

# Half Moon Bay State Beach



## Our Mission

The mission of the California Department of Parks and Recreation 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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***www.parks.ca.gov***

### **Half Moon Bay State Beach**

**95 Kelly Avenue**

**Half Moon Bay, CA 94019**

**(650) 726-8819**

Cover Photo courtesy of Frank Balthis

*Nearly four miles  
from north to south,  
the sweeping views  
of Half Moon Bay  
allow perfect  
wildlife watching.*



**J**ust off Highway One in Half Moon Bay, four small beaches stretching south from Montara Mountain form the gentle two-mile curve of fine, white sand that is Half Moon Bay State Beach. To the east the Santa Cruz Mountains frame a dramatic backdrop to this captivating north central coast region known to local residents as the “Coastside.” To the west the enduring Pacific rolls vigorously across the broad, flat beach. The breakwaters of Pillar Point to the north have a buffering effect on the surf, and the waters at this end of Half Moon Bay State Beach form a calm surf.

The Coastside weather pattern is typical of the north central coast, with cool morning fog and highs in the mid-60s during the summer. Spring and fall bring clear, crisp days, while wind and rain—broken by an occasional bright, sunny day—rule the winter months. Dressing in layers is recommended.

## PARK HISTORY

### Cultural History

By the time Europeans arrived here, this area had been occupied for thousands of years by as many as 50 separate and politically autonomous native groups known as the Ohlone. Each group had its own leader, customs and territory, though some smaller groups were connected by shared boundaries, intertribal marriage and similarities of language.

According to the diary of Father Francisco Palou—biographer and successor of Father Junípero Serra—the native people were friendly, offering the Spaniards food and guidance through the steep arroyos.

Also linguistically referred to as Coastanoans (a name bestowed by the



*Bikers on the Coastside Trail near Dunes Beach*

Spanish, meaning coast people), the Ohlones' ecologically rich territory extended from the marine environment of today's San Francisco inland to the oak/grasslands of the western edge of the San Joaquin Valley and south to present-day Carmel. Today's coast Highway One and Highway 92 over the mountains faithfully follow trails created by the Ohlone.

Housing was simple and food was plentiful. Alongside trout- and salmon-rich freshwaters, the Ohlone used willow branches as frames for their dome-shaped dwellings, thatching them with dried tule, cattails or light brush. The ocean provided an abundance of fish, shellfish and sea

mammals, and the inland areas were rich in acorns, berries, roots, barks and nuts. The people—skilled agriculturists—practiced cultivation, controlled burning, pruning and re-seeding in order to encourage the growth of herbs, medicinal plants and desirable food sources. These methods of land management also produced natural forage that would lure local game animals.

The Ohlone hunted large (deer, bears, elk and sea mammals) and small (rabbits, squirrels, skunks and various birds) game for food.

Some Ohlone artifacts found at the park have included tools of obsidian and other sharp stones, artfully woven baskets, jewelry, clothing and weaponry. What the native people could not make or gather they obtained in trade with other native groups.

In the mid-1700s, Spanish missionaries arrived and drew the native people into

the mission system. The decline in the Ohlone way of life began with the loss of their lands and grew rapidly with the introduction of European diseases. By 1810 nearly 70 percent of the Ohlone had perished from disease or had fled to other areas. Former Ohlone lands—the nucleus of today's San Mateo County—were granted to Spanish settlers in the 1840s.

The native people had managed the land productively without overexploiting

it, but those who took it over changed its natural ecology.

In spite of these challenges, today's Ohlone descendants continue the use of native plants and are reviving their languages and passing on their honored traditions.

When the gold rush brought immigrants from Mexico and Chile to the area, San Benito earned the nickname "Spanishtown." Its remarkable diversity began during the

late 1800s, when groups arrived from Canada, Italy, Germany, Ireland, China, England, Portugal, Scotland and the Pacific Islands. The first official mention of Half Moon Bay is on an 1854 Coast Survey sketch of Spanishtown.

Before Highway One was built, Prohibition (1920 to 1933) had caused a proliferation of speakeasies along the coast. This area's hidden coves and thick fog made it perfect for the eagerly awaited ships of Canadian



rumrunners to unload their illegal whiskey onto smaller boats headed north to San Francisco.

