

# Sam McDonald County Park, San Mateo County Parks, San Mateo County

## *In brief:*

4.8 mile loop through some of the quietest trails in the Santa Cruz Mountains redwood belt.

## *Distance, category, and difficulty:*

This 4.8 mile loop hike is moderately easy, with about 900 feet in elevation change. Trailhead elevation is around 640 feet. The park's high point is around 1316 feet. Most hikes require a climb out of the trailhead, and subsequent descent on the return trip. Most of the fire roads are steep.

## *Exposure:*

Mix of shade and sun.

## *Trail traffic:*

Light..

## *Trail surfaces:*

Dirt trails and fire roads.

## *Hiking time:*

2 1/2 hours.

## *Season:*

Nice any time.

## *Getting there:*

From Interstate 280 in San Mateo County, exit Woodside Road/CA 84 (exit #25). Drive west on CA 84 (bear right onto La Honda Road at the junction with Portola Road) about 6 miles, to the junction with CA 35 (Skyline Boulevard). Continue straight on La Honda Road/84, about 6.5 miles, to the easy-to-miss junction with Pescadero Road. Turn left. Drive about 1 mile south on Pescadero Road, and bear right at the junction with Alpine Road. Continue about 0.5 mile on Pescadero Road, to the park entrance on the right (drive slowly, as the entrance is undersigned).

## *Get driving or public transit directions from Transit and Trails:*

<http://www.transitandtrails.org/trailheads/361>

## *GPS Coordinates\* for Trailhead:*

Latitude 37°17'47.40"N

Longitude 122°15'56.04"W

(\* based on [Google Earth](http://www.google.com) data, shown as

degrees, minutes, seconds)

## *Gas, food, and lodging:*

Stores and restaurant about 2 miles back up 84, in La Honda. Gas at the junction of 35 and 84. Camping in the park is restricted to youth groups and equestrian camps. Sierra Club takes reservations 2 months in advance for Hikers' Hut; call 650-390-8411 for more information.

## *Trailhead details:*

Paved parking lot with no designated handicapped parking. Restrooms and pay phone next to ranger station. Maps at ranger station. \$5 entrance fee, self-register if ranger station is unstaffed. Trails are not suitable for wheelchairs. There is no direct public transportation to the park.

## *Rules:*

No bikes or dogs. Most trails are open to equestrians and hikers, but some are designated hiking only.

## *The Official Story:*

Memorial Park (Just down the road) is one

Sam McDonald Park may suffer from a middle child complex. Larger than Memorial Park but still dwarfed by Pescadero Creek Park, Sam McDonald is the least known of the western slope Santa Cruz Mountains county park triad. McDonald's initial 400 acres were acquired in 1958 (with more land purchased in 1970), while Memorial's acreage was obtained in 1924 (it is the oldest of the county parks), and youngest child Pescadero Creek happened along in the 1970s. With an inconspicuous entrance on Pescadero Road and limited facilities, families looking for the perfect campsite or hikers planning long multi-day treks pass right by McDonald, on their way to Memorial, Pescadero Creek, and adjacent Portola Redwoods State Park. While Memorial and Portola feature drive-in campsites, at McDonald (as well as Pescadero Creek),



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you must hike or ride on horseback to a limited number of campsites that require reservations. All three of these county parks have distinct personalities, but similar terrain. Redwood forests are prominent, and trail networks string together steep fire roads with more gentle trails. Bicycles are restricted to a handful of trails at Pescadero Creek, and horses are commonly encountered in Pescadero Creek and McDonald (Memorial does not permit them). A detailed map of the three county parks and Portola State Park doesn't exist, but would be helpful in planning long hikes. It's possible to dayhike Pescadero Creek and one of any other park in a single visit, and another option is to wander through all of them on a multi-day backpacking ramble. Adjacent parklands and easements permit a three county blockbuster trek, from the valley foothills of Rancho San Antonio Open Space Preserve west through Monte Bello Open Space Preserve, south through Skyline Ridge and Long Ridge Open Space Preserves, then west into Portola and Pescadero Creek. From there you can go north to McDonald, east to Memorial, and/or south into Big Basin.

