Indian Grinding Rock State Historic Park

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CALIFORNIA STATE PARKS
P.O. Box 942896
Sacramento, CA 94296-0001
For information call: (800) 777-0369
(916) 653-6995, outside the U.S.
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Indian Grinding Rock SHP
Chaw'se Regional Indian Museum
14881 Pine Grove-Volcano Road
Pine Grove, CA 95665
(209) 296-7488 • www.parks.ca.gov/igr

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"It was the Indians' way to pass through a country without disturbing anything; to pass and leave no trace, like a fish through the water or birds through the air."

—Willa Cather, author

Indian Grinding Rock State Historic Park is located in the Sierra Nevada foothills, eight miles east of Jackson. The park is nestled in a small valley 2,400 feet above sea level with open meadows and large valley oaks that once provided Native Americans with an ample supply of acorns. The 135-acre park preserves a great outcropping of marbleized limestone with 1,185 mortar holes—the largest collection of bedrock mortars anywhere in North America. Trails make it easy to explore the meadows and surrounding forest. The Chaw'se Regional Indian Museum features a variety of exhibits and an outstanding collection of Sierra Nevada Indian artifacts. A Miwok village and roundhouse have been reconstructed in the middle of the valley.

THE GRINDING ROCK AND PETROGLYPHS

Chaw'se is the Miwok word for the mortar cups that formed in a stone slab as the Miwok people pounded acorns and other seed into meal. The largest *chaw'se* example can be seen at the park. The main grinding rock also features 363 petroglyphs—including circles, animal and human tracks, and wavy lines. Some of these carvings are thought to be as old as two or three thousand years; they are now becoming difficult to see. This association of rock art and bedrock mortar pits is unique in North America. Except for one other small site, Indian Grinding Rock State Historic Park has the only known occurrence of mortars intentionally decorated with petroglyphs.

The marble grinding rock is fragile and very susceptible to weathering and chipping. The natural elements are claiming many of the petroglyphs, so please stay off the rock and respect this irreplaceable reminder of indigenous Miwok culture.

Sculpture of Miwok dancer

HISTORY

The Miwok

The Northern Sierra Miwok, who settled in this area many centuries ago, established their villages alongside the rivers and streams of the Sierra Nevada—from the Cosumnes River on the north to the Mokelumne River on the south. Other Miwok groups lived to the west as far as Mount Diablo and as far south as Yosemite National Park.

The Miwok had a detailed understanding of the resources available to them, passing this knowledge down from generation to generation. Deer were the most important animal resource, and all parts were utilized. The meat was used for food; clothing was made from the hide. Antlers, bones, and hooves were used for tools and instruments, and the brain was used to tan hide.

Plant foods were generally collected and processed by

Bark house museum exhibit

women while men trapped, fished, and hunted. All resources were portioned so they would continue to be available, and little or nothing was wasted. For example, a plant called soap root was mashed and used not only as soap, but also to stun and catch fish. Its leaves were eaten fresh, and the bulb could be baked and eaten. The dried, fibrous leaves were bundled and used as a brush.

Acorns, the mainstay of the Miwok diet, were gathered in autumn, dried, and stored in large granaries *(cha'kas)* made of poles interwoven with slender brush stems. Resembling large baskets, the *cha'kas* were thatched with short boughs of white fir or incense cedar to shed snow and rain and then lined with pine needles and wormwood to repel insects and rodents.

Acorns are rich in nutrition, but because they contain a lot of tannin, they are bitter to the taste. To make them edible, the Miwok cracked and shelled them, and placed the acorn meat in the mortar holes *(chaw'se)* in the large flat limestone outcropping in the meadow to be pounded with a stone pestle to the texture of fine meal. The Miwok took the meal to the creekside and poured water through the meal to leach out the tannin. The prepared meal was mixed with water in a large, watertight cooking basket. Hot rocks were added to the acorn mush or soup and moved around with paddles until the acorn meal was cooked.

Reconstructed Miwok village

The Miwok also caught fish and hunted game throughout the hills. The climate was agreeable, the water supply reliable, and many good village sites were available. Commodities that could not be found locally could often be obtained through trade with neighboring groups.

The village was the primary political unit in Miwok life, though alliances were likely to exist between villages. Village size varied from two dozen individuals to as many as several hundred. Each village had a specific territory that belonged to the group. Because each territory encompassed several ecological habitats, the village could be reasonably sure that its needs for food, clothing, and shelter would be met.

