

# Indian Grinding Rock State Historic Park



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**Indian Grinding Rock SHP**  
Chaw'se Regional Indian Museum  
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**(209) 296-7488 • [www.parks.ca.gov/igr](http://www.parks.ca.gov/igr)**

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*"It was the Indians' way  
to pass through a country  
without disturbing  
anything; to pass and  
leave no trace, like a fish  
through the water or birds  
through the air."*

—Willa Cather, author

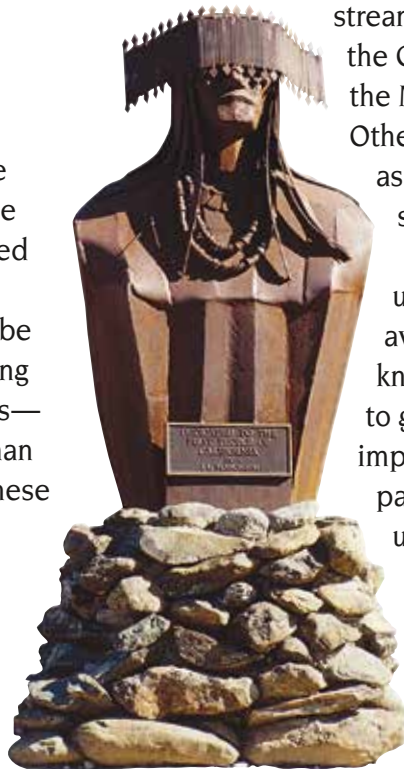


## Indian Grinding Rock State Historic

**Park** is located in the Sierra Nevada foothills, eight miles east of Jackson. The park is nestled in a small valley 2,400 feet above sea level with open meadows and large valley oaks that once provided Native Americans with an ample supply of acorns. The 135-acre park preserves a great outcropping of marbleized limestone with 1,185 mortar holes—the largest collection of bedrock mortars anywhere in North America. Trails make it easy to explore the meadows and surrounding forest. The Chaw'se Regional Indian Museum features a variety of exhibits and an outstanding collection of Sierra Nevada Indian artifacts. A Miwok village and roundhouse have been reconstructed in the middle of the valley.

### THE GRINDING ROCK AND PETROGLYPHS

*Chaw'se* is the Miwok word for the mortar cups that formed in a stone slab as the Miwok people pounded acorns and other seed into meal. The largest *chaw'se* example can be seen at the park. The main grinding rock also features 363 petroglyphs—including circles, animal and human tracks, and wavy lines. Some of these carvings are thought to be as old as two or three thousand years; they are now becoming difficult to see. This association of rock art and bedrock mortar pits is unique in North America. Except for one other small



*Sculpture of Miwok dancer*

site, Indian Grinding Rock State Historic Park has the only known occurrence of mortars intentionally decorated with petroglyphs.

*The marble grinding rock is fragile and very susceptible to weathering and chipping. The natural elements are claiming many of the petroglyphs, so please stay off the rock and respect this irreplaceable reminder of indigenous Miwok culture.*

### HISTORY

#### The Miwok

The Northern Sierra Miwok, who settled in this area many centuries ago, established their villages alongside the rivers and streams of the Sierra Nevada—from the Cosumnes River on the north to the Mokelumne River on the south. Other Miwok groups lived to the west as far as Mount Diablo and as far south as Yosemite National Park.

The Miwok had a detailed understanding of the resources available to them, passing this knowledge down from generation to generation. Deer were the most important animal resource, and all parts were utilized. The meat was used for food; clothing was made from the hide. Antlers, bones, and hooves were used for tools and instruments, and the brain was used to tan hide.

Plant foods were generally collected and processed by



*Bark house museum exhibit*

women while men trapped, fished, and hunted. All resources were portioned so they would continue to be available, and little or nothing was wasted. For example, a plant called soap root was mashed and used not only as soap, but also to stun and catch fish. Its leaves were eaten fresh, and the bulb could be baked and eaten. The dried, fibrous leaves were bundled and used as a brush.

Acorns, the mainstay of the Miwok diet, were gathered in autumn, dried, and stored in large granaries (*cha'kas*) made of poles interwoven with slender brush stems. Resembling large baskets, the *cha'kas* were thatched with short boughs of white fir or incense cedar to shed snow and rain and then lined with pine needles and wormwood to repel insects and rodents.



