Crystal Cove Backcountry
Self-guided
3-mile loop trail

CALIFORNIA STATE PARKS
Crystal Cove State Park
8471 Pacific Coast Highway
Laguna Beach, CA 92651

Park Hours: 6:00AM to Sunset

Welcome to the Crystal Cove self-guided hike. This is a 3-mile hike, which will take you about two hours to complete. An elevation gain of 300 feet at the start gets your heart rate going but is easy. There is one steep downward slope ("Pole") that may not be safe for pregnant woman or people with knee problems. The purpose of this guide is for you to gain an understanding of different habitats at Crystal Cove State Park, to learn the history of the area, to try to identify plant species, and to enjoy your hike.

Before you begin you may want to stop by the plant garden outside of the Headquarters office to become familiar with some of the native plants that you may see on your hike.

You may also go into our Visitor Center to familiarize yourself with some of the native animals you may see as well. Because there are no signs for this self-guided hike, natural trail markers and descriptions will be used for identification of plants. When plant names are used the common name is given first and the Latin scientific name follows in italics. For this guide we have selected plants that best represent the differing plant communities.

For your safety and to help preserve the natural habitat remember to stay on the trails. Also, do not feed animals. Feeding the animals can cause them to become dependent on human food, which is not healthy for their bodies. It is also dangerous to feed the animals because they can spread diseases that can be very harmful to humans.

Dog are not allowed on the backcountry trails.

As you continue your hike, notice the different kinds of plants you see. These are typical of coastal sage scrub habitat.

Can you find the plant that is a low spreading shrub with branches 2-4 feet long? Depending on the time of year, this plant has white, pinkish, or burnt red flower tops with long stems. California Buckwheat, Eriogonum fasciculatum, is common in the Coastal Sage Scrub community. While flowering between May and November this plant has pinkish white flower heads, which turn reddish brown as they ripen. The flowers are cherished by bees and make an excellent quality nectar.

This plant was used to cure headaches and stomach aches by the Native Americans.

As you look for plants you may see a beautiful, luminous red flower with hairy white leaves and stems. This plant is called Indian Paintbrush and blooms February-May. There are two types of paintbrush found at Crystal Cove State Park, both resembling a paintbrush dipped in bright red paint. Felt paintbrush, Castilleja foliolosa has hairy white leaves. Coastal paintbrush, Castilleja affinis has a deeper colored flower and has darker leaves.

Look for a shrub up to 10 feet tall with a sticky trunk and many wide spreading limbs with green leafy leaves. Depending on the month, this plant has pinkish to red berries or pinkish-white flowers in closely packed clusters. Lemonade Berry, Rhus integriformis, is an evergreen shrub, meaning the leaves always stay green. The plant flowers between February and April and the seeds mature during the summer. The sticky surface of the berries has a tart lemonade flavor. Native Americans used both dried and fresh berries for tea. They were also used for a small pox lotion, colds and coughs.

Can you find the plant that is a shrubby tree from 6-30 feet tall with green leaves sporting tooth like ridges? This plant bear red berries in clusters during the winter. Teyan, Heteromeles arbutifolia, is an evergreen shrub. It has small white flowers that grow in clusters and blooms from June to July. Native Americans toasted or boiled the berries, which tasted sweet and spicy. Stored berries were parched and ground into meal flour.

As you continue hiking up the trail you will come to a for in the trail. A sign with a map on it will divide the trail. Go right. This will take you to "Pole". If you do not want to go down the steep hill, return to the parking lot at this point.

From this high point in the park, you will see homes in the far distance. There was once a time when no homes

village sites and caves used as shelters during the winter rains. There are a number of plant species that Native Americans depended on for food, tools, lodging, medicinal purposes and other uses such as jewelry and musical instruments. Some of these will be pointed out as you come to them.

Look out toward the field to your left. This meadow was once grassland habitat that was destroyed by grazing from sheep and cattle. Grasslands once covered over 13% of California’s natural areas, but due to over grazing, agricultural practices, and urban sprawl, more than 99% of grasslands in California have been destroyed. Native grasslands consist of bunch grasses such as Purple Needlegrass, Nassella pulchra and Foothill Needlegrass, Nassella lepidota, which may be seen along the trail on the left.

As you continue up the trail, look for a plant that has numerous grayish-green thread-like leaves that are once or twice parted with thread like divisions. This plant also has an aromatic fragrance and is shrub like ranging from 2-5 feet tall. Coastal Sage Brush, Artemisia californica, not a true sage because it is in the sunflower family, blooms August-February and has very small greenish flower heads. Spaniards use this plant for a tea to cure brochial troubles and as a wash for wounds. It was also used in baskets or bedding to keep insects away.

