

## Frank's Favorite Hikes

# SPRINGTIME ON THE NORTH PEAK TRAIL

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Reprinted from *Mountain News*, Spring/Summer 2011

Of the many attractions of Mount Diablo, perhaps the most eagerly anticipated is the annual return of the mountain's spectacular wildflower display. There are those trails along which a particular species predominates—globe lilies along the Globe Lily and Perkins trails. Johnny-jump-ups along the Coulter Pine and Bruce Lee Spring trails. California poppies on the slopes of Long Ridge. Bird's eye gillias on the Bald Ridge trail. But there is one trail that has just about all of them, growing together in astounding profusion: the North Peak Trail, passing through the sun-drenched meadows just below the summit, the park's Elysian Fields. If you have never been there at the time of blooming, you owe it to yourself to go.

Start your exploration at the lower summit parking lot; here you will find restrooms, water, picnic tables—and incomparable views, another attractive feature of this hike. As you leave your vehicle, you will be drawn to the unobstructed panorama to the east; a broad, sweeping vista of apparent wilderness stretching from the Central Valley, across to the distant Mount Hamilton, and out toward Mount Umunhum in the Santa Cruz Mountains. It is a beautiful and impressive sight in all kinds of weather.

Now look for your trailhead, ① the beginning of a steadily descending section of the Summit trail, easily spotted near the vehicle entrance to the parking lot. This wide, well-maintained trail passes through a



*Five Peaks; View of Summit • Paul Salemme*



forest of mature buckbrush and bay trees, with occasional openings to reveal the ever-shifting views. Here you do have a dominant flowering species—the trailside buckbrush itself, a wild lilac, which bears clusters of white flowers in abundance. On warm, sunny days, the air is filled with their heady, sweet perfume. Look out also for trailside stands of yerba santa, with profuse trumpet-shaped white blooms, slightly tinged with purple. The plant, named “Sacred Herb” by early Spanish settlers, was used by Bay Miwoks as a remedy for respiratory problems.

The trail section ends at ② Devil's Elbow, the sharpest Summit Road curve; a trail sign points out the beginning of the North Peak trail, heading toward Prospectors Gap. Here you must stop to admire the extraordinary assembly of Franciscan chert cliffs, pinnacles, and rocks spilling down from the summit, crowned by towering Devils Pulpit to the north. Particularly when highlighted by rays of the sun, these splendid 140-million-year-old formations, the color of congealed blood, constitute one of the most amazing Bay Area natural sights.

Turn left (east) onto the North Peak trail; it begins with a short but very steep section, which requires careful attention to your footing. At first the flowers are not as profuse as promised, but you will spot examples of blue witch, wallflower, and naked buckwheat, among others. There are some fine specimens of juniper along the way, loaded with berry clusters thick as grapes. The farther you go, the more colorful becomes the massed wildflower display, with the climax growth just below ③ Devils Pulpit, at the point where the trail veers leftward toward the north. Here, in meadows sprinkled with picturesque boulders, perhaps two dozen species form a broad carpet of happy cohabitation. Take a moment to rest on a boulder, to admire the scene around you and the now visible distant Sierra Nevada, stretching across the length of California.

But more pleasures await you as you proceed along the intimate single-track trail, perched above the steep canyons far below. Even though the area has not been fire-ravaged since 1977, the fire-induced wind poppy may still be found occasionally—a rare find, indeed. On the other hand, the sloping meadows farther along toward Prospectors Gap abound with broad swaths of goldfields, a joy to the eye. The only thing to mar your pleasure is the evidence of pig damage, from animals descended from pigs released by early ranchers for hunting purposes. They are a problem all over the mountain, bulldozing the moist earth to dig up wildflower bulbs.

Just before Prospectors Gap, ④ the trail begins a long, steep descent with rather treacherous footing. Unless you wish to reach the gap for some reason, stop before attempting the descent and note a little unmarked path on your left. A few steps take you to a spot that opens up new vistas to the west, as well as great views of the Ransom Point monolith above, and Summit Visitor Center—our own modest mountain-top castle. The total round-trip hike to this end point and back is about  $2\frac{1}{4}$  miles, and your climb is 620 feet, mostly on the way back. Allow  $2\frac{1}{2}$  hours.

Of course, you can extend your hike past Prospectors Gap to include the length of the incomparable Bald Ridge trail, with its wonderful carpets of bird's eye gilia. Be aware that this will increase your hike by another 3 miles, with an additional climb of 650 feet, allow two more hours. And say hello to the melodious California thrashers, which favor that particular environment.

A word of caution; it is impossible to foretell the best time for the wildflower display—it usually occurs between March and May—or whether the display will be a decent one. But the North Peak trail offers ample rewards even if flowers happen to be skimpy.