

MOUNTAIN NEWS



MOUNT DIABLO INTERPRETIVE ASSOCIATION

Summer 2012



The Biannual Membership Newsletter

Frank's Favorite Hikes: Black Point Trail

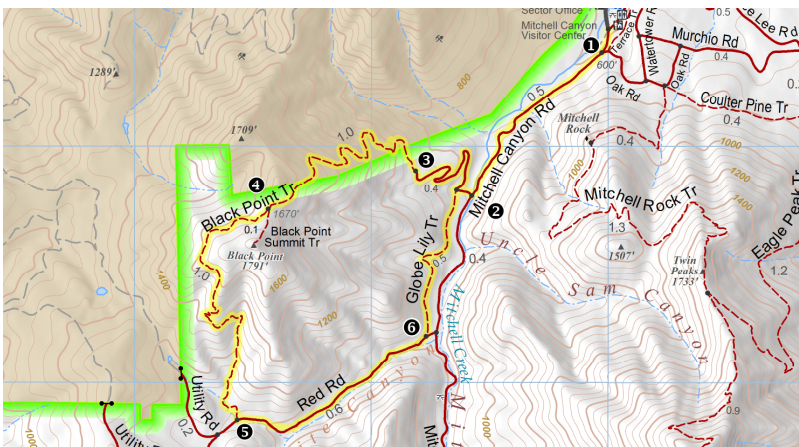
by J. Frank Valle-Riestra

Ticks are found on Mount Diablo; that is hardly news. Ticks are found almost everywhere on Bay Area trails. With reasonable precautions, they do not pose an appreciable hazard to hikers, just a bit of a nuisance. We mention ticks here because a portion of the loop to be described passes through some fine stands of native bunch grasses, and bunch grasses are a favorite host plant to ticks. So, let us face it, at some periods during the year (which are unpredictable), you will pick up ticks on your clothing. Wear light colors to make the ticks easier to spot and to pick off or rather scrape off; it is amazing how the little critters can flatten out and hang on for dear life to resist casual efforts to brush them off.



Photo by Leslie Contreras

The portion of the loop in question is the Black Point Trail, not long ago cleaned up and cleared by the park's maintenance personnel and volunteers, and now in excellent shape. The work did clear away bothersome poison oak, but could not clear away the seasonal black flies around the Black Point summit or eliminate a few very steep stretches with somewhat slippery footing on the south-facing slopes. You may well wonder - ticks? Black flies? Slippery slopes? This is a favorite trail? Rest assured that there are compensating features - the Black Point Trail is one of the park's top attractions, best appreciated during the spring months.



Your exploration starts at the Mitchell Canyon Road trailhead, at the end of the paved Mitchell Canyon Road on the outskirts of the little town of Clayton. A modest parking fee is charged. On weekends and holidays, drop in at the Visitor Center to get the latest information on trail conditions. And before starting your trek, be sure to visit the native plant garden behind the Center, an amazing display created almost singlehandedly by Dave Caniglia, a park volunteer.

Now follow the road along Mitchell Canyon for just 1/2 mile, to the first posted trail on your right. This is the beginning of the Black Point Trail, and

the first part is a gently ascending road with a packed sandy soil base. In the middle of spring, the road base is transformed into delightful carpets of bright, ground-hugging wildflowers - in particular, Bird's Eye Gilia (*Gilia tricolor*), Baby Blue Eyes (*Nemophila menziesii*), Goldfields (*Lasthenia californica*), and many others. More flower species, some blooming right into the warm summer months, favor the narrow zone between the road and the surrounding chaparral, in particular, Blue Witch (*Solanum umbelliferum*), Indian Paint Brush (*Castilleja* spp.), and Deer Weed (*Lotus scoparius*). If you enjoy flower identification, this is the trail for you, although other attractions will vie for your attention - such as the ever-changing views of Mitchell Rock across Mitchell Canyon.

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Soon you reach the end of the road, and a single-track trail beckons you to plunge into the cool, mixed-green woodland of Black Point's north-facing slopes. The forest here is typical of Mount Diablo - a mix of Bay Laurel (*Umbellularia californica*), Madrone (*Arbutus menziesii*), Gray Pine (*Pinus sabiniana*), and oak species. The flowers are not as noticeable, but the eye is gladdened by a profusion of bunch grasses which at one time covered the mountain, to be displaced by introduced Mediterranean grasses. The well-engineered trail is a pleasure to follow, zig-zagging its way moderately to ascend the flanks of Black Point. All too soon, and quite suddenly, the trail leaves the forest and starts its way through "hard" chaparral.

