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POINT REYES NATIONAL SEASHORE:
BEAR VALLEY TO ARCH ROCKKEY AT-A-GLANCE
INFORMATION**LENGTH:** 8.8 miles**CONFIGURATION:** Out-and-back**DIFFICULTY:** Moderate due to length**SCENERY:** Douglas-fir forest, coastal bluff, and ocean views**EXPOSURE:** Mostly shaded**TRAFFIC:** Heavy**TRAIL SURFACE:** Dirt fire roads and trails**HIKING TIME:** 4 hours**SEASON:** Good all year—beat the crowds with a winter visit.**ACCESS:** Free**MAPS:** Available online at nps.gov/pore/planyourvisit/maps.htm and at the Bear Valley Visitor Center, where you can also buy Tom Harrison Maps' *Point Reyes National Seashore topo* (order it online at tomharrisonmaps.com; \$9.95).**FACILITIES:** Restrooms and drinking water at the visitor center**SPECIAL COMMENTS:** No dogs allowed. Three short interpretive trails begin at the Bear Valley trailhead, exploring the region's history, vegetation, and the effects of the 1906 earthquake.**CONTACTS:** 415-464-5100, ext. 2; nps.gov/pore**DRIVING DISTANCE:** 32 miles from the Golden Gate Bridge toll plaza

GPS INFORMATION

N38° 2.381' W122° 47.988'

IN BRIEF

Departing from the Bear Valley Visitor Center, a nearly level fire road ushers you through woods, a meadow, and coastal grassland. A bluff called Arch Rock, the turnaround point, rewards you with beautiful views of the ocean and shoreline. The hike returns on the same route, although more-ambitious hikers can opt for a loop to the top of Mount Wittenberg.

DESCRIPTION

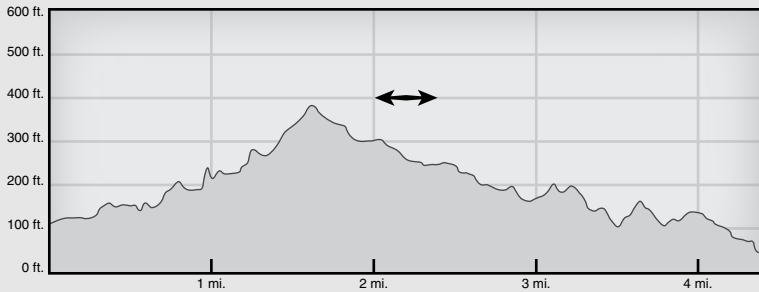
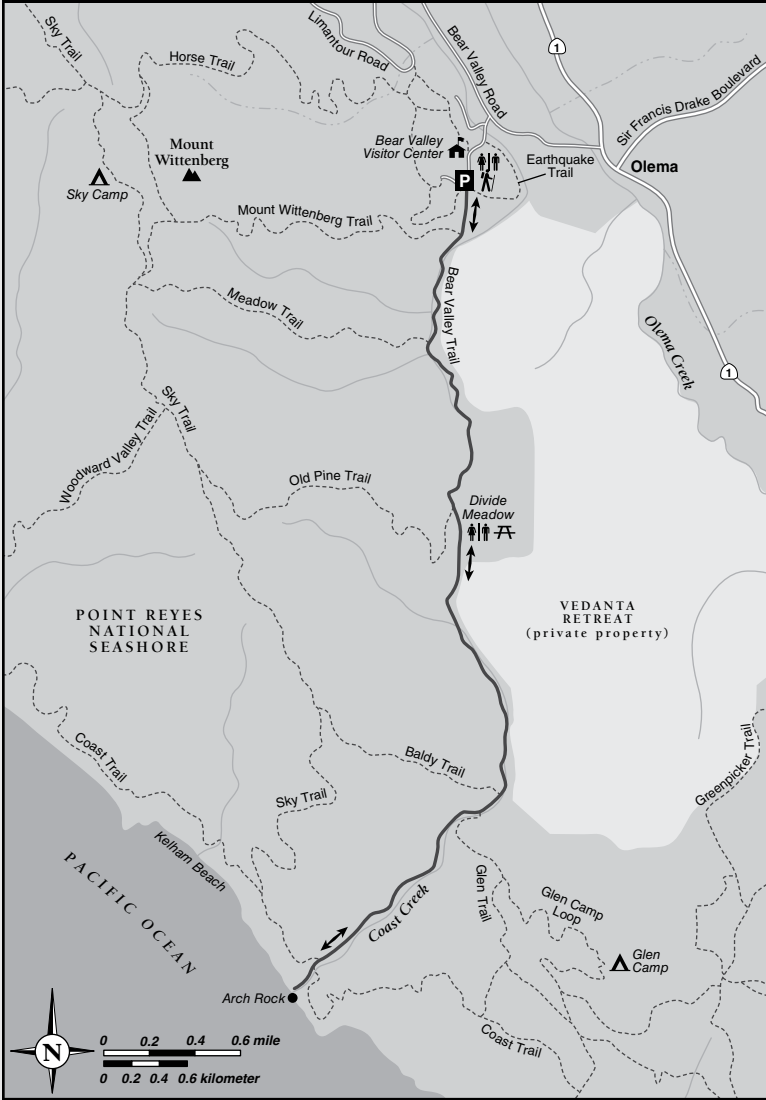
Muir Woods, Big Basin Redwoods State Park, Mount Tam's Pantoll area—some Bay Area trailheads bustle with visitors from sunup to sundown. Point Reyes's Bear Valley is no exception: Every day of the year, it's inundated with nature-lovers, many of whom come just for this trail. But you can beat the crowds by arriving very early or choosing a weekday, particularly in winter, the park's quietest season.

