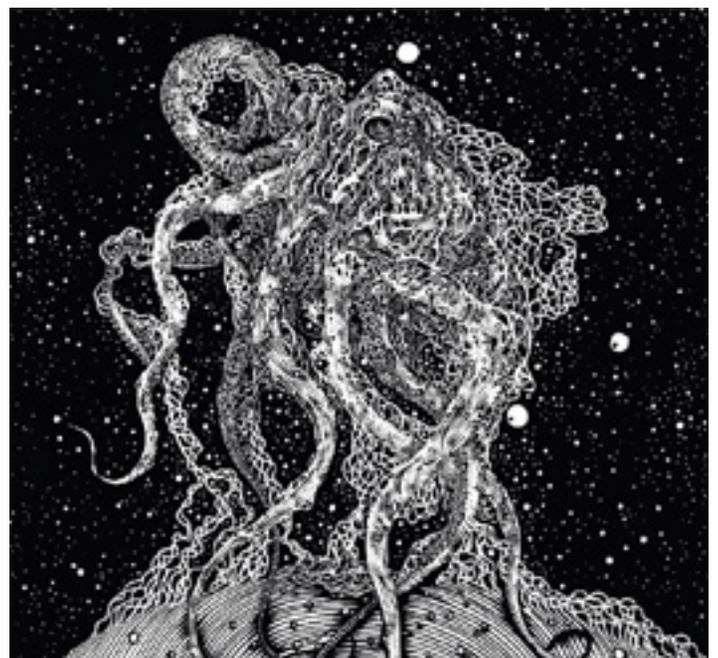
A trip to a park always provides a memorable experience, but increased visitation numbers have at times put a strain on visitors, parking availability and trails. In order to help create a more rewarding park experience, Rovers are looking forward to getting back on the trails to help with reinforcing trail etiquette and providing interpretive information to visitors. - Shanda Grunkemeyer-Gibbs

SUPPORT STATE PARKS WHILE ENJOYING A TASTY BEER

We are so excited to announce our latest partnership with an awesome local business. In collaboration with CCSPA, There Does Not Exist Brewery has launched a limited edition, small batch beer that supports our Central Coast State Parks!

This beer, “Uncommon Anatomy” launched on June 10, just in time for our most recent screening of our Get Outside! Film Series. The audience and TDNE’s regular customers were able to enjoy this pale ale while watching the amazing documentary *Playing with Sharks*, National Geographic’s latest film about the life of Valerie Taylor, a spearfisher turned shark conservationist.

Leading up to the beer launch, we have had so much fun promoting “Uncommon Anatomy” via social media as we gradually revealed the label artwork and name for our followers to guess. The label is an incredibly detailed black and white drawing of an octopus in outer space, fitting right in with TDNE’s mystical, cosmic theme.



SIGHTS AND SOUNDS OF THE SAN SIMEON CREEK TRAIL



How lucky are we to have an abundance of gorgeous hiking trails in our State Parks? Hiking is one of my favorite ways to explore our parks and feel connected to the land I call home. The San Simeon Creek Trail in Hearst San Simeon State Park is one of my favorites on the Central Coast; it's perfect for wildlife lovers, plant lovers, and basically anyone who appreciates the outdoors!

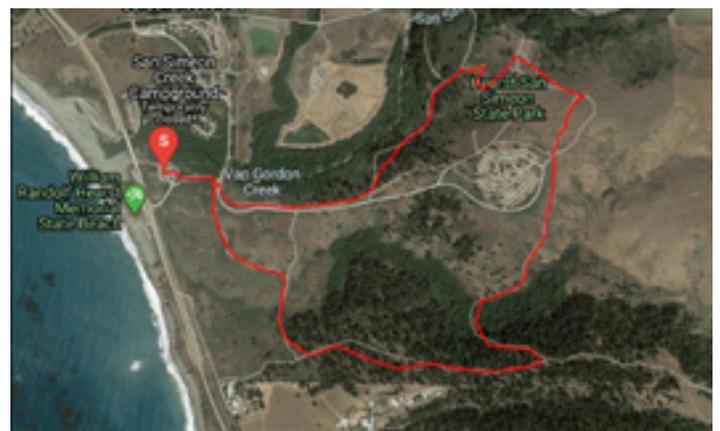
The entirety of the hike is just under 3.5 miles--but you can adjust the length depending on where you start. It passes through parts of the San Simeon Natural Preserve and Washburn Campground, and there are gorgeous panoramic views of the Santa Lucia Mountain range and the Pacific Ocean.

I love how the San Simeon Creek Trail has incredible ecological diversity. In just one hike, there are five different plant communities: riparian woodland, grassland, seasonal wetland, coastal scrub, and the Cambria Monterey pine forest. One minute you're surrounded by dry brush, and the next you're surrounded by lush, green plants. Not to mention the abundance of wildlife that feed and live in these areas, too!

