



California State Parks Video Transcript



Coast Nature Walk at Wilder Ranch State Park

Morning everybody. Welcome to Wilder Ranch State Park. My name is Liz Ryan, and I'm going to be leading the nature walk this morning. We have a fine misty early morning in late August, and we're hoping that today we'll see some of the diversity and wildlife that we have here at Wilder Ranch.

Behind you is Wilder Creek, which flows into the ocean. Once we get up onto the trail, it's called the Old Cove Landing Trail, we'll be walking with that creek to our left and that forms a wildlife preserve. And hopefully, as I say, we'll see some good wildlife there. So, let's head up onto the trail.

I mentioned that Wilder Ranch has a great diversity of wildlife, and part of the reason for that is because it extends from the shore of Monterey Bay, where of course we can possibly see things like starfish, up to a high ridge where you would be seeing redwoods. The trail that we'll be walking on runs along the coastal bluffs, so we'll be looking down at the ocean. There'll be lots of places to be looking. We'll be looking in the bushes along the trail, probably for birds, and then we'll have to keep our eye on the water to see what kind of sea creatures we might see out there.

VISITOR: How far is it out here?

LIZ: We're going to be walking for maybe a quarter of a mile to the point where we reach the coast. And as we do that, as I mentioned earlier, to our left will be a nature preserve that protects the wetlands formed by Wilder Creek and a little delta and beach where it finally reaches the ocean. Moving off to the left now here . . .

VISITOR: What are these? Are these the same flowers here—the yellow ones and the ones that have gone to seed?

LIZ: No, they're actually not. This stuff that's gone to seed is one of our common weeds. As we go along, I'm going to be sort of concentrating on the native plants that we might see. Of course, we're late in August and almost the first of September. You asked about a plant—this is one of the common native shrubs that we have along here. This is coyote brush, and you'll be seeing that throughout as we walk along.

VISITOR: That's an odd name. Are there coyotes?

LIZ: Coyote brush. There are coyotes. Again, that's one of the animal species that we won't be seeing, probably, on this walk. But in the backcountry we have not only coyotes, but we

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also have mountain lions. On this trail extremely unlikely that we would ever see a mountain lion. But if we're quite lucky, we might see a bobcat. A bobcat of course would be much smaller than a mountain lion, and it does have a tail at most about a foot long with a white tip.

Now we're crossing some railroad tracks here. This is a railroad track that was put in just about 1900. As you notice, it's on a trestle, and the trestle is filled, so that really created a dam for Wilder Creek. They had to, of course, cut a little opening for a culvert so the creek could pass under. As we walk along now, you'll see that we're coming to a wetlands that is formed by Wilder Creek. This wetlands is a nature preserve so that there's no access by trail to the preserve, but we can look down to our left as we go on and be on the lookout for the kind of animals that might be living down there. Wilder Creek here forms a freshwater wetland, which is a really important ecological niche and very scarce in California.

This is another of our native plants, the California sagebrush, and you'll see that throughout here. For those of you who are into cooking or gardening, it's not a sage, although it tastes and smells a little bit like a sage. For you gardeners, it is an artemisia and not a sage. If you look off now to the left, you'll see that we have riparian growth, lots of willows, alders, those type of bushes that grow close to the creek and form a habitat within the wetland. We'll keep our eye out as we walk along here and, with any kind of luck, we might see a small herd of deer that's taken up residence down there and that would be the California black-tailed deer.

This wetland is actually a recovering wetland. In the background behind you, you probably hear the sound of a tractor. There is farming that goes on within the boundaries of the park. And that's true because farming is a historic part of what was always here. At one time, when the park service got this area, this whole area was farmed, and so we are trying to restore the wetland to its original form. For one thing we would like to see steelhead trout return to Wilder Creek. Without the wetland to purify the creek and to provide haven for the young fish while they're building up their strength to move out into the ocean, the steelhead would simply never return. The presence of farming in the park is really important from our point of view, too, because the fields also provide a habitat. Right here in this area we're beginning to see a variety of birds. They're going past pretty quickly so we may not get a good look at them. We saw swallows in the air off to our left and in the distance a long line of pelicans. So this is just another example of the diversity that we see in Wilder Ranch, because now we're seeing land birds and sea birds, all from one vantage point. Down here you can see the wetland a little more clearly because the growth is less dense here, so you can see perhaps some cattails and some tule reeds down here—plants very typical of a wetland.

