

Guest writer David Herlocker is an interpretive naturalist for Marin County Parks, leading natural history walks at Mount Burdell and other county open space preserves. Marin Parks typically leads public walks focusing on Mount Burdell's wildflowers in April and birds in May – check marincountyparks.org for upcoming walks.

Mount Burdell in Spring ~ David Herlocker

Mount Burdell is a great place to enjoy nature at any time of the year, but it is particularly rewarding during April and May as the migrants return from their wintering grounds. Mount Burdell lies near the northeastern corner of Marin, where the open grasslands dotted with majestic valley oaks attract some species that are less often encountered in the cooler coastal parts of the county.

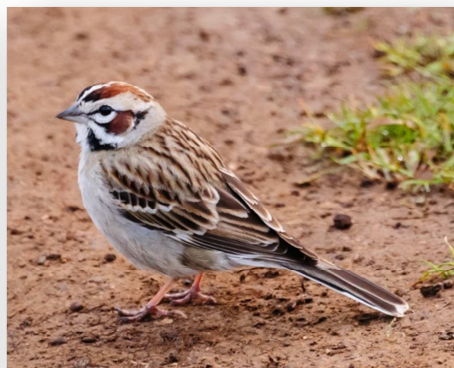


Open oak savanna is a Mt. Burdell specialty, with majestic spreading valley oaks, bays, and more. Photo by Chuck B.

To enjoy a great morning bird walk, start at the San Andreas trailhead off of San Marin Dr. As you head north up the fire road, listen and look for blue-gray gnatcatchers as you are serenaded by warbling vireos and orange-crowned warblers. As you crest the hill an enormous meadow comes into view. Scan the road surfaces here for lark sparrows and western bluebirds. The wire fence on the left is a great place to see western kingbirds, but remember to scan the lower wires where you might find grasshopper sparrows.



Blue-gray gnatcatchers squeak in the trees
Photos by: John Sutton



Lark sparrows forage on the fire roads
Larry Scheibel



Bullock's orioles visit from Mexico
Jan Arendtsh

Continue straight toward the huge oaks at the far edge off the meadow which are very popular with Bullock's orioles who weave their pendulous nests in the fresh new leaves. These mature trees are riddled with cavities that provide nesting opportunities for white-breasted nuthatches, western bluebirds, violet green and tree swallows, and a variety of woodpeckers. Expect to hear house wrens – usually more than one will serenade you as you explore this area.

Return to the fire road and head up the hill and you will come to a grove of trees where the Deer Camp fire road and the Middle Burdell roads meet. This area is usually alive with birds, listen closely and you are likely to hear the distinctive song of the lazuli bunting. If you watch for a while, you will be able to figure out the favorite singing perches of these dazzling males as they patrol their territories. You should be able to position yourself for great looks at one of our most beautiful birds.

From this spot, you can go left up toward the Pierre Joske Grove, passing through more prime lazuli bunting habitat along your way. Ash-throated flycatchers and western wood-peewees are also common along this route. The grove is a great shady retreat where Bullock's orioles and black-headed grosbeaks can be found. If you want a longer walk, try heading up the Middle Burdell fire road to pass Hidden Lake – a gorgeous vernal pool. Then you can loop back across the south facing slope and enjoy one of the best wildflower displays in the county.

Some Other Options ~ Jack Gedney

Above, David describes a walk from the most popular trailhead on San Andreas Dr, a walk which certainly does lead to some of the prime springtime bird activity and the best parts of the preserve for lark sparrows, lazuli buntings, and Bullock's orioles. But Mount Burdell contains a spacious 1627 acres and is bordered by Olompali State Historical Park, private ranchlands, and further connections to other open space preserves to the south – you have choices! From the same trailhead, you can quickly leave the popular fire road for the narrow and uncrowded Dwarf Oak Trail if you would like a quieter and woodsier setting. Alternatively, visit one of the more eastern trailheads around Fieldstone Dr. (consult the full map at marincountyparks.org to see all trails) for less-travelled trails still well laden with majestic oaks.

If you have a good half a day or more to enjoy yourself, arrange an up-and-over walk including the more wooded northern side of Mount Burdell rising above Olompali State Historical Park. Compared to the sunny and open oak savannas that dominate the southern side, the Olompali side of the mountain is mostly wooded with a mixed oak-bay-madrone forest that holds pileated woodpeckers, brown creepers, Pacific wrens in ferny canyons, and other similarly forest-loving species.



Look for lazuli buntings around the Deer Camp/Middle Burdell intersections. Photo by Doug Greenberg.



by Pease Press.

Adapted from official map at marincountyparks.org

Practical Details

How to Get There: The main trailhead described above is found near the end of San Andreas Dr. To get there, take the northernmost Novato exit for Atherton Dr. and head west on San Marin Dr. for about 3 miles. Turn right on San Andreas Dr. and continue to the clear trailhead towards the end of the street. Consult a map for the many other neighborhood trailheads or leave a vehicle somewhere and embark on a point-to-point trek over the top from Olompali State Historical Park (1558 ft. max elevation and ~8 miles, depending on route).

Rules & Access: Mount Burdell is a Marin County Open Space Preserve and so is open to free public access 24 hours a day, but lacks amenities such as garbage cans, restrooms, or picnic tables – except for a few near the top right before entering state park land. Leashed dogs are permitted on trails and unleashed dogs under voice control are permitted on fire roads. As with all Open Space Preserves, excellent maps are available at marincountyparks.org or you can consult our favorite printed map, *Trails of Northeast Marin*