Although a few trails begin near the visitor center, it's not hard to find Bear Valley Trail, which starts at the south edge of the parking lot—look for the steady stream of

Directions

Leave San Francisco on northbound US 101 and use the Golden Gate Bridge toll plaza as your mileage starting point. Drive 11 miles north on US 101, then take Exit 450B, at San Anselmo/Sir Francis Drake. Stay to the left toward San Anselmo and drive west on Sir Francis Drake Boulevard about 20 miles to the junction with CA 1. Turn right on CA 1 and drive 0.1 mile, then turn left onto Bear Valley Road. Drive about 0.4 mile, then turn left at the SEASHORE INFORMATION sign just past the red barn. Drive about 0.2 mile to the parking lots at the end of the road.

Point Reyes National Seashore: Bear Valley to Arch Rock





Arch Rock, a gorgeous Point Reyes destination

people. The initial section of trail runs along the edge of a meadow, but it quickly veers right and into shade. Bear Valley Trail is level, with very few blips in elevation along its length. The moist environment shelters Douglas-fir, California bay, tan oak, elk clover, creambush, red elderberry, and hazelnut.

After 0.2 mile, Mount Wittenberg Trail departs on the right, on the way to Point Reyes's tallest spot, at 1,407 feet. Stick to Bear Valley Trail at this junction and the next, with Meadow Trail at 0.8 mile. After a tour through the woods, the trail emerges at the edge of Divide Meadow at 1.6 miles. The sunny, sloping meadow, rimmed with Douglas-fir, is the turnaround point for many visitors, but more scenic delights wait for hikers down the trail. Old Pine Trail veers off uphill near the restrooms on the right—continue toward the ocean on Bear Valley Trail.

The next 1.5-mile stretch has no junctions and is a quiet part of the park. The trail descends briefly into a little shaded canyon tucked between ascending forested hillsides. At 3.1 miles, you'll reach a multiple junction. Baldy Trail begins on the right, and Glen Trail starts on the left. Here, Bear Valley Trail, in the middle, shrinks from a fire road to a trail. Cyclists who want to continue on Bear Valley Trail must leave their bikes at a rack.

Past this junction, the woods become even more lush. Coast Creek murmurs on the left and ferns cascade off the sloping hillsides. In summer you might see

foxglove blooming here. Moisture-loving buckeyes sprinkled through dense stands of Douglas-fir completely shade the trail, and when you step out of the woods on a sunny day you'll be blinking like a newborn kitten. Along the trail, young Douglas-firs tower above coyote brush, sticky monkeyflower, sagebrush, and bush lupine.

Bear Valley Trail ends at a junction at 4 miles. Coast Trail picks up the baton for the final stretch to the ocean, now partially visible straight ahead. Stay to the left, following the sign for Arch Rock. At 4.2 miles, Coast Trail slips off to the left, almost unnoticed when the grasses are high in summer. The path to Arch Rock continues straight, ascending gently through a pretty mix of coastal plants, including paintbrush and lizard's-tail. Views open up to the ocean. At 4.4 miles, you'll reach Arch Rock and the end of the trail. This little bluff, jutting out over the ocean, has unfenced drop-offs, so use caution.

