

SAN ELIJO LAGOON ECOLOGICAL RESERVE



Map and Trail Guide

Cover photo by Al Butler

LAGOON AMBASSADORS

San Elijo Lagoon was formally dedicated as a county park and state ecological reserve in 1983. By conserving rare habitats, we ensure the survival of native plant and animal species, as well as the preservation of public recreational opportunities.

CONTACT US

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San Diego County Parks and Recreation
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San Elijo Lagoon Conservancy
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California Department of Fish & Wildlife
858-467-4201 • wildlife.ca.gov



LAND AND OCEAN CONNECT



Welcome to San Elijo Lagoon Ecological Reserve, one of San Diego's largest coastal wetlands, and home to an exceptional diversity of plants and animals. The 979-acre reserve is primarily a shallow-water estuary, formed where Escondido and La Orilla Creeks meet the Pacific Ocean.

Twice daily, incoming tides cover much of the landscape with salt water. As the tide ebbs, mudflats are exposed that are rich with invertebrates, providing food for shorebirds and ducks. Fresh water from rain-fed creeks and storm drains mixes with the salt water. The plants and animals in this estuarine environment have evolved to survive at the intersection of land and ocean.

TRAILS AND RECREATION



Explore seven miles of easy to moderate trails and hike the quarter-mile moderate to strenuous **Annie's Canyon Trail**. Whether you are a runner, hiker, birder, photographer or painter, the lagoon provides natural solace and recreation. Trails connect wetland habitats of coastal strand, salt marsh, freshwater/brackish marsh, riparian scrub, coastal sage scrub, and mixed chaparral.

Each visit is unique. The lagoon is renowned for its abundant wildlife, revealed sometimes with a splash, as a Striped Mullet leaps from the tidal waters. Winds carry the fragrance of coastal sages and Western Fence Lizards bask in the sun. Look east for the elusive mule deer often observed at the lagoon.

TIDES OF CHANGE



Coastal wetlands perform natural benefits. These ecosystems filter pollutants, improving coastal water quality. Lagoons provide hatcheries for young fishes and refuge for resident and migrating birds. We rely on this wetland for its natural inspiration and health-promoting benefits in our coastal community.

Ninety percent of California's coastal wetlands have been replaced by urban development. San Elijo Lagoon is a valuable part of what remains. Beginning in the 1800s, the railroad and highway bisected the lagoon, reducing its natural exchange with the ocean. Successful efforts have improved water quality and wildlife habitat by annually dredging the sand-blocked inlet. This restores tidal exchange critical to the health of this estuarine habitat.

PACIFIC FLYWAY



Bays and estuaries are important places for birds to refuel and rest during migration. Each year, millions of shorebirds and waterfowl travel the Pacific Flyway migration route along North America's western coastline. Some species migrate thousands of miles between northern breeding areas and southern wintering areas. More than 40 percent of North American bird species have been sighted at San Elijo Lagoon, which serves as an important stopover.

NATURE CENTER



2710 Manchester Ave. • Cardiff-by-the-Sea, CA 92007
Park Office 760-634-3026

Nature Center Hours: 9 a.m. – 5 p.m. daily
Trail Access: Sunrise to Sunset

Begin your visit at the LEED Platinum-certified nature center. Designed with a focus on energy efficiency and natural resource preservation, the nature center offers live animal exhibits, cultural and historical displays and information on local flora and fauna.

Restrooms, water fountains, and balcony-view seating are provided. Outside, the ¾-mile ADA-accessible loop trail reveals expansive views of birds foraging in salt marsh and mudflat habitats.

The Nature Center is available for private events, meetings, and birthday parties.

EARLY INFLUENCES



Native peoples relied on the lagoon's rich resources. Early Kumeyaay and Luiseño built villages along upland areas. The first Spanish expedition in 1769 led Gaspar de Portolà to these shores. Mexican ranchos in the 1840s introduced grazing cattle, sheep, and irrigated crops. Later, European settlers cultivated grains and beans on the lagoon's hillsides.

As the population grew in the 1940s, an area was set aside as settling ponds for sewage. This practice continued for decades, greatly reducing the biological value of the lagoon.

