

The Wildlife that Call San Mateo County Parks Home

By Michele Beasley

From a sun-dappled Pacific shoreline, grey whales are spotted blowing a misty jet of vapor 12 feet high. In grassy meadows, butterflies playfully dance among the wildflowers as a woodrat builds its home off trail. In a cool dark redwood forest, a bright yellow banana slug sets the pace — nice and slow to take in this magical landscape. The howl of a coyote pierces the night, and the sound of crickets lull you to sleep.

This is San Mateo County. The 23 parks that make up the San Mateo County Parks system provide habitat for a plethora of creatures. Birds, mammals, insects, reptiles and fish all call the parks home.

We are lucky to always spot some wildlife in the parks. A raccoon family sleeps in each morning right outside my office window at Coyote Point! Sometimes we catch sight of that rare bird or trout that makes our hearts soar. Some of these animals are quite elusive, some are threatened or endangered. All have a story to tell.

Let's meet some of our neighbors, the animals that populate your San Mateo County Parks. Emphasis on *some* as there are many to know and love.

Our Winged Friends

San Mateo County Parks host some epic bird-watching spots, from Pillar Point Bluff and Marsh on the coast to the Coyote Point marina on the bay. A diversity of raptors, shorebirds, seabirds and land birds can be found throughout the parks. It is common to hear or see woodpeckers, chickadees, towhees, quail, scrub jays and red-tailed hawks. It is exciting to catch sight of a peregrine falcon nest or night herons roosting in trees.



Bobcat stares back. Photo by Rob Cala.

Many bird populations are doing well, but birds face threats from loss and degradation of habitat through development, invasive species and predator pressures (like feral cats). Humans are trying to right some wrongs and create restoration success stories. Each of us can play a role in supporting these efforts.

For example, park visitors will note the Crumb Clean Campaign at **Memorial Park**, which reminds us to properly dispose of all food waste so as not to attract Steller's jays. Doing so helps protect the marbled murrelet, an endangered sea-

bird that likes to nest high in old-growth redwoods. Steller's jays are this bird's main predator.

The County's recent acquisition of **Tunitas Creek Beach** is good news for the western snowy plover. Tunitas Creek Beach provides important nesting habitat for this cute but threatened shorebird. Plans that map out how this gorgeous stretch of coastline will become our next county park call for improving snowy plover breeding habitat.

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San Mateo County Parks

Coyote Point Recreation Area
Crystal Springs Regional Trail
San Andreas Segment
Sawyer Camp Segment
Edgewood Park & Preserve
Devil's Slide Trail
Fitzgerald Marine Reserve
Pillar Point Bluff
Flood Park
Friendship Park
Junipero Serra Park
Huddart Park
Memorial Park
Pescadero Creek Park
Sam McDonald Park
Heritage Grove
Mirada Surf
Moss Beach Park
Quarry Park
San Bruno Mountain Park
Sanchez Adobe
San Pedro Valley Park
Tunitas Creek Beach
Woodside Store
Wunderlich Park

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9 Ways to Protect the Planet and Parks

I know I can feel overwhelmed when I hear about wildfire, drought and disappearing species. I want to know: what can I do? These problems seem so huge, where do I even begin? Sometimes, the simplest actions have the biggest impact. Tweaks in our daily routine can go a long way in caring for our natural environment.

1. Conserve water. We are in the second year of a record-breaking drought – not the kind of record anyone likes to break. Taking shorter showers, not letting the water run when we brush our teeth, installing low-flow toilets and rethinking gardens with plant species appropriate for our dry climate are all good actions to take.

2. Leave No Trace. The Leave No Trace Center for Outdoor Ethics provides a mindful, sustainable set of ethics for engaging with the outdoors known as The 7 Principles. They include disposing of waste properly, not disturbing plants or animals and leaving what you find.

3. Share it. One of the best ways to support your favorite park is to visit it with someone who has never been before. People protect what they know and love, and to know San Mateo County Parks is to love them. Bringing a child to experience the magic of a redwood forest can instill wonder that lasts a lifetime – benefiting both child and park.

4. Reduce, reuse, recycle. When prepping for a visit to a park or simply in our everyday lives, we can make it a habit to cut down on waste and use fewer resources. Invest in a water bottle, coffee canteen and reusable containers for food items. Download a smartphone app, like OuterSpatial, instead of using paper maps to navigate around a park.

5. Manage your land. Defensible space on your property between your home and the trees, shrubs and woodlands that surround it can help slow or stop a wildfire. Use fire-resistant plants in your landscaping, like red monkey flower, California lilac and sage. These plants are also drought tolerant. You can learn more from CalFire's Ready for Wildfire campaign.

The San Mateo County Resource Conservation District connects people with the technical, financial and educa-

tional assistance they need to conserve and manage natural resources. A defining characteristic of RCDs is that they provide confidential, free assistance.

