



# IN SEARCH OF SONOMA MOUNTAIN

By Meade Fischer

When I read that Mickey Cooke and Pat Eliot, two ladies who have crusaded for six decades to acquire the top of Sonoma Mountain for the public, had finally succeeded, and that it afforded panoramic views of the entire North Bay, I knew I had to get up there and take a look around.

The mountain, saved from development in a \$9.95 million deal that closed on December 31, 2008, was purchased when The Sonoma Land Trust, the Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District and the California Coastal Conservancy pooled their resources and bought the 283-acre Sonoma Mountain Ranch.

The mountain, on the spine of the range that separates Petaluma and the Highway 101 corridor from Sonoma and the Valley of the Moon, tops out at about 2,400 feet. No Mt. Whitney, Mt. Denali or even Mt. Diablo, it is still one of the highest points in Sonoma County and is situated to offer views of Mt. Tam, Mt. Diablo, plus Mt. Hood and Red Mt. to the north, and even, on a clear day, a touch of the blue Pacific over the hills of Golden Gate National Recreation Area, 360 degrees of some of the Bay Area's finest scenery.

My first instinct was to take the easy way up, so I drove Sonoma Mountain Road, off Adobe Road, east of Petaluma. After over five miles of twisting road and delightfully bucolic mountain pastures, I came to the end of the road. Unfortunately, there were no parking signs, and the road ended at a locked gate topped with rows of barbed wire, along with no trespassing signs. After sitting in the car for a few minutes, considering my next move, I started getting the feeling that someone didn't want people accessing the top of the mountain through their land.

Luckily, it was a clear day, so even from below the summit, I could see most of west Sonoma and Marin counties.

After a bit of research I realized that the only way up would be through Jack London State Historical Park near Glen Ellen. Naturally, this could not be driven and would involve an eight and a half mile round trip and a 1,800 foot climb. I discovered that while this top parcel would eventually be part of the park with official trails and all, the process had not yet been completed. Still the park boundary was only about a quarter mile from the summit.

I set aside May first to make the trip with camera in hand to catch those spectacular vistas. Unusual for May, rain was expected.

Thinking a light spring shower would not be a problem, I drove into the park as soon as it opened.

It is quite a straight forward trip up the mountain. Upon paying at the entrance, I turned right to the parking lot for the lake and the London historic farm. In a few dozen yards I passed the old farm buildings and the London Cottage. Then the dirt road split at a vineyard, the main trail to the lake on the right, passing the two silos and rounding the upper end of the vineyard. Then there is a locked gate to stop vehicles and two lake trail options, both the same distance.

The lake is a mile from the parking lot, and it is mostly choked with plants, now filled in and much smaller than during London's time. At the lake, the Mountain Trail begins, a well maintained dirt road that extends almost to the top of the park. From this point on it is easy to follow, if not always easy to climb, just stay on the road and follow the Mountain Trail signs for another three miles.

The trail winds up through redwood groves and mixed forests, over several tiny creeks and through some meadows, rich with flowers in the spring. About a half mile above the lake, the trail leaves the woods and enters a small clearing, with huge patches of purple vetch on one side and a mass of yellow lupine on the other. There is a bench facing the Sonoma Valley, and I quickly realized that the park service only puts benches where the views are exceptional. It is wise to stop, rest and look!

As I continued past the bench, a wild turkey was walking on the path. It kept running ahead of me as I ascended, never realizing that stepping off the trail would get it out of my way.

About a half mile further, a trail leads off to the left through another meadow to Asbury creek, a lovely waterway to follow down, but on another day or possibly on the way back. There are three or four other trail junctions further up, but the Mountain Trail is clearly marked and always on the dirt road.

There is another clearing with another bench, which on a clear day affords a great view of Mt. Diablo. Then the mixed forest again. Soon the canopy opens up, and scattered oaks are strewn in a thick, verdant, knee deep meadow.

Entering the meadow, I startled a deer, that dashed into the woods and a hawk that was on a limb just above my head. Since I was the only person on the trail that day, no one had scared the wildlife.

High on the mountain side, it is mostly open meadow with a sprinkling of oaks, and there the trail forks. The right leads to the far end of the park and the hayfields, The left reads "Park Summit .4 mile," almost there. It becomes a

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