Acorns are rich in nutrition, but because they contain a lot of tannin, they are bitter to the taste. To make them edible, the Miwok cracked and shelled them, and placed the acorn meat in the mortar holes (*chaw'se*) in the large flat limestone outcropping in the meadow to be pounded with a stone pestle to the texture of fine



*Reconstructed Miwok village*

meal. The Miwok took the meal to the creekside and poured water through the meal to leach out the tannin. The prepared meal was mixed with water in a large, watertight cooking basket. Hot rocks were added to the acorn mush or soup and moved around with paddles until the acorn meal was cooked.

The Miwok also caught fish and hunted game throughout the hills. The climate was agreeable, the water supply reliable, and many good village sites were available. Commodities that could not be found locally could often be obtained through trade with neighboring groups.

The village was the primary political unit in Miwok life, though alliances were likely to exist between villages. Village size varied from two dozen individuals to as many as several hundred. Each village had a specific territory that belonged to the group. Because each territory encompassed several ecological habitats, the village could be reasonably sure that its needs for food, clothing, and shelter would be met.

### **The Gold Rush**

The annual cycle of native life that revolved around the little meadow was dramatically altered by James Marshall's discovery of gold at Coloma in January 1848. Miners poured into this area, forcing the Miwok out of their traditional patterns of residence and subsistence. Prospectors and both hydraulic and quartz mining operations eventually surrounded the area. Mine tailings can still be seen today in the park's ravines.

Though mining was the dominant economic activity in this area during the 1850s, agricultural enterprises were also attempted. Several farms and ranches were established in the area, with one of the first located in the meadow area of the present-day park. In June 1852, one miner wrote in his diary, "They are mowing their grass and barley on the flat and offered me \$3 a day to mow." The diarist declined this offer and hastened to nearby Volcano, where a miner's wage was \$6 a day.

Reminders of early-day Amador County ranching and farming activity are dotted

throughout the park, including a farmhouse and outbuildings, a garden site, orchards, livestock pond sites, and other traces of farm life. By 1868 the property belonged to the Else family, who grew barley and other grain crops, raised cattle, and planted an orchard. The small stream that runs through the park is still known as Else Creek.

William Blakely acquired the property in the 1870s. In the late 1880s, he sold about 160 acres to Serafino Scapuccino. Scapuccino tended the orchard, raised cattle, and developed a truck garden. He is said to have welcomed the Miwok, who sometimes camped in the meadow, gathered acorns, and held ceremonial events at the old village site. He also put a fence around the "great rock" to protect it.



*Oak tree*

After Scapuccino's death, his family continued to hold title to the property until the 1950s. At this time the surviving members, James and Serafino, Jr., became concerned that development pressures would eventually destroy the scenic, historical, and archaeological value of the meadow and its unique bedrock mortars. A friend suggested that it might be possible to preserve the site as a state park, an idea that found immediate support in the nearby town of Volcano.



*Hun'ge—the Roundhouse*

A campaign to save the site was launched, and in 1958 the State of California acquired 48.5 acres of the Scapuccino property. The site was formally dedicated as a state park in 1968 and was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1973.

### **TODAY'S PARK**

#### **The Village and Roundhouse**

Development in the park emphasizes the aboriginal importance of the site. A reconstructed Miwok village provides present-day descendants of the Miwok with an opportunity to preserve their heritage and traditions and share them with future generations of Californians. Bark houses, a ceremonial roundhouse, acorn granaries, shade ramadas, an Indian game field, and demonstrations of time-honored arts, crafts, and games all combine to illustrate the past. California State Parks has an ongoing commitment to collaborate with the local Native Americans in park development.

The Roundhouse (*hun'ge*) is the setting for various social gatherings and ceremonial events. The Miwok traditionally held

ceremonies here to pray, to mourn the dead, or to observe special occasions through music and dance. In a typical village, this semi-subterranean community center was the largest building and tended to be between 20 and 50 feet in diameter. The Indian Grinding Rock State Historic Park *hun'ge* is 60 feet across—one of the largest in California. Four massive beams and center poles support the roof. A hole in the center of the roof allows smoke from the fire pit to escape and also permits some observation of the night sky.

Miwok homes ranged from eight to fifteen feet in diameter and were built of cedar poles interwoven with grapevines or willow and covered with cedar bark. A hole was left at the top to vent smoke from cooking or heating fires. Bark houses (*u'macha*) can be seen near the grinding rock and also at the reconstructed village west of the Roundhouse.

