



August 2005

California Fly-In

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Photos
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The adventure really started when we landed our prop plane on the dirt airstrip. The takeoffs and landings were almost as exciting as the fishing

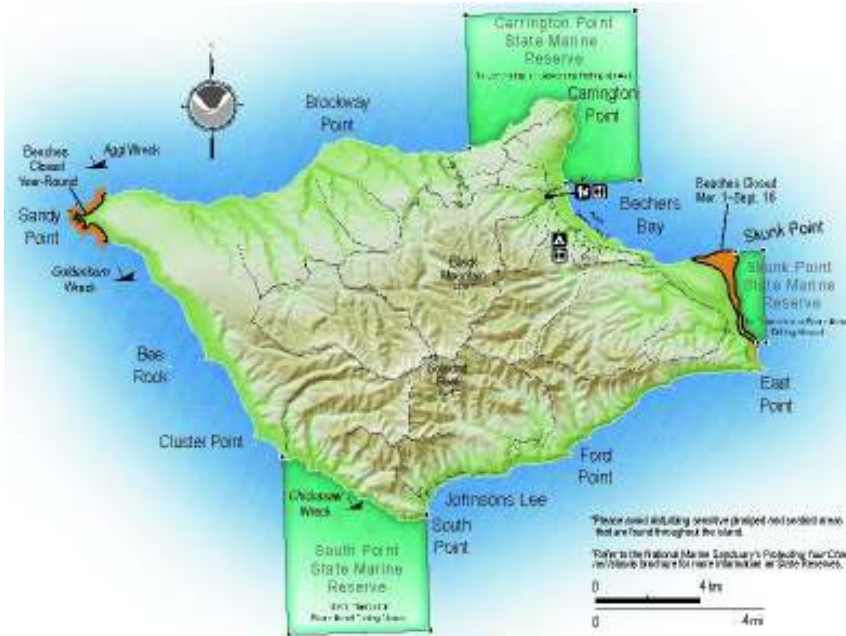
Santa Rosa Island offers long stretches of secluded beaches great for fishing or just getting away from it all.

Let the plane take the strain on a fly-in trip to Santa Rosa Island

“That’s it!?” exclaimed Chris Baugh to Terre Delong and I. “That’s what we’re landing on?” he asked incredulously as the small 6-seater twin-prop banked sharply over the cliffs lining us up with what could be best described as a dirt strip in a field greened temporarily by the winter rains. We all grinned at each other simultaneously – this was the start of our own little mini-adventure that had begun that morning at a private airport just south of Santa Barbara. In a scene straight out of Air America, we dropped down and bumped along the roughly-hewn airstrip coming to a quick stop. No villagers rushing out to meet us here though, just the National Park Service Ranger who had come over to give us the lay of the land, or island in this case of course.

Our adventure began when Delong had mentioned the possibility of a fly-in trip to the Channel Islands as a change of pace, a chance to explore a new surf fishing destination. We decided to make a weekend of it and camp out on the island, roping Baugh into the adventure also as he was another dedicated surf-fisherman. Fly-ins are of course normally associated with the remote back-country of Alaska, so it was intriguing to discover the possibility of experiencing this so close to home. Plans were set in motion, the necessary camping permit was requested from the National Parks reservation service and a warm weekend back in March this year found

us meeting up at the airport in Camarillo at the offices of Channel Islands Aviation (see sidebar for details) who run the only flights allowed to the islands.



Map courtesy of Channel Islands National Park Service

Santa Rosa was our destination and is the second biggest of the 8 Californian Channel Islands after its neighbor Santa Cruz. Situated 26 miles off the coast it covers 84 square miles which to put it into perspective is roughly 4 times bigger than Manhattan. It has a rich and varied history and offers the visitor much to see (see sidebar for details) but we were here to sample the surf fishing for Barred Surf Perch, rumored to be a much bigger average size than we were used to on the mainland. We had packed light, even though we were allowed 65lb of gear each on the plane, we had no wish to carry that much around for one nights camping. The airstrip was right above Bechers Bay

where we planned to fish, and was a short walk below the Water Canyon campground where we were to stay for the night. After a quick dump of the gear at the campground (we were the only ones there!), we grabbed our rods and headed straight for the beach.