### **Natural History**

The rugged coastline of Half Moon Bay State Beach, one-half-mile west of Highway One on Kelly Avenue, consists of four smaller beaches with a two-mile crescent of shoreline. Over the years geologic movement and nearly constant erosion have created a diverse system of mountains, canyons and

marine terraces. Located within the active San Andreas and Seal Cove-San Gregorio-Palo Colorado fault zones, the coastline shows the uplifting, faulting and folding actions of millions of years of seismic activity. Semiprecious stones are sometimes found here, with various forms of quartz (agate, chert, jasper, hydrolite and onyx) prominent.

Inland, sand dunes change constantly according to the season. In winter, wind and storms tend to carry the sand out to sea, but the milder wave action of summer months

brings it back. Primary sources of new beach sand are eroding bluffs and sediment from the Sacramento and San Joaquin Rivers.

### **Plants**

The plant communities of Half Moon Bay are not as diverse as they were when this coast was pristine. The introduction of non-native species such as sea fig, cape ivy, New Zealand spinach and poison hemlock has affected the survival of native plants and animals.



Along the Coastside Trail, visitors will see California poppies, beach primroses, sand verbena, lizardtail, wild radish, mustard, coyote bush and yellow bush lupines. The bluffs and terraces of the higher elevations have been altered for agricultural purposes, diminishing the presence of the native sage scrub that once dominated the area.



*Horse trail along the Coastside Trail*

### **Animals**

The most common birds in this area are migratory and resident water-associated birds such as western snowy plovers, western, California and glaucous-winged gulls, brown pelicans and sanderlings. Offshore, migrating gray whales, California sea lions and harbor seals provide great wildlife watching.

At Frenchman's Creek the willow shrubs that grow along the banks make this riparian

area attractive to a number of bird species, including red-tailed hawks, barn owls, red-winged blackbirds and American kestrels. Coyote bush is home to white-crowned sparrows, and jackrabbits and brush rabbits nibble along the trail's edge.

### **RECREATIONAL ACTIVITIES**

Coastal access is available at Roosevelt Beach, Dunes Beach, Venice Beach and Francis Beach.

#### **Camping**

The Francis Beach campground has 52 family sites, some suitable for tent camping, others for trailers or recreational vehicles. Although hookups are not available, there is a dump station. Coin-operated hot showers are also available.

#### **Trails**

The level, 4-mile multi-use Coastside Trail extends along the beach's eastern

boundary from Kelly Avenue north to Pillar Point and south to Poplar Beach, offering spectacular ocean views. A horse trail parallels the Coastside Trail between Roosevelt and Francis Beaches; horses are not permitted on the beaches. Restrooms are adjacent to parking areas.

#### **Fishing**

From late spring through summer, Half Moon Bay is noted for good runs of surf smelt. Anglers use throw nets and are known to bring along gear to catch the striped bass that sometimes follow the smelt.

#### **Swimming**

Swimming is not recommended here because of extremely cold water temperatures and unpredictable rip currents.

#### **Surfing**

Surfing conditions here are nearly impossible to forecast because of the unpredictable weather and surf action. However, depending on the direction of swell and the level of



*Campground at Francis Beach*





the tide, lucky surfers have been known to catch some memorable waves, particularly around the southern end of the crescent. A mile offshore Pillar Point, where waves can reach 20 feet in height, the world-famous Maverick's surfing spot is for experts only. The gentle swells at The Jetty near El Granada make it perhaps the most popular surfing spot in the area for beginners.

### Visitor Center

The park's visitor center features information and exhibits about the cultural and natural history of the area. Summer hours are Thursday through Sunday from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.

Call the park for winter hours.



*Western  
Snowy Plover*

## Sharing the Beach with the Western Snowy Plover

The western snowy plover that nests at Half Moon Bay is a sparrow-sized, light-colored shorebird with dark patches on either side of its neck, behind its eyes, and on its forehead. The Pacific coast population of the snowy plover, found on flat, open beaches, in dunes and near stream mouths, is a threatened species.