6. Volunteer. Give love to your favorite parks by volunteering to help care for them. You can do beach cleanups with Pacific Beach Coalition, volunteer at the Mission Blue Nursery with San Bruno Mountain Watch or restore habitat with Parks' Natural Resources team.

7. Eat and buy local. Not only does buying local support area farms, food producers, and businesses, it benefits the environment by reducing the mileage and fuel needed for transportation. That means less waste, less pollution and fresher foods. We are so lucky in the Bay Area to have access to so much delicious, healthy food. Like parks, farms are an important element in our open space network.

8. Choose non-toxic chemicals. We want to live and work in a clean environment, so we buy cleaning products. But what about the chemicals in those cleaning products? These chemicals can wash into streams and rivers. Some persist in the environment and enter the food chain. For our home and office, natural and eco-friendly cleaning products are safer for people and the environment.

9. Support environmental organizations, including your local Parks Foundation! People can give their time, talent or treasure to organizations that work hard to clean up the environment, protect endangered species, preserve regional landscapes and care for local county parks. If you are reading this newsletter, you probably already do!

It is our responsibility to care for the planet, and for parks, so that for generations to come, all of it may be enjoyed. Parks are our close-to-home connection to the bigger, natural world. Small shifts in how we think and act can add up to a big, positive impact! Showing love for the planet, and for our nearby parks, can begin with riding a bike to work, changing household cleaners, taking shorter showers or inviting a friend to a park for their first time. Which action will you take next?

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And here's a success story — **Devil's Slide** Rock is home again to a growing colony of common murre thanks to a restoration project installed in 1996. It featured decoys, three-sided mirror boxes and CD players projecting amplified murre calls to lure the birds back after an oil spill in the 1980s wiped out the colony. That's a pretty creative solution!

Wild Cats

Is there any local animal that stirs up such a mixture of wonder and fear as the mountain lion (also known as a puma, cougar, or panther)? The habitats of these powerful predators range from deserts to snowy mountains, and they play an important role in the ecosystem. Their large hind legs give them impressive jumping and sprinting abilities which along with their agility, vision and adaptability make them fantastic hunters.



Mountain Lion caught on a wildlife camera. Photo by Ken Hickman



"Yes, I indeed have a favorite wildlife resident in San Pedro Valley Park...it's the **mountain lion**. Even though I've never personally seen one in my 20+ years of hiking in the park, I'm completely fascinated by them. They're beautiful, powerful, elusive, secretive, top-of-the-food-chain members of the park's animal family who are vital to the ecosystem that exists up and down the peninsula. One can only marvel at these creatures, knowing that they are living out there, unseen, in the wilds of the park and the open spaces beyond."

— Mark Golembiewski,
Friends of San Pedro Valley Park



The elusive weasel. Photo by Rob Cala.



"The **long-tailed weasel** — I can go on and on about the peregrine falcon or harbor seals, but the long-tailed weasel is so elusive, I've been looking around for one for years...In parks on the coast I just kept seeing flashes of fur out of the corner of my eye and then one day finally, one ran out of the brush and just stared at me for a bit and I thought, it looks like a little panda! They are very assertive and have a ton of attitude."

— Rob Cala, Park Ranger

Deer is their preferred food source, but they will prey on smaller animals like rabbits and livestock. Mountain lions generally hunt at night and try to avoid people.

This past June, a mountain lion was seen feasting on a freshly killed deer right along the popular **Sawyer Camp Trail**, resulting in the trail's temporary closure. While this type of sighting is rare, it isn't too surprising. The watershed is prime mountain lion territory. Development has encroached on this habitat, making urban encounters more common. Mountain lions are a specially protected species in California.

Closely related but much smaller, the bobcat (named for its bobbed tail) is about twice the size of the average house cat. This beautiful cat with tufted ears is not a threat to humans, although it is still a wild animal. Shy and reclusive,

bobcats generally avoid people. They are on the hunt for small animals.

It's the Tidal Life

In 1999, California passed the Marine Life Protection Act (MLPA), which is part of the California Fish and Game Code. Marine Protected Areas are underwater parks where sea life can thrive. **Fitzgerald Marine Reserve** is part of the Montara State Marine Reserve and a popular destination for naturalists and children alike! This rocky seashore hosts a living community of marine life. A variety of algae, crabs, sponges, sea stars, mollusks, and fish make their homes in the inter-tidal; that area between low and high tide.

The number one stated goal of the MLPA is to protect the natural diver-

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Sea anemone at Fitzgerald Marine Reserve. Photo by Rob Cala.

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“One of my favorite groups of wildlife is **bats**. They’re a super example of many biological concepts, including evolution and adaptation (echolocation, only true mammals that can fly!), convergent evolution (birds, bats and flight), and homologous structures (human hand and bat wing bones)! Locally, they play a critical role in managing pest populations like moths and mosquitoes, and in other areas of the world, they are important pollinator species for one of my favorite fruits, bananas! They get a bad rap because of vampire narratives, association with rabies, and more recently, rumors about the origins of COVID-19. But I think they’re an amazing example of the diversity of life on earth and how every species has an important role to play in keeping the delicate balance we all share on this planet.”



