Russian Gulch
Mendocino Headlands
Van Damme
State Parks

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.

California State Parks supports equal access. Prior to arrival, visitors with disabilities who need assistance should **contact the park at (707) 937-5804**. If you need this publication in an alternate format, call (916) 654-2249 or contact **interp@parks.ca.gov**.

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Russian Gulch, Mendocino Headlands and Van Damme State Parks
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Roaring sea caves, a rare pygmy forest, ocean views from Victorian windows—welcome to Mendocino area state parks.

On the Mendocino coast, the air smells of salt, and the crashing waves create a continuous resonance. The tall bluffs at this spot north of San Francisco resemble the rugged shores of the east coast, but with an unmistakable California flair. Victorian-era communities that overlook the sea reflect the New England roots of their builders who, in the ordinary course of life, added volumes to California's colorful history.

MENDOCINO AREA STATE PARKS

Two miles north of Mendocino, Russian Gulch State Park's collapsed sea cave cuts 200 feet into the headlands to form the boiling surge known as the Devil's Punchbowl. Mendocino is embraced on three sides by unmatched views from Mendocino Headlands State Park. Van Damme State Park, beginning at the mouth of the Little River, has a protected cove for divers, a fern canyon for hikers, and a unique forest of Mendocino pygmy cypress.

The climate here is temperate year-round. Winter rains and cool summer fogs that usually burn off by mid-morning provide the moisture necessary for the thriving coastal redwoods. Prepare for changeable weather by dressing in light layers.

MENDOCINO HISTORY

Native Americans

The Pomo date back about 3,000 years on the North Coast. They built their main village of redwood bark houses at the mouth of Big River. The Pomo hunted large and small game, caught fish and shellfish, and gathered seaweed, acorns and various seeds. Whatever they could not obtain locally, they acquired in trade with other groups; in times of plenty, native groups often gathered to share the bounty. When Russian and Aleutian fur trappers arrived here in the early 1800s, they were likely the Pomo's first contact with non-natives.

Little River, Van Damme State Park

When the Pomo were drawn into the mission system in the early 1800s, their way of life was forever altered. Within a generation or two, direct conflict and exposure to European diseases nearly decimated them. Today about 5,000 Pomo descendants, who still occupy parts of their ancestral lands, gather the raw materials to make some of the world's finest Native American baskets and to pass on this ancient skill to the next generation of artisans.

European and American Settlers

Settled by emigrants from all over the world, the Mendocino area has a long history of entrepreneurial exploitation. In 1812 a ship owned by the Russian-American Company entered a cove beneath the bluffs of what would become North America's southernmost Russian settlement, Fort Ross. In the 1830s, the American and Hudson's Bay trappers passed through seeking mammal pelts. The Russian colony had failed by 1841. The Fort Ross property had various owners until 1906, when the fort and acreage were acquired by the State for restoration, reconstruction and interpretation.

The Lumber Mills

In 1850 the brig *Frolic* sank off Point Cabrillo with its San Francisco-bound cargo. Attempts at salvage were largely unsuccessful. However, would-be salvagers, who had hoped to find treasures for the taking, looked around at the enormous stands of redwoods nearby, and realized that they had found their fortune. Within two years they had built a sawmill at the mouth of the Big River.

In 1984 an archaeological team from San Jose State University discovered fragments of Chinese porcelain in housepits of a former Pomo settlement. This was the first indication that the Frolic's cargo had been partially salvaged by local native people in 1850.

In 1851 San Francisco engineer Harry Meiggs built the sawmill at Big River. By the early 1900s, Big River had become an important lumber town.

In 1864 Little River was founded as a mill town to supply lumber to build San Francisco. Heavy logging diminished local timber resources; by 1893 the Little River Mill closed, so businesses, services and the school were abandoned.

Near Russian Gulch, several small, short-term mills operated until the area became "logged over," but the mills' pier was used for passengers and freight into the next century.

