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by Matthew Jaffe
Cayucos to Cambria



While the Nature Conservancy and the Hearst Corporation continue to negotiate the future of San Simeon Point, new acquisitions to the south have opened up beautiful stretches of coast to the public.

Just north of Cayucos, trails now traverse Estero Bluffs, a 3 1/2-mile stretch of coastline that was acquired by the Trust For Public Land in 1998. Here, pelicans dive for fish while cormorants and other seabirds chatter and crowd rock islands. Harbor seals laze on small rocks just above the waterline; sea

otters announce their presence with a rapid tapping sound as they crack open shellfish.

More hidden from view is the 430-acre East-West Ranch, which sits between residential oceanfront areas in Cambria, 13 miles north of Cayucos. Here, the 1-mile Bluff Trail runs through grasslands colored in spring by lupine and poppy. Locals have assembled large benches and chairs from driftwood and rope, and even a small bridge across an arroyo. Come here on the right day and you might catch one resident playing his bagpipe along the cliffs as the mist veils the land and the sunset fires the horizon.

The northern San Luis Obispo County coast has a way of producing such magical moments. Along one 3 1/2-mile loop hike at San Simeon State Park — which happens to be closer to Cambria than San Simeon — you'll pass through wetlands, a Monterey pine forest (this is the southern range of this rare tree), riparian woodlands, and open grasslands.

Near the trailhead at the marsh, a bobcat works its way across a meadow and toward a thicket. At the same time, a doe and a pair of fawns emerge from the brush only about 20 yards from the bobcat. The animals appear oblivious to one another until some Steller's jays begin to call as the bobcat disappears into the growth.

Then the doe does a strange thing. She leaves her fawns and walks back to the spot where the bobcat walked into the scrub. She pokes her head in and, apparently satisfied that the bobcat poses no threat, returns to her young, who go on their way.

It may not quite be the lion laying down with the lamb. And the northern San Luis Obispo coast isn't quite paradise. But for the residents here, elephant seals and otherwise, it comes pretty darn close.

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