

# Caswell Memorial State Park



## Our Mission

The mission of California State Parks is to provide for the health, inspiration and education of the people of California by helping to preserve the state's extraordinary biological diversity, protecting its most valued natural and cultural resources, and creating opportunities for high-quality outdoor recreation.



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### CALIFORNIA STATE PARKS

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### Caswell Memorial State Park

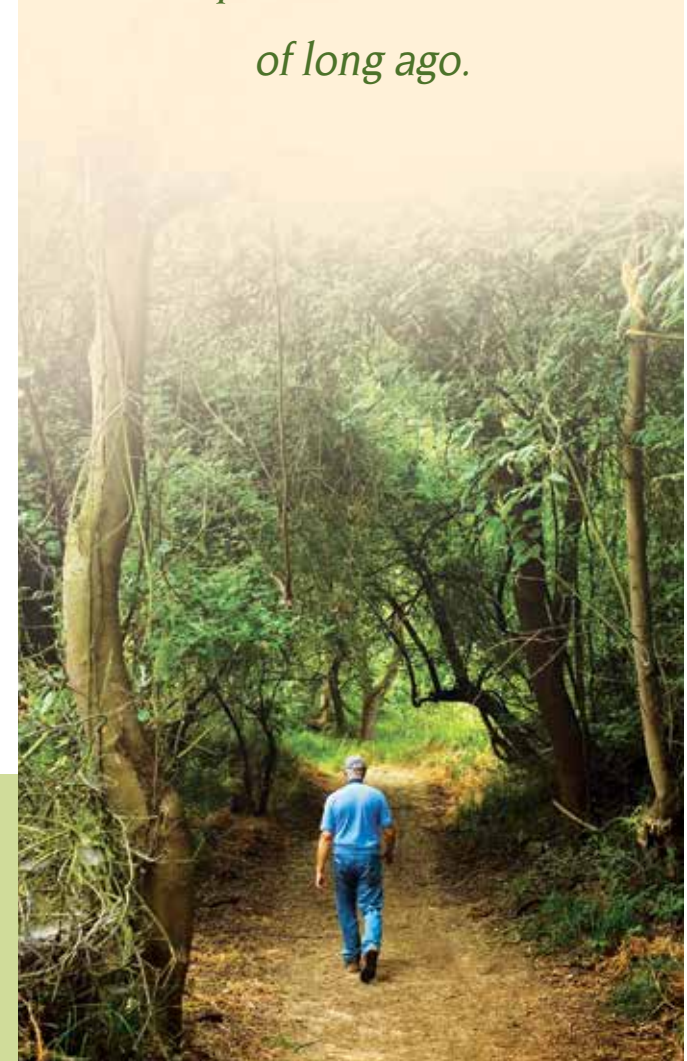
28000 South Austin Road

Ripon, CA 95366

(209) 599-3810

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*To enter  
this ancient forest  
is to step back in time  
and glimpse a  
riparian woodland  
of long ago.*



A

**small, wild refuge in the midst of California's Great Central Valley**, Caswell Memorial State Park is situated on the Stanislaus River near the town of Ripon. This riverside park's 258 acres protect what is considered one of California's finest examples of a mature oak riparian forest. Once a prominent feature in the landscape of the Central Valley, today these riparian forests are extremely rare.

The Stanislaus River winds along the south side of the campground and day-use areas. The park offers activities such as camping, picnicking, swimming, fishing, tubing from the campground to the day-use area, bird watching, and hiking. Fishing is popular, and fishing spots are plentiful along the sandy main channel of the Stanislaus River or the extremely slow-moving oxbows. Largemouth and smallmouth bass, catfish, bullhead, bluegill and other sunfish, crappie, and pikeminnow thrive here year round. Striped bass and Chinook salmon annually migrate through the area.

### **PARK HISTORY**

For millenia before recorded history, native people lived in the forests along the Stanislaus, Tuolumne, and San Joaquin Rivers. Now known as the Northern Valley Yokuts,

they made use of the rivers' stable food supply of fish, acorns, and large and small game.

Spanish colonists began establishing a mission system along the coast of California in the mid-1700s. The influence of the missions on the native people triggered a rapid change in the Yokuts culture.

The area of the Stanislaus River became historically significant in 1829, when Estanislao, a former convert from Mission San José, led an uprising against the Mexican army. After four attempts, the Mexican army defeated Estanislao and his followers, and the river came to be known as "Rio de Estanislao," in honor of the brave chieftain whose name is Spanish for Stanislaus.

The Yokuts way of life began its decline during the 1830s. Vast numbers of native people died from disease, the harsh life at the missions, and war. In 1833 a severe malaria outbreak killed one-third to one-half of the native people. Four years later, a smallpox epidemic swept through the California Indian population.