RUSSIAN GULCH STATE PARK

Devil's Punchbowl, the park's most famous feature, formed when pounding waves forged an inland tunnel and left a hole 100 feet across and 60 feet deep. At high tide, boiling waves crash around the cave's interior, producing a reverberant echo. The photogenic Frederick W. Panhorst Bridge rises gracefully 100 feet from the bottom of the gulch. The park has nearly a mile and a half of ocean frontage; its craggy beauty rivals any point along California's coast. In the spring, the park's foggy headlands bloom with acres of wildflowers.

Park History

Lumber operations around Russian Gulch were modest: shingles, split lumber and railroad ties. In the early 1880s, several homesteaders filed claims on the land, and some of it was farmed. Until well into the 1900s, Russian Gulch was a fishing boat harbor and stop for freight and passenger ships. In the mid-1920s, F. O. Warner, a Los Angeles real estate developer, purchased land around Russian Gulch to open a resort; visitors realized that Russian Gulch was an ideal place to spend hot summers. In August 1928, the *Mendocino Beacon* reported that the Native Sons of the Golden West had launched a movement "to have Russian Gulch . . . set aside for one of the proposed State Parks." In 1933 the State acquired the land, and on October 21, 1934, Russian Gulch State Park was dedicated.

The source of the name "Russian Gulch" is uncertain. Possibly cartographers charting the area named it for its proximity to Fort Ross; others suggest the name came from a fort deserter who settled in the area.

VAN DAMME STATE PARK

Park History

The park was named for Charles Van Damme, son of Belgian settlers. Van Damme became a successful businessman in San Francisco, then returned to Little River to buy 40 acres of redwood forest to create public picnic and camping facilities. He left this land to the State. In 1934 this acreage, combined with most of the upper Little River drainage lands, became Van Damme State Park.

Van Damme habitats include marine, coastal beach, coastal bluff terrace, pygmy forest, redwood forest and riparian, with wetlands areas farther inland. Bishop pine and coastal redwoods grow along the river. The Little River provides habitat for steelhead, coho salmon, stickleback, and both prickly and Coast Range sculpin. Red alder, willow, grand fir and western hemlock are part of the riparian plant community, and the park's Sitka spruces grow at this species' southernmost limit. Yellow warblers, belted kingfishers, Swainson's thrush and northern spotted owls are significant local birds.

Van Damme sawmill

William H. Kent, the first permanent American settler in the area, joined the gold rush in 1850. In 1853 he went to work at the Little River sawmill and later bought land in the area now partially encompassed by Van Damme State Park. Between 1864 and 1893, lumber operations became Little River's commercial foundation, and the industry's land holdings came to include much of what is now the park.

The panic of 1893—a five-year economic depression—hit the American west particularly hard. Of 156 national bank failures that year, 66 were in the Pacific states and western territories. By 1900 the mill operation was completely shut down.

MENDOCINO HEADLANDS STATE PARK

This 347-acre green belt, on the headlands between Highway One and the Pacific Ocean, surrounds the town of Mendocino. Sheer bluffs rising from a rocky shoreline form the park's southern section. The historic Ford House Visitor Center (built in 1854) sits on the south side of Mendocino's Main Street. Most of the shops on the town's picturesque main street have excellent ocean views.

Park History

Mendocino was the first of several north coast towns founded between 1851 and 1920—the height of the lumber industry. German immigrant William Kasten was bound for the gold country in 1850 when his ship fortuitously ran aground off the Mendocino coast. In 1851 he filed papers claiming land he called "Port of Good Hope."