On a sunny day, is there a better spot for lunch anywhere in the Bay Area? If you love ocean breezes, the sound of crashing waves, the calls of sea birds, and sweeping seashore views, I think you'll be pleased. This bluff is also an excellent location for seal-watching. I lingered here on one hike, transfixed by a harbor seal bobbing up and down in the water, seeming to look right at me.

When you're ready, return to the Bear Valley trailhead. Hankering for a more strenuous hike? As you return up Bear Valley Trail, turn left on either Old Pine or Meadow Trail, then ascend on Sky Trail to Mount Wittenberg Trail, which returns to Bear Valley Trail 0.2 mile from the parking lot. The views from Mount Wittenberg are mostly obscured by a young forest of Douglas-fir, but the trails are pretty and you may see the remnants of an exotic white-deer herd.

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POINT REYES NATIONAL SEASHORE:
ESTERO TO DRAKES BAYKEY AT-A-GLANCE
INFORMATION

LENGTH: 8 miles (8.4 miles if you continue to the “beach”)

CONFIGURATION: Out-and-back

DIFFICULTY: Moderate

SCENERY: Coastal

EXPOSURE: Almost entirely unshaded

TRAFFIC: Light

TRAIL SURFACE: Dirt trails

HIKING TIME: 4 hours

SEASON: Good all year but muddy in winter.

ACCESS: Free

MAPS: Available online at nps.gov/pore/planyourvisit/maps.htm and at the Bear Valley Visitor Center, where you can also buy Tom Harrison Maps’ *Point Reyes National Seashore topo* (order it online at tomharrisonmaps.com; \$9.95).

FACILITIES: Pit toilets at trailhead

SPECIAL COMMENTS: No dogs allowed. Chimney Rock, at the far southwestern tip of Point Reyes, is a sublime spot for spring wildflowers.

CONTACTS: 415-464-5100, ext. 2; nps.gov/pore

DRIVING DISTANCE: 42 miles from the Golden Gate Bridge toll plaza



GPS INFORMATION

N38° 4.883' W122° 54.846'

IN BRIEF

Point Reyes has creeks; ocean and bay coastline; a lagoon; waterfalls; ponds and lakes; and an estuary, Drakes Estero, which lends its name to this trailhead. You’ll descend through coastal scrub and a pocket of pines to a little bridge, then climb to a bluff where you can see the other three bays that also feed into Drakes Estero. After a bit of roller-coastering, the trail drops to ocean level, and although the official end of the trail is near the mouth of Drakes Estero, if the tide is low you can continue another quarter-mile over mudflats to glimpse Drakes Bay.

