

THE SERPENTINE SCENE

Geology and vegetation

The South Hills are mostly serpentine, a mineral formed on the ocean floor more than 70 million years ago. As pieces of the Earth's crust pushed against each other, a mix of rocks rode to the top, eventually becoming the Franciscan formation that makes up the Pacific Coast Range of mountains.

The chemical and physical properties of serpentine make the soil unsuitable for agriculture. Because most other plants can't tolerate serpentine soil, native plants such as bunchgrasses and wildflowers continue to thrive in the South Hills.



Adobe Sanicle, one of the rarest wildflowers in California, grows around springs and seeps in South Hills and Laguna Lake.



Non-native red fox in a field of serpentine rocks.

Wildlife at South Hills

A survey of the South Hills identified 55 species of birds, 17 species of mammals, eight species of reptiles, and three species of amphibians as occurring or likely to occur there. These numbers are conservative and it is expected that continued survey work will reveal more wildlife species in the area.

Notable wildlife species observed at South Hills include the red fox, coyote, and several species of raptors including red-tailed hawks, kestrels, and peregrine falcons. Deer do not appear to stay in the South Hills but do wander through from time to time. Rodents are present in low diversity and include California mouse, deer mouse, vole, and ground squirrels.



San Luis Obispo Star Tulip



Chocolate Lily



Clay Mariposa Lily



Peregrine Falcon



Kestrel



Red-tailed Hawk



SOUTH HILLS

NATURAL RESERVE



Welcome to the South Hills

South Hills Natural Reserve is part of the City of San Luis Obispo's natural lands system. The blue-gray serpentine rocks underlie much of the South Hills, supporting high-quality native bunchgrass habitat, many rare plant species, rock outcrops, and great views.

Spring wildflowers can be abundant, including the adobe sanicle, star tulip, clay mariposa lily (*bottom, right*), Palmer spineflowers, California wild rose (*left*), and San Luis Obispo live-forever.

Preserving nature

Because of the fragile nature of this habitat, please stay on the trails. Hiking and biking are permitted on the Loop Trail, which is considered *easy to moderate*. The steep, rocky Ridge Trail is a *moderately strenuous* hike. Bicycles are prohibited. Please clean up after your dogs and never allow them to chase wildlife. Smoking is prohibited in all City Open Spaces. Take only pictures... leave only footprints.

Enjoy your visit!

Wayne and Kathleen Gann donated the first 7.5 acres for the South Hills Natural Reserve in 1981. John and Carole King donated 54.5 acres in 1993 and granted a public easement on another 71 acres in 2007, bringing the total current area to 133 acres.

The City of San Luis Obispo is grateful to the Ganns and Kings for their community-spirited donation of this scenic and ecologically rich area, for the benefit and enjoyment of wildlife, residents, and visitors.



CHEAPSKATE HILL



The view from "Cheapskate Hill" above the baseball stadium that was built on the former racetrack, still visible in the photo on the left, circa 1940s. The same view from what is now known as South Hills on the right, around 2006.

A "Sensational Racing Romance"

South Hills' main contribution to San Luis Obispo history was a great view of the auto races held at what was known in the early 1920s as Exposition Park. Paying fans could watch the races from the grandstand, but for those who didn't wish to pay, the view from "Cheapskate Hill" was just fine.



Ralph DePalma at Exposition Park in 1924. DePalma was a National Championship bicycle racer who enjoyed equal success in motor racing, once winning the Indianapolis 500 race.

The racetrack was not a commercial success, and the property was sold after about three years. The grandstand remained as part of a baseball field for a number of years, and in time, 18 acres of the original 80-acre property became Meadow Park.

Photos provided by Tod Rafferty and the Central Coast History Foundation.



In the early 1920s, Exposition Park's one-mile track was billed as the nation's fastest dirt oval and attracted the top drivers in the country.



At least one road race was held through the streets of San Luis Obispo. Here, local driver Fred Laelling in car number seven, left, attempts to overtake another racer at the corner of Nipomo and Palm Streets. The passengers in this race are mechanics.



HOLLYWOOD RACES TO SAN LUIS OBISPO

Local driver Johnny Holmes wanted to race in the 1923 film "Sporting Youth." During a qualifying run, as Holmes powered his Ford into the second turn, the steering arm broke. The car bounced over the inside bank and Holmes was thrown 50 feet, landing on his face and knocking all his teeth out. He was carried off the track on a door taken off a nearby chicken coop. His racing days were over. Forty years later, Holmes remembered, "those Model T Specials used to get up to a hundred miles an hour at Exposition Park." The day after Holmes lost his teeth and his chance to be an extra in the movie, Director Harry Pollard set up eight cameras around the one-mile circuit and caught the next accident on film. Lou Wilson's Duesenberg missed the turn and crossed the track, flipping end over end.

Universal-Jewel Pictures gave the San Luis Obispo Chamber of Commerce 1,000 feet of film to promote the track and the city, but by the summer of 1925, Exposition Park was losing money. After the fourth fatality in three years, the Daily Telegram reported that a bugler played "Taps" over the grave of Horace Wallace, "the local racing pilot for whom Death on Sunday flashed the checkered flag signifying the young man's last race was finished." Too many fans watching the action for free from Cheapskate Hill ended the races for good.