

Birdathon 2018

April 19, The Piratical Flycatchers

At first there was only ocean here. Then Eagle gave Hawk a feather for strength and Hawk dove down to the bottom of the ocean, pulling the mud up to form the land. Hummingbird brought fire to the top of Mount Umunhum and it ignited in his throat, burning a bright ruby red. (1)

That's part of the Amah Mutsun Tribal Band's story of how Mount Umunhum and surrounding lands formed. Modern geologists would say that the San Andreas fault scraped against continental North America over 15 million years ago and the accreted debris formed what we call the Coast Range. (2)

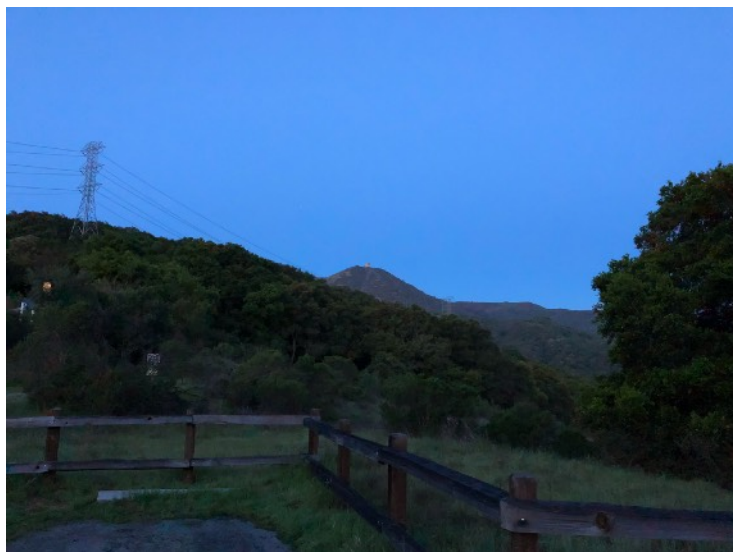
Either way, this patch of land where we live and the plants and creatures that live here have witnessed a lot of change. I was pondering the different forms that change takes as we explored the parks and open space preserves of our county, crisscrossing the Bay Area Ridge Trail and scouring the edges of the San Francisco Bay in pursuit of birds. Our goal was to find as many bird species as we could in a single day.

Thursday morning at 5am we started out from our home in Sunnyvale. When we bought this house in 1993, we considered ourselves extremely lucky to be situated a stone's throw from one of the last remaining farmlands in Silicon Valley. We expected that plot of valuable open space to change, consumed by houses or retail stores or office buildings, but even as other lingering orchards and farms disappeared from the South Bay, the Corn Palace's last acreage managed to persist for twenty-five more years. A couple days before our Birdathon though, we received a letter in the mail outlining plans to build houses on the Corn Palace field; soon that small patch of open land will be gone.

Indulge me a bit as I fast forward through 300 years of South Bay history, starting just before Europeans arrived and zipping to the present day. In the 1700s the Bay Area had Elk and Grizzly Bears and California Condors. Redwood and Douglas Fir forests covered the west hills; the east hills and south hills were oak/bay woodlands and grassland and the northern edge of the county was wetlands, creeks, sloughs and the San Francisco Bay. The Amah Mutsun and other Ohlone tribes gathered acorns and hunted and fished along the bay's edge and in the hills. Then the Spanish came and built roads and forts and missions and towns. The land was divided into Ranchos. The Gold Rush brought many more people. The railroads came. Mercury mines were dug in the Almaden hills. The Redwoods and fir trees were cut down for building the new towns. The marshes of the bay were carved up into evaporation

ponds for harvesting salt. Aerospace and tech industries arrived and we went from being “The Valley of Heart’s Delight” to “Silicon Valley.” The spot where our house sits went from a grassy patch near a seasonal creek to a Spanish Rancho where cattle grazed to a cherry orchard and then to a house built in the boom after World War II. The Corn Palace land next to it changed more slowly, remaining farmland as the cities of Sunnyvale and Santa Clara grew to surround it on all sides, until finally, today, it is about to disappear.