Coastal Sage Brush is the dominant plant in the Coastal Sage Scrub plant community. Coastal sage scrub was once abundant in California. Urban development has replaced 75-90% of it and it is now an endangered habitat. It is home to a threatened bird, the California Gnatcatcher, Polioptila calorifrons. Development, destruction of habitat, and predation on eggs from other animals and birds has caused the California Gnatcatcher to be threatened. The call of a Gnatcatcher sounds like the mewing of a cat. Listen for the high-pitched cut as you pass the Coastal Sage Scrub.

KEY: Walk along No Dogs trail until you reach the burned wooden pole on the left side of the trail. Turn and look toward the meadow and the ocean. Looking toward the horizon on a clear day you might see Catalina Island toward the right or San Clemente Island to the left.

The ocean at Crystal Cove is a breeding ground for the Bottlenose Dolphin, Tursiops truncatus. Like most mammals the bottlenose dolphin gives birth to live young. Usually having one baby at a time, the baby is born underwater near the surface and normally comes out tail first. With a quick twist, the mother is generally able to break the umbilical cord. The baby has no air in its lungs and begins to sink and may need to be nudged to the surface for its first breath.

Crystal Cove is also an excellent whale watching spot for the Gray Whale, Eschrichtius robustus. The gray whale migrates south from the icy waters of the Bering Sea and Chukchi Sea to the warm lagoons of Baja California where they mate and calve. The 11,000-mile round trip is the longest migration of any mammal. If you are hiking between the migration months of December-April look out toward the ocean and see if you can spot a fluke (tail) or a heat shaped spout of water from the whale’s blowhole.

Native Americans used resources from the ocean and the land. A people who were given the name 'amenoos by the missionaries from Mission San Juan Capistrano first inhabited Crystal Cove State Park. The Janezetas engaged in a small trading network and bartered items such as shell beads, cribbed fish, deerskins, and acorns. Their existence has been documented in archaeological
could be seen from the backcountry of Crystal Cove. These hones are an example of how Crystal Cove is becoming an island surrounded by an ocean of development.

With the construction of the 73-toll road, which borders the back of the State Park boundaries, the wildlife corridor has shrunk. A corridor allows for wildlife in other natural areas to travel in and out of an area. Unfortunately, due to the increase in noise and other inhibiting factors species are not able to cross as easily into and out of the State Park, which jeopardizes finding mates, food, and territory.

Looking towards the right you are treated to a magnificent view of El Moro Canyon. As you look at the hills that surround the canyon you will see a number of slopes. The direction of a slope creates a certain type of environment for the vegetation on that slope. A north-facing slope receives less direct sunlight and holds more water to help feed the plants. A south-facing slope gets more direct sunlight, which creates drier soil. Plants such as cactus grow on the south-facing slope because they can survive in the drier conditions. As you continue your hike take note of the plants you see.

BE CAREFUL as you walk down Poles. The trail is very steep. Dig in your heels! Your feet can slip on the gravel and you can fall.

Can you find the plant that is common along the sides of the trail, growing straight, 2-8 feet tall? This plant blooms bright yellow flowers from February to July and the remainder of the plant is very green. Black Mustard, Brassica nigra, is an invasive weed brought by the train from France. It is thought to have scattered the seeds to mark their trail. This plant normally grows in meadows, disturbed areas, and along trails and roads. If the plant is not cut out before it dies, it turns grayish brown and is sickly like. The seeds and flowers taste spicy like hot mustard.

Look for the plant with green-gray spiny leaves. This plant has a stalk that grows from the middle of the plant reaching 1-1/2 to 3 feet high (or even higher). At the top of the stalk a purple feather bristle-like flower blooms May-July. Artichoke Thistle, Cynara cardunculus, is an invasive exotic species and is found on disturbed soil. This plant is difficult to get rid of and has a high grow back rate after eradication attempts. The seeds can germinate after 2-20 years in the soil, which adds to the peskiness of this species.

Take a break at the second telephone pole on your left. Looking into the meadow on the left you will see what is known as The Bowl. The Bowl was once a grazing field for cattle, sheep, and horses, which greatly impacted and destroyed a lot of the natural habitat in this area. The restoration team, Resource Management a. Crystal Cove State Park, is working to restore this and other areas throughout the park to their natural habitat.

Looking closely, you may see round plots throughout the right side of the bowl. These are restoration plots where native grasses are planted with the hope that they will grow, spread, and overtake the entire meadow area. One problem associated with restoring areas in the park to their natural habitat is invasive non-native plants such as black mustard and artichoke thistle. These plants are fast-growing weeds as they outcompete the native plants and make it difficult for them to grow. Resource managers employ a variety of methods to remove invasive exotic species, which include mowing, hand pulling, herbicides, weed whacking, mulching, torching, and controlled burns.

This is good area to see hawks, turkey vultures, crows, and ravens. These birds take advantage of the open meadow to hunt for food such as gophers, rabbits, ground squirrels, snakes including rattlesnakes, or any dead animal.

Continue walking down Poles and stop when you get to the bottom.

