



Mt. Sutro Native Plant Garden and Trail Network

If you were instructed to close your eyes and then airlifted to this spot, when you opened them, would you have any idea where you were? With nothing but the sound of the wind sweeping through the towering trees, would you recognize that you were dead center in the middle of San Francisco?

This is Sutro Forest, a 61-acre wilderness area on Mt. Sutro in the heart of the city. The 900-foot high hill, once covered with low brush and chaparral, was planted with hundreds of blue-gum eucalyptus trees by Mayor Adolph Sutro on the city's first Arbor Day in 1886.

You may remember that Ishi, the last Yahi Indian who arrived at the University of California San Francisco in 1911, spent the waning years of his life on Mt. Sutro, called Mt. Parnassus at the time, where he felt at home in the forest and in caves he found in the chert outcroppings.

Over the years, the eucalyptus trees thrived in the cool fog, crowding out plants like California Honeysuckle and Sweet Cicely native to the hillside. Impenetrable blackberry brambles and Cape Ivy took over, rendering pathways that circumnavigate the hill inaccessible.

In a remarkable demonstration of environmental and civic stewardship, UCSF, the property owner, collaborated with native plant groups and community residents in crafting the Mt. Sutro Open Space Reserve Management Plan to restore the hiking trails and preserve the hill as a native habitat refuge.

Craig Dawson, who grew up in the shadow of Mt. Sutro, is the lead volunteer in efforts to reclaim the site. Craig founded the Mt. Sutro Stewards, a hearty group of volunteers who's idea of fun is to spend weekends removing acres of invasive plants and grooming hiking trails, many built during the Works Progress Administration in the 1920's. In just one year, the Stewards have clocked over 5000 volunteer hours of back-breaking work. They rescued a trail buried deep beneath a landslide by carving a tunnel through 6 feet of dirt and blackberry brambles. While climbing down a steep slope on the Western ridge, Craig, Jake Sigg and Ben Pease accidentally discovered remnants of another trail, buttressed by hand-built retaining walls clearly built to accommodate travelers on horseback. The stewards unearthed and restored the trail, which they believe dates back more than a century.

On Mt. Sutro's peak, hundreds of volunteers cleared the summit of weeds and put in a native plant demonstration garden with a grant of \$100,000 from the San Francisco Rotary Club, on the remains of the old Nike Radar Station, a vestige of the Cold War. The garden, radiant with ceonothus, lupine and tree mallows and abuzz with bees and butterflies, is a fitting and timely symbol reflecting the values and priorities of a new day.

UCSF and the Mt. Sutro Stewards have been joined by an impressive array of other volunteer groups, including the California Native Plant Society, Nature in the City, and One Brick to open up the rugged hillside to sunlight and air. Plants native to Mt. Sutro, including Ferry Bells, thought to have disappeared forever from the city, are starting to pop through the soil. The larger goal, Craig Dawson says, is to connect Mt. Sutro to Twin Peaks, Laguna Honda, and beyond, in a contiguous network of hiking trails and natural parkland. Tonight we honor UCSF, the Mt. Sutro Stewards and their partners for saving this haven of tranquility and biodiversity, hidden in plain sight in the heart of the city.