

# OTAY VALLEY PATH FEATURES VIEWS OF PONDS WITH HISTORICAL TIES

## Kumeyaay people once populated river region; entire valley affected by 1916 flood

By Priscilla Lister Special to the U-T 12:01 a.m. Sept. 26, 2013 Updated 2:50 p.m. Sept. 25, 2013

There are about 8.3 miles of trails in the Otay Valley Regional Park, including this very easy loop of nearly 4 miles in its western area along the Otay River.

The trail skirts the river, which is dry in late summer, along with four small ponds that were created long ago for salt and gravel mining operations here.

The ponds today make for some pretty viewpoints as well as good spots for year-round birding.

More than 200 species of birds have been spotted in the park year-round, including great blue herons, snowy egrets, American coots, ducks, least Bell's vireo, coastal gnatcatchers and southwestern willow flycatchers.

Most of the habitat along this western portion of the park, because it's very near the coast, is maritime scrub and coastal sage scrub. Smell the sage as you walk along the trail, and in late summer, note the abundant yellow blooms of coastal goldenbush, common around river mouths and salty marshes, according to James Lightner's "San Diego County Native Plants."

Though Otay River is dry in late summer today, it wasn't always so. About 13,000 years ago, Kumeyaay people populated this river valley year-round, living on its abundant resources and free-flowing water that empties into San Diego Bay, according to a history of Otay Valley at University of San Diego. "Otai" is the Kumeyaay word for brush.

Father Junipero Serra chose the Otay River Valley as his first camp when he traveled north to establish the missions in what is now California, according to the park.

By the early 1800s, Spanish ranchos took over the area and cattle grazed around the river. Commercial salt production began here in the 1850s.

In 1897, the first Lower Otay Dam was built by the Southern California Mountain Water Co., then owned by E.S. Babcock and John D. Spreckels, with the intention to supply Coronado and the Hotel del Coronado, built by Babcock in 1888. The Upper Otay Dam followed a bit later.

But in 1916, after Charles Hatfield, the notorious "rainmaker," had been hired in December 1915 by the city of San Diego to bring some rain, the flood of January 1916 destroyed the Lower Otay Lake Dam and inundated the entire Otay Valley.

It destroyed the commercial mining companies begun in Otay Valley in 1912 by Henry G. Fenton, who had been a mule skinner (driver of mules) who hauled sand and rock for Babcock and his Coronado Beach Co. By 1915, Merrill Nelson bought property near Fenton and started another sand and gravel company, Nelson & Sloan, with partner Paul Sloan. Both companies rebuilt after the flood, and sand and gravel production continued in the valley for a long time, as it does now on a very limited basis.

The Salt Works operation that you can still see there today originated in this part of San Diego Bay in 1871 by Shaffer and Stone. In 1902, the Western Salt Co. was founded there by Graham Babcock, son of E.S. Babcock. Fenton eventually took over salt mining here in 1922.

One of the ponds you see on the trail is named Fenton Pond after the longtime businessman in this area.

This pond sits next to Willett Grove where a monument to its namesake, John Willett, also stands. Willett, a World War II veteran and father of Chula Vista's Mayor Cheryl Cox, was honored in 2009 at age 88 for his long service in making the Otay Valley Regional Park the beauty that it is.

In the early 2000s, the valley was filled with garbage, including refrigerators and abandoned cars, The San Diego Union-Tribune reported in 2009. Willett's cleanup efforts resulted in the removal of about 700 tires and 1,200 tons of trash in the river valley. As chairman of the Otay Valley Citizen's Advisory Committee, Willett organized many volunteers in this effort, but his leadership and dedication made it all happen.

Today the Otay Valley Regional Park is a multi-jurisdictional effort by the county of San Diego and the cities of Chula Vista and San Diego.

There are several trailheads in this regional park, which you can identify when you download the map. While the soft-surface trails and their intersections are not well-marked on site yet, you can't really get lost here, but you'll want to take a map with you. You'll pass through a commercial nursery and spot some of those old salt and gravel operations from afar.

But the ponds are the blue gems here, so take your time at them.

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