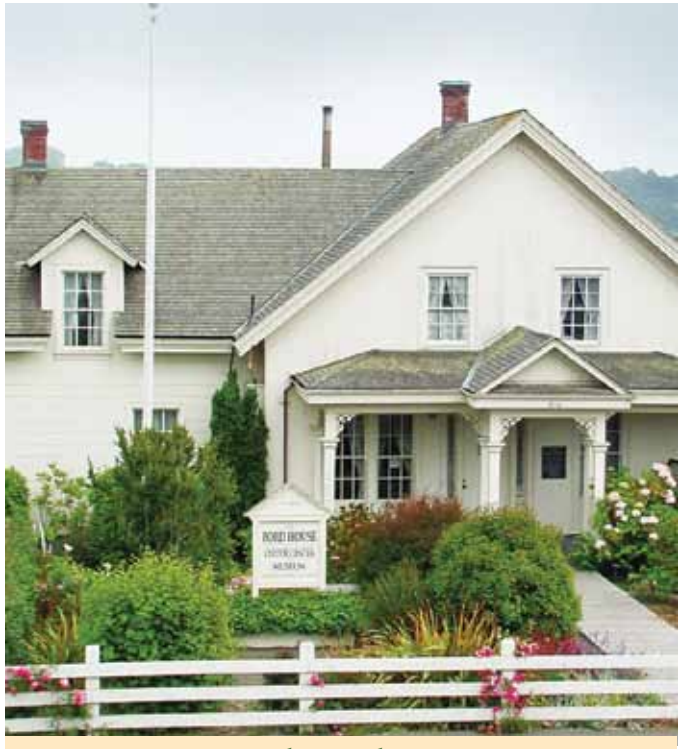
Those who built Mendocino's Victorian buildings found their fortunes in the magnificent stands of coast redwoods. In 1854 Jerome B. Ford, superintendent of the first sawmill in Mendocino and founder of the town, built a home overlooking the Pacific for his bride. Today the Ford House Visitor Center exhibits tools, a scale model of 1890 Mendocino, Native American artifacts, and photographic images that interpret the town's history. While Mendocino is known today for art galleries, shops, and inns, its well-tended Victorian architecture still conjures up a time when transportation was by horse, and each home had a water tower and an outhouse.

The State acquired a portion of the headlands in 1957, and in 1974, through the support and advocacy of the local residents, the land around the town became Mendocino Headlands State Park.

Big River Property

In 2002 California State Parks acquired 7,334 acres of land between Russian Gulch and Van Damme that begins near the Mendocino Headlands, where the Big River flows into the ocean, and extends east to inland ridges. Once this area rang with the sounds of logging operations. Today the jarring logging noises have been replaced by bird and animal sounds and the splash of canoes and kayaks going to sea. Park terrain encompasses coastal brackish marsh, mudflats, coastal and valley freshwater marsh, coastal scrub, riparian forests, Bishop pine, grand fir, Mendocino pygmy cypress, coastal conifers, coastal redwoods and mixed hardwoods and conifers.

Big River's estuary protects the habitats of 27 threatened or endangered animal species and 21 rare, threatened or endangered plant species. Some threatened species are slowly reappearing. This project and other protected lands form a 74,000-acre corridor that allows wildlife to roam freely between existing parks and preserves.



The Ford House Visitor Center

RECREATION

Visitors can enjoy hiking fern canyons, miles of trails, horse camping, a 36-foot waterfall, scuba diving, bluff-top picnicking, camping and a bicycle trail, among many choices.

Camping—Russian Gulch and Van Damme State Parks have campgrounds—reservations are highly recommended from spring through fall. Call (800) 444-7275.

Diving and Fishing—Russian Gulch's rocky ledges attract abalone divers. The well-protected dive site at Van Damme has shallow areas and offers beginners gradual entry from the shore. Abalone divers need a valid California fishing license and punch card. NOTE: The beauty of the Mendocino coast is tempered by its unpredictability and danger. Dive only in designated areas, and heed the warnings on the parks map.

Kayaking and Canoeing—The Big River has an outlet to the sea, sea caves, and a great view of historic Mendocino. At Van Damme, tide pools and sea caves provide adventure, while at Russian Gulch, canoes and kayaks take you from the cove's calm waters into the ocean.

