



Day Trip to Lopez Lake

Text and Photos by Ruth Ann Angus

The hills are green, and the days are gradually getting warmer. It is spring and the perfect time to visit one of our county's best attractions: Lopez Lake. The frenetic pace of the summer months—when the lake bustles with boaters and water skiers—is not



yet upon us, and there is a peaceful mood for you to enjoy the natural surroundings.

Pack a picnic and head out through Arroyo Grande Village into the countryside. Soon, you will approach the beginning of the lake. Lopez came into being in 1969, when the government flooded farmland—strawberry fields and all—to create a water supply for the growing Five Cities area. Two former Chumash villages located near the present dam are now beneath 160 feet of water, as is the original ranch belonging to Juan and Jesus Lopez. Trees and buildings were removed in preparation for the flood. It wasn't long, though, before area residents recognized Lopez Lake as a great recreation spot, and it became a popular county park.

The lake has 22 miles of shoreline, and afternoon winds make it a perfect place for sailing or windsurfing. Lopez is also a great place for a canoe or kayak trip. Good boat launching facilities are located adjacent to the marina

and store, where boat and equipment rentals are also available. Water skiing is especially popular.

Fishing is great at Lopez Lake, which is stocked with rainbow trout, bass, crappie, catfish and bluegill. You will find fishermen quietly angling in the backwaters of the lake's many arms.

If you love nature, then this is the place for you. More than 150 species of birds have been noted, and 30 mammal species. Among these are mule deer, which are easily seen browsing

the oak-studded hillsides. Coast live oaks, with their acorn abundance, attract the colorful and industrious acorn woodpecker. A master at saving up for a rainy day, this bird goes about in a serious manner drilling numerous holes in the trees. It then collects acorns and, one by one, stuffs them into the prepared storage receptacles for future consumption.

Turkeys also love the acorn-rich habitat at Lopez. They even have their own special trail named for them—Turkey Ridge Trail. This is their favorite roosting and feeding area, and they are so accustomed to people that you can get pretty close to them. During mating season, the big males strut their stuff, puffing up their feathers and fanning their tails. Turkeys aren't aerodynamic experts, but it may surprise you to see them well up into the trees. Their large wings make flying between trees difficult, and they never take long-distance trips. They roost in trees at night and make crazy, careening flights from the trees to the ground.

Hiking is a great way to experience the park's flora and fauna. Just walking beneath the stately live oaks is a treat. In spring, lupine, buttercups and popcorn flowers bloom among the hummingbird sage, sword fern and maidenhair. Of the numerous hiking trails, most are relatively easy. Some bring you to views of the lake, while others offer panoramic vistas. Along the way, you may see evidence of prehistoric times in the shell fossils embedded in the Santa Margarita limestone. This was an inland sea some 26 million years ago, and the remains of



Many migratory birds find Lopez Lake a great stopping-off point. A flock of American white pelicans often resides at one end, and eared grebes, cormorants, mergansers and other waterfowl dot the surface of the lake. One of the best ways to see the birds is to take a ranger guided nature boat tour. Park rangers will take you out on a comfortable, stable pontoon boat that can get back into all the twists and arms of the lake. If you're really lucky, you may spot a bald eagle perched in a tree, or an osprey hunt-

ing. ancient scallops and oysters stick out of the crumbly soil.

You can enjoy your picnic at one of the lake-side tables. You might even want to stay overnight at one of the tent or RV campgrounds rated among the best in the county.

For more information, visit www.slocounty-parks.org or call 788-2381. ♣