A game field (*poscoi a we'a*) has also been reconstructed near the Roundhouse. One game played by the Miwok was very similar to soccer. On a field about 110 yards long, players tried to kick or carry a ball to the opposing team's goal. Both men and women played, though the rules were different for each. Men could only kick the ball, while women could handle the ball in any manner. However, if a woman held the ball, a man could pick her up and run for the goal.

#### **Big Time**

Several times each year, ceremonies are held in the *hun'ge* by local Native Americans. In September, Indian families meet at the park

for the annual acorn gathering ceremonies (Big Time). Dancing, hand games, singing, and storytelling are traditional activities. Spectators are welcome, but there is no fixed schedule of events. Native American crafts and foods are available.

#### **Chaw'se Regional Indian Museum**

The two-story Chaw'se Regional Indian Museum has been designed to reflect the architecture of the traditional roundhouse. Outstanding examples of the technology and crafts of the Miwok and other Sierra Nevada Native American groups are exhibited in the museum.

The collection at Chaw'se includes Northern, Central, and Southern Miwok, Maidu, Konkow, Monache, Nisenan, Tubatulabal, Washo, and Foothill Yokuts.



*Miwok dancers*





*Chow'se Regional Indian Museum*

Examples of basketry, feather regalia, jewelry, arrow points, and other tools are on display. Hours at the museum vary seasonally. For current hours, visit [www.parks.ca.gov/igr](http://www.parks.ca.gov/igr) or call (209) 296-7488.

The nonprofit Chow'se Association operates a sales area, where visitors may purchase books, posters, postcards, and educational items. Lectures, videos, and demonstrations at the museum provide insights into Native American life in the Sierra region.

### **Fauna**

Though the park is small, it offers many opportunities to observe wildlife. Oak woodlands and mixed pine forest provide

a wide variety of habitats, much as they did when the Miwok lived here. Bird life includes Steller's jays, California quail, acorn and hairy woodpeckers, northern flickers, hermit thrushes, and California thrashers. In summer the bright colors of western tanagers, northern orioles, calliopes, and Anna's hummingbirds can be seen in the forest near the museum. A bird list is available at the museum.

Animal life includes deer, foxes, black-tailed jackrabbits, bobcats, and occasionally a mountain lion or black bear. The legendary coyote—the trickster of Miwok stories—can be heard “singing” on quiet summer nights.

### **Flora**

More than 130 species of native plants have been identified in the park, many of which were used by the Miwok. Spring brings an incredible variety of wildflowers to the Sierra foothills. Flowering plants include monkeyflower, giant trillium, shooting star, several species of lupine, farewell-to-spring, harvest brodiaea, Humboldt lily, western buttercup, mariposa lily, Hartweg's iris, showy phlox, wild rose, mountain violet, filaree, yellow star flower, and baby blue eyes.

### **Weather**

The Sierra foothills experience warm, dry summers and cool, moist winters. Summer temperatures exceed 90 degrees. Winter brings an occasional snowfall.



*Soap root*



*California quail*

## **RECREATIONAL ACTIVITIES**

### **Trails**

There are two developed trails in the park. The North Trail, a one-mile round trip, starts near the museum. It traverses the ridge surrounding the meadow, crosses the creek, passes by the old farm site, and continues to the reconstructed Miwok village site. There it joins the half-mile South Nature Trail, a self-guided loop that starts near the Roundhouse. A trail guide describes the ethnobotany of the area, identifying some of the plants that were used by the Miwok.

### **Picnicking**

Near the grinding rock, a picnic area with a shade ramada can accommodate groups of up to 150. Reservations for the picnic area are not necessary. There is also a small picnic area next to the museum. Please do not use campsites for picnicking.

### **Camping**

The park is open seasonally. Visit [www.parks.ca.gov/igr](http://www.parks.ca.gov/igr) for current hours.

Each of 23 campsites has paved parking (trailers/motor homes are limited to 27 feet

long), tables, food lockers, fire rings, piped water, and restrooms with flush toilets and showers. Wood gathering is not allowed, but firewood may be purchased at the park. Campsites are first-come, first-served.

### Environmental Living/Group Camping

Camping in the bark houses to the north (*U'macha'tam'ma'*) is a unique opportunity to get back in touch with the natural world while learning something about Miwok life. Seven bark houses, each one suitable for up to six people, have been constructed in a secluded area of the park. They can be reserved for a group of up to 44 people. The camping is primitive; you must haul water, supplies, and equipment two hundred yards or more from the parking area. However, your experience will be unforgettable.

