

# El Capitán

## State Beach



### Our Mission

The mission of California State Parks is to provide for the health, inspiration and education of the people of California by helping to preserve the state's extraordinary biological diversity, protecting its most valued natural and cultural resources, and creating opportunities for high-quality outdoor recreation.



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#### **CALIFORNIA STATE PARKS**

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[www.parks.ca.gov](http://www.parks.ca.gov)

Discover the many states of California.™

**El Capitán State Beach**  
**El Capitán exit from Highway 101**  
**Goleta, CA 93117**  
**(805) 968-1033**

*During fall and winter low tides, dedicated surfers watch “El Cap” for the elusive west swell that brings the hollow, curling waves of their dreams.*



## Lush sycamores and oaks flourish along El Capitán Creek at the entry to El Capitán State Beach.

Tall bluff-top groves are visible for miles along the terraced coastline. This extremely popular beach, 17 miles west of Santa Barbara off U.S. Highway 101, is a perfect place to enjoy camping, hiking, surfing, picnicking and beach walking. At El Capitán, the moderate climate brings cool fog during the summer months. Late summer and fall are sunny and warm; winter storms often break up into crystal-clear days.

### PARK HISTORY

Chumash Indians lived here in the village of Ahwin as long as 3,200 years ago. They built their dome-shaped houses along the creek that had scoured out the canyon. Skilled hunters and gatherers, the Chumash are known for their exquisite basketry and for building seaworthy plank canoes (*tomol*) that allowed them to travel to the offshore islands. Some of their beautiful cave paintings can be seen at nearby Chumash Painted Cave State Historic Park.



Spanish explorer Juan Cabrillo “discovered” this area in 1542, claiming it for Spain. In 1782, the Spanish built the Santa Barbara Royal Presidio—the last Spanish fortress constructed in Alta California—to protect the nearby missions and settlers from foreign invasion and attacks by the native people.

For the Chumash, Spanish colonization meant the end of their traditional way of life. Exposed to European diseases against which they had little immunity, their population quickly plummeted.

After Mexico gained its independence from Spain, most surviving Chumash became ranch hands and servants on the new ranchos. Today, a growing number of their descendants are rediscovering their traditional heritage.

### “El Capitán”

The first commander of the Santa Barbara Presidio was José Francisco Ortega, who had been chief scout for the Portolá expedition when they discovered San Francisco Bay. When Ortega retired as a brevet captain after 40 years of military service, the Spanish Crown granted him 26,500 acres of land west of what is now El Capitán State Beach, which takes its name from this early Californian.

Ortega’s grandson, José Dolores Ortega, obtained another 8,800 acres of land, including the site of the future state beach, from the Mexican government in 1841. He and his family lived on Rancho Cañada del Corral, raising cattle and farming until they were forced

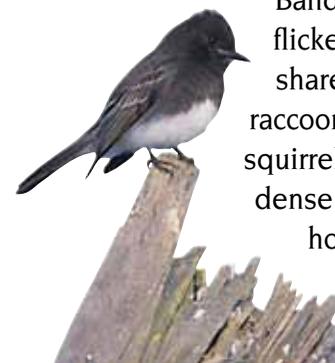
to sell it in 1866, following years of ruinous droughts.

In 1953, the State of California purchased 111 acres of the former rancho to create El Capitán State Beach, and in 1967, the Legislature approved purchase of an additional 21 acres. Growing threats of development to the lands across the highway from the park led to a public-private fund-raising effort in 2002 that raised \$500,000 in seven weeks to purchase 2,500 acres of land known as El Capitán Ranch.

This property was added to El Capitán State Beach, and today the park offers high-quality coastal recreation while preserving an important part of California’s environment and history.

### PLANTS AND ANIMALS

The impressive stands of coast live oaks, sycamores, and willows along El Capitán Creek create a lush coastal woodland. The oaks provide food for wildlife, while sycamores and willows provide shade.



**Black Phoebe**  
Band-tailed pigeons, flickers, and scrub jays share the acorns with raccoons, western gray squirrels and mule deer. The dense sage along the creek is home to black phoebes, California thrashers and wren bushtits. Sea birds include scoters, western and Clark’s grebes, gulls, terns and loons.

