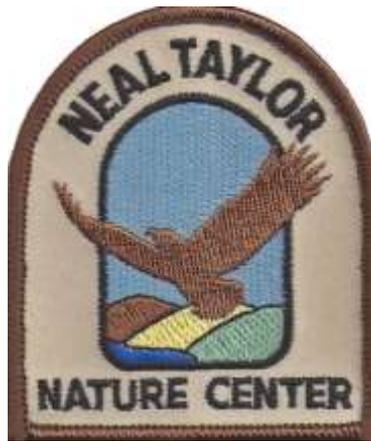


# **A Self-Guide to the Don Wimpess Nature Trail**

**(Formerly known as the Oak Canyon Trail)**

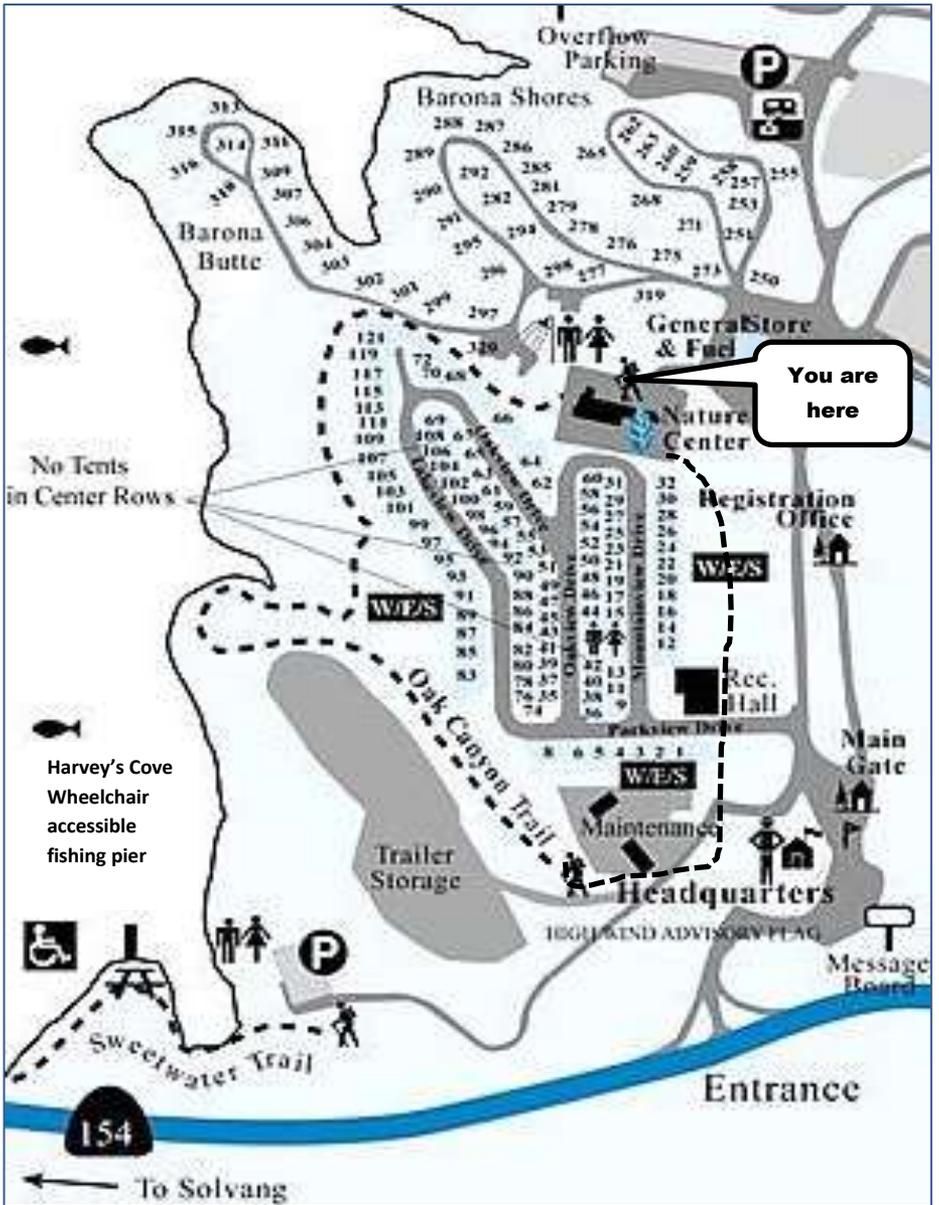
This guide will lead you through and describe the various habitats of  
the ½-mile nature trail loop.

