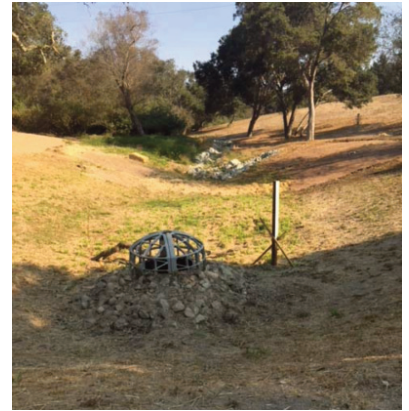




Welcome to Pinto Lake County Park! As you make your way along this short easy, self-guided nature trail (approx. ½ mi.), you'll find 12 numbered signposts which correlate to the numbered descriptions below. Enjoy!

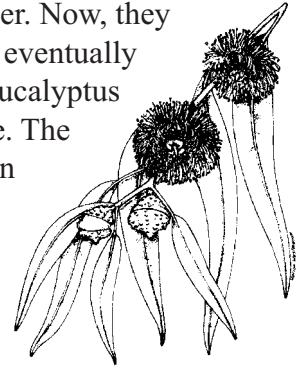
1. Protecting Pinto Lake Waterways

As you look across the road, you'll see a basin with what looks like a large sieve inside; this is a sediment basin, which helps to prevent pollutants and unwanted debris from entering the park's waterways. The silt, sticks, trash, and other refuse that can be seen surrounding the basin have all been stopped from polluting our waters by making their way to Pinto Lake - an 8,000-year-old lake and one of the few naturally formed lakes in the Monterey Bay. It spans over 100 acres and is up to 27 feet deep in some locations. The lake, part of the Parjaro River watershed, is fed by several creeks including Amesti, Todos Santos, CCC, and Pinto.



2. Eucalyptus and Oak: Invasive vs. Native Trees

Much of the vegetation covering Pinto Lake County Park is shaded by groves of oak and eucalyptus trees. Here, you'll see both: a native oak tree and the invasive eucalyptus. The native Oak trees help sustain a balanced biodiversity within the landscape. An entire ecosystem can rely on oak trees! Acorns for these trees supply food for wildlife, while their trunks and strong branches provide shelter for birds and other small creatures. However, the towering eucalyptus trees that can be spotted overhead are categorized in California as moderately invasive. Eucalyptus trees were originally brought from Australia in the 1850s to be used as timber. Now, they cover much of coastal environments in California. When the eucalyptus bark and leaves fall and eventually break down in the soil, they contribute oil to the ground below that creates ideal conditions for eucalyptus growth. This creates an environment which makes it difficult for native plants to grow and thrive. The repression of native plants is why many park departments and government agencies try to contain eucalyptus into manageable groves or in smaller and previously established areas; this practice gives native plants a chance to grow and thrive in other places. Though both trees exist here, invasive plants, such as the eucalyptus, are known to often outcompete natives for the necessities: space, light, water, and nutrients. This can compromise the delicate balance of habitats and biodiversity within varying, natural environments. Here, we can see both coexist.



3. Meadows and Riparian Areas: California's Integral Environments



Riparian areas and meadows serve as two very important parts of California's ecosystem. Meadows can be natural reservoirs for water and can absorb rain throughout the wet season. Their uniqueness helps maintain diversity within our ecosystems, as they provide a habitat for many aquatic and terrestrial species. Meadows can also often help supplement saved water into riparian areas, such as the river you can see from this spot. These riparian systems are very important when it comes to the health of the environment. Riparian systems supply stability, shade, and organic matter to streams while also providing a habitat for wildlife. Many of the species that you see here at Pinto Lake County Park, both animal and plant, wouldn't be here without the help of meadows and riparian areas.