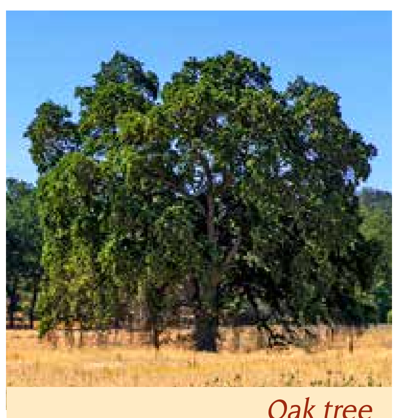
The Gold Rush

The annual cycle of native life that revolved around the little meadow was dramatically altered by James Marshall's discovery of gold at Coloma in January 1848. Miners poured into this area, forcing the Miwok out of their traditional patterns of residence and subsistence. Prospectors and both hydraulic and quartz mining operations eventually surrounded the area. Mine tailings can still be seen today in the park's ravines.

Though mining was the dominant economic activity in this area during the 1850s, agricultural enterprises were also attempted. Several farms and ranches were established in the area, with one of the first located in the meadow area of the present-day park. In June 1852, one miner wrote in his diary, "They are mowing their grass and barley on the flat and offered me $3 a day to mow." The diarist declined this offer and hastened to nearby Volcano, where a miner's wage was $6 a day.

Reminders of early-day Amador County ranching and farming activity are dotted throughout the park, including a farmhouse and outbuildings, a garden site, orchards, livestock pond sites, and other traces of farm life. By 1868 the property belonged to the Else family, who grew barley and other grain crops, raised cattle, and planted an orchard. The small stream that runs through the park is still known as Else Creek.

William Blakely acquired the property in the 1870s. In the late 1880s, he sold about 160 acres to Serafino Scapuccino. Scapuccino tended the orchard, raised cattle, and developed a truck garden. He is said to have welcomed the Miwok, who sometimes camped in the meadow, gathered acorns, and held ceremonial events at the old village site. He also put a fence around the "great rock" to protect it.



Oak tree

After Scapuccino's death, his family continued to hold title to the property until the 1950s. At this time the surviving members, James and Serafino, Jr., became concerned that development pressures would eventually destroy the scenic, historical, and archaeological value of the meadow and its unique bedrock mortars. A friend suggested that it might be possible to preserve the site as a state park, an idea that found immediate support in the nearby town of Volcano.

Hun'ge—the Roundhouse

A campaign to save the site was launched, and in 1958 the State of California acquired 48.5 acres of the Scapuccino property. The site was formally dedicated as a state park in 1968 and was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1973.

TODAY'S PARK

The Village and Roundhouse

Development in the park emphasizes the aboriginal importance of the site. A reconstructed Miwok village provides present-day descendants of the Miwok with an opportunity to preserve their heritage and traditions and share them with future generations of Californians. Bark houses, a ceremonial roundhouse, acorn granaries, shade ramadas, an Indian game field, and demonstrations of time-honored arts, crafts, and games all combine to illustrate the past. California State Parks has an ongoing commitment to collaborate with the local Native Americans in park development.

The Roundhouse *(hun'ge)* is the setting for various social gatherings and ceremonial events. The Miwok traditionally held ceremonies here to pray, to mourn the dead, or to observe special occasions through music and dance. In a typical village, this semi-subterranean community center was the largest building and tended to be between 20 and 50 feet in diameter. The Indian Grinding Rock State Historic Park *hun'ge* is 60 feet across—one of the largest in California. Four massive beams and center poles support the roof. A hole in the center of the roof allows smoke from the fire pit to escape and also permits some observation of the night sky.

Miwok homes ranged from eight to fifteen feet in diameter and were built of cedar poles interwoven with grapevines or willow and covered with cedar bark. A hole was left at the top to vent smoke from cooking or heating fires. Bark houses *(u'macha)* can be seen near the grinding rock and also at the reconstructed village west of the Roundhouse.

A game field *(poscoi a we'a)* has also been reconstructed near the Roundhouse. One game played by the Miwok was very similar to soccer. On a field about 110 yards long, players tried to kick or carry a ball to the opposing team's goal. Both men and women played, though the rules were different for each. Men could only kick the ball, while women could handle the ball in any manner. However, if a woman held the ball, a man could pick her up and run for the goal.

