

A Long the Pacific

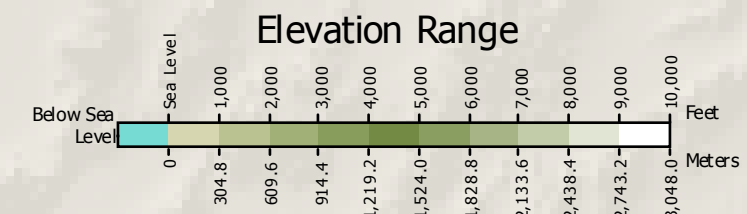
A Physiographic Map of California

A State of Diversity

The geography of California is very diverse. From alpine mountains to hot deserts, California is home to some of the most striking geographic features in the western United States. The state boasts both the highest point, Mt Whitney at 14,505 ft (4,421 m), and the lowest point, Death Valley at -282 ft (-86 m), in the contiguous U.S. In addition, California is home to the world's tallest tree, the Coastal Redwood in the north Coast Ranges, the most massive tree, the Giant Sequoia in the western Sierra Nevada, and the oldest tree, Bristlecone Pine residing in the White Mountains of the Basin and Range province.

The state is divided into 11 distinct physiographic provinces (see province descriptions to lower left side of map), they include the Klamath Mountains, the Cascade Range, the Modoc Plateau, the Basin and Range, the Coast Ranges, the Great Valley (Central Valley), the Sierra Nevada, the Transverse Ranges, the Mojave Desert, the Peninsular Ranges, and the Colorado Desert. Physiographic provinces (or geomorphic regions) are broad-scale subdivisions based on terrain texture, rock type, and geologic structure and history. A combination of geology and topography.

In terms of area, California ranks 3rd in the United States behind Alaska and Texas with a total land area of 163,970 square miles. The state is ranked 1st in population, with an estimated 2007 population of 36.5 million.



CALIFORNIA TAPE ALBERS PROJECTION, STANDARD PARALLELS 34° AND 40° 30'

SCALE 1:1,500,000

1 centimeter equals 15 kilometers; 1 inch equals 23.7 miles

0 25 50 75 100 Kilometers

0 25 50 75 100 Miles

Physiographic Provinces

Basin and Range

The Basin and Range is located east of the Cascade Range and the Sierra Nevada mountains and extends well into Nevada and Utah as part of the Great Basin. The Basin and Range is essentially a long series of mountains and valleys. Just a small portion of this large physiographic province falls within the California state boundary. Notably, this small portion is home to the oldest lake in North America, Mono Lake.

Modoc Plateau

In the northeast corner of the state lies the Modoc Plateau, an expanse of lava flows at an altitude of 4,000 to 6,000 ft (1,200 to 1,800 m). The plateau supports large herds of mule deer, Rocky Mountain elk, and pronghorn antelope. There are also several herds of wild horses on the plateau.

Cascade Range

The Cascade Range is a mountainous region stretching from British Columbia in Canada down to the northern part of California. The Cascades are part of the Pacific Ring of Fire, the ring of volcanoes around the Pacific Ocean. All of the known historic eruptions in the contiguous United States have been from Cascade volcanoes. The last Cascade volcano to erupt in California was Lassen Peak, which erupted from 1914 to 1921.

Klamath Mountains

The Klamath Mountains are a mountain range in northwest California and southwest Oregon, the highest peak being Thompson Peak (9,002 ft or 2,744 m) in Trinity County, CA. The mountains have a varied geology, with substantial areas of serpentine and marble. As a result, they have a unique flora including several endemic or near-endemic species.

Coast Ranges

The Coast Ranges lie west of the Great Valley and extend north and south of San Francisco. The central and northern ranges include the Diablo Range and the Santa Cruz Mountains. The northern Coast Ranges are home to the Coast

Sierra Nevada

The eastern Sierra Nevada mountains create the spine of California, running from north to south for 400 miles (600 km). The topography of the Sierra is shaped by tectonic uplift and glacial action. The highest peak in the contiguous United States, Mount Whitney at 14,505 ft (4,421 m), lies within the Sierra Nevada.

Peninsular Ranges

The southernmost mountains of California are the Peninsular Ranges, east of San Diego and continuing into Baja California (Mexico) in the Sierra San Pedro Martir. The Peninsular Ranges contain the Laguna Mountains, the San Jacinto Mountains, the Santa Ana Mountains and the Palomar Mountain Range, notable for its famous

Colorado Desert

To the east of the Peninsular Ranges lie the Colorado Desert, which extends into Arizona and Mexico. One feature of the desert is the Salton Sea, an inland lake that was formed in 1905 when a swollen Colorado River breached a temporary canal near the U.S.-Mexico border and flowed into the Salton Basin for almost two years. Today, the Salton Sea remains as California's largest lake.

Great Valley

California's geography is largely defined by its central feature — the Great Valley, a huge, fertile valley between the coastal mountain ranges and the Sierra Nevada. The area is noted for its productive agricultural fields that stretch from

Transverse Ranges

Southern California is separated from the rest of the state by the east-west trending Transverse Ranges, including the Tehachapi, which separate the Great Valley from the Mojave Desert. The highest point of the range is Mount San Geronimo at 11,499 feet (3,505 m).

Mojave Desert

The Mojave Desert is bounded by the peninsular Tehachapi Mountains on the northwest, together with the San Gabriel and the San Bernardino Mountains on the southwest. These western boundaries are quite distinct, forming the dominant pie-slice shaped Antelope Valley. The outlines of this valley are caused by the two largest faults in California: the San Andreas and the Garlock. The Mojave Desert also contains the lowest, hottest place in the Americas: Death Valley at -282 ft (-86 m), where temperature normally approaches 120 °F (49 °C) in late July and early August.