You are now on El Moro Canyon trail. A streambed runs through El Moro Canyon, creating a riparian community. Riparian communities occur along watercourses that create a cool moist climate unique where hot, dry summers dictate the nature of most communities. Shrubs or low growing dry vegetation will no longer dominate, rather you will notice taller trees and a larger diversity in vegetation. From Poles turn right to continue your hike and see if you can find these plant species.

Can you find the plant that has a small white flower with a yellow cone in the middle and is slightly woody, growing 3-6 feet high, with black berries on it? White Nightshade, Solanum douglasii, is common on brushy slopes and disturbed ground. You may also see Purple nightshade Solanum sarracineum, which looks very similar to White Nightshade, but has larger purple flowers and green berries. The Native Americans are said to have used the juice of the berries for tattooing and to cure inflamed eyes. Coyotes eat the berries from nightshade, which can then be seen in their scat.

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Look for small tree with branches 18-18 feet tall alongside the creek bed. Arrowroot Willow, Salix lasiolepis, grows along arroyos, streams, and areas with reachable groundwater. Sals, from the Latin, means “o leap or spring,” which is a characteristic of fast growth. The caterpillar-like appendages on willows are called cuticles. Cotoneaster flower from January to March and releases seed in clouds of fluff. The bark of thist willow contains salicylic acid, an ingredient in aspirin, and was once chewed for headaches. The poles and branches were used as frames for homes, fences, baskets, and traps.

At the first and only creek pass, stop. There may be flowing water, but more likely it is dry. El Moro Creek runs through the backcountry and is the principal water source for the species that live here such as mule deer, coyotes, bobcats, raccoons, opossums, wrens, and the non-native bulrush.

Since the average rainfall in this area is only 12 inches per year, this stream merely flows. Plants that are not by the stream and do not have access to ground water gain water in other ways. Fog is a source of water for plants whose leaves capture the moisture in the air.

As you continue along the trail you will see new vegetation. See if you can find these plant species.

Mule Fat, Baccharis salicifolia. This is a willow-like evergreen that is found along streams and flowers April-October. The leaves stalks were used for arrows and for sunshade roofing.

Look out for this one and don’t touch! Can you find a common shiny green or red leafd plant that grows in leaf groups of three? Poison Oak, Toxicodendron diversilobum. All parts of this plant including the leafless winter stems, the glossy red new leaves, the attractive three-lobed mature leaves, the fall bright crimson leaves, and the white flowers and berries, contain pelorusin. 1. Cont. The skin causes a rash, which is severe in some people.

At a large dig in the road, the stream crosses underneath it a culvert. You will probably see some water here. Look for deer tracks.

Can you find an erect, gray woolly plant with alternate leaves? Leaves are green on top and silvery on the bottom. If it is June-October, this plant would be flowering white, bell shaped flowers at the top of the stems that form the shape of a pine tree. The top of the flowers resemble a triangle with the top being the smallest point and the bottom being the largest. The Native Americans named Mugwort, Artemisia douglasiana, Pakokish. A position was made from this plant to alleviate poison oak rash. In the Middle Ages mugwort was considered a magical protective herb to ward off superstitions. It was also believed that if a bite was placed under one’s pillow one could see their entire future in their dreams.

Look in the water for an erect plant that grows 3-7 1/2 feet and looks like it has a hot dog growing out of it? Cattail, Typha angustifolia, is found at the edge of ponds, in marshes, and year round in streams. The hot dog like appendage at the top of the stem is called a spike. The spike can be 4-7 inches long and carries the seeds of the plant. The seeds can be white to yellowish and fluffy. Early uses of the flowers were to produce latter for weaving and the seeds of this plant were eaten as well.

Near the cattail you will see, Giant Reed, Arundo donax, which is an invasive non-native plant from the grass family that is a danger to riparian areas. This plant grows 9-20 feet tall and often forms large colonies. This plant out competes native riparian plants and causes a number of problems. It monopolizes soil moisture, replaces riparian vegetation, reduces habitat and food supply, and provides little shade in comparison to natives leading to increased water temperatures and reduced habitat quality for aquatic wildlife. Although attempts are made to rid the riparian area of this plant, it is difficult to remove and there is not a high success rate of eradication.

From here, head right, up the hill. If you’re lucky, you may hear a Cactus Wren singing from its cactus perch.

Lupine is one of the many wildflowers in Crystal Cove State Park. Several species of this flower, all within the pea family, can be seen at Crystal Cove. “Lupinus” was the name given to these plants from the Latin word meaning wool; as these plants were once thought to rob the soil of possessions. However, Lupine adds nutrition to the soil by replacing nitrogen underground, which is a building block for plants.

When you reach the yellow gate you have completed the 3 mile loop.

Congratulations! We hope you enjoyed your hike and found the educational experience as well. Remember that only humans can help protect wildlife and habitat.

Thank you for visiting Crystal Cove backcountry and come visit us again soon.

Prepared by Joy Earnes, May 2001
Designed by Sara Jayne, July 2001