Big Time

Several times each year, ceremonies are held in the *hun'ge* by local Native Americans. In September, Indian families meet at the park for the annual acorn gathering ceremonies (Big Time). Dancing, hand games, singing, and storytelling are traditional activities. Spectators are welcome, but there is no fixed schedule of events. Native American crafts and foods are available.

Chaw'se Regional Indian Museum

The two-story Chaw'se Regional Indian Museum has been designed to reflect the architecture of the traditional roundhouse. Outstanding examples of the technology and crafts of the Miwok and other Sierra Nevada Native American groups are exhibited in the museum.

The collection at Chaw'se includes Northern, Central, and Southern Miwok, Maidu, Konkow, Monache, Nisenan, Tubatulabal, Washo, and Foothill Yokuts.

Miwok dancers

Chaw'se Regional Indian Museum

Examples of basketry, feather regalia, jewelry, arrow points, and other tools are on display. Hours at the museum vary seasonally. For current hours, visit **www.parks.ca.gov/igr** or call (209) 296-7488.

The nonprofit Chaw'se Association operates a sales area, where visitors may purchase books, posters, postcards, and educational items. Lectures, videos, and demonstrations at the museum provide insights into Native American life in the Sierra region.

Fauna

Though the park is small, it offers many opportunities to observe wildlife. Oak woodlands and mixed pine forest provide a wide variety of habitats, much as they did when the Miwok lived here. Bird life includes Steller's jays, California quail, acorn and hairy woodpeckers, northern flickers, hermit thrushes, and California thrashers. In summer the bright colors of western tanagers, northern orioles, calliopes, and Anna's hummingbirds can be seen in the forest near the museum. A bird list is available at the museum.

Soap root

Animal life includes deer, foxes, black-tailed jackrabbits, bobcats, and occasionally a mountain lion or black bear. The legendary coyote—the trickster of Miwok stories—can be heard "singing" on quiet summer nights.

Flora

More than 130 species of native plants have been identified in the park, many of which were used by the Miwok. Spring brings an incredible variety of wildflowers to the Sierra foothills. Flowering plants include monkeyflower, giant trillium, shooting star, several species of lupine, farewell-to-spring, harvest brodiaea, Humboldt lily, western buttercup, mariposa lily, Hartweg's iris, showy phlox, wild rose, mountain violet, filaree, yellow star flower, and baby blue eyes.

Weather

The Sierra foothills experience warm, dry summers and cool, moist winters. Summer temperatures exceed 90 degrees. Winter brings an occasional snowfall.

California quail

RECREATIONAL ACTIVITIES

Trails

There are two developed trails in the park. The North Trail, a one-mile round trip, starts near the museum. It traverses the ridge surrounding the meadow, crosses the creek, passes by the old farm site, and continues to the reconstructed Miwok village site. There it joins the half-mile South Nature Trail, a self-guided loop that starts near the Roundhouse. A trail guide describes the ethnobotany of the area, identifying some of the plants that were used by the Miwok.

Picnicking

Near the grinding rock, a picnic area with a shade ramada can accommodate groups of up to 150. Reservations for the picnic area are not necessary. There is also a small picnic area next to the museum. Please do not use campsites for picnicking.

Camping

The park is open seasonally. Visit **www.parks.ca.gov/igr** for current hours.

Each of 23 campsites has paved parking (trailers/motor homes are limited to 27 feet

long), tables, food lockers, fire rings, piped water, and restrooms with flush toilets and showers. Wood gathering is not allowed, but firewood may be purchased at the park. Campsites are first-come, first-served.

Environmental Living/Group Camping

Camping in the bark houses to the north *(U'macha'tam'ma')* is a unique opportunity to get back in touch with the natural world while learning something about Miwok life. Seven bark houses, each one suitable for up to six people, have been constructed in a secluded area of the park. They can be reserved for a group of up to 44 people. The camping is primitive; you must haul water, supplies, and equipment two hundred yards or more from the parking area. However, your experience will be unforgettable.

Group camping reservations may be made up to six months in advance by mail, by calling (209) 296-7488, or by visiting **www.parks.ca.gov/igr** for applications.

ACCESSIBLE FEATURES ♿

- **Camping**—Two family campsites and the restroom are accessible.
- **Trails**—The North Trail is hard-packed for .6 mile. Except for service animals on leash, dogs are not permitted on trails.
- **Picnicking**—Tables are easy to access.
- **Exhibits**—There is easy access to the restrooms, into the Indian Museum, around exhibits, and to the viewing platform at the Grinding Rock. A video is also available.