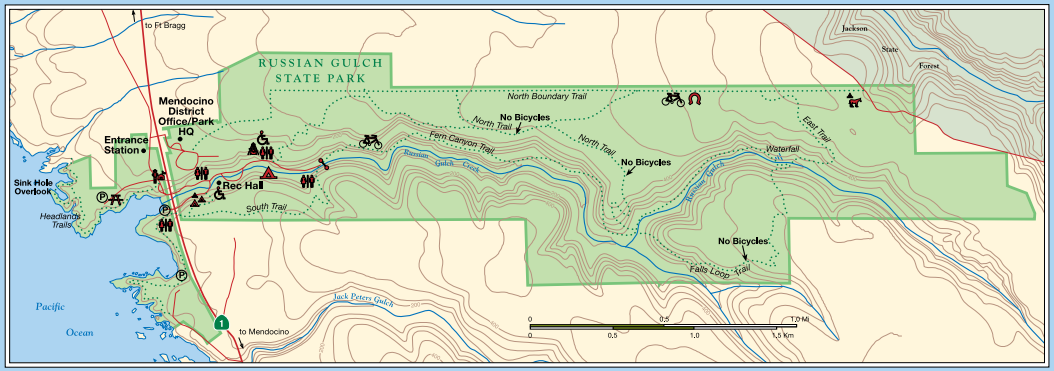
Interpretive Activities—Summer interpretive activities include staff-led hikes, campfire programs and junior ranger programs. Times and locations are posted in each park.

