

# Documentation of Existing Public Access at Edwards Point, Las Varas Ranch

## Gaviota Coast, CA



Photo Courtesy of California Coastal Records Project



September 16, 2014



SANTA BARBARA COUNTY  
**Trails Council**

**Introduction:** Edwards Point on the Las Varas Ranch has a long history of informal use by members of the public. As disclosed below, historic public use includes fishing, hiking, beach walking, swimming, and surfing. This existing public use is threatened by proposals to develop two large estate residential compounds at Edwards Point. These residential estate compounds, including guest homes, walls or fences would lie across routes historically used by the public to gain access to shoreline at this location, effectively blocking public access. In addition, based on similar situations along the eastern Gaviota Coast and at locations such as Broad Beach in Malibu, the real potential exists for new development to use security guards, cameras and other security measure to interfere with or eliminate historic public access to the coast at Edwards Point.



*Provision of public access to and acquisition of scenic Edwards Point has been planned by Santa Barbara County for over 30 years.*

This brief report provides photographic and other evidence of substantial and sustained public access at Edwards Point to allow state and county decision-makers to understand the nature and importance of public access at Edwards Point. As part of its review of the impacts of Las Varas Ranch development proposal, Santa Barbara County has not undertaken any detailed or systematic surveys of existing public access or retained any recreational experts to assess such use, instead relying on hearsay and secondhand sources of information from a surf book, the project applicant's ranch manager and consultant surveying the site for other resources (e.g., biology). This report provides a greater level of information on existing public access.

**Methodology:** The information in this report was compiled local sources, including a photographer who has visited Edwards Point periodically over the last 5 or more years, with photographs taken episodically during this period, representing only a sampling of public use. This information is supplemented by field surveys compiled by the Santa Barbara County Trails



*This photo depicts a hiker on the bluffs at the inner cove at Edwards Point looking west toward the point (background). This photograph was taken in winter- spring as indicated by the green pasture.*



Council (Trails Council) during preparation of the Gaviota Coastal Trail and Access Study (Trails Council, 2013). These surveys were conducted in spring and early summer of 2013 outside of the winter surf season when use would be expected to be higher. Trails Council field crews consisting of an experienced Environmental Planner and 1-2 interns performed 12 days of field reconnaissance along the Gaviota Coast to survey and document existing coastal access routes, parking and beach use between Bacara Resort and Spa and Gaviota State Park. During these surveys, Trails Council field crews observed an average of 2-3 cars parked on El Capitan Ranch Road during the majority of these surveys. During several follow up public access surveys conducted during the late summer, Trails Council field crews noted as many as six cars parked at El Capitan Ranch Road, where parking south of US Hwy 101 serves as the "trailhead" for access to Edwards Point along the UPRR.

### Existing Public Access Routes to Edwards Point

Primary public access to Edwards Point occurs along the Union Pacific Railroad (UPRR) corridor and across the bluffs on Las Varas Ranch west of Edwards Point and down to the beach at the Point (Figure 1). Public road shoulder parking is available along El Capitan Ranch Road, with space for approximately 15 cars. The public traverses the UPRR corridor along the tracks and this access has created a visible informal trail along the edge of the tracks.

Access follows the tracks for approximately 1,500 feet to the first ranch gate at an at-grade UPRR crossing (Figure 1). However, coastal access may also occur via the existing Gato Creek tunnel under the UPRR, located approximately 3,000 feet west of El Capitan Ranch Road.<sup>1</sup> After leaving the UPRR corridor, the public then follows several existing ranch roads and/ or cattle trail across the blufftop gaps in the steep bluff at Edwards Point west of Gato Creek (Figure 1). Access is also available to Edwards Point along the beach from El Capitan State Park to the west and the Naples informal coastal access located two miles to the east and west respectively. However, due to the intertidal nature of area beaches and the presence of rocky points, such beach access is reliable only at low tides. Based on Trails Council field surveys in September of 2014, lateral access from the east may be available at a "0" low tide and from the west at tides of from 0 to 1 foot. Such tides occurred for several hours on 13 of 30 days in September of 2014, allowing lateral access on 40% of the days in



*Trails Council surveys of the Gaviota Coast indicate ongoing use of El Capitan Ranch Road for coastal access parking to the beach at Edwards Point.*

---

<sup>1</sup> The Trails Council has documented existing access along the UPRR during field surveys and observed hikers entering the ranch, as well as the presence of the informal trail along the tracks and signs of ongoing public use along UPRR, including multiple footprints. Trails Council crews have also observed the public climbing through fences near the west end of the ranch.





