

Into the Wilderness -- Our Wildest State Parks

By John McKinney

When the great rains came in the winter of 1986, it sure felt like a wilderness to me. Three days of downpours washed out the access road and, quite suddenly, I had Sinkyone Wilderness State Park all to myself. I had volunteered for the position of park/camp host for the month of January in order to give something back to our wonderful state park system and also, less altruistically, to flee the big city and get some uninterrupted time to think and write.

Until the park road was repaired, I was marooned at the old ranch house/visitor center. What a glorious week in the wilderness! By day I trekked atop the towering shoreline cliffs that rise abruptly like volcanoes from the sea. I visited all the park's redwood groves and kept company with a herd of Roosevelt elk. Nightfall found me close to the woodstove, reading and writing by lantern light.

Even when the rains ceased and the park road was reopened, almost no one came to visit. With no one to host, I was free to check out all the "Lost Coast" footpaths and work on producing a trails map of the state park. I also had plenty of time to contemplate the many environmental treasures of Sinkyone and to appreciate the important place a wilderness, and the very *idea* of wilderness has in our lives.

We delight in our state parks, both the well-known popular icons, as well as the little known and obscure. We learn of our state's history from our State Historic Parks. We flock to our State Beaches and State Recreation areas to unwind.

But what of our State Wilderness?

Our state *what*?

By definition, a State Wilderness is an area managed to best preserve the primeval character of the land. No permanent structures are permitted. So far, Sinkyone Wilderness State Park is the only one among our 274 or so California parks with Wilderness in its name. Other parks—such as Point Mugu State Park with its Boney Mountain Wilderness—have specially designated wilderness areas that are managed to preserve their pristine character.

While the California park system has a relatively small number of capital W Wilderness areas, those that it does possess are of great symbolic value and offer visitors a very special experience. Two of my favorite parks—Mount San Jacinto, and Sinkyone Wilderness—preserve some of the very best examples of wild California and give us the chance to see how State Wilderness areas are such a valuable part of our state park family.

They are "hiker's parks—that is to say, some effort is required to get to, and through, the wilderness. A little effort yields big rewards: pristine countryside and the peace and tranquility that comes with it. Wilderness parks also lend themselves to backpacking and backcountry camping. Plot a course on the map, talk over your itinerary with a ranger, and hit the trail for a week.

Mount San Jacinto State Park

With its towering pines and incense cedar, great boulders and lively creeks, as well as steep trails and rugged peaks, the state park offers both a family-friendly

introduction to the pleasures of the San Jacinto Mountains and challenges to the serious hiker.

The park's 13,500-acre wilderness includes a magnificent forest preserve topped by stony ramparts and mighty Mt. San Jacinto. Bighorn sheep patrol the desert-facing high country, mule deer browse the verdant meadows, golden eagles soar over the high peaks. Many hikers in the San Jacinto Mountains can't resist comparing the range with the High Sierra. Certainly the peaks look a bit like those in the Range of Light when observed from the flatlands.

Palm Springs Aerial Tramway makes it easy for hikers to enter Mount San Jacinto State Wilderness. Starting in Chino Canyon near Palm Springs, the tram takes passengers from the desert floor all way up to 8,516-foot Mountain Station at the edge of the wilderness. The San Jacintos seem an island in the sky because of their incredibly rapid rise from the desert floor. Alpine and desert vegetation thrive in amazingly close proximity.

Enjoy some moderate day-hiking out to Round Valley or hike all the way to the peak. The view from the 10,804-foot summit (Southern California's second-highest peak) takes in San Geronimo Pass, the shimmering Pacific, the Colorado Desert and distant Mexico. John Muir found the view "the most sublime spectacle to be found anywhere on this earth!"

Sinkyone Wilderness State Park

Sinkyone Wilderness State Park comprises about half of this Lost Coast, which is so rough--rougher even than Big Sur's coast--that it even thwarted California's highway engineers; much to their frustration, they were compelled by geography to route Coast Highway inland more than 20 miles. Thus the park remains isolated, accessible only by dirt roads.

The Sinkyone Wilderness is black sand beaches strewn with patterns of driftwood and the sea's debris, mosaiced with small stones. On grassy bluffs, Roosevelt elk turn tail to winds blowing in from Siberia and the Bering Sea. Canyon mouths fill with fog, nourishing the redwoods within. The land we call Sinkyone Wilderness State Park has long been recognized as something special. During the late 1960s, the great Catholic theologian Thomas Merton believed that the Needle Rock area would be an ideal place for a life of prayer and contemplation and talked of establishing a monastic community.

Take a short hike or a long one on the Lost Coast Trail, which traverses the length of the park. Magnificent vistas and varied terrain, dense forests, prairies, coastal bluffs and beaches reward the hardy explorer.

Wilderness Park Information

Sinkyone Wilderness State Park

Classic Day Hike: From the visitor center, a 6-mile jaunt to Middle Ridge, around Frog Lake, with a return on Fish Trail

Camping: 13 walk-in sites in the northern part of the park and along the Lost Coast Trail, 35 primitive drive-in sites at Usal Beach at the southern tip of the park.

Season: All year, but very rainy in winter and early spring.

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Mount San Jacinto State Park

Classic Day Hike: Take the tram to Mountain Station; from here, it's a 4 mile round trip with 600-foot elevation gain to Round Valley and an 11 mile round trip with 2,300-foot gain to the top of Mt. San Jacinto. A wilderness permit is required.

Camping: 33 developed wooded campsites, 50 primitive campsites, 4 wilderness camps (overnight permit and reservations required)

Season: Late spring to November, depending on snowfall.

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John McKinney is the author of Day Hiker's Guide to California's State Parks. For more of his hiking tips, visit www.thetrailmaster.com