

Frank's Favorite Hikes

CAMEL ROCK

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There are trails in Mount Diablo State Park that are not well known. One of these is the Camel Rock Trail, a gentle single-track trail that parallels the lower reaches of North Gate Road. The trail has been improved in recent years through the efforts of the Park's trail maintenance crew and volunteers, and now provides the curious hiker with an easy and comfortable pathway through a decidedly unique environment.

Camel Rock trailhead is located on North Gate Road—a little over a mile beyond the entrance kiosk—at the Park boundary marked appropriately with a prominent brown signboard. A wide pull-off at the side of the road provides for adequate parking.

To find the trail, cross the road and look for a narrow path climbing steeply to the right. It is clearly posted as the “Camel Rock Trail.”

A steep but mercifully short climb takes you into a world of broad meadows, under the undulating skyline of Long Ridge with its scattered silhouettes of California buckeyes. It is a world of surprising silence and isolation yet so close to the road and urban development, and a source of pleasure and exhilaration to the lonely hiker. Look up toward Long Ridge and you will notice that the treeless zone you are crossing is separated by a sharp line from a zone of more profuse chaparral. The line represents the edge of a band of serpentinite which spans Mount Diablo's lower reaches. Serpentinite is a magnesium-rich mineral that forms a soil not favored by most shrubs and trees. Indeed, as you walk on, you will run across outcrops of the mineral, with aspects ranging from a slick, glass-like green to a crumbly blue, and even a white powder.

The grasses are lush in these open areas, but the sunny habitat also favors wildflowers tolerant of the magnesium-rich soil. Springtime brings fine varietal displays—indeed, the dry spring of 2008 brought forth an astounding spectacle of massed California Poppy (*Eschscholzia californica*) coloring Long Ridge with a blinding bright orange. Smaller orange explosions of trailside poppies usually last well into the fall, along with late bloomers such as the aromatic Tarweeds (*Hemizonia congesta*) and the bright red California Fuchsia (*Zauschneria californica*) in rocky outcrops. The trail here may be partially covered with thick grasses; however, it is not difficult to follow.

Your upward progress will take you through alternating zones of grasslands, chaparral, and oak savannah. Several small streams cross your path, mostly dry in the warm months, but some with silent pools of clear water even in the fall that are an important wildlife resource. Notice the smooth polish of the eroded rocks that form the stream bed, evidence of the sculpting power of winter's flash floods. The stream gullies impart some down-and-up episodes to your voyage, but the general trend is a moderate climb to the terminus of Camel Rock Trail where it meets Burma Road.



Camel Rock • Carl Nielson

On your way you will pass through warmer regions of chaparral with its pleasing aromas of Black Sage (*Salvia mellifera*), California Sagebrush (*Artemisia californica*), and the charming Vinegar Weed (*Trichostema lanceolatum*). You will find those cool stream gullies a pleasant contrast to the hotter chaparral, shaded as they are by a forest growth of buckeyes, oaks, bay trees, and an occasional maple, a burst of color in the fall. Upper reaches of the trail penetrate an oak savannah, and here you will spot the first of several spectacular rocky monuments, terminally eroded protrusions of greenstone. You are free to let your imagination discover novel shapes in these crumbling formations, but they do not resemble a camel. As you reach Burma Road, you may wonder where the name of Camel Rock Trail comes from. There is a rock resembling a camel nearby, but it is not adjacent to the trail.

After all that effort, you owe it to yourself to find Camel Rock. On Burma Road, climb uphill a short distance to the point where the road slightly curves to the left at the beginning of a steep rise. Then leave the road and cross the meadow to your right. Camel Rock will come into view to the south. It is a pleasant place to rest and take in some refreshments.

To complete a loop back to your vehicle, return to Burma Road and descend to the paved North Gate Road. Cross the road, and continue on Burma Road to its junction with Little Pine Creek Road. Continue along Little Pine Creek Road to its terminus at North Gate Road where your vehicle is located. The descent is steep but pleasant through more oak savannah and oak tree plantings with wonderful views of the undulating flanks of Long Ridge across the valley. You will see traces of the Camel Rock Trail you had climbed in the distance.

The loop length is three miles with a net climb of about 500 feet. Allow for two hours. The only hazard might be ticks. It is wise to check your skin when you get home.