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**Enjoy your hike!**

Produced by the Neal Taylor Nature Center at Cachuma Lake



The trail starts in the front of the Nature Center. Go west across the lawn in front of the Nature Center to the large oak tree behind the rest rooms.

This tree in front of you is a Valley Oak (*Quercus lobata*) and is one of the two

predominant types of oak in the park. It is deciduous, meaning it will lose its leaves in the wintertime.



It is the oak most commonly found on the open plains of the Santa Ynez Valley. This oak is becoming increasingly scarce because the younger trees are not replacing the older trees. This scarcity is caused by a number of factors. One of the contributing factors is the depredation from cattle, which eat the young tree sprouts, as well as the acorns that fall to the ground. A young oak must be able to survive for several years before it is large enough not to be destroyed by cattle. Other factors contributing to the decline of the oaks are depredation from gophers, the lowering water table from pumping, and soil tilling, which uproots young seedlings. In the past, many of these oaks were cut for firewood.

Take notice of the large number of small holes in this tree. If you look closely, you will see that many of these holes are filled with acorns. This is the work of a commune of Acorn Woodpeckers--likely a mating pair and their relatives. They all chip in to support the nesting pair and will remain in this location year-round. The Acorn Woodpecker will select certain trees in their domain as “granary trees” and will continue to drill holes in which to store acorns as a food supply when other foods, such as insects, are scarce.



Keep looking around on your walk and see if you can spot other granary trees.

If you look carefully, you can see several holes about 1 ½ inches in diameter. These are the nest holes for the woodpecker. If you were to wait around for a bit, you would most likely see several woodpeckers in this area.



Woodpeckers aren't the only wildlife using this tree. Observe the place where a large branch has broken off exposing the interior of the tree. This makes an excellent home for a tree squirrel, possum, raccoon, or owl. The abandoned woodpecker nests sites are also used by smaller birds.

Continue westward on the paved road out towards the Barona Butte area. You will pass over a small draw and into a woodland of Coast Live Oaks (*Quercus agrifolia*).



These are the oaks of the cooler areas and do not shed their leaves during the wintertime. The leaves of the Live Oak are oval in shape and somewhat cupped with small spines on the edges. If you look closely at the underside of the leaves you can see little brown hairy growths at the intersections of the leaf veins. These are known locally as “hairy armpits,” and it is a unique characteristic of the Coast Live Oak. The acorns are smaller and more bitter than those of the Valley Oak. Also, the interior of the tree contains more tannin and does not rot out as fast as the Valley Oak.

Alongside the road are a number of sandstone boulders that have scale-like plant growth called “lichens.” A lichen is a unique organism which is a combination of fungus and an alga that mutually support each other. The fungus provides the structure, and the green (or sometimes other-colored) single cell of the alga, which is distributed throughout plant, photosynthesizes food for the lichens.

Cut across the grassy field to the left. Here there are a number of oaks that have a lacy-like structure hanging from their branches. This is not Spanish Moss, but another form of lichen. This lichen on the trees is Lace Lichen and obtains all of its nourishment from the air and sunlight. Sunlight provides the green algae in the lichen with the power to produce food. Water and necessary trace minerals come directly from the air. You will find this plant only in areas that have early-morning fog.

Lichens in general are very sensitive to air pollution and are one of the first plants to show stress when the air is polluted. Lace Lichen used to be plentiful in Santa Barbara but have since vanished due to increased air pollution.