4. Coyote Brush and Great Horned Owls:

The Varying Species at Pinto Lake

To your left is Coyote Brush, or *Baccharis pilularis*, which grows in abundance at Pinto Lake County Park. This native vegetation flowers in the late fall and winter, growing to a height up to eight feet. Though it's thought to be deer resistant, it does provide shelter and substance for other wildlife, like goldfinches and sparrows. Coyote brush is also an effective native plant to help fight against erosion in drier areas, as it doesn't need much water and its roots can help stabilize the soil. Up higher and to the right, this spot also makes a great viewing point for the Great Horned Owls that can sometimes

be seen tending active nests in the grove of eucalyptus trees. This activity usually peaks in January, but the Great Horned Owls can be considered a year-round attraction to listen and watch for. Though they're not necessarily rare in nature, they can be rare to spot as they're nocturnal and their feathers blend right into the trees. Great Horned Owls are often also known as "hoot owls" and "tiger owls" due to their striped feather pattern. This is a great spot to rest and watch for movement within the Eucalyptus' tall canopy.

5. Decomposition: An Important Link Making the System a Cycle

Look at the leafy ground and falling branches around you. Littering the forest floor is a collection of dead leaves, twigs, and unidentifiable pieces of plants and animals. These materials are an essential part of Pinto Lake's many habitats as they break down into smaller and smaller parts, eventually becoming food for a variety of worms, slugs, insects, and bacteria. These important decomposer animals turn the dead and decaying litter into plant food, becoming a natural fertilizer which helps complete the food-chain cycle. In this seemingly magical way, dead material springs to life again as it becomes food for the living. Nothing in nature is ever wasted – matter is cycled over and over again, from plant to animal to decomposer and back to plants again.



6. Poison Oak: Leaves of Three, Let It Be

For most people, it first erupts in an uncomfortable rash that itches uncontrollably. Consuming its leaves or inhaling smoke from its burning wood can be fatal. Poison oak's urushiol oils chemically "lock on" to skin proteins within 20 minutes after exposure to the plants (including dormant plants or long-dead prunings). The oils do not evaporate and can remain active for a year or longer on clothes and tools. But for the local wildlife, these leaves found in groups of three, along with white flowers that

turn into berries in late summer, make a delicious salad on the vine. Deer will browse the leaves, birds will nibble on their berries, and insects will make a home in its branches.

People seem to be the only ones that cannot tolerate the plant without ill effect, giving us a good reason to learn how to identify it. That task can be challenging as this deciduous plant loses its leaves in the fall. It also has a variety of forms ranging from bushy shrubs, to a tangle of climbing vines, to a creeping plant that snakes along the ground. In all forms, this plant can cause an itching rash. It is easy to confuse poison oak and blackberry, as both these plants have leaves in groups of three which turn red in the fall before dropping. If you look closely to your right, you can spot a main difference on their branches: blackberries have the thorns that are common in the berry family, where poison oak has smooth, spineless branches.





7. California Blackberry: A Tasty Snack with a Prickly Back

Late summer is when the competition erupts. That's when the California blackberries come into season, having turned from green to red to black – black signifying their sweetest stage of development. Local wildlife, as well as park visitors, take advantage of these seasonal crops, scouring local vines for a treat. The spines that cover stems and veins of the three-lobed leaves are best avoided. Paws, bills and fingers become stained from the purple juices by all who partake in the delicious sweetness of the tasty fruit. Despite the prickly nature of these spiny plants, they also provide homes to a variety of animals that have become quite comfortable surrounded by these bristly-backed bushes.



8. An Oak Tree Grove: The Live Oak as Food Producer

What comes to mind when you think of an oak tree? Many people think of its helmet of rounded leaves that offer a shady break from the summer sun; but for wildlife, the oak is an important source of food. Every fall, these trees produce a crop of acorns that are harvested by many animals, from squirrels to scrub jays. They will gorge on, hoard, and store acorns, always leaving behind or forgetting a few which could sprout into a new oak tree. These nutritious nuts are full of vitamins, amino acids, fats, and carbohydrates, making them a valuable part of any animal's diet. Acorns were also a staple for the Native American Ohlone people. Unlike animals, the Ohlone had to leach out the bitter tasting tannic acids before eating them. In addition to the oak seeds, oaks also attract insects, lichens, and fungus, providing additional food sources for wildlife.

