

Mid Santa Cruz Island



© K.d.-O 2003

Arriving at Mid Santa Cruz Island, one often notices the lush vegetation that grows on the north facing slopes seen from the coast. Santa Cruz Island is the largest of all the Channel Islands, and it is also the most diverse. Two mountain ranges that rise over 2000 feet above sea level, create many canyons, fresh water springs, streams, coastal cliffs, pristine sandy beaches, and rugged rocky intertidal areas. Land ownership on Santa Cruz is split between the National Park which owns and manages the eastern 25% of the island, and the Nature Conservancy which owns and manages the remaining 75% of the island. Landing on Mid Santa Cruz Island, at Prisoners' Harbor, is the meeting place of these two boundaries.

Historical Background

The first humans on the Channel Islands were Chumash Indians. It is estimated that more than 1000 Chumash once lived on Santa Cruz Island. The Spanish made contact with the Channel Islands in the mid 1500s. This contact brought many changes to the Chumash way of life. New diseases were introduced as were different philosophies. Eventually, there were no Chumash living on the islands. The ranching era on Santa Cruz Island came next. A small community of working ranches were established on Santa Cruz Island and flourished during the 1800s -1900s. Ranchers brought many plant species and livestock to the islands. Grazing livestock, played a significant role in altering the islands' landscape. When ranching was no longer profitable on the island, much of the livestock was allowed to roam freely on the island devastating much of the natural habitat.

The Nature Conservancy

In 1975, Dr. Carey Stanton, owner of the majority of the island, met with the Nature Conservancy (TNC) to consider a joint effort to ensure future preservation of Santa Cruz Island. The Nature Conservancy is an international non-profit organization dedicated to the protection and management of ecologically significant land. By 1978, TNC acquired a conservation easement on the western portion of Santa Cruz Island. Dr. Stanton, who was instrumental in starting this enormous effort to help restore Santa Cruz Island, died in 1987, and the Nature Conservancy became sole owner of 90% of Santa Cruz Island. Upon taking control, TNC ceased ranching on 90% of the Island and removed thousands of sheep and cattle, pigs, however are still present on the island. Sheep, horses, and pigs remained on the eastern portion of Santa Cruz Island. The restoration goals of the National Park are similar to the TNC, and by the year 2000, the park was successful in removing sheep and horses from the eastern 10% of the island. In August 2000, the TNC donated 8,500 acres to the National Park, increasing the park property to 25% of the eastern part of Santa Cruz. The purpose of this gift was to ensure affective cooperative management by the two organizations to protect and restore the island.



Island Isolation

The northern Channel Islands rose from the sea about 5 million years ago, and are true oceanic islands, isolated from the mainland. This isolation has resulted in some of the unique assemblages of plants and animals that are found in the Channel Islands National Park. Though isolated, these islands have both a rich natural and cultural history going back hundreds, or even thousands of years ago. Today, visitors to the Channel Islands National Park can observe many of the unique natural wonders, as well as see first hand some of the human impacts which have become part of island life. During the interpretive program on the island, your guide will help you discover how isolation from the mainland has had a profound effect on all island life. In addition you will be introduced to some of the ongoing research, restoration and preservation efforts of the National Park designed to help protect these unique island resources.

The following are some terms that will be used on your guided hike, and examples you might come across as part of your Mid Santa Cruz Island experience.

Native: a species that grows or occurs naturally in California. Furthermore, natives to the Channel Islands include species that were not brought here by humans.



The giant coreopsis, also known as the giant sunflower tree is a native species. Most of the year it is dormant as seen on the **left**.

After winter rains, the plant sprouts foliage followed by a spectacular bloom of yellow flowers usually in March or April, as seen **right**.



Exotic or non-native: a species that has been introduced by man to the island from the adjacent mainland or another area.



Left: fennel, which has the scent of licorice, is very hardy, and has taken over vast expanses of area previously occupied by more delicate native species.

Right: several species of thistles grow on the island. A European native, the milk thistle is found along the trail leading to Pelican Bay.



Island Endemic: a species that grows naturally only on one or more of the Channel Islands.