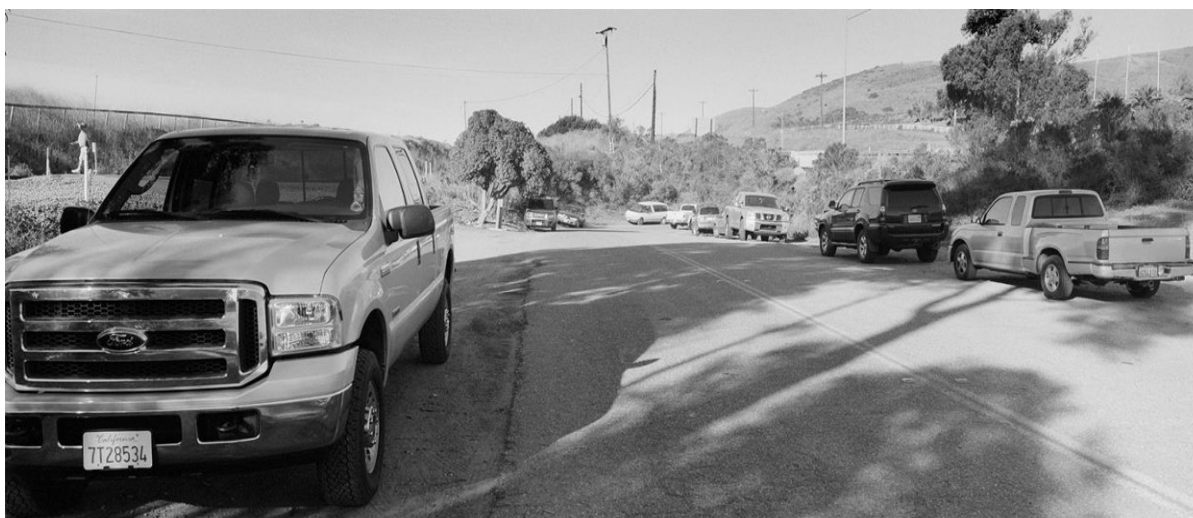


September, but only for several hours each day, or between 10% to 20% of available daylight hours during this month (Southern California Tide Log 2014, Pacific Publishers).

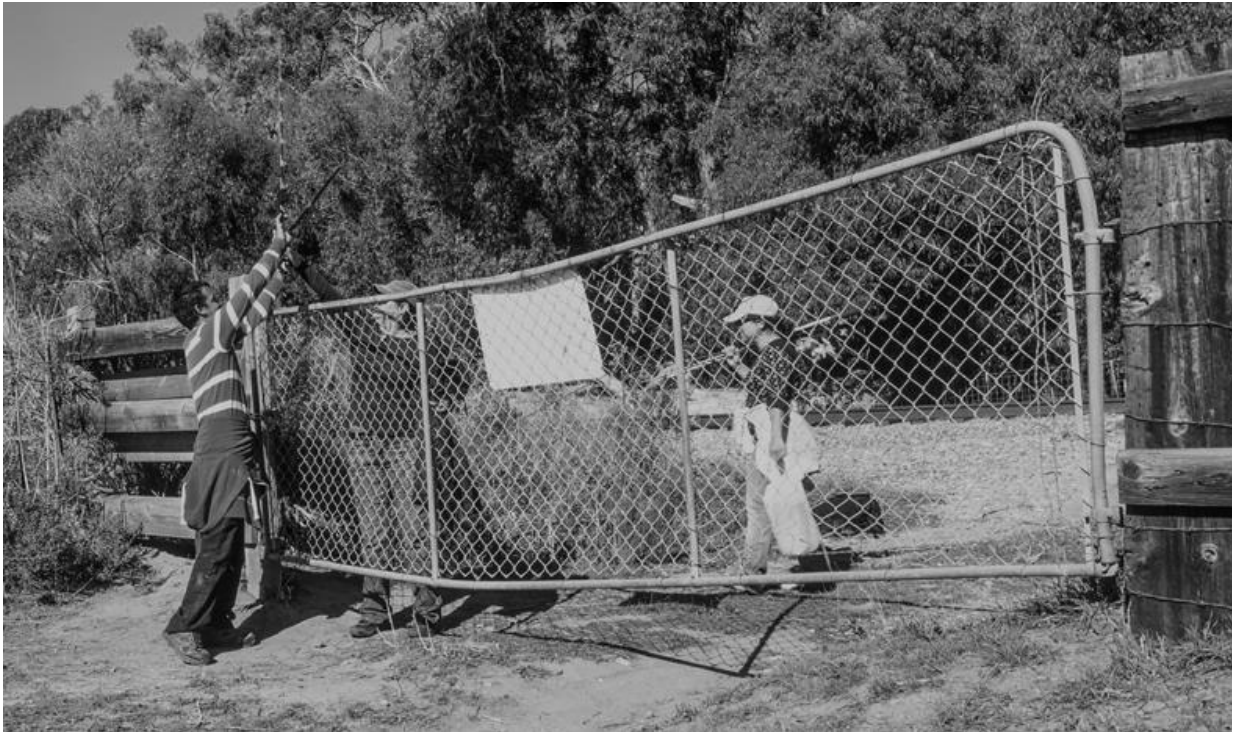
### **Existing Levels of Public Access at Edwards Point**

