

SAVE CUESTA INLET!



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Newsletter 8.1.22

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Elizabeth Hale Design Studio

The beloved Cuesta Inlet has been listed on the market. We are a local group of community members trying to preserve this beautiful space for continued passive recreation. Teeming with bird, fish and plant life, these 13 acres include a tidal wetland that hosts a great many endangered native plant species, and a web of trails where neighbors and visitors walk, enjoy sunrises and sunsets, and launch kayaks, canoes and sailboats. Due to the building moratorium, development is very unlikely, but fencing off the entire area is not, if privately purchased. We have formed a non-profit to facilitate donations supporting the handoff of this cherished natural habitat to established local and county stewards for continued public passage.

A Brief History of Development at Cuesta Inlet from Lynette Tornatzky

"Cuesta Inlet is one of the few intertidal areas in California that is privately owned. In 1960, the Morro Keys Company intended to build a Florida type subdivision by raising 40 acres of submerged land to create 168 waterfront homes with private docks. Some dredging was done to create the shape it is today, but the project was stopped. What did happen was the small lots along the inlet and bay were lived on while waiting to build houses, and small shacks were converted into homes. The building moratorium in 1988 due to groundwater contamination kept anything more from being built." ✨



1964 overhead shot of Cuesta Inlet

The Chumash Legacy

by Thomas Shaw

Human nature cannot be traced exclusively to either biological or environmental influences — it is always a product of both. The early Northern Chumash who lived and thrived in the territory now called Los Osos and who left traces of their activities as far back as thousands of years BP (before the present), have both to thank for their success. Like all humans, the early Chumash survived on instinct and intelligence, but they also benefited from an especially resource-rich natural environment. The abundant marine life in particular (both shellfish and other spiny water dwellers) made it possible for Chumash in this area to survive and grow, and to become socially complex, politically well organized, and very knowledgeable about the world around them. They built tule balsa boats, sweat lodges and seasonal dwellings. They also designed beadwork [cont'd]

Background photo by Michael Sheltzer

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[The Chumash Legacy cont'd] and baskets, practiced shamanic religious rituals and used local plant narcotics (Datura, or Jimsonweed), and traded with neighbors. Although quality of life varied with water level changes and other ecological shifts, these early Northern Chumash might have been considered, in modern parlance, "happy campers." It should perhaps not come as any surprise, therefore, that the Cuesta Inlet in Baywood-Los Osos, a waterfront oasis both for early Chumash and for moderns, Chumash and otherwise, who now frequent the very same shores, is something of a magnet for happy campers of all walks. ✨



Salt Marsh Bird's Beak near Cuesta Inlet

Endangered Plant Profile: Salt Marsh Bird's Beak by George Pilling

There's a pretty little plant growing among the pickleweed and sea lavender at our local wrack line (where the tides leave behind floating eel grass, sea lettuce, and algae) – Salt Marsh Bird's Beak (*Chloropyron maritimum*, ssp. *maritimum*), one of many endangered species found in and near Cuesta Inlet. Listed in 1978 under the Federal and California Endangered Species Acts, and as a Native Plant Protection Act Species, it was once common, populating large areas of the shore from central California to Baja. But it's now found in only a few places – Morro Bay is the northernmost of these spots.

I went out with Carolyn Geraghty, Restoration Biologist with the Morro Bay National Estuary Program, to look for it, using a geolocator to find both familiar and new fledgling Bird's Beak patches, to assure a few plants were still healthy at each spot.

Like almost all plants, Bird's Beak photosynthesizes, making food from sunlight and carbon dioxide in the air. But this can be difficult along the foggy coast where the soils are salty and sandy with few nutrients and little fresh water.

So, Salt Marsh Bird's Beak has evolved the ability to latch on to a host plant's roots and "borrow" water and nutrients. The plant can thrive this way in the dry seasons and set seeds after most other annual plants have died. Host plants include pickleweed and several common grasses.

Salt Marsh Bird's Beak can grow to over a foot high, but the ones we saw were low to the ground. The pink flower opens more than in this picture, pushing the petals apart like a beak opening. The leaves are fuzzy with excreted salt. One spot near Cuesta Inlet has about ten plants, and a few grow in Sweet Springs Preserve.

Among the threats to Salt Marsh Bird's Beak are habitat loss from development that reduces the number and size of salt marshes, non-native plantings like ice plant, water pollution, recreational use (be careful where you step!) and pollution. In Newport Bay, for example, storm drains emptying into the salt marsh areas have altered necessary conditions for this and other native plants. Controlling tidal influxes in certain areas to protect bird nesting sites has decreased seed dispersal for the Bird's Beak. Mitigation is required when development, usage, or other factors change, but since there is so little natural habitat for this plant, there are few places where it can be established.

In each issue, we'll feature profiles of the rare, beautiful endangered species that call Cuesta Inlet home. Stay on trails, tread lightly, and savor every moment we have among these creatures. ✨