At first sight, the broad arc of white sand backed by small cliffs and punctuated by rocks at each end looked very inviting. There were just 4 other souls fishing already who had been dropped off earlier for the day and who would depart in the early afternoon. Apart from them the beach was ours. The first thing we found were sand crabs – millions of them! I have never seen such extensive beds which covered the beach nearly from end to end. This began to give us the idea that with such an abundant food source, our targets should indeed be well-fed. Beyond the breakers the water was crystal clear and scattered clumps of kelp and other seaweeds could be seen easily. A lone Harbor Seal popped up to take a look at us, probably having a break from the nursery further along the coastline at Skunk Point where pupping would have been fully underway, before continuing on its way.

The second thing we noticed was the wind. It was howling. We were later to find out from the ranger that we had decided to visit at the windiest time of year. Not that it doesn't blow at other times apparently, but in spring it is at its most consistent and persistent! This was also contributing to some pretty large breakers, but at least with the benefit of the sun and some warm upper layers we hunkered down to get some fishing done. Keeping things simple, we had decided to use our usual light-line surf rigs which for me comprised my favorite 6'6" Pflueger Trion medium spinning rod, with a Mitchell 308X Gold series loaded with 4lb P-line floroclear. The terminal tackle comprised



Matching light spinning tackle like this with "regulation-size" perch is a challenge. Next time – perch on the fly!

the usual Carolina type rig used for this type of surf fishing. A drilled bullet sinker of $\frac{3}{4}$ oz, a little heavier than I would usually use, was needed to fight the surge. This was threaded up the main line with a plastic bead below it. A barrel swivel was then tied on and a leader of about 18" was added below that. As I use fluoroclear I used a length of main-line for the leader also as I like its properties. It is strong but flexible and with the fluorocarbon coating is practically as good as using pure fluorocarbon for its invisibility underwater. At the sharp end so to speak, was a size 6 Owner Mosquito hook – the perfect size to pin a sand crab too and needle-sharp. Gathering bait was as simple as reaching down into the sand and grabbing a handful of crabs and selecting a nickel-sized one to use on the hook. Turning the crab upside down, I put the point of the hook just to one side of the spear-shaped tail that it keeps folded under its body and out through the back of the shell. We were now ready to go.



Larger-than-hand sized perch like this made up the bulk of the catches. We kept enough for dinner and released the rest.

With the amount of sand mixed in with the whitewater from the big surf, trying to read the beach to look for holes or troughs was practically impossible. So we took to the next best alternative which was working our way a cast at a time along the beach, leap-frogging each other to cover the maximum amount of ground. As we approached the south-east end of the beach, towards the area known as Black Rock thanks to the dark colored boulders and rocky point there, Baugh noticed some holes, their presence given away by a receding wave. They were very

close in but knowing Perch this is not a problem if there is enough water to cover their backs, and without doubt would be providing a natural gathering place for crabs, worms and other beach life dislodged by the waves. With the super-abundance of natural food in the area, being able to put our bait in a likely gathering spot for fish had to be our best bet of increasing the odds of hooking-up. By wading out a little way and casting along the shoreline at a 45 degree angle, we made sure we were covering as many of these holes as we could with a slow retrieve made necessary by the strong wave action to keep in touch with our terminal tackle. Sure enough, it was not long before Baugh was into our first fish and from the mixed look of delight and intense concentration on his face as his pole was bent double and line leaving the reel involuntarily it was a good one. After a few good runs we finally caught sight of the silvery side of a big Barred Surf Perch glimmering through the whitewater, exactly what we had come all this way to find. DeLong and I also caught fish later that afternoon, all of the same size and we kept one each for dinner back at the camp that night while we traded stories and looked back on the day. The wind hardly let up all night, but the campground has permanent wooden windbreaks to camp behind so were comfortable. The winds one saving grace was the clear skies it gave us and the brilliant night sky that unfolded before us. Away from the urban light pollution that most of us city dwellers have grown used to, it was possible to view many more stars than we were accustomed to seeing and satellite spotting became the pastime of the evening.