Below are a few examples of endemic island plants that you might see at Santa Cruz Island

Island Alumroot



Island Monkey Flower



Santa Cruz Island Buckwheat



Animals of Santa Cruz Island: being the largest and most diverse, Santa Cruz island supports a number of animal species. The island fox is the largest native mammal at 12 to 13 inches in height. The fox is rarely seen, and is now threatened with extinction. The island jay is a Santa Cruz island endemic, it is found nowhere else in the world. There are also five reptile species, and three amphibians, including the pacific tree frog.

Island Fox



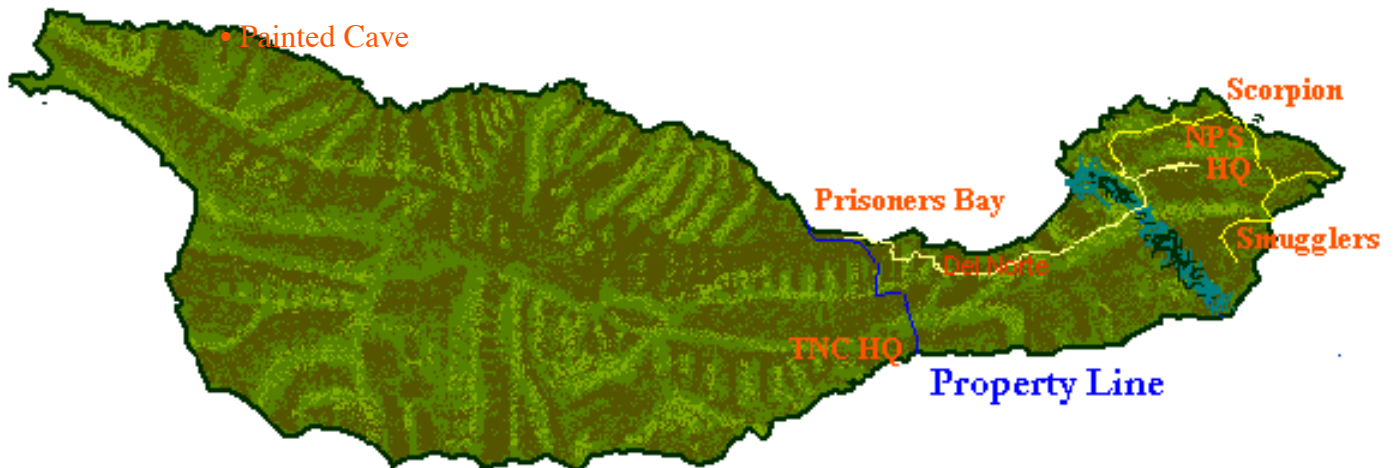
Island Scrub Jay



Pacific Tree Frog



Frazer Point



The Nature Conservancy of California

Santa Cruz Island Interpretive Trail

The Nature Conservancy has developed an interpretive trail that is a little over 4 miles round trip, but feels like a much longer hike due to sections of rugged terrain, and several elevation transitions of 300-400 feet. Because of these conditions, Island Packers recommends this excursion for more mature student groups. Access to this trail is a privilege, and visitors must either obtain a permit in advance, or be accompanied by one of Island Packers naturalists.



© K.d. - O 2003

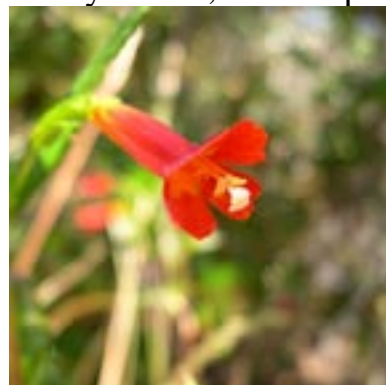
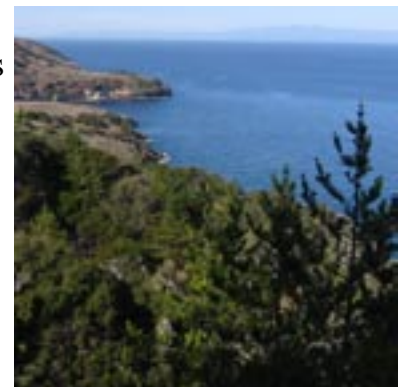
Plant Communities

Several plant communities can be found on Santa Cruz island, and observed during the guided island exploration. As you start up the first part of the trail there is a good example of the coastal sage scrub community. This community consists of low growing, drought-resistant shrubs and interspersed grasses.

