

For the adventurous hiker who wants spectacular views, the Ridge Bluff 8-mile loop is outstanding

# Molera's a hike and a half — and right in our backyard

By MEADE FISCHER  
Special to The Herald

**M**y first memory of Andrew Molera State Park is from the early '70s. The park was a recent addition to the state system and still unimproved. The parking lot and most of the trails were not in place. The old dirt road through the meadow to the beach was a remnant from when the park was a working ranch.

We walked the mile to the beach and the mouth of the Big Sur River. Even then, the surfers had discovered it, and three guys with boards were camped out on the headland at the point. Otherwise, the area was deserted. The park was a chaos of meadow and forest. I imagined it to be as it was when the Esselen Indians had it to themselves.

In 1834 Juan Bautista Alvarado, the future governor of California, got a land grant of almost 9,000 acres from the Mexican government. The land stretched from the Little Sur River to Cooper Point. In 1840 Alvarado traded Rancho El Sur to Capt. John Rogers Cooper. The land was passed down to his children, eventually to a daughter who married E.J. Molera, whose son was Andrew Molera.

It was a working farm, dairy and cattle ranch for many years. Upon Andrew's death, his sister Frances took control of the property, selling it to the Nature Conservancy in 1965, while retaining occupancy and grazing privileges until her death in 1968. The land was transferred to the state, but remained a working ranch until 1972, about the time I first visited.

The park — 20 miles south of Carmel on Highway 1 — has 24 walk-in camp sites about a third of a mile from the parking lot. Having to walk to camp discourages people with heavy camping gear, so one can find a site at Molera when other areas are full.

The numbered sites are a



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fairly recent change. Originally, there was just the large meadow, and campers would find a spot a comfortable distance from the next camper and set up a tent. In the '80s, it cost a dollar to camp, and often the camper would have cleared out before the ranger came around to collect. There were a couple of outhouses and no potable water.

Now one gets an actual site, and it costs \$10 per night, still a bargain compared to the rest of Big Sur.

For day use, one can pay the \$8 parking fee or park on the

highway and walk in.

There are nearly 30 miles of trails in the park. Many people simply walk from the parking lot to the beach, a two-mile round trip. For the adventurous hiker who wants spectacular views, the Ridge Bluff 8-mile loop is outstanding. The preferred route is to cross the river and take the River Trail to the Hidden Trail, a steep three-quarters of a mile climb to the Ridge Trail. Then it's a gradual climb on a dirt road to the top, at over 1,000 feet elevation. There's a bench at the top, affording a view of the park,

Point Sur, Pico Blanco and Post Summit. It's a great place for photography and lunch.

Return via the Bluff Trail, which wanders down toward the beach, through wildflowers and coastal brush. It affords a continually stunning view, and there are side trails to secluded pockets of beach. The trail back to the parking lot intersects the bottom of the Bluff Trail, but a few yards further is the beach, a must stop on a sunny day.

There is also a trail on the east side of the highway, a few dozen yards south of the entrance. This climbs almost

1,600 feet in 2.5 miles before exiting the park and continuing on another 2 miles and 1,600 more feet to the top of Post Summit. This is a very strenuous hike, best saved for a cool day.

For people who want to explore without hiking, Molera Horseback Tours will guide you along the river, meadows and along the beach. You can reserve a horse in advance or simply show up.

There is also fishing in the river and ocean and a sheltered surf spot at the mouth of the river, where the waves wrap around Cooper Point.

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