If you want to spend the day at solely within the confines of McDonald, several loop possibilities exist. Pescadero Road cuts through the middle of the park, and most visitors head either north or south from the main trailhead just off the road. Ridge Trail Loop, about 3.5 miles, visits the north and south section of the park. Supplement that with an additional jaunt southeast



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McDonald's most unusual and prized feature (besides the redwoods) may be Hikers' Hut, operated by the Sierra Club. Perched near the high point of Towne Ridge, the A-frame building makes great, rustic accommodations for a group. The hut has a simple kitchen with drinking water, small common area, large wooden deck, and tiny upstairs loft. There are no beds, but 14 sleeping mats are included. Many hikers are fond of spending the night outside on the deck in agreeable weather,



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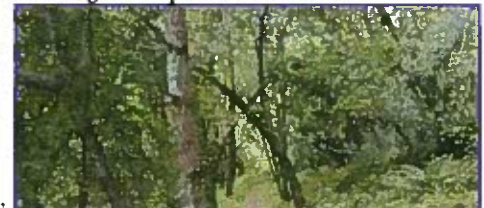
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on Towne Trail, and head back to the trailhead on Heritage Grove Trail, for a near six mile tour of the park. Folks out for a more gentle hike through redwoods might opt for McDonald's Big Tree Loop. Although the 1 mile hike does have some elevation to contend with, its diminutive length makes it a reasonable choice for most.

Winter is muddy at McDonald, and storms can significantly impact the trail conditions, but you are bound to find solitude that time of year. Visit in spring for wildflowers along the high meadows of Towne Ridge and throughout the mixed woodland of Heritage Grove Trail. Summer heat is mitigated by the dark shaded redwood groves, and early in the season you might find orchids and thimbleberries in the woods. In autumn huckleberries and big leaf maples are the draw.



McDONALD PARK JUST DOWN THE ROAD SERVES AS  
park headquarters: 650-879-0238  
[SMC P's Sam McDonald page](#)

**Map Choices:**

- Use AAA's *San Francisco Bay Region* map to get there.
- [Map from SMCP](#)
- Dave Baseli's *Pescadero Creek County Park/Portola Redwoods State Park* map is an excellent guide to the trails of San McDonald as well ([order from Redwood Hikes](#)).
- *Afoot and Afield - San Francisco Bay Area*, by David Weintraub ([order this book from Amazon.com](#)) has a great map and descriptions of a Sam McDonald hike.
- *Peninsula Trails*, by Jean Rusmore, has a simple map and park descriptions ([order this book from Amazon.com](#)).
- *The Santa Cruz Mountains Trail Book*, by Tom Taber, has a simple map and park descriptions ([order this book from Amazon.com](#)).
- *101 Great Hikes of the San Francisco Bay Area*, by Ann Marie Brown ([order this book from Amazon.com](#)) has a simple map and featured hike.

**NEW** [Sam McDonald Park in a nutshell](#) -- a printable, text-only guide to the featured hike.

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easing the strain of the limited indoor sleeping space. Vault toilets are located outside the hut.

**Start at the south edge of the parking lot, near the picnic area.** A large park sign indicates the mileage to several prominent destinations: it's 14 miles from here to Big Basin State Park.



Towne Trail, open to hikers and equestrians, heads into a redwood forest, with huckleberry, thimbleberry, ferns, hazelnut, and currant in the understory. After about 300 feet, the trail reaches Pescadero Road. **Carefully cross the pavement and rejoin Towne Trail on the other side.** The trail widens to fire road width, and begins to climb somewhat steeply. A large water tank is visible, its squat shape a contrast to the towering redwoods. At 0.28 mile, Big Tree Trail breaks off to the left at a signed junction. **Bear left onto Big Tree Trail.**

The narrow hiking only path winds uphill, then rejoins the fire road. **Turn left.** The two run together for a short stretch, then Big Tree departs again, this time for good, on the left at a

signed junction. **Bear left.** Big Tree Trail begins a steep descent into a gulch. Once at the forest floor, the trail winds at a more reasonable grade. Redwoods dominate the landscape, but look closer to the ground in spring for trillium, starflower, and redwood sorrel. At 0.72 mile, Heritage Grove Trail sets out to the right from a signed junction. **Turn right on Heritage Grove Trail.**

