

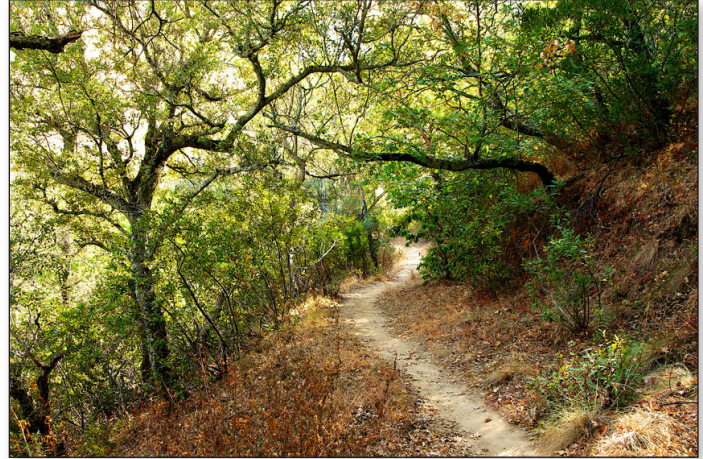
Frank's Favorite Hikes

SECRET TRAIL

by Frank Valle-Riestra

Reprinted from *Mountain News*, Spring/Summer 2011

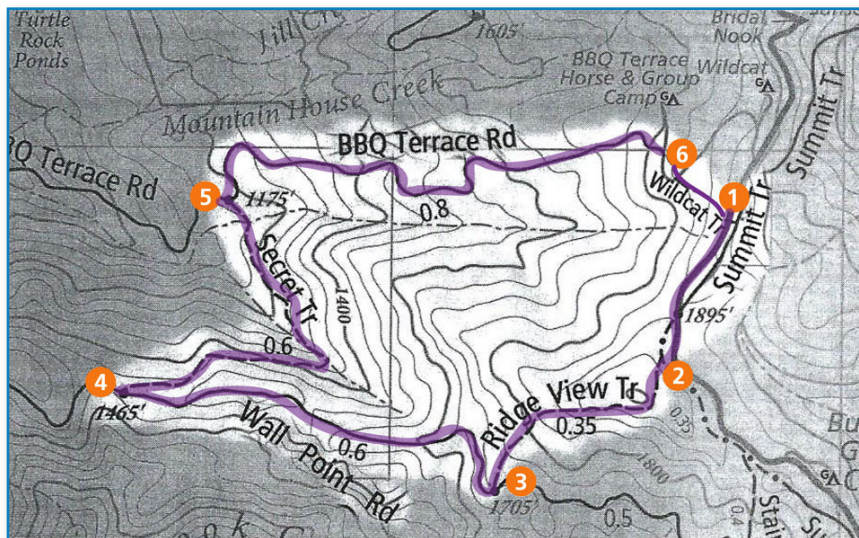
There are almost 200 miles of trails in Mount Diablo State Park, enough to keep even the most tireless hiker busy for many a day. Well-known, well-used trails carry us to delightful destinations throughout the park, near and far. However, scattered among these major hiking thoroughfares are lesser known connecting trails, usually single-track ones, which, by their very nature as connectors, often pass across less visited park landscapes. Many of these landscapes are unique and quite surprising, and the feeling of intimacy imparted by these meandering connectors justifies my referral to them as “secret” trails. One of my favorites is a loop journey incorporating not one, but two such trails, and one of them, as a matter of fact, is officially named “Secret Trail”.



Secret Trail • Paul Salette

To start your exploration of this pleasant loop, drive your car from the junction of North Gate and South Gate Roads, down along South Gate Road, past the small paved road on your right leading to BBQ Terrace group camp. A few yards beyond, there is ① a road pull-off on your left, with a prominent information panel just above it, and a sign, “Authorized Vehicles Only”; the sign is there to keep vehicles away from the broad Summit Trail, which closely parallels the road at this point. There is ample space for parking, but do not block the access to the Summit Trail.

Now walk up to the information panel, which will tell you all about the thrust fault which you happen to be straddling. Here you stand on a broad saddle in the midst of far-reaching meadows, with truly splendid views of the mountain's flanks to the west. If you start early in the morning, the views may well be enhanced by cooling wisps of fog; indeed, an early start is recommended in the warm months of summer and fall.



Walk down (to the south) along broad Summit Trail until it crosses South Gate Road. Just beyond this point, look for ② the well-posted Ridge View Trail, your first secret trail. You can see right away, by comparing its rather faint appearance to the broad, well-worn track of the Summit Trail, that it is seldom used. Nevertheless, it is not difficult to follow along its initial steep climb to the top of the ridge, where it

takes a right turn to cling to the level ridge crest. Here you will feel, indeed, that you have wound up in uncharted wilderness, and there are many delights to draw your attention. For one thing, you are above Rock City, and the views down into that geological fairyland are unmatched, crowned with glimpses of the towering Sentinel Rock—far below you. The trail meanders among the rocky sculptures that are miniatures of the sandstone behemoths in the surrounding valleys. In the spring and early summer months, the trail is a wildflower showplace, and with a bit of luck, you will encounter the astounding and profuse annual display of the four species of Mariposa Lily (*Calochortus sp.*) that favor the mountain, interspersed with white blooming explosions of the non-native, but very pretty *Bellardia*. An extremely steep descent, with acceptable footing, takes you down to the end of Ridge View Trail at **3** Wall Point Road.

Take a right and follow the relatively level broad avenue, with great views on both flanks and plant displays looking for all the world like miniature rock gardens. Monkey flowers, in bloom for a goodly part of the year, are particularly lush along here, in all of their color shades from pale peach to merlot wine. With all of that natural beauty to distract you, do not miss the turn-off to the right after a little over one-half mile, the start of **4** the well-named Secret Trail.

Here you plunge into still another world, a world of shady forest, of madrone, buckeye, bay tree, and live oak; a world cool enough to shelter a variety of flower species well into the warm months—in particular, *Ithuriel's Spear*, *Oregon Sunshine*, and *Indian Paintbrush*. The pretty little trail descends gradually into the depths of Pine Canyon, crossing a pair of tiny stream beds before ending up at **5** BBQ Terrace Road. Cool and intimate as the Secret Trail may be, it is no secret that it also represents an ideal habitat for poison oak; fortunately, this is easily avoided if you pay a bit of attention.

A right turn at BBQ Terrace Road starts you up on the steady climb back to the high saddle where your exploration had started. The grade is not difficult, but it is steady; for the most part, you are on a wide road in the midst of broad meadows, with a few shady rest spots here and there. In summer and early fall, the climb can be quite a warm experience, and an early morning start is certainly indicated. The road ends at a gate at the side of the small paved road to the group camp. A short jaunt to the right along this road takes you to the start of **6** the Wildcat Trail which, in turn, will disgorge you right in front of your parked car.

The loop is not long, about 2.8 miles, but you do have a climb of some 900 feet. With stops, figure one 2½ to 3 hours. Enjoy!