— Katherine Wright, Park Ranger



Blue-Tailed Skink at Edgewood Park.
Photo by Katherine Wright.

“My favorite is the **western skink**. It is rare to see one. I have only spotted one three times in my 30 years of visiting Edgewood. Never was I quick enough to snap a picture. I consider catching a glimpse as it flashes its bright blue tail a privilege and a reminder that so much goes on ‘behind the scenes’ in the Preserve.”

— Kathy Korbholz,
Friends of Edgewood

(Continued from page 3)

sity and abundance of marine life, and the structure, function and integrity of marine ecosystems. Just like national parks, MPAs are open to the public for education, recreation, research and appreciation. They are also protected by state and federal laws.

Harbor seals, like all marine mammals, are protected under the Marine Mammal Protection Act. They often haul out along the Pacific Coast in large numbers at established colony sites like Fitzgerald Marine Reserve. They come onshore to rest, give birth, nurse their young and warm themselves in the sun.

In the water, harbor seals are curious animals who will lift their heads up to look around. On land, they are shy and their habits are easily disrupted by the presence of humans. It is recommended that visitors admire resting seals from at least 300 feet away.

The Butterfly Effect

Butterflies have had a big impact on saving open space lands in San Mateo County, yet in many cases they are struggling to survive themselves due to habitat loss and pollution.

Edgewood Park and Natural Preserve could have become a golf course. However, residents noted that its serpentine grasslands supported a diversi-



Bay Checkerspot butterfly.

ty of plant life, including host plants for the threatened Bay checkerspot butterfly, and this led to the land’s protection. The butterfly once thrived at Edgewood and then disappeared. Scientists and volunteers work together to try and re-establish this butterfly here and at San Bruno Mountain.

The San Bruno Mountain Habitat Conservation Plan was the first Habitat Conservation Plan in the nation (1982) and protects the ecosystems for rare and endangered species such as the mission blue, callippe silverspot, and San Bruno elfin butterflies. **San Bruno Mountain** is the only place on the planet where these species coexist, and the key to their survival is defending grassland habitat from encroaching scrub.

Anadromous Fish

Anadromous fish live in the sea and migrate to fresh water to breed. San Mateo County Parks provide some of the few remaining spawning areas for migratory steelhead trout in the county.

Pescadero Creek, with its sources in the Santa Cruz Mountains, flows through **Memorial Park** on its way to Pescadero Marsh and the Pacific Ocean. To the north in Pacifica, the fresh-water, year-round San Pedro Creek originates on Sweeney Ridge and Montara Mountain and flows through **San Pedro Valley Park** before arriving at the ocean. Both Pescadero and San Pedro creeks are steelhead supporting streams.

Historically, steelhead trout and coho salmon abounded in San Mateo County. These days, both species face extinction. One reason is barriers to fish passage, like dams, levees and excess sediment. Efforts to remove barriers can give these fish a fighting chance. This has been

done along both creeks, showing signs of hope. Joy is watching spawning steelhead trout in San Pedro Creek or coho salmon in Pescadero Creek.

These examples are the tip of the iceberg when we consider the variety of animals swimming offshore, flying overhead, burrowing underground and slinking through the brush. The variety is not surprising considering we live in a biodiversity hotspot with a range of ecosystems from coastal sage scrub and chaparral to redwood forests and salt marshes. What a great reason to express gratitude every day for this earthly paradise, and to show respect to our wildlife neighbors who call the parks home.



Photo by Rob Cala

“The **white-tailed kite** is a very dramatic looking raptor. When I first saw one I thought it was a gull on steroids. It stays in a stationary position while hunting by flapping its wings then swoops down to get a rodent or snake. While mating, they will lock talons and almost fall to the ground. I see them at Pillar Point Bluff and Cowell-Purisima trail.”

— Mary DeLong, Coastal resident,
Beach Watch Volunteer

Kenny Elvin, Master Falconer, wowed guests with his birds of prey at Coyote Point on August 19



The peregrine falcon is the fastest bird, and the fastest member of the animal kingdom, with a diving speed of 242 mph." Photo by Rob Cala



Great horned owls are an amazing resource helping control our rat and mouse populations. Photo by Rob Cala



Ghostly pale, barn owls are silent predators of the night world. Photo by Rob Cala



There is magic and wonder in seeing these birds up close. Photo by Katherine Wright



The laughing kookaburra is native to eastern Australia and makes a very familiar call sounding like raucous laughter. Photo by Rob Cala



This happy barn owl is swallowing its dinner, a mouse. Photo by Katherine Wright