Group camping reservations may be made up to six months in advance by mail, by calling (209) 296-7488, or by visiting [www.parks.ca.gov/igr](http://www.parks.ca.gov/igr) for applications.

### ACCESSIBLE FEATURES

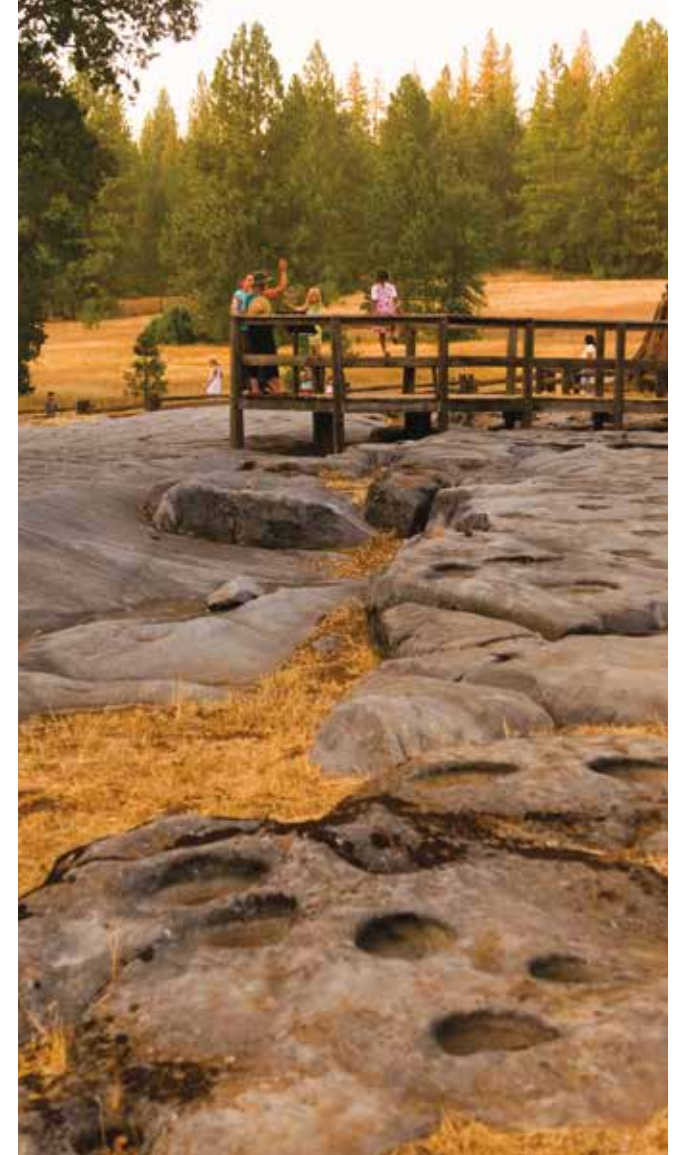
- **Camping**—Two family campsites and the restroom are accessible.
- **Trails**—The North Trail is hard-packed for .6 mile. Except for service animals on leash, dogs are not permitted on trails.
- **Picnicking**—Tables are easy to access.
- **Exhibits**—There is easy access to the restrooms, into the Indian Museum, around exhibits, and to the viewing platform at the Grinding Rock. A video is also available. Accessibility is continually improving. For updates, visit <http://access.parks.ca.gov>.

### PLEASE REMEMBER

- All natural and cultural features are protected by law and may not be disturbed or removed.
- Notify park staff of the location of any found objects.
- Like the grinding rock itself, the meadow at Indian Grinding Rock State Historic Park is fragile. Stay on the trails.
- Park regulations prohibit the consumption of alcoholic beverages except by campers in the campground.

### NEARBY STATE PARKS

- Calaveras Big Trees State Park  
1170 East Highway 4, Arnold 95223  
(209) 795-2334
- Columbia State Historic Park  
11255 Jackson St., Columbia 95310  
(209) 588-9128
- Railtown 1897 State Historic Park  
Off Highway 108 and Reservoir Road  
at Fifth Avenue, Jamestown  
(209) 984-3953



*Accessible viewing platform*

This park receives support in part through a nonprofit organization.

For more information, contact:  
Chaw'se Indian Grinding Rock Association  
[info@chawse.org](mailto:info@chawse.org)

