## PART II SUMMER TO FALL

## SECTION II – THE ESSENCE OF ESSELEN BEAUTY

### Introduction and Site Directions/Descriptions

Thousands of visitors trace the arc of highway around Big Sur (or Big South, named at a time when the wilderness area south of Monterrey remained unmapped.) They may stop at the overlooks where the wide mouth of the bay takes in the tide and cradles tidal pools, but many do not stop to look at the other side, let alone venture into the Ventana Wilderness or the Santa Lucia Range. The casual hiker can access trails a short mile inland from Highway 1, as many who have discovered Pfeiffer-Big Sur campground have learned.

Although it becomes overcrowded in the summer, early risers can find solitude on a fall hike, when the sycamore leaves carpet the forest or a spring hike when the wildflowers bloom. A wilder trail exists seven miles in, on Palo Colorado Road, but at one point in time, marijuana growers chased out anyone who dared camp or hike there.

The value of this range, aside from its dramatic coastline and plethora of village stores, cabins and campgrounds, lies in the rarity of its ecosystem. Perhaps that's why the Esselen Indians dubbed it the Sacred Mountains. Native redwood trees and sequoias grow only in this strip of land from the Santa Lucia Mountains north to Southwestern Oregon.

Dramatic coastal cliffs and a biologically diverse plant kingdom make this region one of the most cherished destinations for Californians. This pilgrimage began centuries ago, with indigenous people of the area.

The Esselen people, together with the Ohlones and Salinians, totaled 27,300 before their indoctrination into mission life in the 1770s. Two thirds of those (15,500) were baptized and herded to the nine missions between San Francisco and San Antonio. The Carmel Mission absorbed the Esselen of Big Sur by 1800. Other Esselen ended up at the San Antonio Mission and possibly the Mission at Soledad. The missions still remain intact, but the spirit of the

Esselen people lives elsewhere, along the cliffs of Big Sur and the sacred mountains inland. The Salinians left survivors in the Big Sur and Diablo ranges. Their tribal council educates people about their history and hosts cultural and educational events in Monterrey and San Luis Obispo Counties. The Ohlone/Esselen Nation fosters collective support for each band, holding tribal council meetings in Castroville.

The coast redwood trees that filled the Esselens' sacred forests have survived as long as 2,000 years. They pillar an animal community prolific with blacktail deer, Roosevelt elk, black bears, squirrels, raccoons, porcupines, weasels, mink, and even ringtail cats.

These forests felt the imprint of eager feet and heard the music of united voices from generations who see these dramatic cliffs as a touchstone for their own search for meaning.

Shared reverence for Big Sur's natural beauty transcends culture. The lost stories of generations, however, reverberate as oceanic white noise. As early as 1877, Stephen Powers, writing for the Department of the Interior, observed of some of the California Indian that their "singular secretiveness has kept the great body of the whites in profound ignorance of their ideas, whatever they may have observed of their customs." Perhaps the fact remains that too few sincerely asked to share wisdom back

and forth as they walked the good road together during the years when the settlers' concept of conquering the land included all the life that lived upon it.

Other religious cultures defend secrecy as the need not to cast seed on stone or pearls before swine, yet in native Californian culture, this respect for the sacred was often misinterpreted as a lack of religion altogether. Such a stand made the Jesuit padres feel justified in their pity for the Indian, inspiring them to "pluck him up to salvation." It gave license to gold diggers and land hunters to assuage their own guilt for enslaving indigenous peoples as indentured servants or to label the land's original inhabitants as

"thieves and scoundrels." Powers made several profound statements about California tribes that manifest themselves clearly in the untold stories of the Esselen people, whose stories now enrich the post-modern world and make us all more whole.

Because clans separated by mountains and blessed with abundant water, plant life and wildlife had less need for inter-tribal warfare, Northern California peoples tended toward peace, right up to the time some were captured for mission life or for sale on the auction block, even after the Emancipation Proclamation. It has been the melancholy fate of the California Indians to remain less understood, nationally, than any other of the

American native peoples, according to Powers, who wrote:

> Once perhaps the most contented…on the continent . . . and they have been more miserably corrupted and destroyed than any other tribes within the Union. They were certainly the most populous and dwelt beneath the most genial heavens, and amidst the most abundant natural productions and they were swept away with the most swift and cruel extermination. . . . (10)

Powers had witnessed fathers shot down because they complained to the miners that their tailings darkened the waters so they could not fish for salmon

and their women were starving. Others were sold to work on the Rancherias up north long after the end of slavery, when the federal marshals never made it to the west to check on the implementation of the executive order.

While intertribal wars plagued Midwestern bands fighting over natural resources, who disunified and lost their struggle over Manifest Destiny and domination in the new land, on the West Coast, small bands were more likely to live separately or to see each other as trading partners, brothers and intermarriage partners. Their persona did not pose a threat even to those such as Powers, who felt anguish for the families widowed due to the callous

assumptions of the pioneers. The qualities he later attributes to the native people include a sense of humor, an absolute devotion to beauty, abstinence from waste, an ability to immerse one's self wholly in a task yet remain detached from an undesired outcome, and a tenacity in those things which apparently mattered most—childbirth and dancing.

