



A view from the trail at Brushy Peak Regional Preserve. Photo: Michele Hammond

VISITING CALIFORNIA GRASSLANDS: by Michele Hammond, CNGA Board Member

## Brushy Peak Regional Preserve, Alameda County, California

Part of the Diablo Range, Brushy Peak Regional Preserve, is part of an extensive corridor of preserved public grasslands and oak woodlands that reach all the way north to Mt. Diablo State Park. Located at the north end of Laughlin Rd. off Highway 580 in Livermore, the preserve is accessible from a parking lot at the base of the peak. Visited mostly in the spring and fall, Brushy Peak is an open grassland, managed with cattle grazing, with spectacular views of the Livermore area when you reach the top. Summer heats up in the eastern part of the county but, for those who want to get out of the foggy coast, there are alkali wetland plants and tarplants to enjoy!

Brushy Peak Loop trail connects with the Westside Loop trail to make a gradual 6 mile hike that passes just below the peak (1,702 ft.) for an amazing view. Starting out of the parking lot, the alkali wetland, or salt grass (*Distichlis spicata*), meadows are first, leading to open purple needlegrass (*Stipa pulchra*) grasslands with scattered spring wildflowers like yarrow (*Achillea millefolium*) and lupines (*Lupinus* spp.). Near the top of the peak, sandstone rock outcrops occur with scattered coast live oaks (*Quercus agrifolia*) and buckeye (*Aesculus californica*).

Spring is the loveliest time to visit both for true green rolling hills and wildflower displays. In February and March, the lilies begin to bloom including the rare stinkbells (*Fritillaria agrestis*) often surrounded by blue dicks (*Dichelostemma capitatum*), Ithuriel's spear (*Triteleia laxa*) and soapplant (*Chlorogalum pomeridianum*). Later in the spring, the phenology of the grassland shifts to wildflowers like harvest brodiaea (*Brodiaea elegans*) and native Douglas silverpuff dandelions (*Microseris douglasii*) nodding in bud. Native bunchgrasses also begin to shoot up their inflorescences in the upland grasslands near the peak,

including purple needlegrass, blue wild-rye (*Elymus glaucus*), and California melic (*Melica californica*).

In summer, one can visit the ugly (or beautiful, depending on the observer) tiny blooms of rare alkali wetland plants like Brittle scale (*Atriplex minuscula*). In the grasslands, yellow spikeweed (*Centromadia pungens* subsp. *pungens*) and the white-flowered hayfield tarplant (*Hemizonia congesta* subsp. *luzulifolia*) rise above the grasses with color and that sticky native smell that insects, birds and California botanists have learned to love.



There is abundant wildlife to watch like western kingbirds and western bluebirds perching on the fence watching for a meal to fly by. About halfway up towards the peak, you can often spot a burrowing owl in the middle of a California ground-squirrel burrow complex. You can also sometimes find the small avian carnivore, loggerhead shrike, or, if you're lucky, spot its prey pinned to a barbed-wire fence.

Brushy Peak is loaded with local history. It served as both an ancient center of Native American trade routes and an historic hideout for Mexican bandits like Joaquin Murietta. For more information about the history of the area and access to the park check out the website: [https://www.ebparks.org/parks/brushy\\_peak](https://www.ebparks.org/parks/brushy_peak)

Access to the preserve is free. Dog walking is permitted on leash only in order to protect the natural and cultural resources.



Inset: *Fritillaria agrestis* is a species of lily endemic to California.