Santa Clara County Parks invites you to share your BEST pictures taken at any one of our 28 County Parks. In fact, your photo might even end up in our calendar, PlayHere Guide cover, social media or even on a billboard!*

Unfortunately, many pictures submitted to us are unusable because of poor quality or low resolution. So, next time you are ready to capture and share that beautiful sunset, spectacular vista or special outing with friends or family, try these 7 easy tips to improve the quality of your photography.

1. Get to know your camera
The only bad pictures are those you don’t take. Learn how you can launch the camera app quickly and how your smartphone focuses. If the option is available, change your settings to record at the maximum resolution. Make sure your lens is clean! Experiment with shooting angles, take pictures you wouldn’t normally take, and look for the unexpected...mule deer playing or pond turtles basking on a sunken log. Play around with the settings to vary resolution, brightness, shooting mode, and other functions unique to your native camera app. Practice makes perfect.

2. Get close and fill the viewfinder
Unless your goal is to capture the big scenic picture, you might miss out on a really great photo. If you are too far away from your subject, you get a tiny, unrecognizable figure and too much foreground or background. Instead, try moving closer and fill the viewfinder. Avoid digital zoom, especially on smartphones, which will reduce quality.

3. Try composing with the rule of thirds
You might be inclined to place the subject in the center of the frame. As unnatural as it may feel at first, try the “rule of thirds” instead. This idea breaks the frame into a grid of three equal sections, horizontally and vertically. Some smartphones have a setting that will place the grid there for you to see as you take the picture. The points where these lines intersect are where you should place points of interest in the frame. You’ll be amazed at the difference!

4. Get the right light
Natural lighting will almost always produce a better shot with realistic color than a photo taken solely with a camera flash, especially for portrait shots. Mornings or afternoons with the sun at low angle are best, but any time other than when the sun is overhead or behind the subject can work. If it’s cloudy, experiment by adding flash. You may have to manually activate the flash, as there’s a good chance that the camera will think that it’s unnecessary on a bright day. Adding flash—if you’re close enough—can fill in shadows and give you a more natural-looking photo.

5. Select photos locations carefully and try to include people
A sunlit trail through a dark forest or lake at sunset is appealing to the naked eye, but your smartphone can’t always translate those into great photos, so avoid high contrast scenes. Put people in your pictures. People make photos more personal, more memorable, and give photos a sense of scale and place.

6. Use a tripod or monopod (or tree stump or big rock)
The best way to get that perfect shot is to make sure you’re in focus and the camera is held steady. You can try resting your phone on top of your hiking stick if you’re a point-and-shoot user. Using a tripod will allow you to set up framing, and can come in handy—along with your camera’s self-timer—in getting a crystal clear, razor sharp image. Worst case, stand as still as possible and hold your elbows tight to your sides as you gently tap the screen button.

7. Don’t forget to post-process and rename
After reviewing your photos for sharpness, clarity and exposure, consider using software to organize, edit, and rename them. Performing some basic editing on a photo can help improve its quality drastically. Cropping can help with composition and you can also rotate a photo so that horizon lines are level. Getting your photos right in-camera is the larger goal, but there’s no harm in a bit of clean-up afterwards.

Most important: please title each image file with the location and subject matter shown. A few minutes of your time will save everybody hours of future guesswork and the use of your images more likely.

*Photos submitted to Santa Clara County Parks may be used for any and all purposes anywhere and in perpetuity at no compensation. Photographer is responsible for any claims that may arise regarding the use of the image(s) submitted, including any claims of defamation, invasion of privacy, rights of publicity, or copyright. Santa Clara County Parks may, but is not obligated to, include photographer’s name as a credit in connection with the image.