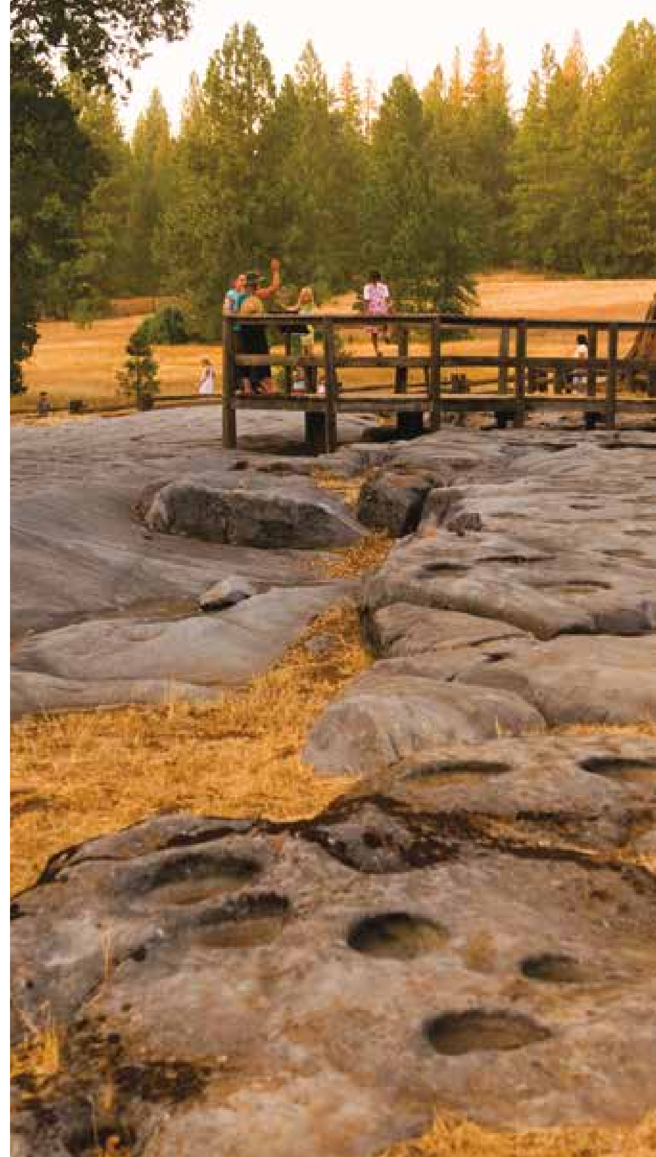
Accessibility is continually improving. For updates, visit **http://access.parks.ca.gov**.

PLEASE REMEMBER

- All natural and cultural features are protected by law and may not be disturbed or removed.
- Notify park staff of the location of any found objects.
- Like the grinding rock itself, the meadow at Indian Grinding Rock State Historic Park is fragile. Stay on the trails.
- Park regulations prohibit the consumption of alcoholic beverages except by campers in the campground.