The level of existing public access to Edwards Point has not been well documented as part of the Environmental Impact Report (EIR) for the Las Varas Ranch Development Project. However, 2013 Trails Council surveys of the Gaviota Coast documented regular public parking at El Capitan Ranch Road on more than 50% of the days such surveys were conducted during the spring and summer, outside of the primary surf season. Trails Council surveys also documented the public using the UPRR corridor to access the ranch as well as public access from an existing blufftop trail system that Links Las Varas beaches with Dos Pueblos Canyon and beach.

In addition to Trails Council surveys, photo-documentation compiled by a local photographer also indicates diverse and sustained use. These episodic surveys confirm regular ongoing use of access to Edwards Point by fishers, hikers and surfers on many of the days that surveys occurred. Such surveys indicate that Edwards Point receives regular use by members of the public, including fishers from Los Angeles, Santa Maria and Lompoc and college surfers. Taken together, Trails Council surveys and those by a local photographer have documented public parking at El Capitan Ranch Road and / or use of the UPRR and / or Edwards point on more than 15 days during limited periods of each of these days. Ongoing public use is likely to be far more extensive than such surveys reveal as the surveys did not cover the entire day and Trails Council surveys occurred outside the winter surf season and were not focused on Las Varas Ranch alone, but the entire eastern Gaviota Coast. Still, the following photographs represent a more substantial body of evidence than the hearsay relied upon in the County's EIR.



*El Capitan Ranch Road west of Edwards Point has sufficient road shoulder parking within public right of way to accommodate approximately 15 vehicles. In this photo, ten cars are visible indicating the probability that 10 or more people are accessing Edwards Point at this one moment in time. However, as shown in later photographs, parties of 2, 3, 4 or even as many as 5 individuals are documented visiting the Point together. This could raise the number of people at the point to 20 or 30 during this period on a single day.*



*This party of three fishers is leaving the Las Varas Ranch Bluffs and handing equipment over the western ranch gate after fishing at Edwards Point. The UPRR lies in the background. This gate lies approximately 1,500 feet west of available on street parking on El Capitan Ranch Road.*



*This man was photographed walking west along the UPRR after leaving the Edwards Point area. His Car is parked on El Capitan Ranch Road approximately 1,500 feet to the west, past the cypress and eucalyptus trees in background. Note faint trail paralleling tracks to the left. Trails Council surveys observed footprints and bike tracks along this trail after rains in spring of 2013.*

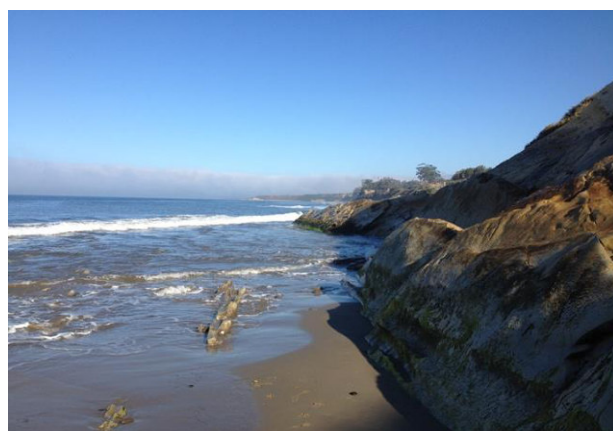




*The UPRR corridor offers the primary access route from public parking along El Capitan Ranch Road to Edwards Point.*



*The Gato Creek tunnel under the UPRR offers another way to reach Edwards Point from the informal public access corridor along the UPRR. This tunnel is used by ranch vehicles and to move cattle between pastures.*



*Lateral access to and along Las Varas Ranches' intertidal beaches is restricted to low and moderate tides.*