Further along the trail you will discover the oak woodland. There are several species of oaks in this area. These oak woodland habitats were important to the Chumash, as they collected the acorns and ground them into a mash for food.

The pine forest is another plant community that will be encountered along the trail. The dominant species of pine is the Bishop Pine, and there is also a species known as the Santa Cruz Island Pine.

As you climb down into the canyons, the cooler climate in these shaded areas provide a habitat for the island monkey flower, and the penstemon.



Prisoners' Harbor Beach Habitat



The cobble and sand beach area at Prisoners' Harbor is a great place to explore. Beach wrack (kelp, sea grass, and other natural debris) wash ashore and provide habitat for rock louse and beach hoppers which in turn provide food for shore birds and some intertidal organisms. During the spring and summer months, harmless leopard sharks and bat rays can be observed in shallow water. There is also a small estuary at the east end of the beach.

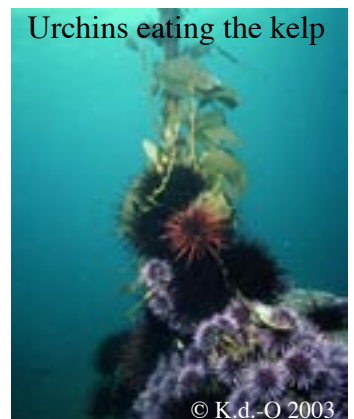


New State Marine Protected Areas



In October 2002, the State of California created the West Coast's largest network of marine reserves which is in the Channel Islands National Park and Channel Islands National Marine Sanctuary. There are twelve fully protected zones and two conservation areas totalling 175 square miles. This represents about 10 percent of the Sanctuary waters. Santa Cruz Island now has three of these special protected areas. The Ocean area at Scorpion Ranch is a State Marine Reserve. Though the reserves are open for boating and diving, you are not allowed to remove any plants or animals from their natural habitat (no fishing). The Scorpion reserve has a shore-line length of 3.3 nautical miles and extends three miles out from the shoreline with a depth range of 0 to 750 feet. Gull Island State Marine Reserve is located on the south side of West Santa Cruz Island. There is also one SMCA on Santa Cruz Island, named Painted Cave State Marine Conservation Area. Painted cave is located on the north shore of the western portion of the island and is one of the largest known sea caves in the world.

Long term monitoring of the kelp forest revealed that the quality of the kelp forest habitat around the Channel Islands was declining. It is believed that the ecosystem was thrown out of balance by a combination of environmental conditions, as well as fishing. Some reefs today show low biodiversity, and many are overrun by urchins and sea stars. By creating these new protected zones, scientists hope that the area will be enhanced and restored to a more natural condition. In other places around the world, protected zones also enhanced local fisheries near the reserves, this is known as spill over effect.



Trip Logistics

- Mid Santa Cruz Island is about 24 miles from the from Ventura Harbor. Travel time on one of our high speed catamarans is about 1 hour and 15 minutes. If you are traveling to the islands during the migration of the pacific gray whale (January-March), time on the boat may be extended to look for and observe whales.

- Island Packers recommends that you call: **(805) 642-1393** after 5:30AM on the day of your trip. This number will provide you with confirmation of your scheduled trip, or inform you of any cancellations due to unsafe sea conditions or inclement weather.

- Check your reservation information to confirm the time and location of your departure. Please plan to arrive at least 30 minutes prior to your departure time so you can check in at the office.

- Dress for outdoor activity, wear sturdy closed shoes for both your safety and comfort (no sandals please).
- Proper footwear is critical at this site, as the hiking terrain is rugged.

Dress in layers, and bring a jacket since it can be cool and breezy even on a sunny day. Sunscreen, or a visor or hat can also make you more comfortable.

- Pack a lunch and beverages, as there are no snack bars on the island, and no running water. Some snacks and beverages can be purchased on the boat. Try to minimize paper and plastic wrappings, as you will have to keep all your waste with you since there are no trash cans or trash services on the island. Santa Cruz has pit style restrooms at one location near the Prisoner Harbor pier.

- Please come to enjoy the isolation and natural beauty of the ocean and the islands. Bring a camera, binoculars or note pad, but leave electronic music and games at home.

We look forward to having you aboard!
www.islandpackers.com 805-642-1393



© K.d.-O 2003



© K.d.-O 2003



© K.d.-O 2003