This is probably a good time of day to be out on the trail because the wind hasn't yet come up, and that's why we're seeing a lot of birds sort of hunting along here. That was a cliff swallow that just went past. And if you look behind us on the hillside there, you'll see evidence that the wind is typical because you can see those conifers there that have been wind-pruned, really, to the contour of the hillside. So we have here a prevailing northwest wind for much of the year.

You were asking earlier about whether the wetlands becomes more wet down here, and one thing you can see is that the creek begins to meander more. You can see a real change in vegetation, and you can see how important the moisture of the wetland is to sustaining that greenery down there. So, as I'm walking along here, I'm keeping my eyes to the left just in case we might spot those deer.

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Look at this, we were just saying this time of year most of the flowers were out of blossom, but here is a beautiful California wild rose, and if you look just behind the blossom, you can see the rose hip. This is the stuff that's loaded with vitamin C that people take.

VISITOR: Wow, I would never have expected to find roses out here so close to the ocean.

LIZ: That's a really nice little surprise. It's next to a thistle here, which of course is . . . whatever it is. It's nice to see that thistle in the background, too, because it's really a nice vibrant purple there. Okay, let's continue on up the trail here.

VISITOR: I'm just so surprised to see wild roses out here so close to the ocean. There's some more, and there's more.

LIZ: Yes, we've got quite a lot of them. It's ironic—one of the things about going on a nature walk at Wilder Ranch is that you never know exactly what it is you're going to see. So here we are looking for deer, and instead of deer we come across a surprising wild rose.

Okay, we're at the stage now where we're getting a nice view of the fields over to our right here. Within the park are some leased agricultural fields and, for the most part, organic farming that happens inside the park. That's another unique feature of Wilder is that it's trying to preserve all of what was historically part of the central coast of California, and the coastal farming is an important part of that.

Of course, this portion of the trail, on both sides, of us we have coyote brush. We've got shrubs on both sides, and that makes a really nice habitat for the California quail. We haven't seen the quail yet, but here it looks to me as though we're seeing a lot of footprints that look suspiciously like quail. A large number of quail just in this area.

VISITOR: Because they seem to run in groups or families, don't they?

LIZ: They do, particularly when there are young quail that are not yet quite independent. Then the quail basically get together and communally protect them and raise them.

VISITOR: Is it true that they have scouts when they're feeding and so forth? Like they have a scout quail that makes a sound, a warning sound or something?

LIZ: Yes, I often see sort of a "sentry" quail perched on a fencepost, for example. Here we have the coyote brush again. It's very common to this part of the central coast and notice here—looks like this one is getting a coat, a nice covering of lichen here on this branch. Lichen, of course, is a combination of an algae and a fungus that basically coexist cooperatively. This is a nice view of it, too. It's sort of pretty, isn't it? Take a look at this down here to our left. We were just talking about coyotes brushing up against coyote brush, and here we have good evidence that there are coyotes in the area because this looks clearly like coyote scat. You can see little furry things in there.

VISITOR: So they eat little field mice and things like that?

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LIZ: Right. Now of course we've been following Wilder Creek along. We saw it start out, begin to meander, and it's finally just about to reach the ocean. This is the first point where you really get a view of Wilder Beach extending on into the ocean. Of course the ocean right here, this is part of Monterey Bay, which in turn is part of the Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary. This is all preserve down here, so the beach is entirely foreclosed to human intrusion.

