Dogs in San Mateo County Parks

By Michele Beasley

San Mateo County is one of the smallest counties in California, but our parks pack an outsized punch. You can see old growth redwoods, walk along the Bay and bird watch the Pacific Flyway. Serpentine grasslands offer up a plethora of wildflowers and tide pools give us a snapshot of underwater life.

Our parks are jewels and people love to visit them. Parks are where we bring out of town guests, spend time with friends and get our exercise.

Consider Sawyer Camp Trail, the most heavily visited park in the county park system. It is used by runners, cyclists, walkers, kids on bikes, and people with strollers and wheelchairs — all of whom are trying to share a 12-16-foot-wide path.

We live in a dense urban environment and more and more people are discovering our county parks. This is good news! However, it does come with some growing pains. Nearly three million people visited San Mateo County Parks last year. People like to enjoy the parks in many different ways, and for some, that means bringing their dog with them.

What is allowed?

If you are a dog owner living in the Bay Area, you have a pretty good idea of where you can and cannot go to walk your dog. For years, the San Mateo County Parks system was not, technically, open to dogs as stated in its ordinance. Overtime, newly acquired parks — like Pillar Point Bluff — came with a history of dog walking, in which case that use was grandfathered-in, meaning the old rule still applies, but with dogs on leash.

Dogs have also been allowed on segments of the California Coastal Trail (Mirada Surf and Devil’s Slide) and Bay Trail (Coyote Point). With several parks having this grandfathered-in use, it became clear that the County needed to update its ordinance to reflect the increased activity.

In 2016, a committee was convened to develop an overarching policy regarding dogs in San Mateo County Parks. They did this while considering the protection of the parks' natural resources and the provision of enjoyable outdoor opportunities for all. The committee proposed two pilots that would explore new, official on-leash and off-leash dog areas.

First, in June 2019, new on-leash dog access was piloted at Junipero Serra Park and Coyote Point. Now, almost a year later, San Mateo County Parks is gearing up for the second pilot which will test off-leash dog access at Pillar Point Bluff and Quarry Park, two of the County’s coastal parks.

This pilot will not go into effect until the Board of Supervisors hears the policy recommendations later this spring. First, it went before the San Mateo County Parks Commission. Held at the Captain’s House this past February, the meeting room was packed with engaged residents who came to share their thoughts.

Parks Commission highlights

A dog work group made up of park rangers, environmentalists, dog owners and equestrians continued the work of the original committee and produced a list of policies to help guide the off-leash pilot. They include:

• Dogs must be under voice and sight control

(Continued on page 3)
San Bruno Mountain Watch works to preserve and protect the Mountain in the City.

Park Partner Spotlight: San Bruno Mountain Watch

Last fall, the San Mateo County Parks Foundation introduced our revamped volunteer group grant program and awarded over $15,000 to six worthy organizations. They are the Friends of Edgewood, Friends of Huddart and Wunderlich Parks, Friends of San Pedro Valley Park, Pacific Beach Coalition, San Bruno Mountain Watch and the Trail Center.

All of these organizations do excellent work which we are proud to support. Here is one example of that work:

Restoring and re-storying a native botanical garden on San Bruno Mountain

The mission of San Bruno Mountain Watch is to protect and preserve the native ecosystems of San Bruno Mountain through ecological restoration, environmental education and conservation advocacy. They received funding to restore a native botanical garden on San Bruno Mountain. The goal of the project is to communally create an easily accessible landscape that will introduce park visitors to both the unique native flora of San Bruno Mountain and the mountain’s captivating natural and cultural histories.

The garden will be developed as a curated collection of intriguing, meaningful and beautiful stories, where each plant represents a tale that seeks to capture the essence of San Bruno Mountain and relate it to the audience. It will describe the “poetic relationships woven together by plants, people, and the landscapes in which they interact”. For example, a sign for a butterfly host plant could share the story of its host butterfly, while one for a moisture loving shrub can mention the importance of fog on San Bruno Mountain.

The San Mateo County Parks Foundation looks forward to seeing this botanical garden come to life and nurture a lot of wonderful relationships in the process.