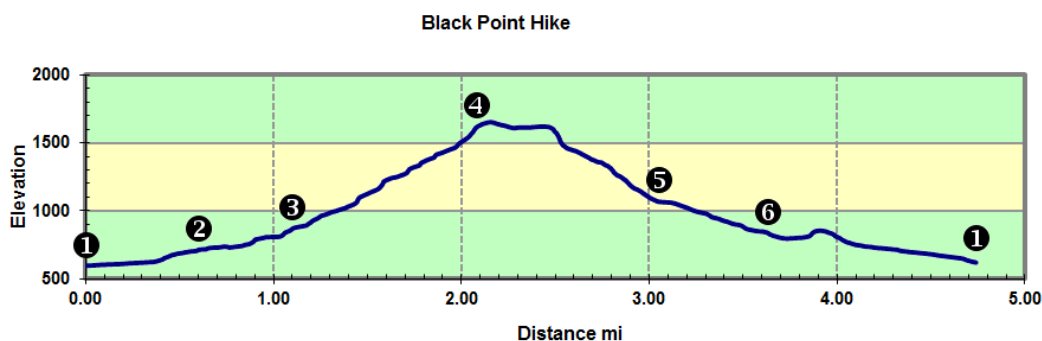
This portion of the trail, right up to the summit at 1,790 feet, can be quite warm in summer, but is quite tolerable during the rest of the year. The dominant chaparral shrub is Chamise (*Adenostoma fasciculatum*); in springtime it displays myriad showy cream-colored flowers, and in the fall its rust-colored fruits turn whole hillsides a rich, vibrant brown, worthy of a Flemish painting, and a joy to behold. Quite a few other species proliferate among the Chamise: the aromatic California Sagebrush (*Artemisia californica*), Black Sage (*Salvia mellifera*) with its attractive spikes of springtime flowers, Big-berry Manzanita (*Arctostaphylos glauca*) blooming late in winter. But two species, blooming spectacularly in good years, will monopolize your attention. One is Pitcher Sage (*Lepechinia calycina*), an unexpectedly lush-looking small plant along all those tough drought survivors. It has felt-like leaves and beautiful pale purple flowers enclosed in an urn of sepals - the "pitchers." The other spectacular bloomer is the Bush Monkey Flower (*Mimulus aurantiacus*); unlike the rarer Pitcher Sage, it proliferates. It prefers the narrow zone between the chaparral and trail's edge, and on occasion one walks along corridors with walls of bloom, in colors of peach, salmon and rose wine. These blooms often last into the warm months of summer.

The trail reaches its highest point in a saddle below the summit of Black Point. A short spur trail of about 100 yards leads to the summit proper, which is pretty overgrown; better views are obtained by continuing on the Black Point Trail as it rounds the western flank of the mountain. Far below you, you will spot gently rolling, grassy foothills, the grazing spread of John Ginocchio's cattle ranch, and an effective and welcome barrier to the flood of development reaching toward the park's wilderness.

Here the plant world benefits from a little more moisture even in summer, moisture brought in by morning mists. The chaparral is "softer," with shrubs, such as Squawbush (*Rhus trilobata*), that are characterized by more pliable, "softer" leaves. As you head south, the chaparral again becomes "harder," and Black Point Trail descends, sharply at times, into the depths of White Canyon. The trail ends at its junction with Red Road, and here you turn left to meet Mitchell Canyon Road, after a gentle descent of about one mile. A metal bench at this junction offers a welcome rest in a shady nook.

Rather than returning to the trailhead entirely along Mitchell Canyon Road, we suggest that you backtrack a few yards along Red Road to the beginning of the Globe Lily Trail. This is another of the park's "secret" trails with any number of visual surprises. It is a showplace of wildflowers, and in the middle of spring you are likely to spot beauties such as the Mount Diablo Globe Tulip (*Calochortus pulchellus*) and the Checker Lily (*Fritillaria lanceolata*). The trail's end closes your loop trip at the Black Point Trail where you started, and you retrace your steps back to the Mitchell Canyon Road trailhead.

The total distance traversed is about 4-3/4 miles, and you climb some 1,200 feet. A gentle pace with rest stops will require 3-1/2 to 4 hours.



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