Only not completely. In those plans that came in the mail, there is a bit of good news. Part of the land where the Corn Palace stands is going to be made into a neighborhood park. It is better than I hoped for, and when I look around the Bay Area, I see other indicators that even with all our growth and change we are managing to maintain and even restore some of the Nature that I love so much. Open space preserves and nature parks ring the South Bay. The Bay Area Ridge Trail that I mentioned before is growing, with Mount Umunhum being added to it most recently. Those salt ponds that destroyed the marshes? They’re being restored, some to their original condition and some to ponds and tidal wetlands that will bring an even greater diversity of birds and wildlife (3). Otter and beaver have both been spotted in San Jose in the Guadalupe River in the past few years. California Condors were brought back from the brink of extinction and have been seen as far north as Mount Hamilton. Bald Eagles and Peregrine Falcons have returned. And although the grizzlies are gone, Elk have been brought back (4) and we still have Mountain Lions and Bobcats and Gray Fox and Coyote and, of course, the vast array of birds that we were headed out to observe.



Mount Umunhum before dawn

Mount Umunhum, named after the hummingbird from the Amah Mutsun story and opened to the public as a nature preserve a mere seven months ago, seemed like a great place to start that morning. It has woodlands and riparian valleys, grasslands and high hills, places for standing and listening to birdsong. There was only one snag, in the form of a large metal locked gate with a sign telling us that the park won't be open until sunrise. It was 5:30am. The sun wouldn't be rising for an hour.

So we improvised. We found a spot on the side of the road to park and we walked to an open area to listen as the Dawn Chorus began. In the direction of the mountain's peak we heard the call of a Western Screech-Owl. We were surprised because we thought we had started too late for this bird. A Gray Fox ran across the road and down into the valley below us. Soon birds started calling. Dark-eyed Juncos were one of the first we heard, and it was also the first bird we saw as the sky began to lighten. We stood a long while in the saddle of Mount Umunhum, listening to the birds and identifying by ear those we could: Hermit Thrush's ethereal spirally song, Spotted Towhee's loud buzzy trill, Steller's Jay's raucous chatter, the Wrentit's repeated short whistles in the cadence of a ping pong ball dropped on a floor, and Anna's Hummingbird's soft buzzes and chips.



First bird sighting of the day: Dark-eyed Junco at Mount Umunhum Road

After exhausting our birding-by-ear skills in the Dawn Chorus, we drove down Hicks Road with the windows rolled down despite the chill and headed toward Almaden Reservoir. Any time we heard birdsong, we stopped. There was no traffic at this hour. At one promising spot we pulled over, got out and listened to the burbling of the creek downslope. Above the water noises we heard the distinct sharp pse-YEET of a Pacific-slope Flycatcher and the lovely tinkling melody of a Pacific Wren.



Mist on Almaden Reservoir

Almaden Reservoir was coated in a wispy fog, indicating that there was, as yet, no wind. We were pleased because no wind means a better chance of finding birds. As the sky lightened, the fog thinned and we were able to see Ring-necked Ducks sitting on the water, joined by Mallards, Double-crested Cormorants and American Coots. Several small flocks of Band-tailed Pigeon and a pair of Common Mergansers flew overhead. Wild Turkeys called in the hills behind us.

We hiked along Alamitos Road, listening for birds and enjoying the morning. Swallows flitted above us, sometimes diving down to the water to snatch up bugs. Ash-throated Flycatchers and California Scrub-Jays called from the oaks on the hillside.



The Piratical Flycatchers catching the rising sun at Almaden Reservoir

The sun rose over the east hills and burned the mist off the lake and immediately started warming us. This was good because our fingers were getting numb from holding binoculars up in the cold morning air. We hiked our way back to the car, checking all the Yellow-rumped Warblers to see if there



Female Wood Duck on Almaden Reservoir

were any less common species hanging out among them (there weren't), and then began driving toward our next stop. But before we left the lake area, we paused near the dam to see if perhaps a Spotted Sandpiper might be hunting along the shoreline there. Our pulling over startled a female Wood Duck that had been resting along the near shore. Most locations we chose have one or more "target" birds and Wood Duck was one we really hoped to see here. After she swam away we scanned the dam with

binoculars and sure enough, a Spotted Sandpiper was hunting along the shoreline there. What a great start to our day!

We arrived at Almaden Quicksilver County Park a few minutes before 8am. This park is named for the mercury mines that were dug here during the Gold Rush; mercury being used in the extraction of gold from gold ore. The parking lot was still locked for the night, but there were spots to stop along the road. As we prepared to scan the area, a park ranger pulled up to unlock the gate. We talked with him briefly and he was excited that we had seen a Wood Duck, as that's a species he'd been hoping to see himself. We shared other nature tidbits with him and then scanned the area for new birds. There was a Wild Turkey in the grass beyond the parking lot, which we had heard before but not seen, and a few other birds at the base of the trail. Eurasian Collared Doves were sitting on the telephone lines outside the park — I didn't realize that this introduced species had made it into the hills. Normally we find this bird nearer the bay in Alviso. I worried about it competing with the native Band-tailed Pigeon, thinking of how bird distributions change over time. This species, let loose in the Bahamas in the 1970s, has been spreading its range, making it to the Bay Area in 2008 ([5](#)).

