



California State Parks

Video Transcript



Where Do We Fit In? ***(Clear Lake State Park)***

Renowned naturalist John Muir once said when we try to pick out anything by itself, we find that it is hitched to everything in the universe. Nothing illustrates this thought better than the Clear Lake basin--a delicate balance of competing yet interconnected forces. Cradling the largest natural lake in all of California, the Clear Lake basin today is noted for its fertile ground supporting agriculture, for its water recreation and sports activities, and for its abundant wildlife. We often forget that human activities affect our natural surroundings and can harm the environment in ways that we can't predict or control. Maybe it's time to ask ourselves . . .

Where do we fit in?

Clear Lake may very well be the oldest lake in North America. As much as two-and-a-half million years ago there was a stream flowing through this valley, a little spotty lake along its margins. The lake gradually grew into a larger lake at about the same time volcanoes began to erupt around the shoreline. There was absolute dance between the lake and the volcanoes, with eruptions creating craters which became new bays on the lake. Other flows, including flows of obsidian, pouring out across the surface, sometimes carving off corners and sometimes creating new smaller lakes along the edges.

We're out here today looking at some continuing evidence of that volcanic activity. Rising through fault lines that underlie the floors of this lake are gases coming forth from the magma chamber and rising to the surface like a witch's cauldron. We see places where these bubbles emerge from the floor of the lake some forty feet below the surface through circular tube-like caves that extend down as much as a hundred feet, teeming with life. In the sediments of Clear Lake we find the record of the ancient life here--fossils of horses, camels, even the woolly mammoth; the ground sloth lived here.

It's little wonder that that when the first people arrived on the continent of North America, some of them chose to call Clear Lake home. Arriving here over ten-thousand years ago, the earliest inhabitants found an abundance of natural resources. Plants such as willow and tule were especially important, providing not only food but materials for clothing, baskets, shelter. Tule was even used for building boats. Food was plentiful in the lakes and streams, which were alive with fish, turtles, and clams, and also attracted countless birds and other wild game. Today's Lake County Pomo Indians still go to Mt. Konocti and other special places to gather important plants for food, medicine, and ceremonial uses, always careful not to harvest too much from any one area.

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This is what is known as “angelica,” or in our Pomo language as “vahco.” It’s a doctoring root. It’s used for fasting and to give a person individual strength. And there is so much to the usage of it; it’s a very important plant to all of the ceremonies, and all the doctoring and all of the tribal activities at the roundhouses. We always use sticks from the area, we never use anything man-made to dig traditional medicine; that way it will replenish itself. And we leave everything the way we got it and we just take the herbs that we use.

From the magnificent to the mundane, every plant and animal has its role and all are interwoven in the dynamic tapestry that we call an ecosystem. Many of these fragile and complex relationships are illustrated at the Clear Lake State Park Visitors Center, which uses dioramas, murals, and other displays to offer unique views into the natural features of today and ages past. Special presentations are also made by park rangers and volunteers, who are happy to share their special knowledge and experience.

RANGER STEVE WOODS: The shoreline tules at first glance appear as if they are very, very ordinary, but in reality they play a very important role in the ecosystem here of the lake. Many of the Clear Lake fish enjoy the protection of the tules and swim up to the tules to spawn and lay their eggs. Also, the tules provide protection for their young, a place where the young growing fish can grow and mature up in the tules--a protected area. Lots of different types of birds like to nest in the tules, including the western grebes, the yellow-headed blackbird, the virginia rail, and many others. Several different types of mammals, reptiles, and amphibians--they all depend on that tule habitat for their protection.”

One of the more flamboyant members of the Clear Lake ecosystem is the western grebe, a graceful diving bird that nests and raises its young among the tules. Their elaborate courtship rituals are both majestic and comical, including dipping, weed shaking, bob-preening, and a maneuver called rushing, which resembles an avian drag race. The western grebe population was in jeopardy during the 1950s, was affected by insecticide use in the area. However, in 1960 spraying of DDT was banned and the population of western grebes has returned to near normal levels. It’s important that we remember that we made some errors with the insecticide usage, and that man can influence these animals--man is their greatest enemy. And it’s important that we are aware of that and we take care of these animals so that we can protect them for future generations.

NARRATOR: Rapid changes continue to occur as the human presence spans across the Clear Lake landscape, and forest and chaparral are reduced to make way for homes, businesses, and agriculture. Lakeside development has destroyed over eighty-five percent of the tule habitat around the water’s edge, and channel-clearing threatens the last remaining natural streams.

We’re at one of the last few remaining natural creek areas as it empties into the Clear Lake basin, and a few feet from one of the busy highways in our area. The motorist may not be aware that down here a great drama is taking place, for on these gravel beds, every spring a unique fish species called the “hitch” make their way up to lay their eggs. They have a short time though, because the streams dry up pretty fast, so they and the developing fry have to make their way back into the lake to find protection and shelter in tule areas and other such places. Should these gravel bars be removed for reasons of channelizing the creek or

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whatever, important habitat for this fish would disappear and the fish too may become extinct from the Clear Lake basin.

Clear Lake State Park offers a chance to observe and interact with our natural surroundings. It's a place to reflect on the words of John Muir and to consider the connections that tie Clear Lake's plants and animals to its land and waters.

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Running Time: 9 minutes

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