*This father and two sons are heading to the beach at Edwards Point and are west of the first at-grade railroad crossing. The Trails Council has interviewed other surfers that have taken their children into Edwards point.*





*This trio of fishermen from Santa Maria is walking down the trail to Edwards Point from the Las Varas Ranch blufftops; Gato Creek lies in background. The distant point is on Dos Pueblos Ranch east of Las Varas Ranch.*



*The same trio of Santa Maria fishermen revisited Las Varas Ranch on a different day than the photo above (note clear skies); they are using the blufftop trail on Las Varas Ranch.*



*Two young hikers view Edwards Point from bluff top on Las Varas Ranch down coast and east of the Point.*





*A party of four college students using the UPRR corridor to access Edwards Point; they had parking their car on El Capitan Ranch Road. They are leaving the UPRR at the western at grade crossing and enter the ranch at gate to right.*



*A photographer is engaged in filming at Edwards Point from the blufftop down coast or east of the Point. The beach at Las Varas Creek and Dos Pueblos Point lie in distant background.*



*A party of Korean fishers from Los Angeles climbs a ranch gate to access Edwards Point. They had parked at El Capitan Ranch Road, walked along the UPRR and across ranch roads to reach the beach by Edwards Point.*



*Fishermen on beach west of Edwards Point with catch during a minus tide. Note lack of dry sand beach berm on this intertidal beach; this beach would be impassable at medium or high tides (i.e., majority of many days).*



*A party of five fishermen from Los Angeles enjoys the fire pit and picnic area at Edwards Point.*





*A Lompoc family of four enjoys fishing on beach west of Edwards Point. They had parked at El Capitan Ranch Road, walked the UPRR corridor and used ranch roads to access beach at Edwards Point. Note that the intertidal beach is all wet sand and the lateral access would be limited at higher tides.*



*A lone surfer scrambles over a ranch gate to access Edwards Point. Note UPRR tracks in foreground and no trespassing sign.*





*Surfers and their five dogs on bluffs in seaside pasture just west of Edwards Point. Note that their faces have been obscured as requested.*



*A beach goer descends the informal coastal access trail down the bluff face near the beach shack located just east of Las Varas Creek. This trail connects to a blufftop coastal trail that extends east to Dos Pueblos Canyon.*



**Importance of Public Access to Edwards Point:** Protection and improvement of public access to and along the coast is a key goal of California's State Coastal Act as well as Santa Barbara County's Local Coastal Plan (LCP). Coastal Act Policy 30211 states that *"Development shall not interfere with the public's right of access to the sea where acquired through use, custom or through legislative authorization..."*. Santa Barbara County's LCP Policy 7-1 states: *"The County shall take all necessary steps to defend the public's constitutionally guaranteed rights of access to and along the shoreline."*

This paper provides substantial evidence that public access to and use of Edwards Point is ongoing and consists of diverse user groups from locations as widely separated as Los Angeles, Lompoc, Santa Maria and UCSB. Photographs and field observations by Trails Council survey crews have documented at least 15 different days of public access to and/ or use of Edwards Point as well as parking at El Capitan Ranch Road. In contrast, the County's draft EIR on the Las Varas Ranch development project provides no maps of access routes, photographic evidence of access or use of systematic surveys focused on recreation. As such, this paper provides substantial evidence in the record of existing public coastal access across Las Varas Ranch.

The County's LCP notes that existing coastal parks are used to capacity especially on summer weekends. We also note that the County's official trail advisory body, the County Riding and Hiking Trails Advisory Committee has found that existing and long planned access at Edwards Point is an issue of significant concern and that its loss would be a significant issue. No new formal public coastal access has been developed on the Gaviota Coast in the last 30 or more years. Acquisition and development of such access is costly and can require years or decades to implement. The high priority placed on protecting such coastal access in adopted county and state laws and policies combined with evidence of sustained and diverse ongoing use and the difficulty of providing new access increases the importance of existing access at Edwards Point.



*A man sitting atop bluffs at west end of Las Varas Ranch. He had completed the beach walk of almost 3 miles from the Naples access Point during a low tide event.*



*This informal fire pit and seating area at Edwards Point receives is used by a range of is people, including surfers, fishermen and hikers.*



*This beach shack and fire pit at the east end of Las Varas Ranch is testament to ongoing use of the area. A trail up the bluff faces links this site to residences on ranches adjacent to Las Varas Ranch to the east, with a coastal trail extending for almost ½ miles to the east connecting with Dos Pueblos Ranch. The public uses this blufftop trail to bypass rocky points which impede lateral access at most tides west of Dos Pueblos Canyon beach.*