A fellow birder, Janna Pauser, arrived in the parking lot and we had a nice chat with her about birding and what species we had seen so far.

Our next stop was one that especially excited me, because a pair of Calliope Hummingbirds had been sighted here by other birders (in fact, Janna Pauser was the first to report it) and it would be a new life species for me. I was really hoping see this tiny hummer, the smallest bird in the United States. It was not to be.

Even without Calliope Hummingbirds, Stile Ranch Trail in Santa Teresa County Park produced an abundance of wonderful birds. We found an Allen's Hummingbird with its rusty red sides and tail, and several Anna's Hummingbirds with the red fire ignited in their throats. But the best part was the sparrows. We found four uncommon species here: Rufous-crowned Sparrow, Lark Sparrow, Savannah Sparrow and Grasshopper Sparrow.



Rufous-crowned Sparrow



Lark Sparrow



Savannah Sparrow



Grasshopper Sparrow



Mule Ears (*Wyethia mollis*)

Rufous-crowned Sparrows are special to me because it was the first “rarity” I ever reported, back when Ginger introduced me to the wonders of birding by hiking the hills behind Cal Poly when we were first dating. Back then there were no email lists, electronic bulletin boards and certainly no websites for sharing birding information. The way information was shared was via a telephone number. To hear about rarities you would call and listen to a long taped message listing all the unusual birds that had been spotted, and to report a rarity you would leave a message after the beep.

Lark Sparrows are just gorgeous birds. Many sparrows are “nondescript” and you have to memorize subtle plumage patterns to identify them, but the Lark Sparrows are bright and boldly marked, nearly unmistakable.

Savannah Sparrows are a good example of nondescript plumage. To tell them apart from other sparrows the best thing to notice is the wash of yellow over their eyes.

And the way to find Grasshopper Sparrows is to listen to their call. They sound very much like grasshoppers, with a long high trill. That trill thrilled me on my first Birdathon in 2004, because Grasshopper Sparrow was a life bird for me. Now I hear it with a hint of melancholy, because as I age my ears are gradually losing the higher registers. I can only hear Grasshopper Sparrow in my right ear now. Change can be hard.

In addition to the marvelous birds, Stile Ranch Trail is a beautiful path with sweeping views and rare plants. It winds in switchbacks up a chaparral and manzanita-covered serpentine slope, through sweeping grasslands, and passing through an old rock wall which is believed to have been constructed when the Spanish ranchos were being subdivided after the 1850s (6). One rare endemic plant that prefers this serpentine soil is Jewelflower, which we found as we hiked to a spot with a panoramic view of the valley below. This park



Jewelflower (*Streptanthus albidus*)



The View from Stile Ranch Trail in Santa Teresa County Park



Common Buckeye butterfly

does not look like Silicon Valley. This place still looks like California from those rancho days: vast stretches of wild land with a few houses or farms interspersed. Yet, if you continued hiking straight up the hillside, before long you'd find yourself on the doorstep of IBM's high-tech Almaden Research Center and beyond that you would see greater San Jose and the confluence of highways 85 and 101. Change leaves its marks on the landscape.

We resisted the urge to hike too far up this trail, because we knew that the habitat would not provide a large number of additional birds, and we needed to move on to our next destination. We headed back down the switchbacks, pausing to check one last time for a Calliope Hummingbird, then departed for our next destination.

Joseph D. Grant County Park, or Grant Ranch as it is commonly called, is partway up Mount Hamilton and another favorite spot of ours. We have camped many times here and it was around the campsites that we birded, adding several warbler species, House Wren, Northern Flicker and White-crowned Sparrow to our list.

