



Pine Mountain viewed from Azalea Hill. Photo: Andrea Williams

VISITING CALIFORNIA GRASSLANDS: by Andrea Williams, CNGA Board President

Azalea Hill / Pine Mountain, Marin County, California

Offering a fantastic diversity of species and grassland types, Azalea Hill is a year-round attraction in the heart of Marin County. Within the span of a few hundred feet, the attentive hiker will notice purple needlegrass (*Stipa pulchra*), serpentine, and Idaho fescue (*Festuca idahoensis*) grasslands; serpentine chaparral and oak woodlands dot the landscape as well. In winter, the parking lot off Bolinas-Fairfax Road is the popular starting spot for hikers to Little Carson Falls via Pine Mountain Road; the 1.5-mile trek to the falls passes through serpentine prairie, chaparral, and grassy seeps.

In spring, the wildflower shows begin. Season, amount of rainfall, and temperature dictate which natives flourish each year: goldfields (*Lasthenia* spp.), babystars (*Leptosiphon* spp.), and tarweeds (*Hemizonia* spp.) alternate in prominence; dot-seed plantain (*Plantago erecta*) is always present but less showy. Dozens of grass species form the foundation of these communities, including the rare serpentine reedgrass (*Calamagrostis ophiditis*) in large numbers at the ecotone of grassland and shrubland.

Summer brings breezes to cool the afternoon hiker; strong winds make waves through the grasslands, rippling sun-bleached stems. Tiny annuals found only in Marin show themselves: Tiburon buckwheat (*Eriogonum luteolum* var. *caninum*) and Tamalpais

lessingia (*Lessingia micradenia* var. *micradenia*) make up in abundance what they lack in stature. The native—and locally rare—few-leaved thistle's (*Cirsium remotifolium*) cream-colored flowers rise above wetter grasslands, in contrast to western thistle's (*C. occidentale*) brilliant crimson heads in chaparral.

What little fall color can be seen in coastal California is on display on Azalea Hill. The “back” side of Azalea Hill has California black oak and Oregon white oak (*Quercus kelloggii* and *Q. garryana*) woodland with a California fescue understory, and brilliant yellow drifts of oak leaves contrast nicely with blue-gray fescue clumps. A proposed re-route of the trail will pass by the surprisingly few western azaleas (*Rhododendron occidentale*) turning red and orange before dropping their leaves.

In just under a mile, at the right time of year, a sharp-eyed botanist can spot over 300 species of plants, including a dozen clover species and two dozen kinds of grasses! It's no wonder CNGA “featured” this site for a field portion of its recent workshop “Identifying and Appreciating Native and Naturalized Grasses of California.” Go back season after season, and year after year, for a changing kaleidoscope of species palettes!