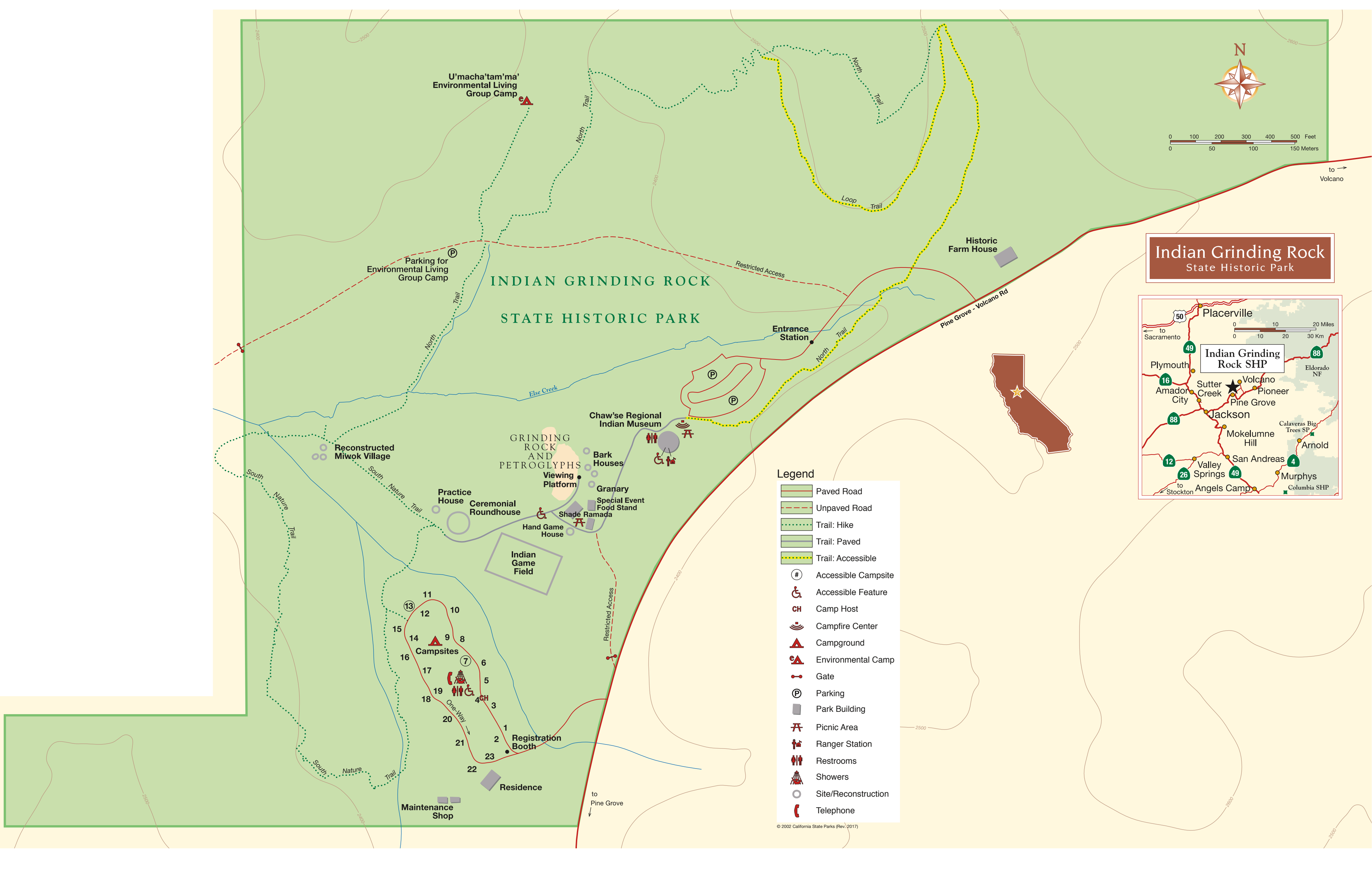
NEARBY STATE PARKS

- Calaveras Big Trees State Park
  1170 East Highway 4, Arnold 95223
  (209) 795-2334
- Columbia State Historic Park
  11255 Jackson St., Columbia 95310
  (209) 588-9128
- Railtown 1897 State Historic Park
  Off Highway 108 and Reservoir Road
  at Fifth Avenue, Jamestown
  (209) 984-3953



Accessible viewing platform

This park receives support in part through a nonprofit organization.
For more information, contact:
Chaw'se Indian Grinding Rock Association
info@chawse.org


Indian Grinding Rock
State Historic Park
INDIAN GRINDING ROCK
STATE HISTORIC PARK
U'macha'tam'ma' Environmental Living Group Camp
Parking for Environmental Living Group Camp
North Trail
Loop Trail
Restricted Access
Historic Farm House
Entrance Station
Pine Grove - Volcano Rd
Else Creek
Chaw'se Regional Indian Museum
Reconstructed Miwok Village
GRINDING ROCK AND PETROGLYPHS
Viewing Platform
Bark Houses
Granary
Special Event Food Stand
Shade Ramada
Hand Game House
Practice House
Ceremonial Roundhouse
Indian Game Field
South Nature Trail
Campsites
One-Way
Registration Booth
Residence
Maintenance Shop
to Pine Grove
to Volcano
Legend
Paved Road
Unpaved Road
Trail: Hike
Trail: Paved
Trail: Accessible
Accessible Campsite
Accessible Feature
Camp Host
Campfire Center
Campground
Environmental Camp
Gate
Parking
Park Building
Picnic Area
Ranger Station
Restrooms
Showers
Site/Reconstruction
Telephone
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Plymouth
Indian Grinding Rock SHP
Eldorado NF
Amador City
Sutter Creek
Volcano
Pioneer
Pine Grove
Jackson
Mokelumne Hill
Calaveras Big Trees SP
Arnold
San Andreas
Valley Springs
Murphys
to Stockton
Angels Camp
Columbia SHP
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