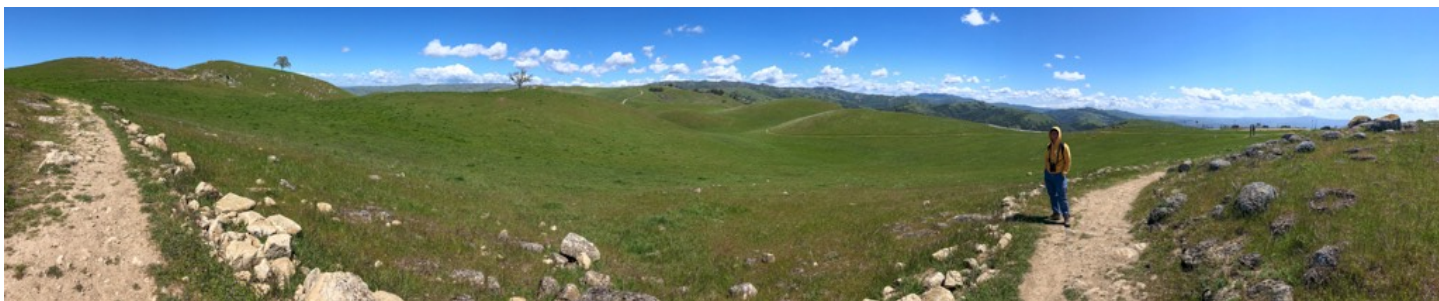
We drove to Grant Lake and pulled the spotting scope out of the trunk to scan for ducks and other water birds. There was a family of coyotes moving through the grass to the south of the lake, one of them playfully rolling in the grass while the other two appeared to be dutifully hunting: we theorized that it was parents and a nearly-grown pup. The lake had a few ducks, but the interesting action was happening in the sky above us. A small flock of Vaux's Swift flew by as we crested a hill, and soon after a Bald Eagle soared over the lake. Long ago Bald Eagles were common in the county, but DDT pesticide use after World War II nearly wiped them out across all of California. For many years none had been seen breeding here. That changed a few years ago when an active nest was found in a power tower beside the Calaveras Reservoir. Since then more nests have been discovered, including one on an elementary school campus in Milpitas just last Spring (7). Almost as if it came for comparison to its cousin, a Golden Eagle flew overhead as we prepared to leave the lake area.



Bald Eagle over Grant Lake



Golden Eagle over Grant Lake



Panorama from Boccardo Loop Trail in Sierra Vista Open Space Preserve

Sierra Vista Open Space Preserve at the top of Sierra Road is one of the most beautiful spots in the East Hills. From it you can see all of San Jose, surrounding cities, the Coast Range and a large swath of the San Francisco Bay. The hilltop is grassland with rocks jutting out. This preserve has only been open to the public for four years, but birders have been coming here for much longer than that. In fact, it's where I found a county rarity on my first Birdathon fourteen years ago. The spot is a flyway for migrant birds, especially hawks, and the grasses are kept short by grazing cattle, which makes it especially attractive to Western Meadowlarks, Horned Larks and Lark Sparrows. Birds can be very picky about their habitat. If the grasses grew too tall, the Horned Larks might just go find a more suitable spot to hang out. The trail has incredible views of the rolling hillsides, and the shockingly steep drop into

Alum Rock Park below. There are beautiful wildflowers here such as Miniature Lupine and Yellow Violets. The sandstone rocks are packed with fossil shells — in the distant past this hilltop was at the bottom of an ocean. As we hiked I thought about Hawk pulling the hills up from the bottom of the sea, about the San Andreas fault plowing up the western edge of the North American Plate. I thought about our kids heading off to college and adult life and Ginger and me becoming “empty nesters.” I thought about retirement and our aging parents and favorite restaurants closing and the Corn Palace field going away, but also about new parks being created and new trails built and new restaurants opening. I thought about the new Apple campus changing a plot of urban land from mostly parking lots and buildings to 80% forest and grasslands and orchards. I thought about how change can feel good and bad, and about how it is all around us, all the time.



Yellow Violet
"Johnny-Jump-Up"

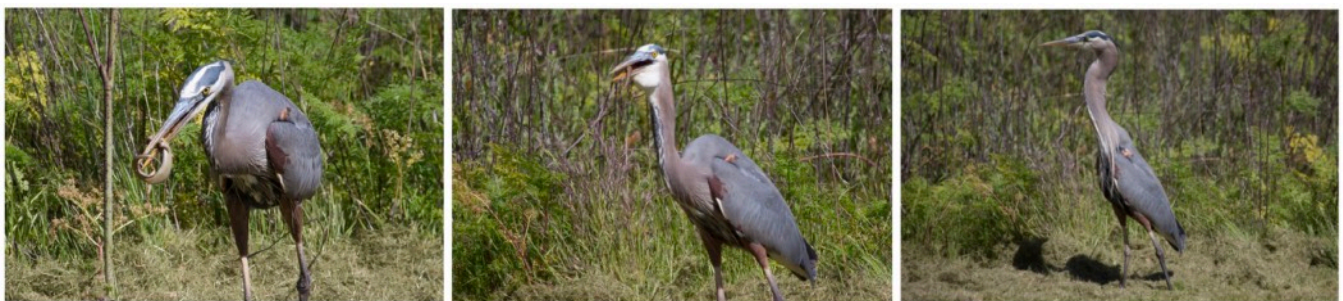
Yellow Violet or Johnny-
jump-ups (*Viola*
pedunculata)