This lichen had many uses for the indigenous Chumash Indians, as they did not have paper products like paper towels, absorbant cloth products, sponge or rubber padding. The lichen served all of these purposes.

Continue southward through the grassy area or along the trail near the edge of the drop-off to the lake. Across the lake you can see Bradbury Dam, which forms Cachuma Lake on the Santa Ynez River. This rockfill dam is a type of embankment dam that was completed in 1953 as part of a project to supply water to the south coastal areas of Santa Barbara County. A 6.4-mile tunnel,

drilled through the mountain, carries water from Cachuma Lake to the south coast. In 1996, Lake Cachuma connected to the state water system to possibly obtain state water during local droughts.

A bird that is very common in this area year-round is the Scrub Jay.



The Scrub Jay is about 12 inches long and has a blue back and a gray breast. It is usually quite noisy and conspicuous. These birds also like acorns, but instead of placing them in holes in trees, they bury them in the ground. They do not find all they bury. They only retrieve approximately 80%, making the Scrub Jay the great planter of oak trees in this area.

Near the south end of the grassy area, a trail comes down from the left. This is the entry from the wheelchair accessible parking Lot. Straight ahead a wide trail leads out into the chaparral. This is the start of the original section of the Don Wimpress/Oak Canyon Trail.

**DO NOT PICK ANY FLOWERS  
LEAVE THEM FOR OTHERS TO ENJOY**

Before entering the chaparral (brush) you should become aware of poison oak (*Toxicodendron diversilobum*), which is a plant that can cause severe skin irritation when the oil (urushiol) of the plant gets on your skin. All parts of the plant are toxic; the leaves, stems, roots, flowers, and berries.



## Poison Oak

### **DO NOT TOUCH THIS PLANT!**

Unfortunately, it is a very common plant in this area and grows throughout the chaparral and under the Coast Live Oaks throughout the park. Do not let your dog roam through the brush, as the oil from the plant can be transferred to your dog's fur and then to you. Despite all of its irritating side effects to humans, the poison oak plant does have some positive attributes to offer, such as erosion control, nesting material, and a food source for some animals.

As you enter the chaparral, look for this plant with the shiny leaves with three leaflets. The color of the leaflets could be green, red, or a combination of the two colors depending on what time of the year you are visiting. In the winter months, poison oak sheds its leaves, displaying only its stem. Don't be fooled: the stem is just as toxic as the leaves.

If you come in contact with poison oak, wash off the oil as soon as possible with soap and cold water. Take extra care when removing or handling your shoes and clothes after hiking, as the oil from the plant can be transferred from these items onto your skin, even days later.

Continue along the trail, noting the many types of chaparral shrubs and flowers. If you are particularly interested in the identification of the many plants, you can find information about them at the Nature Center. During the year, the Nature Center has descriptive lists and displays of the plants in bloom during that time of the season.

Soon you will come to a bridge across Oak Creek. Look around in the brush and you will notice some 2 to 3-foot high piles of small sticks. These mounds are built by the Big-Eared Woodrat, formerly known as the Dusky Footed Woodrat, to protect their nests. They are rarely seen, because they are shy and only venture out at night. Keep your eyes open for more nests as you make your way along the trail.

After crossing the bridge, you enter an area that is much more shaded and cooler. Here you will find plants with larger soft green leaves that like the cool, shaded environment. In this shaded and damper area, the plants need large leaves to absorb adequate sunlight and to prevent the tendency for evaporation. Here we have several types of ferns growing. These are primitive plants that reproduce by means of spores. The ferns along the trail are the Maidenhair Fern, Coffee Fern, Coastal Wood Fern, and the Goldback Fern. Compare the following pictures with the ferns you see.



Maidenhair Fern



Coffee Fern



Wood Fern



Goldback Fern

You may see another plant with fern-like leaves, but it has clusters of very small flowers and seeds. This is a member of the Parsley Family and is closely related to carrots and many common herbs such as oregano. There are also several members of the Carrot Family along this part of the trail. Their leaves vary from finely divided to broad and round.

