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TRAVEL | CALIFORNIA PARKS

Off-highway vehicles kept killing birds. Now a judge has ordered this popular Calif. park to close.

California State Parks now needs to complete a habitat conservation plan it began in 2001

By **Amanda Heidt**, Southwest Contributing Parks Editor

April 17, 2026



FILE: Oceano Dunes State Vehicular Recreation Area, pictured Feb. 26, 2021, is the only California State Park where vehicles may be driven on the beach.

Myung J. Chun/Los Angeles Times/Getty Images



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Off-roading and camping have been temporarily suspended at the Oceano Dunes State Vehicular Recreation Area near Pismo Beach after a federal judge ordered the partial closure to protect a threatened shorebird.



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The ruling, which was made by U.S. District Court Judge Anne Hwang and went into effect on April 14, states that the park must halt vehicle recreation and camping until the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service issues the park a permit allowing for the accidental harming or killing, known as incidental take, of western snowy plovers.

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plans to improve their numbers. In her
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ano Dunes will remain closed.

The closure has provoked mixed reactions among management officials, conservation advocates and visitors.

In a statement shared with SFGATE, Jorge Moreno, a spokesperson for State Parks, said that the agency disagrees with the ruling and is currently reviewing its options.



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"State Parks operates one of the most successful western snowy plover conservation programs on the West Coast at Oceano Dunes SVRA," he said. "This lawsuit does nothing to improve the program and will result in thousands of families losing their camping reservations and coastal recreational access, while cutting operational revenue that funds environmental conservation."

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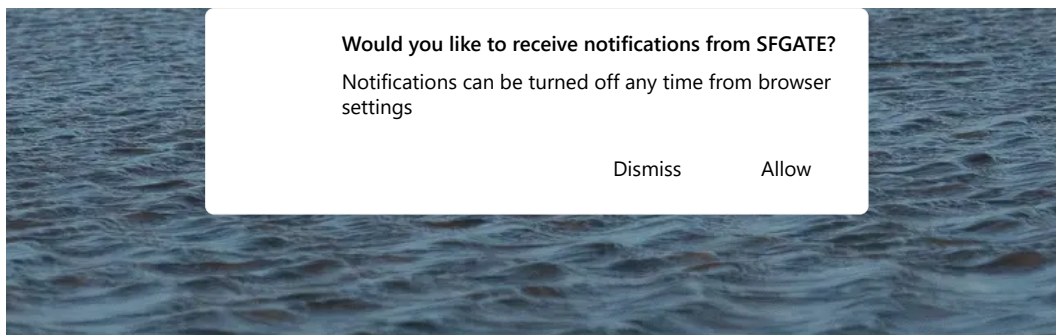
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FILE: Snowy plovers bathe in the Arroyo Grande Creek at Oceano Dunes State Vehicular Recreation Area, Feb. 26, 2021.

Myung J. Chun/Los Angeles Times/Getty Images

The Center for Biological Diversity — a conservation nonprofit whose [lawsuit](#) prompted the ruling — celebrated the news, however. “For decades, state officials have let off-road vehicles tear through protected habitat at Oceano Dunes, injuring and killing snowy plovers, harassing roosting flocks, and degrading their habitat,” Center for Biological Diversity senior attorney Zeynep Graves said in a [statement](#). “These threatened shorebirds will be safer and stand a better chance at survival thanks to this ruling.”

To receive a permit, State Parks will need to develop a habitat conservation plan — a process it began in 2001. And although the state has yet to finish the plan, according to the judge’s filing, snowy plover numbers in the area have nonetheless rebounded. Under State Park’s management, the population of breeding adult snowy plovers at Oceano Dunes has increased from about 30 breeding adults in 2002 to over 200 in 2024, exceeding the mandated annual goal of 180 breeding adults every year for the past decade.

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Off-road recreation has funded some of those efforts, with a portion of the park’s entry fees going toward habitat restoration and [plover conservation](#). Since 2002, there have been a handful of documented snowy plover deaths linked to vehicles, resulting in restrictions on off-highway vehicle access (which today is only about [a tenth of what it once was](#)). Still, the judge noted in the filing that vehicles have been observed dispersing and otherwise harassing birds.

