

exploring

New Steps on Old Paths Rancho Cañada del Oro Neil Wiley

Fifteen years ago, I hiked in Rancho Cañada del Oro shortly after the Open Space Authority of Santa Clara Valley opened a new trailhead on Casa Loma Road. In my February 2006 exploring article, I called my experience “the perfect hike.”

In late March 2021, I hiked the same preserve. In some ways, it was different. The trail to Longwall Canyon Trail had a different name. Early spring flowers were sprinkled along the trails. It was a few degrees warmer. The grasses and tree-covered hills were dark green. I saw fewer deer, turkeys, birds, and ground squirrels, but I saw them, especially along the lower elevations of Longwall Canyon Trail.

Perhaps others were looking elsewhere for water, because our dry winter had made Baldy Ryan Creek a series of little puddles.

The good news, however, was that little had changed in this 5,428-acre preserve. The trails at the lower elevations wandered through shade as they gently climbed up to wider vistas. Most of the views were of forested hills and valleys. They were not spectacular, but were natural, calming, and free from human development. I enjoyed them in solitude. I saw only four people.

The Longwell, Bald Peaks, Catamount loop

It seemed counter-intuitive, but I walked back out of the parking lot entrance to find the trail to Longwall Canyon Trail. It was a level, wide, and easy warmup that passed by several deer and a flock of turkeys. But when I reached the Longwall Canyon Trail, it took me up 900 feet. It wasn't an elevator, but the mild grades and slow, gentle curves were more interesting than switchbacks.

It helped that each bend offered new vistas, a variety of plant life, and other surprises. I saw beautiful green grass and spring flowers, including many small fields of California poppies with sprinkles of tiny white yarrow, dark green miner's lettuce, sky lupine, tidy tips, Indian paintbrush, and sticky monkey flower.

After walking through forest and small meadows, I emerged on the open slopes of Bald Peaks Trail. Atop this ridge, the views were more dramatic. Some were to the north and east toward Calero Reservoir, Mount Hamilton, and Silicon Valley. Others looked

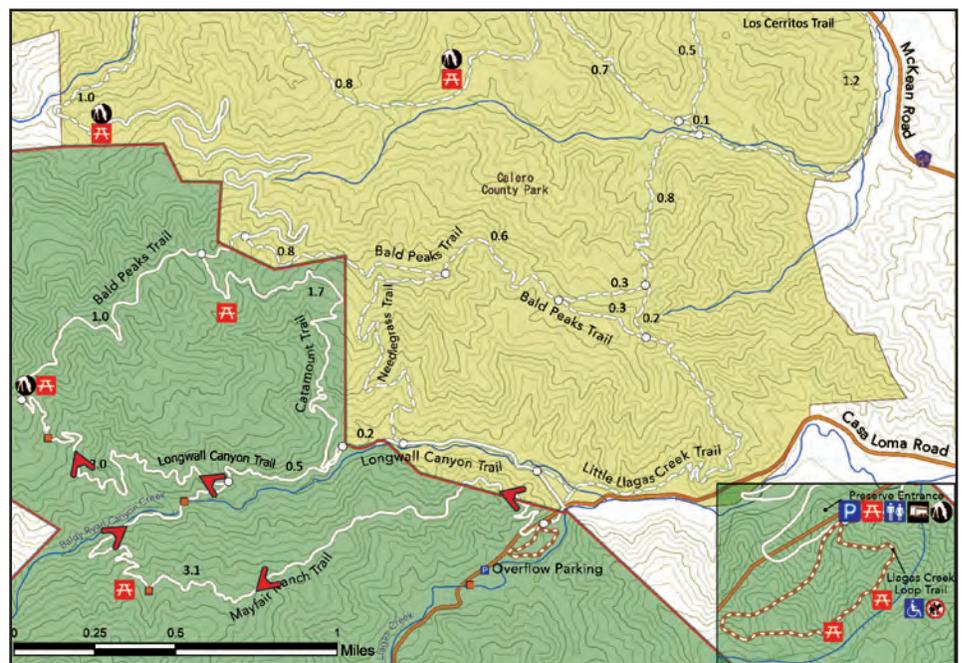


south and west toward the ridge lines of our Loma Prieta and Mount Umunhum.

These moments were so joyful that I couldn't help laughing at the beauty while indulging with a snack bar and a bottle of Pellegrino. I got up when two vultures circled over me. I was tired, but not that tired.

The trail continued along the ridge line, climbing another 97 feet in elevation over ups and downs and around gentle curves. The views were great, but the lack of shade encouraged me to keep moving.

I had brief company when three bike riders came up from Calero County Park. They rode up to a higher view site, then back down to Calero, all in a matter of minutes. It took me longer to reach the





relatively steep downhill Catamount Trail. Although I preferred walking down rather than up, several steep sections of slippery loose gravel required attention.

When I reached the valley floor, I turned left for the short walk back to my car.

It was a perfect hike. Yours will be different and maybe better. After all, it will be your adventure.

Details

Horses and bicyclists are allowed on designated trails. Dogs and other pets are not allowed. No water is available except for a horses-only drinking fountain on Bald Peaks Trail.

Two other trails are available. The 3.1-mile Mayfair Trail offers varied terrain, intermittent shade, and ridge-top views for equestrians, bikers, and hikers. The half-mile Llagas Creek Loop Trail is a paved, wheelchair-accessible trail through open grasslands.

When I hiked this loop in March, the Mayfair Ranch Trail and a section of the Longwall Canyon Trail were one-way. (You can't backtrack, but you don't come face-to-face with other hikers on a narrow trail.)

Getting there

For your GPS, use the address 4289 Casa Loma Road, Morgan Hill.

If you like freeways, you can take Highway 85 south, to Highway 101 south toward Morgan Hill. Turn right on Baily Avenue, left on McKean Road, and a final right on Casa Loma Road.

If you prefer a more direct route at lower speeds, take Blossom Hill, a right on Camden, and a right on Almaden Expressway. At the end of Almaden Expressway, turn right on Harry, and

left on McKean Road. You travel past Calero Reservoir and Calero County Park entrances, then turn right on Casa Loma.

No matter what your route, the last road is no freeway. It may seem more like a wide trail, but it will get you there.

For more information and a map, visit openspaceauthority.org. Don't rely on a cellphone. (A paper map doesn't disappear with a low battery or no internet.) Bring water, a snack, and a small flashlight. They make a difference, especially if you get caught in the dark. Happy trails!