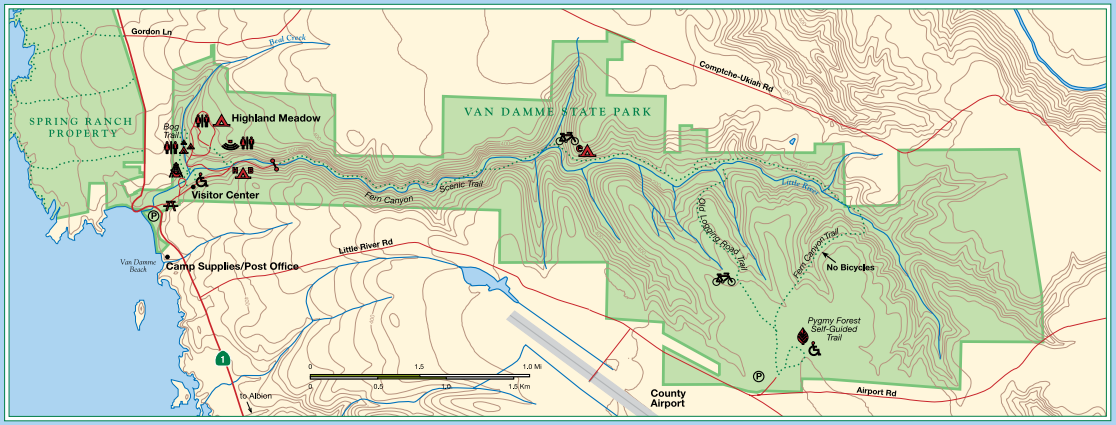
Black-tailed deer

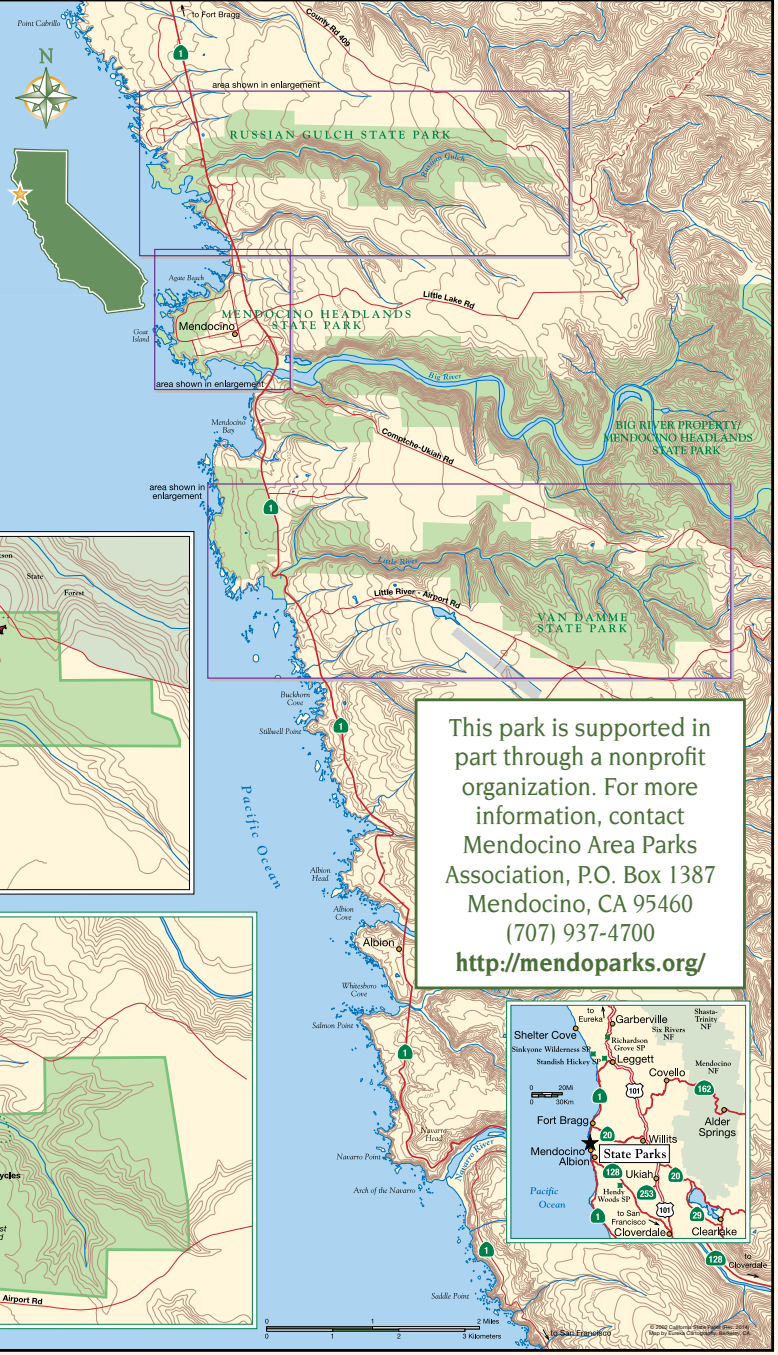
Russian Gulch, Mendocino Headlands, and Van Damme
State Park

Legend
- Paved road
- Trail
- Accessible Feature
- Bicycle Trail
- Boat Launch
- Campfire Center
- Campground
- Environmental Campground
- Group Campground
- Hike/Bike Campground
- Horse Campground
- Horse Trail
- Locked Gate
- Nature Trail
- Parking
- Picnic Area
- Ranger Station
- Restrooms
- Showers
- Waterfall

STAY ALIVE! STAY ALERT!
- Stay back from bluff edges.
- Large rogue waves can sweep you out to sea during **ALL** seasons and ocean conditions.
- Bluff- and ocean-related deaths are common.
- The water is very cold, swift, and unforgiving.







This park is supported in part through a nonprofit organization. For more information, contact Mendocino Area Parks Association, P.O. Box 1387 Mendocino, CA 95460 (707) 937-4700 **http://mendoparks.org/**

PLEASE REMEMBER
- All features of the parks are protected by state law and may not be disturbed or collected.
- Anglers over the age of 16 must have a valid fishing license in their possession.
- Do not gather dead or down wood. Purchase firewood at campground.
- Pets are welcome at most state parks, but must be kept on a leash no longer than six feet. In campgrounds they must be kept in a vehicle or in your tent at night.
- Driving off designated roads is not permitted.
- State law requires that all bicycle riders under the age of 18 wear bicycle helmets.

ACCESSIBLE FEATURES
Russian Gulch and Van Damme both have accessible picnic areas, camping and restrooms. Mendocino Headlands has accessible restrooms next to the Ford House and on Heeser Dr. For updates, visit **http://access.parks.ca.gov.**

SAFETY TIPS FOR ABALONE DIVERS Survive to enjoy your catch!

Check local conditions—Always check the weather forecast and ocean conditions before diving.

Check yourself out—Honestly assess your capabilities in light of weather and water conditions. Are you in shape? Are you sober? Is your equipment in good shape?

Buddy up—Always dive with a partner. Make a dive plan and stick to it. Stay together!

Get a lift—Drop your weights if you get tired or into trouble. Hang your weight belt on your dive tube any time you need a break. Don't overweight! Carry no more than 10% of your body weight.

PLEASE REMEMBER THAT THE OCEAN AND THE ABALONE WILL BE THERE TOMORROW. MAKE A GO/NO-GO DECISION YOU CAN LIVE WITH!