We did not linger here long, as the wind was kicking up, which made the birds difficult to find. A selasphorus hummingbird did shoot by on its way north, but we couldn't determine its exact species at that speed. We moved on.

Next we drove down Marsh Road near the southern edge of Calaveras Reservoir in hopes of finding Lawrence's Goldfinches. As luck would have it, the finches weren't there, but we did get Yellow-billed Magpie, Hutton's Vireo and finally saw an Ash-throated Flycatcher.

Our last stop in the East Hills was at Ed Levin County Park. This is another site where Calliope Hummingbirds had recently been reported. There is a tree here that birders have affectionately dubbed the "Magic Tree" for its ability to attract unusual hummingbirds. The "Magic Tree" is a eucalyptus, and its flowers are a great source of nectar so hummingbirds are here in larger numbers than other places. Unfortunately, we weren't sure exactly which tree was the "Magic" one. Even if we had found the tree, it's uncertain whether our hoped-for species would even be here. After not finding our target bird, we resolved to take a trip someday soon to see one as it migrates through Arizona or summers in the Sierras Nevadas or wherever it turns out to be.

Ed Levin park has two parts. The upper part where we failed to find our hummingbird, and the lower part with a lake, picnic areas and a large area for hang gliders to land. The large field is good for Western Flycatchers, Western Bluebirds, Western Meadowlarks and Red-winged Blackbirds, among others. Up the hill is another place where Lawrence's Goldfinch sometimes hang out. There are flower beds and more eucalyptus trees for the hummingbirds to feed on. The lake sometimes gets unusual ducks. Today, however, we added no new birds to our list, but adventure did find us. As we were getting ready to leave the lakeside, a Great Blue Heron flew in and landed not 20 feet from where we were standing. I was excited, because this would give me a good chance for photography. I took a couple shots of the bird and then without warning it stabbed its giant bill into the tall grass and came up with a large Alligator Lizard! We watched in horror and admiration as it proceeded to kill and swallow its prey. Being fans of lizards, we were sad to see it eaten; being fans of birds, we were happy to see the heron getting a good meal. Death and life working together brought more thoughts of change to mind.



Great Blue Heron catching an Alligator Lizard

Although we did not follow its path precisely, Ed Levin was our last stop along the Bay Area Ridge Trail. It has been encouraging to watch the trail grow over the years. One of the books on our natural history shelf shows 180 miles of the trail being completed in 1995 (8). This past year they finished 375 of a planned 550 miles.



Bay Area Ridge Trail Signpost at Sierra Vista
Open Space Preserve

Now we were on to “phase two” of our birding day. We had a pretty good list total after having hiked and driven through the forests, lakes, chaparral and grasslands, totaling just shy of 100 species. Now it was time to dive down to the Bay. The bayland habitat is so different from the hills that we were confident we’d break 100 species for the day. As we negotiated the traffic entering Highway 237 we added House Sparrow, a typical suburban bird, to our total. Not a surprise, but every check mark on the list gets harder as the day grows later.

The Alviso Environmental Education Center was very good to us: we added fifteen species in a very short time. Then we drove past the fields on Disk Drive and found three Burrowing Owls. Given the amount of construction that has happened in the previous two years across the street, I was surprised that the owls were still there. But it looks like they’re doing a good job of protecting their habitat, and they have signs posted to help raise awareness.

The State & Spreckles area of Alviso gave us Semipalmated Plovers, Snowy Plovers and Least Sandpipers.



Semipalmated Plover and other “peeps” at State & Spreckles

We drove to the Alviso Marina and the Gold Street bridge over the Guadalupe River and added three more birds: Merlin, Black-bellied Plover, Common Gallinule.

Sunnyvale's Water Pollution Control Plant parking lot was surprisingly crowded for a Thursday afternoon. There was a group of about twenty people gathered getting ready to go running on the bayside trails. I worried that their presence would frighten off the birds, but the area was still rather birdy. We added three more species, including Green Heron, an especially skittish bird that we didn't expect to see this late in the day.

