



feature



Hiking, Biking, Birding And Riding

Many River Park trails are open to bikers and horses, but some don't allow dogs, so be sure to check before you trek. If you'd rather troll than stroll, consider a day of fishing or kayaking on Lake Hodges or Lake Sutherland.

River Park rangers and other experts often host guided tours and special events to ensure that your outing is safe and educational. Whether it's a night of stargazing, a day of bird watching, or a field trip for your class, the opportunities abound.

Trickling out of Ironside Spring on Volcan Mountain, the San Dieguito River flows westward through the Santa Ysabel Valley, Lake Sutherland, Pamo Valley, Clevenger Canyon, San Pasqual Valley, Lake Hodges, Santa Fe Valley and the San Dieguito Lagoon before spilling into the ocean at Dog Beach in Del Mar

A River Runs Through It

A meadow of mountain wildflowers bending in the breeze. A snowy white egret winging slowly down the river. The pungent scent of sumac in the sunny chaparral. Here in the San Dieguito River Park, you'll find hidden treasures at every turn. From the Anza-Borrego desert to the shores of the Pacific, this river basin spans over 100,000 acres, including miles of open space and wilderness, a vast array of flora and fauna, several sensitive habitats, and a few endangered species.

Pre-Historic To The Present

Throughout the park, archaeological sites tell a story of human habitation that dates back at least 9,000 years, from hunters and gatherers to more recent occupation by bands of the Diegueño and Kumeyaay Nation. Several sites, such as Piedras Pintadas ("painted rocks"), have been

preserved as cultural resources that can be accessed and enjoyed through the River Park trails. Campsites from the Portola Expedition of 1769, battle sites of the Mexican-American War and remnants of early European settlements are also on the map.

When 20th century suburban sprawl threatened to overtake large swaths of this pristine land, citizens fought hard for its preservation. In 1987, the San Diego Association of Governments (SANDAG) formed a Joint Powers Authority (JPA) along with the cities of San Diego, Del Mar, Solana Beach, Escondido, and Poway for the purpose of acquiring, protecting, and managing lands within the park's massive planning area.

What began as a grandiose vision has gradually become one of the region's greatest assets, as the JPA and other groups have brought parcel after parcel into the park's safe haven.

"We've spent over \$30 million purchasing land that's fully protected in perpetuity," says Dick Bobertz, executive director of the River Park.

Despite recent setbacks such as the Witch Creek Fire, which ravaged about 20 percent of the park and destroyed the JPA offices, Bobertz and his team remain undaunted.

"It's such a relief to know that these resources have been set aside as a refuge from everything around us."

Today, the River Park JPA is forging ahead with the creation of a 55-mile Coast to Crest Trail that will link the ocean to the desert in one long, continuous ramble. About 30 miles of the trail have already been completed, along with shorter spurs off the side and connections to other trail systems.

A Day in the Park

Few other places on Earth offer the natural diversity of San Diego County. In the space of an hour's drive, the desert climbs into the mountains, which slope down into pastoral rivers that carve into rugged canyons and wend their way out to the sea. Here, snow-covered peaks melt into blue lagoons.

There's no better way to begin your day than with a hike to the top of Volcan Mountain, about two miles northeast of Julian. Just park your car on the side of Farmer Road and enter through the gateway created by local artist James Hubbell. In the spring and early summer, you'll pass through stands of sweet-smelling lupine as you climb up to a beautiful vista of the sprawling apple and olive orchards below.

Step off the dirt road onto the Five Oaks Trail, which traverses 1.2 miles through old oak canopies up to a stone bench with a spectacular lookout to Banner Grade. In July and August, it's not unusual for a thunderstorm to roll in from the San Felipe Valley to the south, so be prepared.

Closer to the coast, you can also try the trails along Lake Hodges or the San Pasqual Valley. A new Del Dios Highlands trail hooks up with the Elfin Forest trails on the north side of the Olivenhain Dam.

Best Of The West End

At the west end of the River Park, a colossal undertaking is now underway. Passers-by — including millions of travelers on I-5, Highway 101, or the Amtrak and Coaster trains — might see the big bulldozers in action and assume it's just another gated community or mini-mall in the works. Thankfully, the opposite is true.

This is actually an \$86 million restoration project being funded by Southern California Edison (SCE) as mitigation for impacts at the San Onofre Nuclear Generating Station. As SCE project manager Samir Tanius explains, "Nature is becoming a precious commodity these days." That's why he takes such pride in the pain-staking work being done by his team of engineers, biologists and other conservation experts.

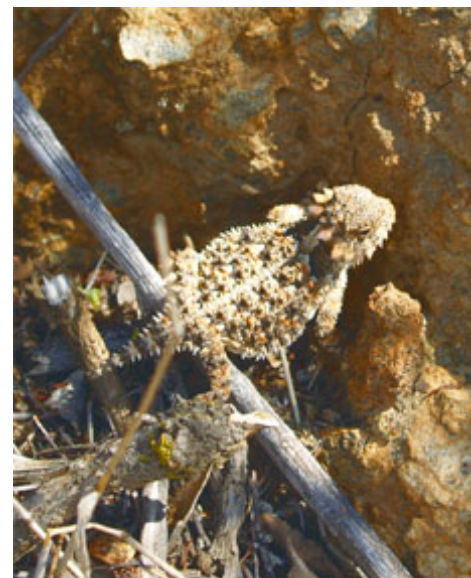
Just west of I-5, an area that was once an airfield for dirigibles during World War II is now being returned to its natural state as a habitat for the Belding's Savannah Sparrow and (hopefully) the federally endangered Least Tern, along with other wildlife.

Working in partnership with local agencies, SCE is restoring 160 acres of wetlands and about 500 acres in total to create a healthy tidal basin with adjoining uplands that will be a home to over 145 different bird species. In creating new nesting sites, SCE is hand-planting over 350,000 seed-grown specimens of pickleweed, jaumea, salt grass, and other marshland natives.

In all likelihood, this project wouldn't have materialized without the help of County Supervisor Pam Slater-Price, who lobbied the California Coastal Commission and SCE to concentrate their mitigation work here.

"Our lagoons are like lungs for the surrounding area. They cleanse the air and the water, and they're such a wonderful gift," she says.

She also foresees the potential for eco-tourism that will draw many visitors to this unique habitat.



Horned lizard



Hikers on Volcan Mountain

They'll come to see more than 15 species of diving and dabbling ducks, avocets, black-necked stilts, and double-crested cormorants airing out their feathers to dry.

They may spy a great blue heron on the hunt as it stands motionless for what seems an eternity before it spears a fish, frog, snake, or lizard, then takes flight with its magnificent six-foot wingspan.

They'll gaze down through salty waters to watch the mullets, mussels, and shore crabs moving about.

And perhaps they'll end their day at Dog Beach, where the San Dieguito River empties into the turning tide.

Wherever we watch the sun go down — from a mountainside meadow or the sandy shore — we can call it a good day in the park. (www.sdrp.org, www.sdrvc.org) — Carole Brummage, photos courtesy of the San Dieguito River Park and San Dieguito River Valley Conservancy



Falls in Santa Ysabel Creek Gorge