

Visiting California Grasslands:

Windy Hill and Monte Bello Open Space Preserves and Cache Creek Natural Area

by Andrew Fulks, Assistant Director, UC Davis Arboretum and Public Gardens; Director, Putah Creek Riparian Reserve and Campus Naturalized Lands; and Vice President, CNGA; amfulks@ucdavis.edu

In California, there are still places you can visit to enjoy remnant stands of native California grassland. Meadows in the high Sierra, located well above the snow line, are some of the best areas for viewing native California grasses without wading through the exotic annual grasses. The Sierra can be quite a trek for many, but luckily there are closer locations for hikes amongst the natives.

Windy Hill and Monte Bello Open Space Preserves

In the Bay Area, the Windy Hill Open Space Preserve and the Monte Bello Open Space Preserve are both filled with rolling grasslands and oak woodlands. Both preserves have gravel parking areas and restroom facilities. Windy Hill also has a universally accessible trail and allows for dogs on leash. Here, you can find both foothill and purple needle grass (*Stipa lepida* and *S. pulchra*), California and Torrey's melic (*Melica californica* and *M. torreyana*), as well as June grass (*Koeleria macrantha*). The real treat at these reserves are the spring wildflowers. Lupine and poppy abound, but keep your eyes open for spring blooms of pale baby blue-eyes (*Nemophila menziesii* var. *atomaria*), Purdy's foothill penstemon (*Penstemon heterophyllus* var. *purdyi*) and California buttercup (*Ranunculus californicus*). The buttercup does well as a garden plant grown from seed, so remember that when planning your native meadow! In the late summer, the colors of the wildflowers are replaced with the sweet scents of tarweed and vinegarweed, two plants whose names connote something unwanted. In reality, these wonderful native "weeds" provide food for native bees and a pleasant aroma to signal the end of the summer.

At Monte Bello, the Stevens Creek Nature Trail is a good introduction to the area and passes through grassland, coast live oak woodland, and riparian areas. At Windy Hill, the Anniversary Trail or the Spring Ridge Trail are both good bets for native grassland and wildflower viewing.

To visit Monte Bello Preserve, take Page Mill Road out of Palo Alto, up to the top of the foothills. There is ample parking and a large sign to announce your arrival. Windy Hill Preserve is located off Skyline Boulevard (Highway 35), about 6 miles north of Monte Bello. You can download trail maps at openspace.org.



Reprinted from *GRASSLANDS* Summer 2014

When planning your outings this summer, be sure to visit a grassland!

Cache Creek Natural Area

If you are further north in California, a good place to visit is the Bureau of Land Management Bear Creek Unit public lands in the Cache Creek Natural Area. A nice introductory hike is the High Bridge Trail, located off of Highway 16, north of the Yolo County line. This trailhead has concrete pit toilets and ample parking, including spaces for horse trailers. The trail is a single-track route that winds up through oak woodlands and chaparral. The vistas of Cortina and Blue Ridge, as well as the rest of Bear Creek Canyon, are spectacular. Grasses include the usual complement of annual exotics that pepper the hillsides in the Inner Coast Range, but the abundance of native grasses and native forbs is outstanding. Spring is generally the best time to visit, with the green grasses putting out seed heads and the wildflowers in full bloom (Figure 1). In summer, you can see the seed stalks of the spring grasses, as well as grasses and sedges still green, down in the canyons. Common native grasses seen along the trail include California melic (*Melica californica*) and purple needlegrass (*Stipa pulchra*). Wildflowers also abound, though timing them is always difficult. Brodiaea, or Ithuriel's spear (*Triteleia laxa*) seems to be the most common, along with Indian warrior (*Pedicularis densiflora*), and mariposa lily (*Calochortus superbus*). These can be seen almost every year on the High Bridge Trail. Trail maps can be found at Tuleyome.org, under the "Get Outdoors" section.



Vista from High Bridge Trail in Cache Creek Natural Area, with Ithuriel's spear (*Triteleia laxa*) in the foreground. Photo: Andrew Fulks.