For our last stop we drove to Charleston Slough. This is a great place to bird, as there are multiple habitats within a short walk: a freshwater lake, reedy marshes, open waters, muddy sloughs. We hiked the loop looking in all our familiar places, and we found seven more species.



Flying shorebirds in the evening light (mostly Marbled Godwits and Dowitchers)

The light faded as we came back toward the parking lot close to 8pm, but one more bird gave us a show: a Peregrine Falcon flew over our heads, came about and then flew over again as if making sure both Ginger and I got a good chance to see our last bird of the day.

The Peregrine Falcon had an especially tough time with change these past fifty years. They were one of the birds most affected by the pesticide DDT. The bird became extinct in the eastern United States in 1964. In California in 1970 only 5 pairs of falcons could be found. DDT thinned their eggshells to the point that a nesting bird would crush the eggs just by sitting on them. DDT affected falcons, hawks and eagles more than other birds because it concentrates as it moves up the food chain. A ban on DDT in 1972 and herculean efforts by conservationists brought this bird back from the brink of extinction. When Ginger and I were in college we witnessed those efforts firsthand: Morro Rock in San Luis Obispo County was one of the last remaining nesting sites in the state, so to keep the population going conservationists removed the fragile thin-shelled eggs and replaced them with ceramic eggs or thicker-shelled eggs from captive birds (9). After the babies were hatched in incubators, they would be reintroduced to the nests to be raised by the wild parents. The conservation efforts on Morro Rock paid off and are continuing to this day.

In 1999 the Peregrine Falcon was removed from the federal endangered species list and in 2009 California removed it from its own endangered species list ([10](#)). The birds have not yet recovered to their pre-DDT population levels, but there is realistic optimism that they will thrive. When I see successful efforts like this as well as all the work around the Bay Area to preserve our wild lands, waterways, plants and animals, it fills me with hope and joy, and a drive to foster positive change in all aspects of my life. Change can be redemptive.



Sunset from the Adobe Creek Loop Trail at Charleston Slough

Notes:

- Our total species count for the day was 130, a personal best for Ginger and me!
- All photographs were taken the day of the Birdathon, either on a Canon EOS 5D Mark III or iPhone X. The flower and butterfly drawings are all original artwork based on photographs that we took the day of the Birdathon. The complete set of photos can be found at http://www.pbase.com/wilmot/birdathon_2018_spring

Footnotes:

- (1) Part of the Amah Mutsun Creation story, from a plaque at the summit of Mount Umunhum
- (2) Roadside Geology of Northern and Central California, Second Edition by David Alt and Donald W. Handyman, pp. 4-5. For why hummingbird throats are red, see <http://www.sibleyguides.com/2011/09/the-basics-of-iridescence-in-hummingbirds/>
- (3) Measure AA money is starting to be used to restore wetlands around the bay (<https://www.mercurynews.com/2018/04/09/san-francisco-bay-18-million-in-new-funding-for-environmental-restoration/>).

- (4) <https://baynature.org/article/tule-elk-relocated-numbers-rebound/>
- (5) <https://blog.nature.org/science/2014/02/18/eurasian-collared-dove-bird-count/>
- (6) Master Plan for Santa Teresa County Park, https://www.sccgov.org/sites/parks/PlansProjects/Documents/SantaTeresaHistoric/April-1992_MasterPlan_Chapter_V.pdf
- (7) <https://www.mercurynews.com/2017/04/21/baby-bald-eagle-hatches-at-milpitas-school/>
- (8) The Bay Area Ridge Trail by Jean Rusmore, copyright 1995. p. ix. Parks that we visited that contain stretches of the trail: Mount Umunhum, Almaden Quicksilver County Park, Santa Teresa County Park, Joseph D. Grant County Park, Sierra Vista Open Space Preserve, Ed Levin County Park. 375 miles of the planned Bay Area Ridge Trail are already complete. Mount Umunhum added 5.3 miles and includes the highest point on the trail (<http://ridgetrail.org/mt-um-access/>) Interactive map: http://www.ridgetrail.org/interactive_map/&Itemid=99/
- (9) <https://www.fs.fed.us/inside-fs/incubator-helped-saved-peregrine-falcons-extinction>
- (10) <https://www.fws.gov/chesapeakebay/peregr.htm>, <http://www.mbnep.org/2017/10/20/morro-bay-wildlife-spotlight-peregrine-falcon/>