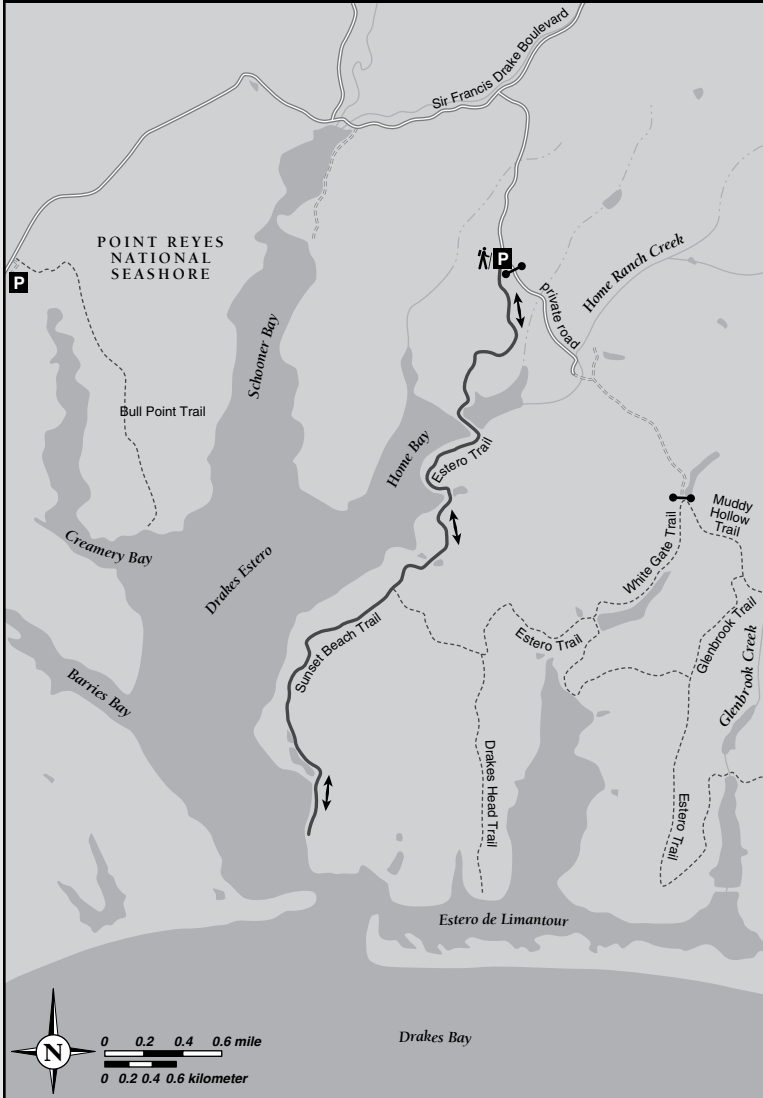
DESCRIPTION

The solitary Estero Trail departs from the parking lot through grassy coastal scrub, with coyote brush and blackberry brambles punctuating the landscape. Iris flower along the trail in spring, along with some blue-eyed grass and California buttercup. Off to the east, a steady slope rises to crest at Mount Vision. Estero

Directions

Leave San Francisco on northbound US 101 and use the Golden Gate Bridge toll plaza as your mileage starting point. Drive 11 miles north on US 101, then take Exit 450B, San Anselmo/Sir Francis Drake. Stay to the left toward San Anselmo and drive west about 20 miles on Sir Francis Drake Boulevard to the junction with CA 1. Turn right and drive 0.1 mile, then turn left onto Bear Valley Road. After about 2 miles, Bear Valley Road ends at Sir Francis Drake; turn left. Continue on Sir Francis Drake about 7.5 more miles, and turn left at the ESTERO TRAIL sign. Drive slowly (there may be cows) for another mile to the trailhead, on the right side of the road.

Point Reyes National Seashore: Estero to Drakes Bay





A view east from Estero Trail

Trail skirts a rounded hill, then leans right, descends, and cuts through the corner of a pine forest, where you'll hear, if not see, many birds.

This pocket of woods has an unnatural feeling to it, probably because it was planted as a grove many years ago. As the trail leaves the pines, it adopts a gentle downhill course, through more pines, coyote brush, blackberry, wild rose, and a few twinberry bushes. Estero Trail bends left and crosses the confluence of a freshwater pond and Home Bay on a pretty little bridge.

Because Drakes Estero empties into the ocean and the entire estuary is affected by tides, the amount of water in the bay varies from slim forked threads to deep pools. On some occasions I'm happy to hike no farther than the benches at the middle of the bridge. On one of my visits here, a pair of egrets perched like sentinels on opposite sides of the viewing platform in the middle of the bridge.

At the other end of the bridge, the trail turns right and begins to climb. Quail and rabbits are commonly spotted, rushing from one cluster of vegetation to another—the sides of the trail are tangled with a variety of plants, including

coyote brush, toyon, huckleberry, bush lupine, ceanothus, blackberry, sticky monkeyflower, and sagebrush. The first crest yields impressive views of Drakes Estero, but the trail doesn't linger. Instead it drops to the shores of a tiny pond, which contributes its share of water to the estuary. A few boards cross the drainage channel. This area is commonly muddy in winter, and trail conditions can be terrible if the cattle that range here have clomped through recently.

The trail climbs again through coyote brush and reaches a fence stretched across the trail (it may be open, depending on the season). Squeeze through the V-shaped stile and ascend to a hill topped with a eucalyptus tree, where daffodils bloom in late winter. Estero Trail descends again to another small pond. It's not much of a surprise at this point to begin climbing once more, but after another fence and stile the trail levels out and reaches a junction at 2.5 miles. Here, where Estero Trail bends left, continue straight onto Sunset Beach Trail.

As the trail sweeps south, short clumps of coyote brush allow views back toward the trailhead and across the Estero to feeder bays to the west. In late summer, bright-yellow goldenrod seems especially showy among the drab tan-and-green brush. There's a descent, but this time it's easy. After you pass through one last cattle fence and stile, the trail reaches the edge of a small pond. According to the park maps, this is the official end of Sunset Beach Trail, at about 4 miles. From here you can see Drakes Estero emptying into Drakes Bay, but you'll get better views (and a little beach) if you continue south.

A slight path veers left, squeezes through coyote brush, poison oak, bush lupine, and sagebrush, then sets off across mudflats. If it's not too muddy, you can continue another quarter-mile to a narrow beach at a sandy point across from Limantour Spit. You may be able to see Chimney Rock, across the bay to the southwest, from here. This is one of the quietest and loneliest places in the Bay Area, where little waves lap against the shoreline and sand sings as it blows across the beach.