The narrow hiking only trail keeps a level pace through the dense, dark forest of redwoods. Banana slugs are common. Tanoak, huckleberry, and hazelnut manage to eek out enough light to accompany the *Sequoia sempervirens*. Orchid-like flowers including hellebore and shinleaf wintergreen lend an exotic air to the trailside flora in summer. Traffic noise from Alpine and Pescadero Roads fades as you wander through this



very quiet section of the park. Rather abruptly, Heritage Grove Trail enters a mixed woodland, with California bay, coast live oak, Douglas fir, tanoak, and a few madrones lining the path. Poison oak, creambush, ferns, ceanothus, and wild rose bask in the dappled sunlight. Although redwoods quickly step back into the picture, their dominance is diminished as they are mixed with other trees and plants. Heritage Grove Trail crosses a creek and soon after reaches a signed junction at 2.43 miles. The trail straight visits Heritage Grove, an option if you'd like to extend the hike and see more redwoods. (The path ends at Alpine Road: from there retrace your steps to this junction.) **Turn right** and remain on Heritage Grove Trail, toward Hikers' Hut.

The hiking only trail climbs gently through a scenic stretch of woods. Coast live oak, Douglas fir, California bay, big leaf maple, and tanoak, along with thimbleberry, nettles, sticky monkeyflower, gooseberry, creambush, currant, hazelnut, and blackberry line the path. Look for hound's tongue in early spring, and the shiny red berries of baneberry (poisonous) in summer. The trail winds uphill like a slithering snake, but then takes a sharp turn to the right and climbs straight uphill. Just past a gate and stile, the trail steps out into a pretty meadow rimmed with Douglas fir. A few steps later, at 2.75 miles, Heritage Grove Trail ends at a signed junction with Towne Trail. **Turn left,** but instead of the fire road, take the slight but obvious trail that heads back into the woods.

The path winds uphill, passes a massive multi-limbed Douglas fir, then reaches Hikers' Hut at 2.86 miles. Unless you have a reservation, **continue uphill on a path that dumps onto a wide dirt fire road, and keep climbing uphill.** At 3.04 miles, the fire road ends at an unsigned junction and view point. At elevation 1316 feet, there are



unobstructed views of the forested ridges to the south. This is a nice place for a lunch break if it's not too hot. When you're ready, **turn around, bear left and head downhill** on the fire road. At 3.16 miles, you'll reach an unsigned junction with Towne Trail. **Turn right.**

The hiking and equestrian fire road descends easily, with creambush, coyote brush, poison oak, and a big leaf maple lining the way. At 3.44 miles, you'll reach a previously encountered junction with Heritage Grove Trail (and a connector to Brook Loop Trail). **Continue straight on Towne Trail.**

The trail bisects a pretty meadow, where even in summer a few California poppies enliven the blonde grass.



Brook Loop Trail runs a few feet to the left, bordering a descending hillside of coyote brush. Towne Trail makes a brief foray



through a mixed woodland, then reemerges into thistle-choked grassland. At 3.87 miles, Brook Loop Trail feeds into Towne Trail from the left. **Continue straight on Towne Trail.** (Brook Trail heads south into Pescadero Creek County Park.)

After a slight descent, you'll pass through/around a gate, and reach the junction with Horse Camp at 4.10 miles. **Turn left**, and then a few steps later, **turn right** at a signed junction, to "McDonald Ranger Station." (From here you could extend your hike into the northern section of the park. Continue straight on Ridge Trail, and once across



Pescadero Road, look for Forest Loop to the right. Take this path back to the trailhead.)

You might see quail and deer along the trail, which quickly begins to descend back into a redwood forest. The steep slopes of a gulch fall away to the right. Traveling in this direction, you might notice blackened bark on only one side of the redwood trunks, evidence that a fire once ripped down the canyon to the north. As you make progress downhill, traffic noises from Pescadero Road drift uphill. **Stay on the fire road as you pass two previously encountered junctions with Big Tree Trail, then retrace your steps back to the trailhead.**

Total distance: 4.80 miles

Last hiked: Wednesday, June 28, 2001

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