At this point now we're very clear that we're at the coast because you can feel the breeze, you can smell the salt air, and we hear the sounds of gulls. We're about to get a nice overlook view of Wilder Beach. We can see what kind of birds might be visiting the beach today.

VISITOR: Great, let's go take a look.

LIZ: All right. Oh yes, we've got a beautiful pelican just cruising into the beach taking his place among the gulls here. We have lots of western gulls down here, a couple of pelicans. Oh, look at that, behind the gulls and the pelicans just to the left are some terns. It's difficult from here to see exactly what type of terns those are. I would guess they might be Forster's terns. They have very vivid beaks, all the terns do, or at least all the terns who come here.

You may also notice the cliffs in the background there. That's a good view of the mudstone cliffs, the Santa Cruz mudstone cliffs, that we have alongside the bay at this point. See that cliff is just almost completely vertical. In fact, if anything, it slants just slightly seaward from the vertical, and what that indicates is that from a geological point of view this is a cliff that's under construction.

By the way, over on the cliff, as your eyes move to the left of the cliff, you'll see some buildings. That's actually part of the University of California Santa Cruz marine science program. It's called the Long Marine Laboratory; it includes the Seymour visitor center. Those two silos there, or what appears to be silos, are actually tanks to hold saltwater for purposes of exhibits. That's an interesting neighbor for Wilder Ranch State Park to have. You can visit the park and then go over to the marine lab and get some more information on some of the sea creatures that we see.

Actually, we don't often see dolphins from the trail here. So this is quite a treat.

Just in the fringe alongside the trail here we've got two little birds pecking away in the underbrush. There they go flying around a little bit. This is the California towhee, a very common bird in this part of the central coast, but outside California quite unusual. It's the California towhee. It's funny I haven't seen them here before.

[Sound of ocean waves]

Now here over on our left this is a nice assemblage of some seaside native plants. This plant right here that has some yellow blossoms on it still, this is a lizard tail, a California native plant.

VISITOR: The leaf looks a little like a lizard tail, or a lizard.

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LIZ: Yes, I think that's probably where the name comes from. Then off a little bit to the right of that you see the seaside daisy, nice kind of pale purple petals with a golden center. Just behind the lizard tail is a coast buckwheat, and again it's a little past its prime, but you can still see that there's some puffballs, and there's a very active bumblebee just getting the last good out of one of those coast buckwheat puffballs there. You're looking here at a young gull on the beach.

[Sound of wind blowing, waves crashing]

All right, down below here we've got a group of sanderlings, a type of sandpiper very common along the coast at various times of the year, just chasing the waves.

VISITOR: Wow, look at them run.

LIZ: Retreating from the wave, and then they'll follow it back in to try to scoop up any food that the waves have brought in for them. Really amazing energy. Oh, and there they all go off as a group. Another closer view of a harbor seal out here.

So we have a nice assemblage of harbor seals out there, just lined up on the rock. Harbor seals really rest during the day and hunt during the night, but their rest is about to be interrupted because as you can see, the tide is coming in and they're going to be getting wet pretty soon.

Down on this ledge here, on this rocky ledge, we've got at least two different types of birds. The birds on the left there are three birds sort of light gray, and if you get a good look at their face, if they'll turn their face to us obligingly, they have a very bright red, long beak. Furthermore, if you look really closely, I think you might see they have a bright red eye. These are oyster catchers, black oyster catchers is the species' name. To their right is a cormorant. This looks like a Brandt's cormorant, to their right. These oyster catchers are resident here in the park. This is a pair that we see frequently, and they've for the past couple of seasons had young. That long, red beak is actually flattened horizontally, and it serves as a real nice pry bar to open up mussels to pry mussels off of the cliff. Oh, look at that, along the boundaries of this rock if we continue on sort of to the right, of course you see more cormorants in companionship with some pelicans, California brown pelicans there. That's nice to see. California brown pelican of course, from a national point of view, is endangered. We see a lot of them here so we don't realize how rare they are, but we're sort of on their migration fly route. So we see not only those that are resident but also the ones that pass by here from the Pacific Northwest between there and Baja, California.