The San Bruno Mountain Conference will be held on Sunday, April 19 at the Mission Blue Center in Brisbane. Contact us to learn more.
• Owner’s leash must be readily available at all times
• A 10-second (more or less) return time when calling your dog
• Dogs must only be on designated trails within eye and ear shot
• Dogs must be leashed in urban areas, like around picnic tables
• One cannot have more than two dogs off leash

The Parks Department’s recommendation differs slightly in two ways:
• The addition of more trails open to off-leash dog use at Quarry Park due to a reduction of brush
• Ross’ Cove Trail at Pillar Point Bluff will remain on-leash in an effort to protect marine life (dogs are not allowed at Ross’ Cove)

Parks staff also clarified that dogs must be in front of you, not behind you.

This last point upset some dog owners, who say that senior dogs sometimes follow behind. They also expressed dismay at having to leash up or restrain their dog every time they see another person on the trail. The exception to this rule is if both people have off-leash dogs. Both recommendations will advance to the Board of Supervisors. The community had more to say.

According to Christine Corwin, President of Coastside Dog Owners Group of San Mateo County, San Mateo County lags behind surrounding counties and park agencies when it comes to dog walking access. Only 8% of the trails in San Mateo County Parks are accessible to people with dogs, yet at least 40% of households own a dog. Meanwhile, in Marin County and the East Bay, more than 80% of trails are open to dog walking.

Speakers voiced concern that the County was in fact taking something away as residents have been walking their dogs off leash at these parks for years. Others cautioned coastal residents to remember that while they are responsible dog walkers, the coast is a regional draw. Not everyone gets to live by the ocean and not everyone is comfortable around dogs. At the same time, not all dog owners have control over their pet. Others spoke up for steeper fines and requested the ability to call a park ranger if they see bad behavior.

Everyone was heard. There is no denying that this is a difficult issue.

Why are dogs in parks such a hot topic?

There are very good reasons why park agencies are cautious about allowing or expanding dog use in parks. Park agencies, like San Mateo County Parks, are responsible for ensuring the safety of all guests, wildlife and the land itself. Rules protect not only wildlife and park visitors, but also dogs and dog owners.

Some people are afraid of dogs and it can be easy to see why. Dogs not under the control of their owner have been known to attack other dogs and people. If someone sees a dog running in the park, it can be hard to tell whether that dog is friendly or aggressive. As one speaker at the Parks Commission stated, “It would be nice to walk the bluff-top at Pillar Point without the fear of someone’s dog jumping on you.”

Dogs can harass and kill wildlife. Our county parks provide habitat for a multitude of species, many threatened and endangered. It is a joy to go to a local wildland park and see a coyote or bobcat close to the trail. This is their home. Dogs are predatory animals, and may choose to chase other animals.

The effects of dogs on wildlife communities has been studied and the evidence shows that the presence of dogs causes wildlife to move away. Barking and scents left by dogs can disturb wildlife. Some small animals will hide in their burrow the rest of the day after smelling a dog.

But pets can also be prey for larger predators such as coyotes and mountain lions. And dog owners must be aware of threats and issues like ticks, which can spread disease, as well as snakes, the terrain and heat. Rules are put in place to protect dogs and their humans, too.

Our Shared Space

For dog owners, though, going to a park is best when you can bring your best friend with you. And on the coast, this use has been allowed for years with few episodes. However, as more people bring their dogs off-leash to these parks, conflicts can arise.

The San Mateo County Parks Department has the challenging role of providing parks that meet the needs of our diverse communities. Other users of our parks include equestrians, mountain bikers and families with young children. And of course, wildlife and plant life. This is not easy, trying to make everyone happy. In fact, it is impossible.

The key at the end of the day is for each of us to be respectful of our neighbors and guests’ concerns. This can be hard to do, but we must try. When we, as a community, share such gorgeous parkland, it is incumbent on all of us to treat the land with love and respect. And that should go for everyone we encounter on the trail. With three million people visiting San Mateo County Parks each year, we have plenty of opportunities to practice compassion and friendliness with our fellow park users.

