

See the stars in state parks and beaches

Stargazing in California State Parks

What better place to stargaze than in a California State Park? Away from urban lights, state parks and beaches offers the perfect place to watch the stars.

Northern California:

Benbow Lake State Recreation Area, two miles south of Garberville on Highway 101, has 1,200 acres with campsites and a large day-use picnic area. Hiking, picnicking and camping are popular summer time activities, while salmon and steelhead fishing are popular in the winter. The park's open field in the campground gives a panorama view of the sky. Access to Benbow State Recreation Area's campground is closed during off-season. For more information about the park, call (707) 923-3238.

Calaveras Big Trees State Park, four miles northeast of Arnold, has 6,750 acres with campgrounds. The park is a popular place for hiking, fishing, swimming and, in the winter, cross-country skiing. The park's scenic overlook provides a great spot for stargazing. For more information about the park, call (209) 795-2334.

China Camp State Park, four miles east of San Rafael on the shore of San Pablo Bay, was the site of a thriving Chinese shrimp-fishing village in the 1880s. Nearly 500 people, originally from Canton, China, lived in the village. In its heyday, there were three general stores, a marine supply store and a barber shop. The park features include an extensive intertidal salt marsh, meadow and oak habitats that are home to a variety of wildlife, including deer, squirrels and numerous birds. The park offers fifteen miles of hiking trails. Visitors enjoy wildlife-watching, hiking, swimming, boating and windsurfing. Because the park is away from the city, visitors can stargaze from various locations. For more information about the park, please call (415) 456-0766.

Fremont Peak State Park, off of Highway 156 and 11-miles south of San Juan Bautista on San Juan Canyon Road, features vistas of Monterey Bay from hiking trails in the grasslands of the higher peaks of the Gavilan Range. Other

views include the San Benito Valley, Salinas Valley, and the Santa Lucia Mountains east of Big Sur.

For astronomical observation at the park, it's best to arrive before sundown as vehicle headlights after sunset disrupt astronomers' night vision. Clouds or rain will cancel astronomy programs. It's a good idea to call the park (831-623-4255) for weather and program updates before you go.

In general, astronomers are friendly, outgoing, and happy to allow you to view through their telescopes and answer your questions. A few courtesies that will enhance everyone's experience:

- Do not touch any part of any telescope unless the owner instructs you on the proper method. In particular, do not touch any glass optical surfaces.
- Please be sure that all children are supervised around telescopes.
- Remember, using lights near telescopes at night is highly disruptive. A piece of red "cellophane" wrapped over the end of a flashlight and held in place with a rubber band works great.

For information from the Fremont Peak Observatory Association, go to their website at www.fpoa.net/ The Fremont Peak Observatory phone number is 831-623-2465.

Henry W. Coe State Park, 13 miles east of Morgan Hill on East Dunne Avenue, is the largest state park in northern California, with over 80,000 acres of wild open spaces. The terrain of the park is rugged and varied, with lofty ridges and steep canyons. The park offers spots where visitors can stargaze. For more information about the park, call (408) 779-2728.

Humboldt Redwoods State Park, 20 miles south of Fortuna on Highway 101, is home to the famous Rockefeller Forest, the largest contiguous old growth redwood forest in the world. This 52,000 acre park offers three developed campgrounds, a horse camp, many day-use areas, beautiful swimming holes on the South Fork Eel River, daily interpretive programs in the summer and over 100 miles of hiking trails. Recreational opportunities include swimming, kayaking, fishing, hiking horseback riding, mountain biking, picnicking, developed and primitive camping and much more. Our many natural prairies throughout the park offer excellent views for stargazing, the best of which can be found at Albee Creek Campground. For more information about the park, call (707)946-2409.

Mount Diablo State Park, five miles east of Danville, has an extensive trail system, fascinating wildlife and distinctive rock formations. Visitors can view the stars from its lofty heights.