Along this section of the trail, you can find the Blue Elderberry (*Sambucus mexicana*), with its large compound leaves.



These plants are found intermittently throughout the chaparral belt. The Blue Elderberry has clusters of white flowers in the spring which later develop into berries that are eaten by birds, animals, and people. Quick-growing shoots of this plant have soft, pithy centers and are often quite straight. They were used by the local Indians to make clapper sticks and flutes.

***Factoid- The generic name “Sambucus” comes from the Greek word meaning “flute.”***

As you come out on the point overlooking the lake again, there is a large green bush off to the right that has dark green leaves up to 4 inches long and 1 inch wide with toothed edges. This is the Toyon (*Heteromeles arbutifolia*), aka “California Holly” or “Christmas Berry.” It has clusters of beautiful red berries in the winter and was at one time (before present laws forbidding it) widely collected to be used as Christmas decorations. Hollywood, CA was named after this plant, which at one time grew in profusion in the hills north of the city.



Toyon Plant

A little further along the trail, you come out into the drier chaparral and to a fork in the trail. The trail that turns back sharply to the left is the one you will take. Straight ahead, the trail leads to Harvey's Cove parking area. Before you turn, look at the mountains to the south and the terrace across the lake.

The mountains to your left are the Santa Ynez Range and were uplifted, starting approximately 3 million years ago, along the Santa Ynez Fault, which runs east-west along the range about a mile south of here. This fault is a lateral-thrust fault. For example, it displaced in both the lateral and vertical directions, the vertical displacement being several thousand feet. This fault is relatively inactive at the present time.

The northern slopes (what you see from here) of these mountains are densely covered with thick chaparral and broadleaf trees such as oaks, bays, and ash. The terrace directly across the bay and the one on which you are standing are composed of rocks and dirt washed down from these slopes during heavy rain that occurred thousands of years ago at the close of the Ice Age.

The trail now leads up over a slight crest of the ridge in a drier chaparral community. The predominant plants here are the Scrub Oak, Chamise, Purple Sage, and Coastal Sagebrush. Many of these plants have very small leaves, often whitish and/or waxy-coated, to prevent loss of water in the hot sun. In the springtime, many small grasses and wildflowers grow in the open areas between these shrubs, but during the dry summers, they completely dry up and disappear.

A typical dry area shrub is the Chamise, of which there are many specimens in this area.



It is the most common chaparral shrub in California. In this area, it grows about 6 feet high, but in Northern California it can be 15 feet high. It is well adapted to this dry area in that it has very small wax-coated leaves that do not transpire much water. Also, it is well adapted to brushfire cycles to which it is exposed. It has a large root crown just below the surface, and this will send up new shoots very soon after a fire has burned through.

As you cross the low ridge, you again enter the deeper chaparral of a less-shaded north slope. Here, the predominant shrubs are the Mountain Mahogany, Ceanothus, and Scrub Oaks. Beneath these are smaller shrubs, one of which is the Hillside Gooseberry (*Ribes californicum*), which usually has 3 spines at each node along the stem. The fruits, which appear in the spring, are also spiny.

As you proceed further up the canyon, the brush gives way to more open Coast Live Oak woodland with lots of poison oak. The oak canopy is so dense that not many plants can survive in the deep shade. Here we can see an unusual characteristic of poison oak. If it grows next to a tree, it will develop into a vine and climb many feet into the tree. Look at the many trees between here and the road, and you will see this characteristic.

Next, you come out of the primitive part of the trail and onto the paved road. Follow the road to the left around the park's maintenance yard. As you go around the maintenance yard, you see to your left a hedge of Toyon. This plant, native to the area, is widely used in landscaping. To the right is open oak woodland consisting almost entirely of Coast Live Oaks. The ground beneath these oaks has been mowed but not watered. Over the years, this area has developed its own mixture of native and non-native understory plants.

