

By Mia Taylor
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THE PLACE: It's hard to believe that such a peaceful stretch of open space exists so close to a busy commercial district, but that's exactly what's been created south of the Chula Vista city limits.

Opened in September, the Otay Valley Regional Park's first walking trail, off Beyer Boulevard, provides a serene setting for an outing. It's the first of six planned "staging areas" from which the public can enter the park. More trails are in the development stage and could be opened next year.

The trail, along with a new ranger station, restrooms and parking at the Beyer Boulevard location, is part of an effort to expand and improve the 900-acre regional park. It's a wide, flat trail that those with limited mobility can also enjoy.

You can begin your walk with a quick educational introduction to the valley and its plant and animal life, thanks to newly installed informational signs next to the ranger station. Nearby are sturdy tables, perfect for a picnic.

The new trail and staging area are in what's known as the Lower River Valley, which is home to a variety of animals, including the Southwestern pond turtle, skunks and California ground squirrels. Keep on the lookout for the occasional bobcat, raccoon or Western rattlesnake.

The park is a bird-watcher's delight, with species including the Cooper's hawk, the California least tern, the California gnatcatcher and the Western meadowlark. Look for mallards flying over Hollister Pond.

Among native plants are Orcutt's Bird Beak and San Diego Barrel Cactus.

As you pass the ranger station, walking farther along the trail, the sounds of traffic fade to a distant and barely noticeable hum, replaced by chirping birds.

The trail is bordered on one side by the tranquil Otay River and on the other by fields and meadows.

You're likely to have a walk here entirely to yourself, even on a sunny weekend afternoon, as the trail remains undiscovered. At just one mile long and mostly flat, it's an easy walk that doesn't require a huge investment of time.

Dogs are also allowed in this new open space as long as they are leashed.

LOCATION: Otay River Valley

HOURS: Dawn until dusk - **COST:** Free