We're getting a good view right now into this little sea cave, and this is being carved into the face of the cliff, which is Santa Cruz mudstone, by the action of the tide. You can see we've got some wonderful reds and greens and various shades of pink in there. It's very nice. If you were to look right behind me you'll see what it is that's causing the cave. Because the tide is swirling right in as the tide comes in, I'm going to get very wet in a second and so will the sea cave.

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VISITOR: So here's a sea urchin test, and it's still pretty fresh. The spines haven't broken off very long ago. It still has that beautiful purplish color. It's been wedged into one of these cliffs. That's a beautiful specimen.

LIZ: This is a nice little assemblage here. We've got a bird feather.

VISITOR: We've got some kelp with the floaters and little cast off crab exoskeletons it looks like here.

LIZ: Here's one you can see pretty clearly is the outer shell of the crab. Neat, neat.

As you remember, the beach is called Fern Grotto Beach, and that's because of this cave that we're walking toward right now. We're standing right now sort of within the cave, and you may notice that we're being dripped on a little bit. This is the constant seepage that comes down from the cliff and nourishes all these ferns. This is a great place to come in the summer when it's a really hot day. Of course one of the things that has happened is while we've been on the trail, the fog has burned off so we now do have some sunshine. That's one of the things that happens at Wilder Ranch is that the weather can change very quickly, but this is weather we can change because we're in a rainstorm right here, and if I move a foot away, now we're not.

VISITOR: Oh, look at all the swallow nests up there.

LIZ: We've been seeing cliff swallows in flight. This is a good example of their nests. These are mud nests that are going to be used year after year, actually, by the same swallows. The swallows, when they return in the spring, they do a little bit of fix up and rehab on the nests from whatever happened during the wintertime and then move back in.

If we go back up on the trail and proceed along, we're going to come to yet another beach, a second beach not far from here, but quite a different one, I think you'll find, and that will be called the Sand Plant Beach.

Well, this is a good overview of Sand Plant Beach, and you see it's really quite different. In the background there is a nice little freshwater wetland, and then as the stream continues on down, it forms a little lagoon. Sometimes during the year saltwater will come up in there, so we actually have a small estuary, which is yet another habitat that we've got at Wilder. Let's take a walk on down to the beach and see what might be waiting for us today.

By the way, the word sand plant refers to the fact that in the backcountry, or upstream from us, is a sand quarry—that kind of a plant. This is the creek that comes down from there. And in here I have at various times seen minnows, I've seen egrets fishing of course, so there must be fish here. I even once, to my great surprise, saw a bobcat who was stalking the egrets. I found it really quite surprising.

VISITOR: Oh, wow, I wouldn't have expected a bobcat so close to the beach.

LIZ: No, but in any case, right now today it looks pretty quiet on our beach. Well, I'm going to terminate the official walk here, and I hope you've enjoyed it, and I hope everyone has enjoyed it. With the harbor seals in the background, the ocean in the background, this is a good place

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to end. When we started out, I said that Wilder Ranch had a great deal of diversity in terms of natural habitats and wildlife. Today we've seen quite a bit of that. It's been predominantly sea creatures today that we saw in terms of large animals. We saw the harbor seals. We had a real treat in seeing the dolphins. We got a distant view of the sea otters, many birds—I'm glad that we got to see the oyster catchers. Our land wildlife was limited pretty much to squirrels and rabbits

VISITOR: And bumblebees.

LIZ: --and bumblebees. Yes we don't want to forget the bumblebees. But I hope that we've gotten a good notion of the fact that when you come to Wilder Ranch you're never sure exactly what kind of creatures you may see, whether they're going to be land, sea, or air creatures. So thank you all for coming.

VISITOR: Thank you, Liz. Thank you for a great tour.

Running Time: 30 minutes
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