Sam McDonald County Park

Sam McDonald County Park offers magnificent redwood forests and a ridge with vistas of the Pacific Ocean. The Park, some 850 acres, includes youth camps, an equestrian camp, and a hiker’s hut. Adjacent to McDonald, Heritage Grove is a stunning 57-acre patch of old-growth redwood forest.

Natural features

Much of Sam McDonald is very steep. Ferns and other shade-loving plants are found in lower elevations; the higher-elevation knolls are covered each spring with colorful wildflowers such as sticky monkeyflower, wood rose, and sun cup. The forests, dominated by coast redwood, also include Douglas-fir, madrone, California laurel, buckeye, big leaf maple, and oak trees. Common wildlife in Sam McDonald includes black-tailed deer, raccoons, opossums, foxes, bobcats, woodpeckers, Steller’s Jays, garter and gopher snakes, and banana slugs. Heritage Grove offers visitors an opportunity to experience the stunning beauty of old-growth coast redwoods. Located on Alpine Creek, the grove includes what are considered to be among the Santa Cruz Mountain’s largest redwoods.

Activities and facilities

Several miles of trails for hikers, cyclists, and equestrians include connections to adjacent parks. Trails in Heritage Grove wind through the redwoods. Heritage Grove Trail, open only to hikers, connects with other trails in the complex. The Grove can also be admired from the parking lot off Alpine Road, accessible from Pescadero Road. The Sierra Club Hiker’s Hut may be reserved by calling the Sierra Club at 650-390-8411 x393. Groups may reserve any of several youth camps or the Jack Brook Horse Camp (seasonal). Make reservations for these camps at www.SMCoParks.org or 650-363-4021.

Pescadero Creek County Park

With 5,860 acres, Pescadero Creek Park is by far the County’s largest park. Its wilderness includes miles of trails for hikers and equestrians. Pescadero Creek Park shares its eastern boundary and a number of trails with Portola Redwoods State Park. The trail network also connects to Big Basin Redwoods State Park, offering the opportunity for long hikes through multiple parks.

Natural features

Pescadero Creek County Park includes a diversity of trees including coast redwood, Douglas-fir, Santa Cruz cypress, California wax myrtle, tanoak, madrone, California laurel, big leaf maple, canyon live oak, coast live oak, and knobcone pine. The Park sits atop a deposit of oil and natural gas. Crude oil pools up in Tarwater Creek and seeps into Pescadero and Alpine Creeks both provide spawning habitat for endangered steelhead; Pescadero Creek also has a small run of endangered Coho salmon. The endangered marbled murrelet, a small and secretive seabird, nests in the Park. More easily seen are black-tailed deer, raccoons, western gray squirrels, and the occasional coyote and mountain lion.

Activities and facilities

This park is largely undeveloped wilderness. Hikers, cyclists, and equestrians can access an extensive inter-park trail network from the Sam McDonald Ranger Station, Portola Trailhead, Portola Redwoods State Park, and at the Old Haul Road and Tarwater Trailheads. Cyclists may use a service road, Old Haul Road, which crosses the Park.

Trail camps at Shaw Flat and Tarwater Flat are available for a fee on a drop-in basis for backpackers and cyclists who register with the ranger at Memorial Park. No water is available at trail camps. Backpack stoves are permitted in trail camps.