At daybreak, 2 or 3 Mule Deer were working their way along a side canyon near to our campsite, taking advantage of the lush grass and abundant wildflowers on the hillside. There are Elk on the island too, introduced for hunting along with the deer from Mid-August to Mid-November each year. The hunting season closes down some areas of the island to backpackers so be sure to check the published guidelines from the Park Service before venturing out at that time of year. After a quick breakfast and freshen up at the spigot, we broke down the camp and packed our gear down to the landing strip to save a journey later on. This gave us the morning back on the beach. We decided to explore a little and found some nice dunes up against the cliffs to stretch out

on away from the wind. Nobody said we had to fish all the time right! This was just as much about getting away and relaxing a little and I can think of no better place than a remote beach you have all to yourself for the day.

We did fish a little too that morning and found some more perch willing to bite. One constant was the size – all big healthy fish and capable of putting up a strong fight, using their flat bodies to work against us in the waves. They were put back to fight another day, hopefully for us on a return visit later this year when we plan to go back and sample the late summer fishing when the wind is calmer and also therefore the conditions more favorable for the fly-rod I had also taken with me on this trip. The un-crowded beach with plenty of unobstructed space behind for the back-cast was perfect and I look forward to being able to hook-up to some more of those big Santa Rosa perch and maybe some Corbina on the fly. I have also heard that there are many Blue Perch to be caught from the shore, particularly in the cove near to the pier that the boat tour operators use and around the rocky points. So in short, a successful trip leaving the door open to further exploration of the fishing potential of this charismatic little island. Like the song says, “I don’t care how you get here, just get here if you can.” You won’t be disappointed.



Sand crabs are a diet staple for barred surf perch and these small baits are plentiful on the beaches of Santa Rosa Island.

Santa Rosa Island MISCELLANY

From pygmy mammoths to the Chumash Indians, from fossil beds to the rare Torrey Pines, Santa Rosa Island is a great destination for hiking and exploring many of the various sites that have been uncovered over the years. The pygmy mammoths were thought to have evolved here 13000 years ago from fully sized ancestors that swam across to the islands perhaps as much as 20000 years ago when the sea levels were lower and the distance shorter than today. A fully intact skeleton was found on Santa Rosa and now resides in the Santa Barbara museum.

The island has a long history of human presence, thanks perhaps to its more friendly rolling landscape compared to any of the other Channel Islands and their craggy mountains. Over 600 archeological sites have been unearthed according to the National Parks Service, ranging from ancient Native American sites, to camps used by early explorers (Cabrillo and Vancouver both passed through on their voyages) and hunters.

Santa Rosa is also different in terms of the fact that is largely made up of uplifted sedimentary rocks rather than its sister islands volcanic origins, which you can see in the sandstone cliffs at Bechers Bay which clearly show folds and fault lines in their different colored layers. This also means there are various fossil beds to be found on the island too.

As with many other remote island habitats, distance has led to several endemic species found only on Santa Rosa and the other islands such as the Island Fox and Spotted Skunk. There is also a stand of the rare Torrey Pines that are only found on the mainland at a site just north of San Diego.

Back-country beach camping is also allowed at certain locations at specified times of the year which you can hike or kayak to (if you came via one of the two boat tour operators). You can also snorkel and dive in the pristine waters around the islands.

The Park Service produces a leaflet and island newspaper detailing everything you need to know about the destinations and distances along with a trail map which can be picked up on the Island at the box under the information map next to the airstrip, or from their local offices.

As with all National Parks, please “take only pictures, and leave only footprints.” That way we all get to enjoy these wonderful wild places and pass them on to our children to enjoy too.

CONTACTS

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www.nps.gov/chis

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Visitor Center

113 Harbor Way, 4th Floor, Santa Barbara, CA 93109

Tel: 805 884 1475

GETTING THERE

By Air

Channel Islands Aviation

305 Durley Avenue, Camarillo, CA 93010

Tel: 805 987 1301

www.flycia.com

By Boat

Truth Aquatics Inc.

301 W. Cabrillo Blvd, Santa Barbara, CA 93101

Tel: 805 962 1127

www.truthaquatics.com

Island Packers Inc.

1867 Spinnaker Drive, Ventura, CA 93001

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