We can’t do everything we want to do in a park. But let’s pause for a moment to reflect on what we do have- the parks themselves, with their rich biodiversity, scenic vistas, miles of trails and picnic areas. Yes, we are very lucky.
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Our Top Ten “Cool Things to Discover” in a San Mateo County Park

1. Sam McDonald Park: Sam’s cabin, Chee-chee-wa-wa – In 1917, Sam acquired a home-site in the steep redwoods near La Honda. There, “among the lords of the forest,” he built himself a humble retreat along Alpine Creek for prayer, meditation and reflection. You can still see this log lodge, which Sam called Chee-chee-wa-wa (‘little squirrel’) at the end of Uncle Man Road.

2. San Pedro Valley Park: Brooks Falls – Two-thirds of the way up Brooks Creek Trail, one will come across a bench that looks out across a canyon to the northern slope of Montara Mountain. After a heavy rainstorm, it is especially cool to see the headwaters of Brooks Creek flowing as a multi-tiered waterfall that drops 175 feet into the lush valley below.

3. Fitzgerald Marine Reserve: Stairs to Seal Cove – A 160-foot bluff-to-beach staircase provides access to Seal Cove’s tide pools where at low tide, the reef is exposed with various marine life. This marine protected area provides habitat to federally protected species like the harbor seals often seen basking north of the stairway.

4. Crystal Springs Regional Trail: Pulgas Water Temple – At this trail’s southern end, one will discover the Pulgas Water Temple which was built by the City of San Francisco in 1934 as a monument to the engineering feat that brought Hetch Hetchy water to the Bay Area from the Sierra Nevada Mountains. Designed in the Beaux Arts style, the Pulgas Water Temple stands beside a tree-lined reflecting pool.

5. Pillar Point Marsh: Night Herons – A walk along the marsh at Pillar Point is a great way to see many birds as the area provides essential habitat for shorebirds and waterfowl during migration. Night herons roost in trees nearby. Great blue herons, egrets, ducks, and geese are some of the birds you will find in the marsh with various raptors hunting overhead.

6. Quarry Park: the labyrinth – Installed on World Labyrinth Day in 2012, this labyrinth was built as a 7-Circuit Petite Chartres, but has evolved over time. To find this labyrinth on the quarry floor bathed in sunlight is a real treat.

7. Sam McDonald Park: The Heritage Grove – From a small parking lot off Alpine Road, one will find a trail that crosses the creek to a 37-acre grove of ancient redwoods and continues through a pretty second-growth cathedral forest.

8. Huddart Park: Kings Mountain Archery Range – Nestled on the eastern slopes of a small mountain range within Huddart County Park, this Archery Range features a field course of 28 targets. Canyon walls and slopes provide a safe and soft natural backstop.

9. Devil’s Slide: rock with Common Murres – Looking out from Devil’s Slide, one will see a small sea stack with lots of Common Murres atop it. This is Devil’s Slide Rock and you are looking at a success story. In the late 1980s, this bird colony was wiped out due to human activity. A restoration project installed in 1996 featured decoys, three-sided mirror boxes, and CD players projecting amplified Murre calls to lure the birds back. In 2005, these were removed to make room for the growing colony and by 2014, it was back to its pre-oil spill numbers.

10. Junipero Serra Park: the double slide – Higher up in the park is Meadow View Playground which features spectacular 54-foot-long double slides offering a bird’s eye view of landings and take-offs at San Francisco International Airport. As one Yelp reviewer stated, “The big slide is the best rush you can get without having to go to an amusement park.”

Campgrounds at Memorial Park closed in October 2019 for the 2020 camping season as the Parks Department embarks on the first comprehensive facility improvement project in the park’s 95-year history. This will allow Parks’ staff to complete the work in a safe and efficient manner. Camping is expected to resume in the spring of 2021. All day-use areas, including hiking trails, picnic areas and the visitor center will remain open during this period.
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For more information, please contact Michele Beasley, Executive Director, at Michele@SupportParks.org or (650) 321-5812.

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