When you're ready, retrace your steps back to the trailhead.

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POINT REYES NATIONAL SEASHORE: TOMALES POINT



KEY AT-A-GLANCE INFORMATION

LENGTH: 9 miles

CONFIGURATION: Out-and-back

DIFFICULTY: Moderate

SCENERY: Coastal scrub and grassland

EXPOSURE: Full sun

TRAFFIC: Steady nearly year-round

TRAIL SURFACE: Broad sandy fire road and meandering paths, with some loose sand

HIKING TIME: 4 hours

SEASON: Spring and autumn are best.

ACCESS: Free

MAPS: Pick up the free official Point Reyes trail map at the Bear Valley Visitor Center, download it at nps.gov/pore/planyourvisit/maps.htm, or buy Tom Harrison Maps' *Point Reyes National Seashore topo* (order online at tomharrisonmaps.com; \$9.95).

FACILITIES: None at the trailhead; pit toilets at nearby McClures Beach

SPECIAL COMMENTS: No dogs allowed. From this trailhead (or from a second parking lot 0.1 mile to the west), it's a 1-mile round-trip hike to McClures Beach.

CONTACTS: 415-464-5100, ext. 2; nps.gov/pore

DRIVING DISTANCE: 48 miles from the Golden Gate Bridge toll plaza



GPS INFORMATION

N38° 11.348' W122° 57.248'

IN BRIEF

Animal sightings are not uncommon in the Bay Area, but at a few locations you are nearly assured of a peek at wild creatures. One of the best spots is Point Reyes's Tomales Point. This hike is a 9-mile out-and-back trek on a remote peninsula where tule elk roam through coastal scrub and birds paddle in the ocean and soar through the skies. Bring binoculars, a hat, and a windbreaker.

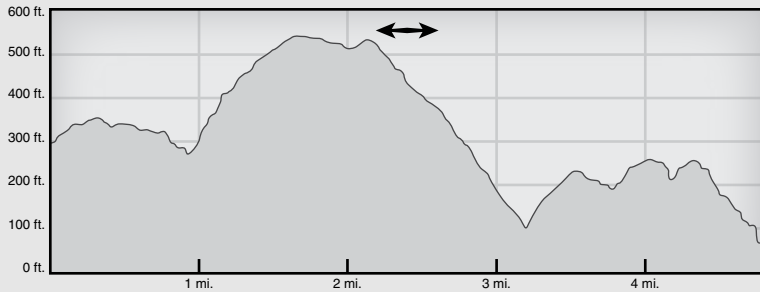
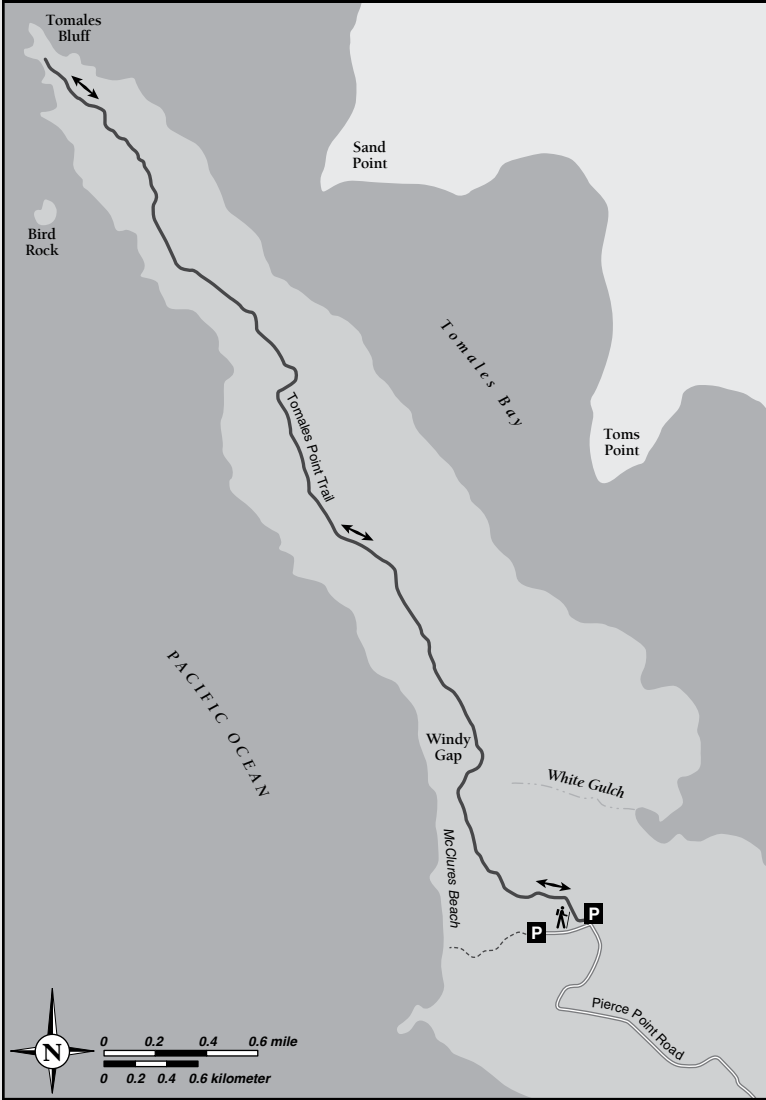
DESCRIPTION