The Mount Diablo Observatory Association has public stargazing programs. For more information, visit the association's webpages at: <http://www.mdia.org/astronomy.htm>

Mount Tamalpais State Park, North of San Francisco's Golden Gate, has 6,300 acres of redwood groves and oak woodlands with a spectacular view from the 2,571-foot peak. On a clear day, visitors can see the Farallon Islands 25 miles out to sea, the Marin County hills, San Francisco and the bay, hills and cities of the East Bay, and Mount Diablo. The park has a very well developed "astronomy night" every month from March through October. The programs always have a guest speaker presenting a specific topic with a slide show followed by star gazing through the many and varied scopes provided by the San Francisco Astronomy Association, an amateur astronomy club. The program is at the Mountain Theater located near the top of the mountain.

For more information about the park, call (415) 388-2070 or on-line at www.mttam.net

Richardson Grove State Park, seven miles south of Garberville on Highway 101, features camping, hiking, and swimming throughout much of the year. Fishing for salmon and steelhead is popular during the winter. The park is where visitors first encounter significant old growth redwood forest when coming north. The 9th tallest coast redwood, a fallen tree ring study conducted in 1933, and a walk-through tree are in the park.

Panorama Point has a view of the southern sky and they day use river bar provides a view of the summer sky.

For more information about the park, call (707) 247-3318.

Sinkyone Wilderness State Park, 36 miles southwest of Redway/Garberville on Briceland Road, features rugged wilderness that once characterized the entire Mendocino Coast. This 7,367 acre park is in an area called the "Lost Coast," since there are no main highways in the vicinity.

The park is tops for serene stargazing on the bluffs overlooking the ocean at the visitor center at Needle Rock.

For more information about the park, call (707) 986-7711.

Standish-Hickey State Recreation Area, 1.5 miles north of Leggett on Highway 101, offers camping, picnicking, hiking, fishing, and swimming on the South Fork of the Eel River which winds through the park for almost two miles. One of the few virgin redwood stands remaining in this area can be seen on the Grove Trail.

The picnic area and river bars give access to open skies for summertime stargazing.

For more information about the park, call (707) 925-6482.

Southern California:

Anza-Borrego Desert State Park, on the eastern side of San Diego County and about a two-hour drive from San Diego, Riverside, and Palm Springs. Park is the largest state park in the contiguous United States. 500 miles of dirt roads, 12 wilderness areas and miles of hiking trails provide visitors with an unparalleled opportunity to experience the wonders of the Colorado Desert.

The park features presentations of current astronomy as well as Native American astronomy. The programs generally run from November through April. For more information, call the park at (760) 767-5311.

Malibu Creek State Park, 25 miles from downtown Los Angeles and four miles south of Highway 101 on Las Virgenes/Malibu Canyon Road, has over 4,000 acres, featuring hiking, fishing, bird watching and horseback riding opportunities. There are 15 miles of streamside trail through oak and sycamore woodlands and chaparral-covered slopes. The park was the center of Chumash Native American life for centuries and was once used to film numerous movies and TV shows, such as *Planet of the Apes* and *M*A*S*H*.

The park is a great place for stargazing because it's removed from city lights. The most popular site is the upper parking lot area and the old foundation site, located on top of the park's "climbing wall."

For more information about the park, call (818) 880-0367.

Palomar Mountain State Park; off Highway 76, up Highway S6, then left on Highway S7 at the junction near the mountaintop; features spectacular views of the Pacific, camping, picnicking, hiking, and fishing (trout) in Doane Pond. This is one of the few Southern California areas with a Sierra Nevada-like atmosphere.

The Palomar Observatory is owned and operated by the California Institute of Technology. For over half a century the Palomar Observatory has been a world-class center of astronomical research. For more information about the observatory, visit their website at: <http://www.astro.caltech.edu/palomarnew/>

For more information about the park call (760) 742-3462.

Refugio State Park, 20 miles West of Santa Barbara on Highway 101 at Refugio Road, offers excellent coastal fishing as well as trails and picnic sites. A bike trail along the beach bluff connects the beach with [El Capitán State Beach](#) 2.5 miles east. The park offers astronomer-led stargazing with telescopes and constellation talks once a month beginning in May. For more information about the park, call 805) 968-1033.

For more information about California State Parks, go on line to www.parks.ca.gov