Powers warned his 19th century readers to "escape the mockeries and the vain pomp and ambitions of civilization" and instead to value the ways of the tribal people, although he felt European-Americans would never model or even contend with the indigenous lifestyle and its lack of routine, modest

eating habits and indulgent sleep patterns—in essence, with such a natural, earth-based existence.

As you ascend the sacred mountains of the Esselens, you may want to imagine your own interpretation of the earth-based existence required to live in the elements here, and to experience it yourself, at least for the day.

Marin Maverick

## Buzzards Roost Trail

2 miles round trip, occasionally strenuous, mostly moderate

Directions to trailhead: From State Highway 1, two miles south of Big Sur, turn southeast into Pfeiffer-Big Sur Campground. Just before the kiosk next to the park administration buildings, turn left into a small parking lot and park in one of the three visitor parking spaces. Look for the signed trailhead at the back of the lot.

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The shrine remains in the sacred mountains of the Esselen people—not a shrine erected by human hands, but a rectory of soil and seed and sky. Untouchability, the mark of the divine, defines this plant community unscathed by human progress and only trifled with by lightning, wind and pelting rain. Buzzards Roost Trail will take you to its steeple.

The trail starts along the banks of the Redwood-Pfeiffer Creek, where it widens to meet the waters of Big Sur. Its broad, clear, shallow expanse probably made fishing easy for the indigenous Esselen people. The riparian scent smacks of cloves and cinnamon, and finches dart about the trees for the first quarter mile.

Follow either fork up through the sequoia pillars that drape the hillside. (Take the left fork to get your heart beating.) After a switchback or two, you'll earn the rare privilege of looking at these giants eye-to-limb. The trees you passed at the trail's ascent extend up beyond the next switchback! Next you'll pass through a grove of madrone, the deciduous, symbiotic partner of the redwood tree.

At six-tenths of a mile, you'll come to the loop. Take the route to the right for the hardiest workout. Look for the very tame blacktail deer, who may stare you down before strutting up the hillside.

Massive trunks give way to a picket forest of new trees as the ascent steepens. Watch for squirrels and

great horned owls. As you near the top, you will see how the trail earned its name. Finally out of earshot of the busy highway traffic, you may see buzzards circling and hear their cries as the only rupture in a still mountain sky. On a good day, an eagle may join the ranks of the wind born.

The forest ends abruptly in a mantle of manzanita, low enough to accommodate sweeping views of a sycamore canyon on the left and the Pacific Ocean on the right. The Esselen people who lived here were members of the Hokan language family, but were probably not closely related to its other members, the Pomo, Yuman, Yana, Shasta, Chimariko and Karok. Making the trek to harvest the

olallieberries at the trail's base and the manzanita berries on top, they would have stopped to give thanks along the trail's detours. Such a spot will appear almost immediately to the right when you reach the clearing.

As the din of civilization recedes and only the cries of birds dim the stillness, sit and watch the fog curl into the lap of the green-skirted canyon. Spirits lifted, follow the loop down to the fork and return as you came.

## Valley View Trail

2 miles round trip, easy

Directions: From State Highway 1, two miles south of Big Sur, turn southeast at Pfeiffer-Big Sur State Park. After paying the day use fee, turn left at the next stop sign and bear right toward the "lodging" sign. Park in the lot adjacent to the restaurant and gift shop complex. Facing the complex, turn left and walk up the road a few yards. Look for the trailhead on your right.

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A century ago, a young man asked a medicine-man for advice about the future. The old man recommended as a first priority, "Understand the

earth on which you live . . . through close observation." He recounted the practical reasons for knowing the animal world and learning about the landscape. He reminded the youth of the greater reward for such awareness, saying, "The earth is under the protection of something which at times becomes visible to the eye." (11)

That something becomes especially visible in the rolling mists of dusk at the shanks of the ridge at Big Sur, where only the ghosts of clouds pin the light to this earthly plane.

Meditating on a rock or a ridge overlooking Big Sur inspires awe in all but the most lifeless of eyes, as contemplation of the two biggest canvasses, sea

and sky, dwarf the power of humans to tame the capriciousness of the waves and storms that sculpted Big Sur's beauty over time.

Tenacious deer may greet you before you even reach the main trail. Meander briefly along the forested path that parallels the road. Just beyond the tree identification display, a signed fork in the road will direct you to the left.

If you cannot take the hike at sunset, you'd best opt for the perpetually scenic falls hike, which you will probably share with plenty of families and photographers. Visible wonders await, but go with an eye toward the invisible as well.

To take the Valley View route, cross the bridge over the trickling brook and follow the curve of the mountain to your left as it ascends into a coast redwood and tanbark oak forest. Stay on it for another half mile, when you'll come to another fork.

Go left up to the ridge, where redwood forests give way to coast live oak, opening up views of the coastal range. Sea mists roll in, snared in the treetops on the thickly forested peaks along the Big Sur River's drainage channel, mirroring the pink whispers of sunset. Views of Point Sur's ocean-splashed proboscis emerge in the break to the northwest.