Jared MacLeod, the vice president of Friends of Oceano Dunes, a citizen initiative formed to promote

responsible re
frustrated” by
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visitors to tree

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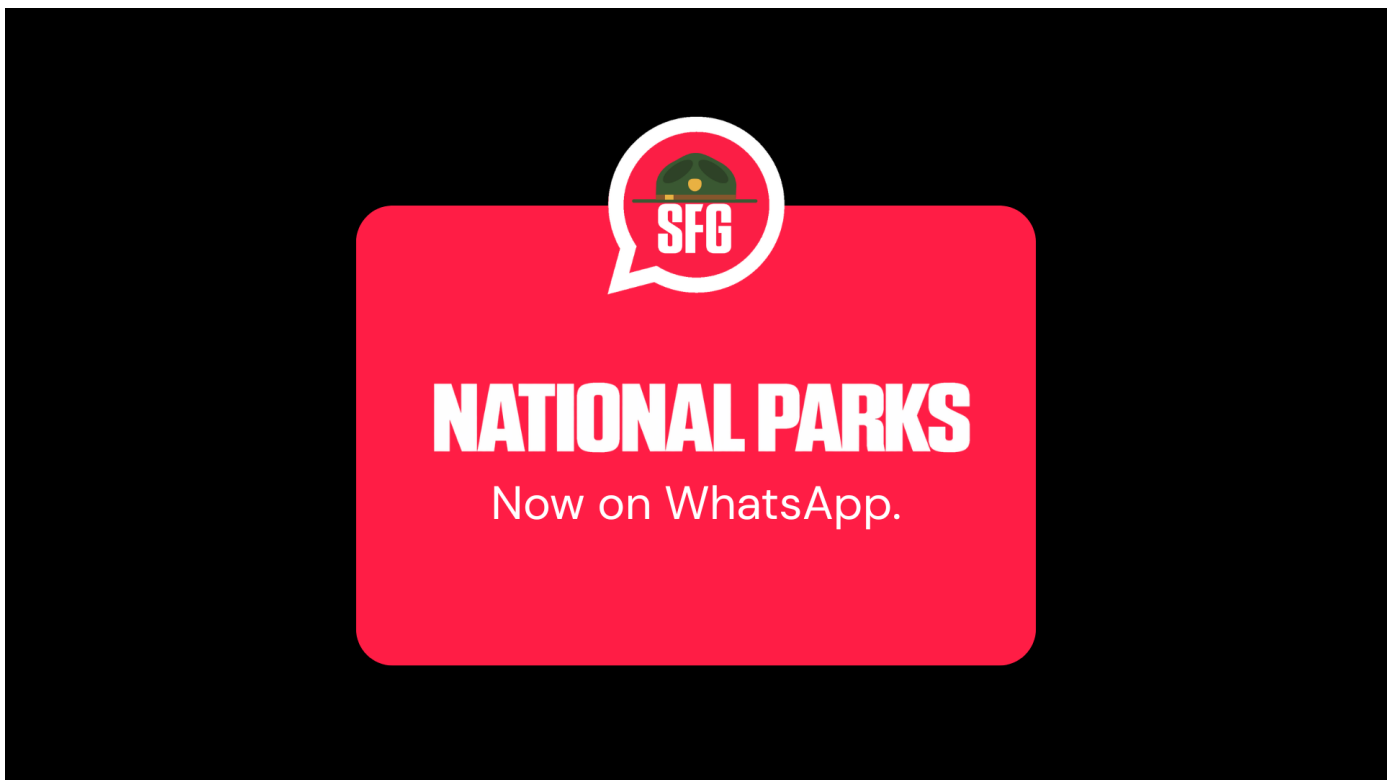
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ok that the group is “disappointed and
had “dropped the ball” on drafting a
leadership in Sacramento, before encouraging

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“The district staff, the hardworking boots on the ground, have nothing to do with this,” he said.

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Closures currently include the area south of Arroyo Grande Creek. Day use and vehicles are still allowed north of Arroyo Grande Creek, and day passes for Pismo State Beach are currently being capped at 1,000. According to the park website, campers were allowed to remain through April 14, and refunds were given to anyone with reservations extending further.

Moreno told SFGATE that reservations are currently canceled through May 22, after which time the management plan should be completed and the park reopened. Visitors should check the [Oceano Dunes website](#) for the most current updates.

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April 17, 2026



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SOUTHWEST CONTRIBUTING PARKS EDITOR



Amanda Heidt (she/her) is the Southwest contributing parks editor at SFGATE, covering parks and public lands across Utah, Colorado, New Mexico, Arizona and Nevada. She is also an award-winning freelance science journalist, with bylines in The New York Times, National Geographic, Nature, Science and NPR, among other outlets. When away from her desk, you can find Amanda kicking around in the desert near Moab or otherwise chasing beautiful scenery. Send story tips to amanda.heidt@sfgate.com, or message her securely on Signal at [ahidt.16](https://signal.me/ahidt.16).

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