I like to begin by walking along the short boardwalk from Washburn Day Use into the campground and following the first stretch of the trail along San Simeon Creek. Although the creek is usually dry, there is still plenty to see. I almost always spot mule deer in the dry creek bed. You might even see a whole family of them cross the trail in front of you--it's happened to me twice!

There are a ton of interesting flora along the trail as well. The visibility of flowering plants will vary throughout the year, but some you might find are California fuchsia, bull thistles, teasels, twinberry honeysuckles, California wild roses, lupines, nightshades, California poppies, and orange bush monkey flowers.

After crossing the creek and passing through the seasonal



wetland, you enter a forest filled with Monterey pines and oaks. The Monterey pines are so special because they are only native to the Central Coast and Mexico, so the Cambria pine forest is one of only five native locations you can find them.

After moving out of the lush riparian woodland, you enter the grasslands near Washburn campground, where there are great views of the Santa Lucia mountains and the ocean. I always like to watch the sky and wonder if I'll get lucky and spot a California condor, though it's mostly turkey vultures swooping through the air.

After the grasslands, you travel down the ridges and back to the familiar plant community found at the beginning of the hike. When the landscape clears up I just like to stop, close my eyes, and listen for the soft shaking of the rattlesnake grass in the wind. Eventually, after winding downhill, you will make it back to where you started.

I love this trail for its incredible diversity. There is so much to see, hear, learn, and experience. I highly recommend putting this one-of-a-kind trail on your hiking to-do list! You are sure to have a special experience. - Monica Rutherford

NATURAL HISTORY MUSEUM AND RANCH HOUSE REOPENING



It's finally here! The Morro Bay Museum of Natural History (pictured) and the Spooner Ranch House will be reopened to the public on July 1st. We are so excited to finally welcome you back to these incredible facilities! As you know, CCSPA and State Parks have been hard at work during the closure--cleaning, painting, updating, and prepping for the return of our valued volunteers, docents, and visitors.

Upon your return to the Museum of Natural History, you can look forward to seeing local artist Marcie Hawthorne's beautiful new artwork in the gift shop that brightens up the space and starts conversations about local wildlife. To

complement the new murals, the layout of the gift shop and our merchandise have also been updated and allows for much easier navigation.

The Spooner Ranch House is also undergoing a deep clean by a professional crew in preparation for re-opening. Thank you to our many donors who helped make this possible! Because of your support, CCSPA was able to raise \$7,500 for this much-needed task.

We can't wait for you to come explore, reconnect, shop, and support your local State Parks. We are looking forward to seeing you all back very soon!

FIREWOOD SALES HELP OUR STATE PARKS!

All firewood in our local State Parks is provided by CCSPA. When you purchase wood, you directly support the interpretive and educational programs at your local State Parks. While you enjoy your campfire, you can feel good knowing your dollars are making a difference! Firewood is sold at all of the State Park campgrounds in San Luis Obispo county.

- Oceano Dunes Campground
- North Beach Campground, Pismo State Beach
- Montaña de Oro State Park Campground
- Morro Bay State Park Campground
- Morro Strand State Beach Campground
- Hearst San Simeon State Park Campground

Thank you for your continued support of the Central Coast State Parks Association.

THE MONARCH MERCANTILE TRAILER HAS MOVED!

It's now in the Fin's Restaurant parking lot on Grand Avenue in Grover Beach. Come visit us in our new location!

As always, shop our online nature store any time for unique gifts, apparel & books!

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Morro Bay Docent

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More information to follow



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All members receive a copy of **Nature Notes** quarterly newsletter, discounts to CCSPA events and discounts at participating **Public Lands Alliance** stores. Additional benefits include:

\$25 Hummingbird

- ★ Two vouchers for admission to the **Morro Bay Museum of Natural History**
- ★ 10% discount at all **CCSPA** nature stores

\$50 Otter

- ★ Free admissions for two adults to the **Mind Walks Lecture Series**
- ★ Four vouchers for admission to the **Morro Bay Museum of Natural History**
- ★ 10% discount at all **CCSPA** nature stores

\$75 Raft of Otters

- Family Membership that includes two adults and unlimited kids 17 and under.
- All benefits of Otter membership, plus:
 - ★ 15% discount at all **CCSPA** nature stores
 - ★ **Explore Parks Passport** discount coupon book

\$100 Coyote

- All benefits of Raft of Otters membership, plus:
 - ★ Invitation to the **Ice Cream Social** at Montaña de Oro

\$250 Monarch

- All benefits of Coyote membership, plus:
 - ★ Invitation to **Afternoon with the Monarchs** at Pismo Monarch Butterfly Grove
 - ★ An exclusive holiday shopping night at the **Morro Bay Museum of Natural History**

\$500 Gray Whale

- All benefits of Monarch membership, plus:
 - ★ Invitation to **Martini de Morro**

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 - ★ Invitation to a behind-the-scenes tour of Hearst Castle

\$1,500 Keystone

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 - ★ Free small ad in the **Explore Parks Passport** discount book

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