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Meade Fischer: Beauty of Fort Ord dunes

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By MEADE FISCHER
Guest commentary
Posted: 03/13/2009 01:39:33 AM PDT

The Fort Ord dunes have been through many changes since I first saw them in late winter 45 years ago. Then I was in basic training, sent by my National Guard unit for a six-month stint.

Mostly, I recall damp, overcast days and physical exhaustion. It was hard to appreciate the area, wearing heavy boots, carrying a gun and listening to the barking of a drill sergeant.

Still, I saw the beauty of the dunes and thought that I'd enjoy exploring them under different conditions.

I wasn't able to see the actual beach at the time, as it was beyond the firing range, and considering how inaccurate riflemen we were, probably a hazardous place to wander.

Being a surfer, I did wonder about the beach and the waves.

Around the time I moved to the Monterey Bay, Fort Ord was decommissioned, and overworked trainees no longer blasted rounds into the dunes. The landward side of the dunes was still closed, probably filled with tons of lead. The beach, untouched and unspoiled was open, but difficult to access.

Just before the last vestiges of Stilwell Hall were removed, a friend and I took a walk along the four miles of beach from Marina to Sand City, parking a car at either end. Then, with intermittent winter showers, we walked from one end to the other. Once a few hundred yards from the parking lot at Marina, we had the beach to ourselves.

"To ourselves" is slightly inaccurate. While there were no other people, the beach was awash with birds. On the steep face



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of dunes, rising in places almost vertically, hundreds of vultures roosted, waiting for the tide to bring in the bodies of shore birds and marine mammals.

Gangs of sandpipers dashed up and down the beach with the pulsing of the surf. Flocks of gulls criss-crossed the sky, and formations of pelicans glided by, just above the waves. There were plovers in the dunes and tiny shelled creatures in the wet sand. The beach was strewn with an interesting assortment of flotsam and jetsam.

Below the skeleton of Stilwell Hall was the rock and concrete that ran down to the beach, reinforcement that was put in place in a futile attempt to hold back the forces of nature and preserve the old building. It was necessary to climb over this barrier to continue our walk.

Two deep gullies ran back into the dunes, one near Stilwell, the one that would become beach

access from the new state park, just opened.

Almost 45 years from the day I lay on the dunes with a rifle in my hands, I visited the new park, and I was impressed. The parking lot is big enough to accommodate a moderate crowd, and there are informational kiosks that give directions, information and warnings about unleashed dogs.

A 250-foot long wooden walk leads to an overlook, where one can see miles of dunes and most of Monterey Bay.



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A 1,500-foot trail leads down to the beach, starting with a paved road and becoming a sand path through the gully. Beachcombers, hikers, kite fliers and surfers were using the beach, and as I walked down the beach, the crowds thinned out, just as they had when I walked it a few years earlier.

Stilwell Hall and the rock wall are gone, leaving the beach open from end to end. Once away from the access gully, I found the sandpipers dancing on the beach. I didn't notice the vultures, which, I suppose, moved further down the beach to get away from the newly invasive creatures on their beach.

The beach is a little less wild than it once was, but it's more accessible for those who want to enjoy the beauty of nature, and all things considered, the state did an admirable job with our newest park.

Meade Fischer is a Watsonville writer.

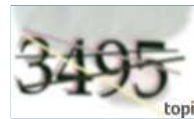
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