

8/25/93 HIKE  
START TIME = 0830 HRS.



## Nicholas Flat Trail

Season: All Year

Leo Carrillo State Beach to Nicholas Flat

7 miles round trip; 1,600-foot elevation gain

Nicholas Flat Trail departs from Pacific Coast Highway and climbs inland up steep, scrub-covered slopes to a wide meadow and a small pond. From its high points, the trail offers good views of the Malibu coast.

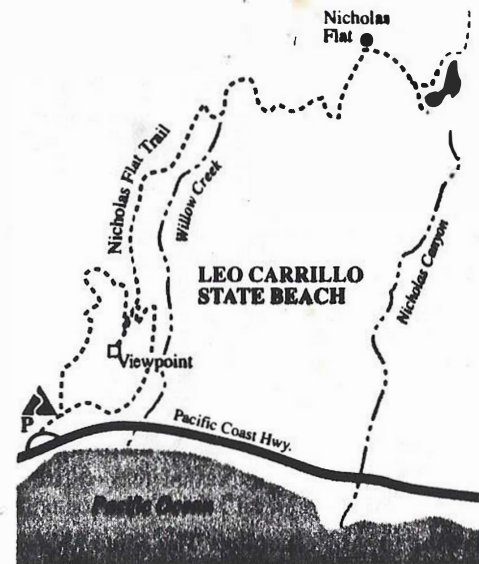
Nicholas Flat Trail can also be savored for one more reason: In Southern California, very few trails connect the mountains with the sea. About eighty-five percent of all Californians live within 30 miles of the coast; in the Southland, most of the extensive coastal trail system that existed a hundred years ago has been covered with pavement or suburbs. Nowadays, to find a lot of trails that lead from Coast Highway into the mountains, you'd have to travel to the Big Sur region or the parklands north of San Francisco.

Get an early start on the Nicholas Flat Trail. Until you arrive at oak-dotted Nicholas Flat itself, there's not much shade en route. The trail crosses slopes that were scorched by a 1985 fire. In good wildflower-watching years, you might spot such fast-fading spring blooms as monkeyflowers, coyote brush, golden yarrow, bush sunflowers, hummingbird sage, and a lot of lupine along the trail.

**Directions to trailhead:** From the west end of the Santa Monica Freeway in Santa Monica, head up-coast on Pacific Coast Highway about 25 miles to Leo Carrillo State Beach. There's free parking along Coast Highway, and fee parking in the park's day use area. The signed Nicholas Flat trailhead is located a short distance past the park entry kiosk, opposite the day use parking area.



Pond at Nicholas Flat



**The Hike:** If the state park hasn't mowed its "lawn" lately, the first fifty yards of Nicholas Flat Trail will be a bit indistinct. Immediately tentative beginning, the trail junctions. The right branch circles the hill, climbs above Willow Creek, and after a mile, rejoins the main Nicholas Flat Trail. Enjoy this interesting option on your return from Nicholas Flat.

Take the left branch, which immediately begins a moderate to steep ascent

of the grassy slopes above the park campground. The trail switchbacks through a coastal scrub community up to a saddle on the ridgeline. Here you'll meet the alternate branch of Nicholas Flat Trail. From the saddle, a short side trail leads south to a hilltop, where there's a fine coastal view. From the viewpoint, you can see Point Dume and the the Malibu coastline. During the winter, it's a good place to bring your binoculars and scout the Pacific horizon for migrating whales.

Following the ridgeline, Nicholas Flat Trail climbs inland over chaparral-covered slope. Keep glancing over your right shoulder at the increasingly grand coastal views, and over your left at the open slopes browsed by the park's nimble deer. In the spring, the fast-fading wildflower population is dominated by that scrambling vine with the white trumpet-shaped flowers—morning glory.

After a good deal of climbing, the trail levels atop the ridgeline and you get your first glimpse of grassy, inviting Nicholas Flat. The trail descends past a line of fire-blackened, but unbowed, old oaks and joins an old ranch road that skirts the Nicholas Flat meadows. Picnickers may unpack lunch beneath the shady oaks or out in the sunny meadow. The trail angles southeast across the meadow to a small pond. The man-made pond, used by cattle during the region's ranching days, is backed by some handsome boulders.

Return the way you came until you reach the junction located 3/4 mile from the trailhead. Bear left at the fork and enjoy this alternate trail as it descends into the canyon cut by Willow Creek, contours around an ocean-facing slope, and returns you to the trailhead.