At its northwestern edge, Point Reyes tapers to Tomales Point. Pierce Point Ranch occupied the area until 1973, and the farm buildings, now historically preserved, stand near the Tomales Point trailhead. A self-guided tour through the ranch is a fine way to begin (or end) a hike. In 1978, a herd of 10 tule elk were reintroduced to the point, which was then fenced off from the rest of Point Reyes. The elk have multiplied, and the population in

Directions

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Point Reyes National Seashore: Tomales Point





Sweet-smelling yellow bush lupines mix with fresh ocean breezes at Tomales Point.

2009 was more than 440. Other creatures you may see on the point are a variety of birds, coyotes, bobcats, and (although sightings are rare) mountain lions.

The weather plays a big part in enhancing (or ruining) hikes along the coast, and Tomales Point is no exception. Attempt a hike during one of the Bay Area's famous foggy summer days, and not only will the views be completely obscured, but the wind can chill you thoroughly. Spring and autumn are the best seasons for a visit, and note that when the elk rut (July–November), males are more aggressive and you should give them an extra-wide berth.

The trail starts at a level grade, skirting the ranch buildings before heading into a grassy coastal-scrub-plant community, dominated by coyote brush. In early spring, wild radish covers the knoll on the left, presenting a lavish display of white and lavender blossoms. Northern harriers seem to favor the point, and you might see one or two fluttering in place above the ground, looking for a meal. As the trail travels north it offers views of the coastline, which past McClures Beach gradually ascends to steep rocky bluffs. Tomales Point Trail drifts downhill to aptly named Windy Gap. If you haven't already seen elk, the sloping valley on the right is one of their favorite spots. A brief moderate ascent brings the trail up to the grassy ridgeline, dotted in some spots with wind-sculpted coyote brush. Look

to the left for ocean views and right to take in the hills of Bolinas Ridge rolling up from Tomales Bay. The trail descends to Lower Pierce Point Ranch, a site now marked by a handful of cypress trees often occupied by raptors. A few salmon-berry shrubs mingle through stinging nettles in a damp spot on the right.

Once again the trail begins to climb, but here vegetation begins to crowd the route. Somewhat abruptly, the path dissolves to sand at about 3.8 miles—some firmer patches of terra are ahead, but this is the trend for the rest of the trail. Navigating becomes a bit tricky, as elk paths score the area, so try to stick close to the ridgeline and keep heading northwest. Elk scat is common everywhere, and you stand a very good chance of observing *Cervus elaphus nannodes* if you keep your noise level down. On the other hand, if you're *too* quiet, you might come across a loner mostly camouflaged by the tall thick stands of lizard's-tail and yellow bush lupine. Even if you don't see them, you'll hear them—elk bellows are unlike any other animal vocalization I've ever heard. I can only describe the sound as similar to a loud, high-pitched door squeak.

The trail finally begins to descend slightly, signaling that the first leg of the hike is near its end. Be careful of unannounced sheer drop-offs on the left—the views are incredible, but the ground can be unstable near the edge. This is one of the most isolated and quiet hiking destinations on the coast, where the only sounds are the crash of the surf, the cries of the birds, and the peal of a buoy near the mouth of Tomales Bay. At about 4.5 miles, a bare spot—kind of a sandy bowl that's a bit sheltered from the wind—makes a decent rest stop, especially if you're in a group. Beyond that, a tiny path drops straight down to the tip of the point, but I don't recommend this option. After you've had your fill of this coastal gem, backtrack to the trailhead.