*Thomas Caswell on his Modesto ranch, ca. 1920*

Seven hundred acres of riparian forest along the river were purchased by Thomas Caswell, a farm equipment manufacturer and rancher, in 1915. In 1950 the Caswell family created a legacy for the people of California by donating 134 acres of forest to be preserved as a state park, so future generations might experience the valley in its original natural state.

### **NATURAL HISTORY**

One of the rarest habitats in California is the riparian woodland. The term "riparian" refers to vegetation or habitat along rivers and streams. A vast forest once covered much of the Central Valley's riverbanks and floodplains. What you see in the park today is just a remnant of this once much larger forest. Thanks to the forethought of the Caswell family in protecting what was left, the park now includes a large area of mature riparian forest.

A variety of micro-climates can be found within the riparian zone; as a result, the vegetation is a mosaic of different species. Dense willow groves grow along the shore of the river. Willows also grow in the lower, wetter areas within the park, providing excellent feeding, nesting, and shelter for many species of small birds.







*Great horned owl*

Just inland from the willows, but still in the wetter and more frequently flooded areas, cottonwoods stand. As some of the tallest trees, they provide nesting habitat for the

threatened Swainson's hawk and other raptors and owls. Sycamore trees are also found in this area. Higher areas that historically were flooded for shorter periods of time are predominantly vegetated with a valley oak forest.

The majestic valley oak is the largest species of oak in the United States. Some of these mature oaks are more than 60 feet tall, with a circumference of up to 17 feet. Valley oaks produce long, slender acorns. Many insects, birds, and mammals depend on these acorns as their main food source for part of the year.

A rich understory of wild rose, blackberry, currant, and sedge flourishes. This tangle of undergrowth provides protection and food for a large variety of wildlife, such as rabbits, woodrats, raccoons, weasels, skunks, foxes, and opossums. In the evenings, listen for

the great horned owls hooting in the surrounding trees.

The valley's riparian woodland has been devastated by water reclamation and flood control efforts. As the habitat has receded, the riparian brush rabbit and riparian woodrat have become endangered. Many conservation-oriented agencies are working on recovering these species.

### RECREATIONAL ACTIVITIES

**Trails**—One of the most magnificent aspects of the park is an abundance of extensive nature trails. The short trails offer a glimpse of what the riparian ecosystem of the valley looks like in its natural state.

**Camping**—In a pleasant, wooded area beside the river, 64 family campsites each have a table, camp stove, and food locker. The sites will accommodate trailers up to 21 feet long or motor homes up to 24 feet. Hookups are not available. The group campground will accommodate tent camping for up to 50 people, though it has been known to flood during the spring.

### ACCESSIBLE FEATURES

Four campsites, Oak Grove Picnic Area and connecting routes, parking, restrooms, and

showers are accessible. The self-guided 0.7-mile nature trail forms a loop from portions of four hiking trails, but assistance may be needed. A fat-tire wheelchair is available for loan. Accessibility is continually improving. For details, visit <http://access.parks.ca.gov>.

### NEARBY STATE PARKS

George J. Hatfield State Recreation Area  
4394 North Kelly Road, Hilmar 95324  
(209) 826-1197

McConnell State Recreation Area  
8800 McConnell Road, Ballico 95303  
(209) 394-7755

Turlock Lake State Recreation Area  
22600 Lake Road, La Grange 95329  
(209) 874-2056

### PLEASE REMEMBER

- **No lifeguard is on duty. Use caution** in the cold river water; water levels change rapidly. All visitors should wear life jackets while in or near the river at all times.
- Dogs must be kept on a six-foot-maximum leash and in a tent or enclosed vehicle at night. Except for service animals, dogs are not allowed on trails or beaches.
- Wood gathering is prohibited. All natural and cultural resources, including plants and animals, are protected by law and may not be disturbed or removed.
- Quiet hours are 10 p.m. to 8 a.m. Operate generators only between 10 a.m. and 8 p.m.
- Park only in the areas indicated and observe speed limits.



# Caswell Memorial State Park



## Legend

- |  |  |  |                   |
|--|--|--|-------------------|
|  | Major Road   |  | Group Picnic Area |
|  | Trail: Hike with Mileage                                       |  | Parking           |
|  | Trail: Accessible Loop   |  | Picnic Area       |
|  | Trail: Self-Guided Loop<br>(Wheelchair Assistance Recommended) |  | Ranger Station    |
|  | Accessible Feature   |  | Restrooms         |
|  | Campfire Center  |  | Showers           |
|  | Campground   |  | Swimming          |
|  | Campground: Group  |  |                   |
|  | Boat Launch: Hand<br>(Canoes and Kayaks Only)                  |  |                   |

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