As you walk the crest, a clearing a quarter mile into the oak grove makes an ideal evening

meditation site. Sitting here alone at dusk, expressing gratitude for the complexities of this forest and the simplicity of living in it, one can sense why the native Esselens revered these mountains.

Follow the loop, return the way you came, or walk back to the fork in the road and take the loop detour to your left. Enjoy the aroma of nubile campfires, the music of the stream, and the blush of wildlife in the trees, and keep your eyes open for any magic that comes your way.

## Pfeiffer Falls

1 mile round trip, easy

Directions: From State Highway 1, two miles south of Big Sur, turn southeast into Pfeiffer-Big Sur State Park. After paying the day use fee, turn left at the next stop sign and bear right toward the "lodging" sign. Park in the lot adjacent to the restaurant and gift shop complex. Facing the complex, turn left and walk up the road a few yards. You'll find the trailhead on your right.

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Pfeiffer Falls spits only a thin long arm down the granite wall otherwise covered by moss and fern.

Autumn thins out the crowds as well as the falls' girth, making the site a quiet early morning meditation site.

Begin the trail as you did the Valley View Trail, paralleling the road until you come to the cutaway tree ring and the fork in the trail beyond.

Get away while the campers lay sleeping or coaxing bacon grease off frying pans. Without the perspective of humans, you may feel like an elfin gnome walking through this forest of redwoods and giant sequoias whose jaws, sometimes split at the roots by lightning strikes, could eat a log or easily house a family of fox pups. Pfeiffer Redwood Creek cranks up its sound effects as you near the falls. Bridges and staircases mark this threshold of the

Ventana Wilderness, but it feels more like an entry to one of nature's finest amusement parks, despite the poison oak that snuggles alongside rugs of fern and clover.

Signs direct walkers easily to the falls every step of the way. Upon reaching the end, sit on the rocks beneath the last staircase to meditate. Relish the kaleidoscopic beauty of changing maples, cottonwoods and sycamores among redwood stanchions 400-500 years old. While the Esselen people made use of many plants whose berries, leaves or wood seemed destined to serve the human world, redwood trees—the world's tallest trees — served the world by their very being. They canopied

sacred mountain paths where valley dwellers, even hunters, came not in a spirit of consumption, but a spirit of gratitude.

Absorb the residue of that spirit before returning the way you came. You may choose to linger by taking one of two turnoffs, to the Valley View loop or the Oak Grove.

# Andrew Molara State Park Beach Trail

1 mile round trip, easy

Directions: Drive three miles north of Big Sur on Highway 1. Turn west at the Andrew Molara State Park sign. Pay the day use fee and park in the large lot at the base. Of the several trailheads available, take the one at the north end of the lot that crosses the river and leads to the beach.

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Fifteen miles of trail stitch the patchwork of plant and animal communities of Andrew Molara State Park. The Beach Trail renders a sampling in a short, easy walk.

Several Esselen villages once nestled in this cradle of calm between the battalion of ocean tides and the dwarfing redwood stands in the mountains beyond. Esselen people left these meadows to visit their sacred mountains and no doubt returned to collect the bounties of the meadow and shore.

The beach trail passes under sycamore and cottonwood stands, and offers backward vistas of rolling foothills. Eventually, the flat, easy trail gives way to the riparian vegetation of the Big Sur River's mouth, where tule, red alder and willow shade a variety of species before reaching the coastal inlet that so many seek out for its rare accessibility along the cliff-cloven shoreline of Big Sur.

Piecing together the evidence of early life here requires a careful study of the ecosystem, and a study of Esselen resourcefulness. The meadow land was cleared for cattle grazing before it became a state park in 1968, so some features of the original plant community may have disappeared, but we can assume that nomadic visitors made use of the coffee berry, mustard grass and poppies and that they frequented the mountainside for blackberries and acorns from the coast live oak and canyon oak. They probably extracted kelp and shellfish from the tidal pools at low tide and dabbled in the art of whaling.

A mid-winter hike rewards today's visitors with excellent vantage points for viewing those migrating gray whales. Molera Beach also plays host to sea lions and otters, and the park supports such a prolific and unique bird population that the attendant at the kiosk sells park guide books for birdwatchers. More than 250 species have been documented. Many of the species do not appear elsewhere on the central coast.

The usual beach-combing gulls, sky-diving pelicans and meadow-bound hawks enjoy plenty of feathered friends—or prey. Quail, cormorants, hummingbirds and chickadees join a throng of more uncommon sky dwellers.

To imagine waking up to a chorus of sea lions every day, seek out a perch at Molera Point, at trail's end, to the north, though you may find simpler solace in a meditation site among the immediate boulders or on the sand, listening as the tide sucks away at the rocks on its recourse or smacks against the bluffs at high tide. Some may prefer to hide away in the grasslands that link the beach to the Redland forests inland, appealing to the creative force that shares the human desire to preserve these sacred coastal mountains.