9. From Forests to Farms: Where Food Comes From

The vista to your left offers views of a variety of scenes from woodlands and wetlands to fields and greenhouses. The fields and greenhouses hint at how we humans maintain our well-stocked market shelves. Changing the natural landscape by creating farms enables us to ensure a supply of fruits and vegetables to stores, and from there to our homes. Wildlife, too, has its source of food, examples of which can be found in the woodlands and wetlands seen below. Everything from nuts and berries to fresh fish can be found within these important ecological communities. Each species that harvests from these habitats has their own tools, which come in the form of physical adaptations. Each species fills a niche, or job, within nature by eating and being eaten. In this way, demand and supply cycle endlessly; each plant or animal uses the raw materials from each other to maintain the health of the ecosystem.





10. Invasive Ivy: Twisting to the Top

Much of the groundcover here is Ivy, an evergreen foliage. Ivy thrives in many conditions, from full sun to shade, which allows it to spread rapidly over large areas. The adaptiveness of ivy means that it is often able to outcompete other vegetation and twist its way up many trees. This can be harmful if it overtakes the trees' canopy, as the additional weight can weaken a tree enough to cause it to fall. Ivy is considered an invasive species and though vibrant, it can displace native plants and make it difficult for animals who depend on the native plants as food sources. Ivy has become a particular problem in coastal regions and can be spotted among many trails in Pinto Lake County Park.



11. Bird Blind: A Birdwatcher's Paradise

As you may have noticed over the course of this walk, Pinto County Lake has an abundance of wildlife, especially birds! At this stop, there is a structure that is made for blending in and getting great views of the local bird population without being seen - this is called a bird blind. This allows viewers to see the birds behave more naturally without being noticed, perfect for those with cameras or binoculars. As noted earlier, Pinto Lake is home to Great Horned Owls, but also many smaller birds. These include a variety of Woodpeckers, Coots, Quail, Egrets, Herons, Hummingbirds, the Kingfisher, Swallows, and many more! Keep your eyes and ears open for colorful feathers and unique bird songs! Helpful information for beginning birders can be found here, courtesy of the Santa Cruz Bird Club: <https://santacruzbirdclub.org/birding-for-beginners/>

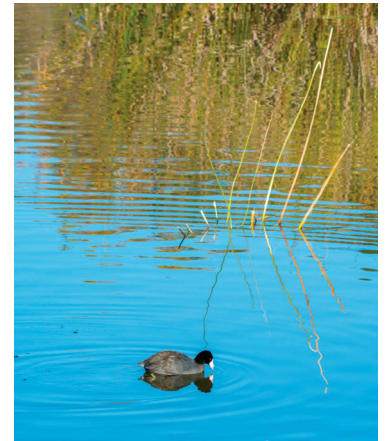
12. The Wetland Habitat - Aquatic Wildlife and Plants

There was a time when wetlands were seen as worthless tracks of land, with value only in their extremely rich soil; as a result, many were turned into farms. However, with time, we began to see another view of wetlands. Abundant supplies of insects, fish, and vegetation made them a popular stop-over for migratory birds, as well as a hang-out for resident wildlife. Spending just a few minutes silently observing this scene will reveal glimpses of animals such as the great blue heron, with its long bill, handy for spearing fish. The American coot is also seen here, as it searches the area for aquatic plants and the occasional fish, snail, or insect. Wetlands provide abundant food for many animals. No longer seen as worthless, the biological value of these wetlands has been recognized and, in many cases, has been actively protected and restored. Like wildlife, plants also have their favorite habitats.



lake, eventually creating a wetland.

As the name suggests, wetlands are wet, attracting moisture-loving plants such as willow and tulle found along the edges, and pennywort on the water's surface. Not only do these plants prefer the conditions found here, but they also help create and maintain them. As flowing water makes its way into these habitats, it comes into contact with plants. The roots, stems, and branches of these plants slow the water flow which causes the rich, muddy sediment held in the water to settle on the lake bottom. As these rich soils accumulate, they gradually fill in the



More information about Pinto Lake County Park

In addition to the nature trail you've just walked, Pinto Lake features a playground, bike pump track, dog park, public art, a fishing pier, sports fields, disc golf course, two reservable picnic pavilions with grills and electricity. For more information about availability, as well as other park features, please visit <https://www.scparks.com/Home/ExploreOurParksBeaches/AllCountyParks/PintoLakeCountyPark.aspx>