Extremely difficult to see, the small, well-camouflaged bird lives and nests in small depressions in the sand. Much of the snowy plover's habitat exists in coastal units of California State Parks.

The bird nests in spring and summer, and the first month of life is the most challenging for plover chicks. The young plovers are under constant stress from people, feral cats, visiting dogs, native predators, and even high-flying kites that resemble raptors.

The snowy plover has lived on California beaches for thousands of years. However, today its survival is seriously threatened.

If the snowy plover is to survive human use of its natural habitat, it needs our help. In California's state parks, plovers are monitored to determine their numbers, banded to allow later identification, and protected

behind temporary fences while they nest and nurture their young. Non-native plants are removed, and predators are kept under control; if necessary some portions of the beach may be closed to dogs and people. California State Parks, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and other coastal land managers work together to ensure the success of this small shorebird.

Avoid approaching fenced or posted habitat areas; lighting fires or camping on the beach except in designated areas; and disturbing areas that provide the plovers with nesting and feeding habitat. Because of the snowy plover's threatened status, it is protected by the federal Endangered Species Act, and anyone who harms or disturbs the plover or its habitat may be cited and fined.



Photo courtesy of Frank Balthis

## PLEASE REMEMBER

- There are no lifeguard stations at Half Moon Bay State Beach. Always use caution in or near the ocean, which is very cold year round. Even a short swim can cause cramps or hypothermia (a life threatening condition in which your body temperature drops below normal). In addition, strong rip currents can pull even the most experienced swimmers offshore.
- Dogs are not permitted on the beaches. When in the campground, in the day-use picnic areas, or on the Coastside Trail, dogs must be on a leash no more than 6 feet long.
- Horses in the park are restricted to the designated horse trail and are not permitted on the beach.
- Beach fires are NOT allowed.
- Shells, driftwood and other natural beach features are protected by State law.
- Fireworks are prohibited.
- To prevent vandalism, lock your car, activate the car alarm and take the key with you. Hide valuables out of sight. Report any suspicious activity to park staff.

This park is supported in part through a nonprofit organization. For more information contact:

San Mateo Coast Natural History Association  
c/o Año Nuevo State Reserve  
New Years Creek Road  
Pescadero, CA 94060  
(650) 879-2041



## NEARBY STATE PARKS

**Point Montara Light Station**, 25 miles south of San Francisco off Highway One, (650) 728-7177

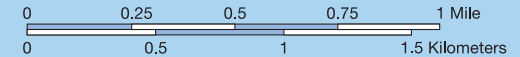
**Montara State Beach**, 8 miles north of Half Moon Bay off Highway One, (650) 726-8819

**San Gregorio State Beach**, 10.5 miles south of Half Moon Bay off Highway One, (650) 879-2170

## ACCESSIBLE FEATURES

- The Coastside Trail through the park is paved and accessible.
- Francis Beach camping, picnicking and beach access via a beach wheelchair are available. Four campsites, three restrooms, parking and outdoor rinsing showers are accessibly designed.
- The park Visitor Center and Information Center are both accessible. Accessibility is continually improving. For current accessibility details call the park, or visit <http://access.parks.ca.gov>.

## Half Moon Bay State Beach



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Map by Eureka Cartography, Berkeley, CA





### Legend

- |  |                    |  |                       |
|--|--------------------|--|-----------------------|
|  | Paved road         |  | Information           |
|  | Horse Trail        |  | Parking               |
|  | Trail              |  | Picnic Area           |
|  | Accessible Feature |  | Ranger Station        |
|  | Campground         |  | Restrooms             |
|  | Campfire Center    |  | RV Sanitation Station |
|  | 1-52 Campsites     |  | Showers               |
|  | Gate               |  | Telephone             |
|  | Group Campground   |  |                       |

Accessible sites:  
15, 28, 34, 44

**FRANCIS BEACH CAMP-GROUND AREA**

Map showing 52 numbered campsites (1-52) and various amenities including restrooms, showers, picnic areas, and a visitor center. The map also shows the Coastside Trail, Balboa Blvd, and the Park Entrance.

**Inset Map Legend:**

- Park Building
- Road
- Trail