

SANTA CRUZ

More trails set to open at Gray Whale

Gray Whale Ranch
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✓ Roughly 10 miles of new trails are set to open to hikers, equestrians and bicyclists at Wilder Ranch State Park next year.

Or at least legally open.

Most of trails already are in place, leftover from logging days. But while they haven't been officially opened by the state Parks Department, it is common to find visitors on the routes.

The trails are on the Gray Whale Ranch section of Wilder Ranch, east of Highway 1 just north of Santa Cruz. A walk through the forested park yields occasional ocean views, and visitors might see a hawk or bobcat.

"You can go out there and have a nature experience just minutes from the city," said John Buchanan, supervising ranger. "You can see all the way to Monterey on a clear day."

For more than 18 months, an advisory committee of sometimes divergent trail users, environmentalists and park staff have mulled over which trails to open. Ten trails were considered, but only five of them would be opened, in addition to nine already used by the public, under a plan now being circulated. Four of the new trails would be available to hikers, cyclists and equestrians while the other one would be for walkers only.

"A lot of these trails won't take much work," said Ralph Fairfield, chief ranger for the Santa Cruz district. "We could open them up as soon as its approved."

That approval process is ongoing. The trail plan is under review and open to public comment through Dec. 8. Once that process is complete, the plan would need Coastal Commission approval.

Buchanan said the new trails could be open by the spring, but called that "optimistic."

The property contains federally listed animal and plant species like the Ohlone tiger beetle and the Ben Lomond spineflower. Fairfield said the trails were studied with those kind of issues in mind. In some cases the trails will be rerouted and the state can close them if needed.

Save the Redwoods, a non-profit conservation group, bought the 2,300-acre Gray Whale Ranch in 1997 to preserve as open space, then turned the property over to the state parks department.

Comments on the trail plan are being accepted through Dec. 8. Copies of the plan are available at the state parks office in Santa Cruz at 600 Ocean St. or by calling 916-445-8789.

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