

VISITING CALIFORNIA'S GRASSLANDS:

Ridgecrest Boulevard, Mount Tamalpais, Marin County

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Mount Tamalpais dominates the horizon of Marin County, and hundreds of acres of grasslands wrap its southwest flank. Offering views of the Pacific Ocean on one side and the reservoirs holding Marin County's drinking water on the other, the scenery along this section of California's Coastal Trail certainly grabs one's attention (Fig. 1). The Ridgecrest grasslands encompass lands managed by California State Parks, Marin Municipal Water District (MMWD), and the National Park Service and allow for hiking and enjoyment of their natural beauty (Fig. 2).

The vastness of these grasslands means you will find a plethora of species. Grassland-dependent animals such as western meadowlarks and grasshopper sparrows can often be seen, and hawks and coyotes are reliably found. Badgers and rattlesnakes, while not often visible, definitely patrol the slopes. The plant life is even more rich, dominated by our state flower, California poppy (*Eschscholzia californica*), and our state grass, purple needlegrass (*Stipa pulchra*, formerly *Nassella pulchra*). At least three species of lupine (*Lupinus nanus*, *L. bicolor*, and *L. albifrons*), western thistle (*Cirsium occidentale*), and bracken fern (*Pteridium aquilinum*) round out the showy common forbs. While walking through these grasslands, each section has its subtleties to appreciate.

The coastal prairie along Ridgecrest Boulevard is most easily accessed from Pantoll Road off Panoramic Highway; at the top of Pantoll Road is Ridgecrest Boulevard and the Rock Spring parking lot. Rock Spring is, in itself, a fine example of serpentine grasslands, wet meadow, and serpentine barrens. There, one may find rare plants such as Brewer's milkvetch (*Astragalus breweri*), Mt. Tamalpais bristly jewelflower (*Streptanthus glandulosus* ssp. *pulchellus*), marsh zigadene (*Toxicoscordion fontanum*), and harlequin lotus (*Hosackia gracilis*). Spring is prime time to see golden California oniongrass (*Melica californica*) and native onions (*Allium falcifolium* and *A. amplexans*) dotting the rocks and possibly even anise swallowtail butterflies laying eggs on native hogweeds (*Lomatium* spp.).

Heading west, more common "California annual grasslands" dominate the ocean side of the road, but pockets of red fescue (*Festuca rubra*) grassland tuck into drainages on the "lake" side, with late-flowering mugwort (*Artemisia douglasiana*) and goldenrod (*Solidago velutina* ssp. *californica*). For the observant, over a dozen species of clover can be seen, along with sweet surprises, such as fringepod (*Thysanocarpus curvipes*) and hairy wood sorrel (*Oxalis pilosa*). Visitors may

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Figure 1. Ridgecrest Boulevard offers sweeping views. Photo: Marin Municipal Water District



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.

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Figure 2. Coastal breezes sculpt trees along the trail. Photo: Marin Municipal Water District

Ridgecrest Boulevard *continued*

also notice “invading” natives such as coyote brush (*Baccharis pilularis* ssp. *consanguinea*) and Douglas-fir (*Pseudotsuga menziesii* var. *menziesii*); years of fire suppression and lack of grazing have allowed these woody plants to increase (Fig. 3), converting coastal prairie to coastal scrub and conifer forest. In some areas, the woody species are being cut back to ensure the grasslands and all the plants and animals that depend on them have room to thrive.



Figure 3. The march of the Douglas-fir: left, 1984; right, 2014. Photos: Marin County



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