PRESENT DAY



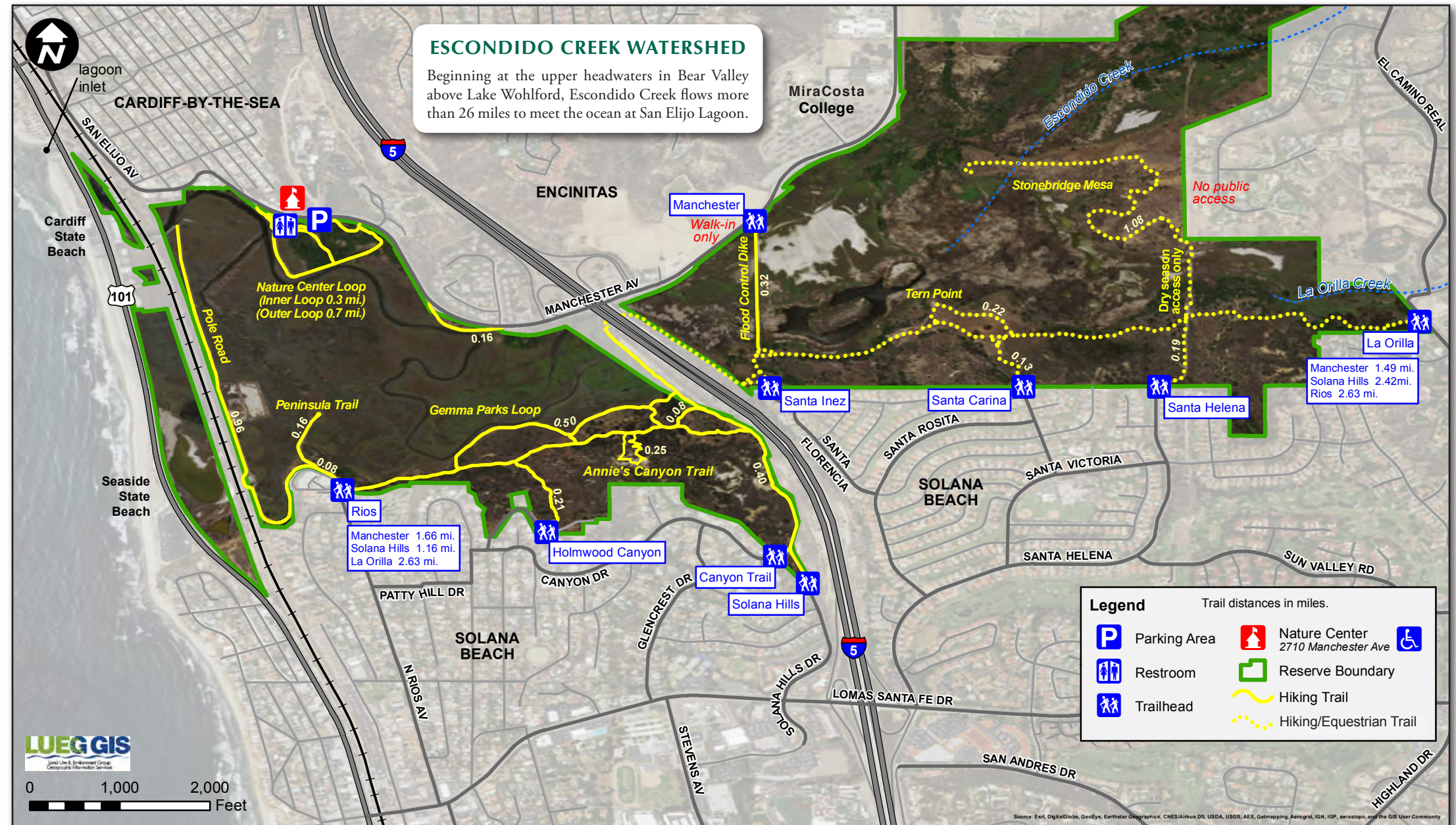
Prior to the passage of clean water protection acts in the 1970s, San Elijo Lagoon was slated for development. Various plans were considered, from a marina with 750 homes to a water park attraction. Citizens organized to save this lagoon. Volunteers led tours, cleaned debris, and hosted membership drives. Founded in 1987, San Elijo Lagoon Conservancy became the nonprofit land trust for the Reserve. Management of the reserve is shared by county, state, and conservancy collaboration.

Visitors today can enjoy free nature tours, school field trips, family events, and habitat restoration projects that foster stewardship for this natural place.

RESERVE REGULATIONS AND ETIQUETTE

- TRAIL USAGE** Walk, jog, and hike on established trails only. Trails are open daily from sunrise to sunset.
- WILDLIFE** All wildlife and resources are protected. Feeding wildlife and releasing any animal or plant is prohibited.
- PETS** Pets are permitted if they are licensed, restrained on a leash no longer than 6 feet, and attended to at all times. Pets are not recommended on the strenuous loop of Annie's Canyon Trail.
- EQUESTRIAN ACCESS** Equestrians are permitted on trails east of I-5. Please yield to horses and their riders.
- VEHICLES** Bicycles, motorcycles, and all vehicles are prohibited.
- RECREATIONAL WATER ACCESS** Recreational water use, including use of SUPs, kayaks, and swimming, is prohibited.
- VEGETATION AND NATURAL FEATURES** All plants, animals, natural features, and archaeological resources are fully protected and may not be damaged, injured, or removed.
- REMOTE CONTROL AIRCRAFT** Remotely piloted aircraft and drones are prohibited.
- FIREWORKS AND WEAPONS** Fireworks and weapons are not permitted.
- FISHING AND HUNTING** Fishing and hunting are prohibited in the Reserve.
- LITTER** Litter and dog waste can harm wildlife. Please dispose of it properly in the provided receptacles.
- SMOKING** Smoking, including the use of vaporizing products, is not permitted.

San Elijo Lagoon Ecological Reserve



Native Plants and Animals