Long-billed curlews, willets, plovers and sanderlings walk the narrow beach.

Dolphins may be seen just offshore; the bluff tops offer excellent views of California gray whales during their annual migrations.

Great Basin fence lizards are at home in the sage scrub. Southern Pacific rattlesnakes hunt for various rodents, including the California mouse and the Pacific kangaroo rat. Beneath the woodlands canopy, grasses and herbaceous plants offer shelter to a wide variety of insects, reptiles and birds. During fall, monarch butterflies decorate the trees—look for clusters of reddish-brown wings with black veins.

## RECREATIONAL ACTIVITIES

**Family Campsites**—The 132-site family campground is open all year. A short walk takes you to the beach. Each site has a picnic table and stove or fire ring; restrooms with hot showers are nearby. Several sites are paved for RVs only. Some sites accommodate trailers and recreational vehicles up to 42 feet in length.

**Group Campsites**—Five group camping areas, accommodating 40-100 people, overlook the ocean from the marine terrace.

**Reservations**—Reserve family or group sites by calling (800) 444-7275 or make online reservations at [www.parks.ca.gov](http://www.parks.ca.gov).

**Hike and Bike Campsites**—Register at the park entrance to camp in the “Hike and Bike” area. Hot showers, restrooms, tables and barbecues are available.

**Hiking**—A self-guided nature trail winds through the woodlands on El Capitán Point. The Bill Wallace Trail, named for a coastal protection advocate and former Santa Barbara County supervisor, winds through the park, offering hikers more than ten miles of views with a 1,000-foot elevation gain.

**Surfing**—Surfing conditions change with the weather. However, at low tides during fall and winter, advanced surfers sometimes find a perfect west or west-southwest swell.

## PLEASE REMEMBER

- Do not hike along the beach without first consulting a tide chart or talking with a lifeguard. The beach that exists at low tide may disappear when the tide comes in, trapping you against the cliffs.
- Stay away from the cliffs. They are dangerously unstable and may collapse.
- Keep dogs on leashes no longer than six feet, and in a tent or enclosed vehicle at night. Only registered service dogs are allowed in park buildings, on trails or on the beach.
- A parent or guardian must accompany youths under 18 years of age. Any unaccompanied youth must present written consent from the parent or guardian stating the dates of the authorized stay and the name of the park.

## ACCESSIBLE FEATURES

**Camping**—Six sites have firm surfaces and accessible tables; you may need help with water spigots and restroom entry.

**Trails**—A bluff-top bike trail/walkway overlooks the Pacific Ocean and the Channel Islands. Some portions are steep or eroded.

**Beach/Shore Access**—Ask to borrow a beach wheelchair at the entry station.

For the latest accessibility updates, visit <http://access.parks.ca.gov>.

## NEARBY STATE PARKS

- Refugio State Beach, 10 Refugio Beach Road, Goleta, 23 miles NW of Santa Barbara on Highway 101 (805) 968-1033
- Chumash Painted Cave State Historic Park, three miles S of San Marcos Pass, Highway 154 on Painted Cave Road (805) 968-1033



# El Capitán State Beach



0 0.5 1 1.5 2 Miles  
0 0.5 1 1.5 Kilometers

LOS PADRES NATIONAL FOREST

## Legend

- |  |                     |  |                      |  |                |
|--|---------------------|--|----------------------|--|----------------|
|  | Freeway             |  | Campfire Center      |  | Parking        |
|  | Paved Road          |  | Campground           |  | Ranger Station |
|  | Unpaved Road        |  | Fishing              |  | Restrooms      |
|  | Trail               |  | Group Campground     |  | RV Sites       |
|  | Railroad            |  | Hike/Bike Campground |  | Supplies       |
|  | Intermittent Stream |  | Hiking               |  | Surfing        |
|  | Accessible Feature  |  | Locked Gate          |  | Swimming       |
|  | Bicycle Trail       |  | Nature Trail         |  | Telephone      |

