



From left: Miner's lettuce (*Claytonia perfoliata*) along N. Orr Creek Trail. Native bees visiting common blennosperma (*Blennosperma nanum*). A Pacific banana slug (*Ariolimax columbianus*) along N. Orr Creek Trail. Photos: Emily Allen

VISITING CALIFORNIA GRASSLANDS: *by Emily Allen, CNGA Board Member* **Low Gap Park, Ukiah, Mendocino County**

Nestled in the Coast Range Mountains of Mendocino County, less than two miles off Highway 101, Low Gap Park is worth exploring for just a quick trip or, better yet, a full day! The easily accessible 80-acre park in the city of Ukiah was the site of an old lumber mill with worker housing and, up until 1955, a portion of the park was used as a city dump (Neale et al. 2013). The development of the park began in the 1970s and it continues to be expanded and updated. Current features include ample parking, bathrooms, a skate park, dog parks, an archery range, playgrounds, various sports fields and courts, a fitness course, picnic tables, and a disc golf course. The trails throughout the park are well-maintained and there are several longer hiking trails that connect the lower and upper sections of the park as well as many other shorter trails to explore.

The park is located on both city and county land, which makes management a challenge. Several groups work to ensure the park is well-kept, and that the fragile and diverse ecosystems are protected. The Ukiah Valley Trail Group and their many volunteers do an enormous amount of work to develop plans, build and maintain trails throughout the park, install fences to help keep hikers on trails, and install signage to educate and inform park visitors (Frederiksen 2017). Other groups, including the local California Native Plant Society (CNPS) Sanhedrin chapter, remain very active in the continued discussions about how to best protect the diverse and sometimes fragile ecosystems throughout the park. CNPS offers several guided walks through the park each spring that are a fun way to explore and gain a further appreciation for the park.

A wide range of native plant species can be found as soon as you enter the park, and if you take your time along the trails to take a closer look you will continue to find many surprises. There are varied and unique soils and geological features throughout the park, which each have their own subtleties to appreciate. Make sure to also keep an eye out for the intriguing native wildlife that includes Pacific banana slugs (*Ariolimax columbianus*), red-bellied Newts (*Taricha rivularis*), native pollinators and insects, and many species of birds. As you enter the park and pass the dog park, there is a large serpentine hill that in early spring is splashed with yellow common blennosperma (*Blennosperma nanum*) and followed by California goldfields (*Lasthenia californica*). Later in the year you may find other species blooming, including hayfield tarweed (*Hemizonia congesta*) and naked buckwheat (*Eriogonum nudum*).

There is an easy walk along the North Orr Creek Trail that begins to the right of the hill and follows Orr Creek, a tributary to the Russian River and home to several fish species, including steelhead trout and rainbow trout (Neale et al. 2013). There are many colorful springtime blooms including shooting stars (*Primula hendersonii*), baby blue eyes (*Nemophila menziesii*), and California buttercups (*Ranunculus occidentalis*). You will find different species of ferns, mosses, fungi, and lichen throughout the park, but especially along this trail. Miner's lettuce (*Claytonia perfoliata*) can be found along most of the trail in spring, and a unique species to keep an eye out for in early spring in wetter areas is hairy woodrush (*Luzula comosa*) with its distinctively hairy blades. The Orr Creek Trail circles around Orr Creek Meadow, which contains several native

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species including California oatgrass (*Danthonia californica*), Yampah (*Perideridia kelloggii*), and annual native clovers (*Trifolium* spp.) (Neale et al. 2013).

One of the newest trails is the longer City View Trail, which begins by a vernal pool and opens into the City View Meadow, where you can find several upland natives including Idaho fescue (*Festuca idahoensis*). Well-defined switchbacks lead into the hills and meander through oak woodlands and hardwood and conifer forests that include Douglas-fir (*Pseudotsuga menziesii*), redwood (*Sequoia sempervirens*), tanoak (*Notholithocarpus densiflorus*), madrone (*Arbutus menziesii*), and many of the seven oak species (*Quercus* spp.) found in the park. Large clumps of California fescue (*Festuca californica*) can be found along some of the slopes. Two perennial understory flowers that you can find in spring along this trail include the hound's tongue (*Cynoglossum grande*) and the flashy warrior's plume (*Pedicularis densiflora*). In the summer you can find the vibrant red firecracker flower (*Dichelostemma ida-maia*) among the redwoods and mixed evergreens (Monroe 2016). At the top of the trail, there is an oak meadow and a welcoming bench that rewards you with a view of the valley below.

Several groups have developed helpful and detailed resources that are worth looking at before you visit the park. The Sanhedrin CNPS chapter website has a brochure developed by classes of the California Naturalist Program with names and photos for 30 wildflowers found in the park, as well as a self-guided nature hike

through the park that includes descriptions of the soils, vegetation, and unique highlights. On their website you can also find a Low Gap Park plant list which is now 10 pages, and was created and updated based on findings from botanical walks in the spring that have been held in the park since 1983. The iNaturalist (inaturalist.org) website has a Low Gap Park and City View Trail checklist with a robust list of species, including photos of fauna and flora of the park. The Ukiah Valley Trail Group's website is a wonderful resource for maps and current information for the park.

The park is open sunrise to sunset and dogs are allowed on leash. When visiting the park, as with all grasslands, make sure to stay on the designated trails, respect signs, take only photos, and "leave no trace" (your trash with you when you leave). Together we can protect the natural areas of Low Gap Park and allow it to be a source of learning and enjoyment for many for years to come.



References

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- Neale, B., T. Hunt, and A. Davis. 2013. "Low Gap Park/City View Trail nature hike," The California Naturalist Class Capstone Project.



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The mission of the California Native Grasslands Association is to promote, preserve, and restore the diversity of California's native grasses and grassland ecosystems through education, advocacy, research, and stewardship.