In this area, there are a large number of California Ground Squirrels. If you stop and watch for a while, you are sure to see a few of these animals. They are pests to farming communities, but they are a good food source for a number of mammals, birds, and reptiles, such as coyotes, foxes, bobcats, mountain lions, hawks, and snakes.

Proceed past the entrance to the maintenance yard and on to the grassy area alongside of the recreation hall and RV campground. As you cross the mowed area, notice the small flowering plants that are growing in the grass. They include Dandelions, Bur Clover (small yellow pea flowers), Oxalis (small yellow flowers with 5 petals), Fillaree (small 5-petaled violet flowers), Speedwell (small blue and white flowers), Geranium (small reddish-purple flowers), Scarlet Pimpernel (Small 5-petaled salmon flowers), and Chickweed (small white flowers that have 5 deeply lobed petals which make it look like there are 10 petals). There are also several type of grasses. All of these are non-native plants. Most of them are from the Mediterranean region. The regular mowing of the area has completely changed the plant life to these foreign species which can withstand frequent mowing.

You soon pass under a small grove of trees that have been planted here. These are cottonwoods with single triangular leaves and ashes with their compound leaves, each having several leaflets. Note the green bush-like clumps in the branches of these trees. The clumps are mistletoe, which is a parasitic green plant that grows on other plants and derives much of its nutrients from the host plant. In fact, the infestation can be severe enough to kill the host plant.

Mistletoe is a flowering plant that has green leaves that produce some of its own food, and its flowers produce little white sticky berries. Some birds like to eat these berries and in the process get some stuck to their beaks. The bird may

then fly to another tree, wipe its beak on a branch, and thereby spread the seed to another tree.

This is a good place to see some of the birds of the area. Look around the trees and telephone poles and see woodpeckers, Brewer's Blackbird, cowbirds, crows, starlings, and maybe an occasional hummingbird. Sometimes there is a Great Blue Heron out on the lawn hunting for insects, or maybe a gopher, frog or a mouse.

Before reaching the Nature Center, notice the tree with rows of lots of little holes. These holes were made by the Red-breasted Sapsucker. They drill these holes so the tree will leak sap, which attracts ants and other insects which make up a major part of their diet.

Follow the gentle swale down along the fence to the east of the Nature Center and to your starting point. We hope you have enjoyed the walk and have found it to be informative.

## **Thanks for exploring the Don Wimpess Nature Trail!**

Also, take a minute to stop by the Nature Center to explore the many exciting displays and exhibits offered there. If you found this guide helpful and would like more in-depth information about Cachuma Lake and the history of local area, please stop by the Nature Center's gift shop and purchase the Cachuma Lake Guide Booklet.

# Donald Stanley Wimpress



September 18, 1921 - April 17, 2011

Don was born on September 18, 1921 in Riverside, California to Charles Stanley and Alline Kirkpatrick Wimpress. He graduated from Glendale High School in 1940 and received his Bachelor's Degree in Mechanical Engineering from the University of California, Berkeley in 1950. After graduation from High School, Don worked briefly for the Sequoia and General Grant national parks, then for 2 years with the California Institute of Technology in Pasadena on their Eaton Canyon rocket project; then another 2 years in the U.S. Army receiving a discharge as a Second Lieutenant after service in Germany. Finally, two more years with the U.S. Naval Ordnance Test Station at Inyo-Kern, California, before entering a university.

Upon taking an early retirement in 1980 Don and Betty moved to the Santa Ynez Valley where he became actively involved in community work with Los Olivos and with Lake Cachuma. In 2010 Santa Barbara County recognized his contributions to the Cachuma Lake Nature Center, naming one of their hiking trails the Don Wimpress Nature Trail.

He wrote two books about the plants of Cachuma Lake that are used as resources for volunteers and Park naturalists. He wrote, with contributions from other volunteers, the booklet, "A Cachuma Lake Guide," which details facilities and services offered by the Park, as well as information about the natural and human history of the Cachuma Lake watershed.

Don was an avid outdoorsman who enjoyed hiking, camping, trailering, motorcycling and boating.