

BEAR VALLEY TRAIL–MT. WITTENBERG TRAIL–MEADOW TRAIL LOOP
POINT REYES NATIONAL SEASHORE, CA

This 4.8-mile loop trail starts at the Bear Valley Visitor Center, and ascends to the ridge between Bear Valley and the coast. Due to the fog (and smoke from the August 2018 California fires), we were not able to get good views looking down towards the seashore. We also opted not to take the 0.4-mile side-trip to the top of Mt. Wittenburg.

I recommend picking up a hiking map from the Bear Valley Visitor Center (a PDF is also available on the NPS website).

The distances for this hike are as follows:

Bear Valley Visitors Center to Mt. Wittenburg Trail turnoff: 0.2 mile

Mt. Wittenburg Trail turnoff to junction with Z-Ranch Trail: 1.8 miles

Junction with Z-Ranch Trail to junction with Sky and Meadow Trails: 0.4 mile

Junction with Sky and Meadow Trails to Bear Valley Trail via Meadow Trail: 1.6 miles

Bear Valley Trail–Meadow Trail junction to Bear Valley Visitors Center: 0.8 mile

The main Bear Valley Trail follows a dirt road, and occasionally you may encounter ranger vehicles on this road:



Looking across a large grassy field to the left of the trailhead:



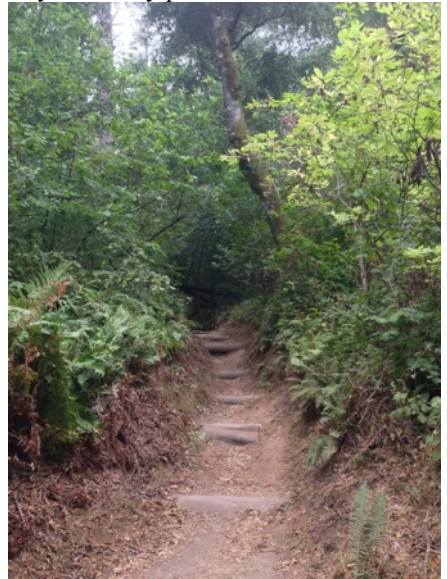
These purplish flowers were growing on a vine which had climbed a greasewood bush near where the Mt. Wittenburg trail takes off:



The Mt. Wittenburg trail starts off moderately steep:



The trail climbs steadily through the trees, and the scenery is quite enjoyable with the variety of nearby plants:



We spotted this very large fungus growing off a tree near the trail:



The branches of this fallen tree have grown skyward, forming many smaller trees, with a similar appearance to a nurse log:



This tree really is bent as it appears in the photograph (this is not an iPhone photo distortion):



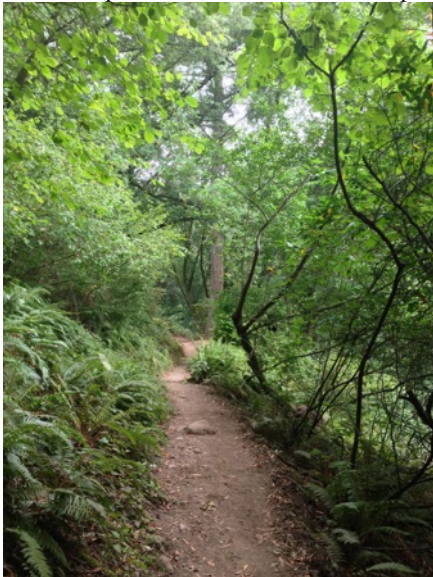
The trail levels out briefly, then ascends again. Although the trail is nowhere near as steep as trails I've hiked in the Canadian Rockies, it is steeper than one might expect:



The light filtering through the fog made for excellent photography:



The next three photos show our continued progress up this nice trail. Notice all the ferns alongside the trail through here:



The tree to the left of the trail in this photo has one large branch which is growing upwards and is competing with the trunk for width:



This small box attached to a tree is located on the side of the trail, and its label reads "NOTE: These cameras are for wildlife monitoring ONLY. All images of humans are deleted/discarded.":



As we gain elevation, the trees thin slightly, and we hike through an open area with some (native Californian?) grasses growing alongside the trail:



The trail then flattens out again briefly, and we walk through a grove of very tall, thin, and densely packed trees:



This tree off in the distance has many branches which have broken off:



The trail gets steep and rocky again:



However, overall the terrain is starting to level out:



At this point in the hike we were starting to get above the fog, and we were encountering some sunshine in the clear patches of trail:



The trail enters the trees yet again, and we at this point over two-thirds of the way to the top:



On a clearer day, there would probably be good views of the surrounding hills from this switchback in the trail:



In most places there aren't any obstacles on the trail, but occasionally erosion has exposed tree roots, as shown in this photo:



We are just starting to be able to see the outlines of some nearby hills through the fog:



The sunlight filtering through the trees was giving good lighting for HDR photography here:



The next three photos show our continued progress up the trail:



The trail crosses a small ridge, and we are now hiking through trees with grasses below them, rather than all the ferns:



The trail ascends this small ridge, and we are now above the fog line:



This is a particularly nice part of the trail:



Looking out across the trees from a viewpoint along the trail. Note that there was a bit of smoke in the air from the California wildfires on this day, hence the brown tinge to the fog:



Here we have reached the final uphill stretch before the trail leaves the trees and intersects with the Z-Ranch Trail:



There are a lot of very small douglas fir trees in this clearing:



The Z-Ranch Trail is to the left in this photo (heading north), and the continuation of the Mt. Wittenberg Trail is to the right:



It is 0.2 miles to the summit of Mt. Wittenburg from here, but we decided not to hike up to it because we were short on time and there probably would not be much of a view due to the fog:



Looking towards the coast from here, where there should be a good view when there is no fog:



There is an unmarked trail which heads south along the ridge from this fork; I'm guessing it leads to an unofficial viewpoint looking towards Bear Valley, but I'm not sure:



Here we are hiking down the part of the Z-Ranch Trail which heads south, towards the junction with the Meadow Trail:



The trail soon re-enters the trees for a short distance:



Notice the fog which is just on the other side of the ridge:



Looking out at the fog, which is just below where we are hiking right now:



The trail descends gradually to where it joins with the meadow trail:



Looking down the hillside into the fog:



Here we can see up ahead that we will soon be re-entering the fog:



There is another unmarked side-trail heading off to the left here. It may go to a viewpoint, or re-join with the other unmarked trail; I'm not sure:



While continuing along the trail, we encountered this spectacular scene of the sunlight filtering down through the fog and the trees. I've seen similar rays of sunlight, for example coming down from clouds over the Black Mountains in Death Valley, but this is the best:



Panorama of the trail and the sunlight coming down:



Photo of where the sun is just barely visible through the trees:



The contrast between the rays of sunshine and the surrounding area increased while we were taking these photos:



It really seemed to be a matter of being in the right place at the right time to see this amazing scene:



Just ahead is the fork with the Sky Trail, which leads to the nearby camping area:



Looking down the trail towards Sky Camp, and into the fog:



Up ahead, the trail we are on joins with the Sky Trail, and continues on towards the Old Pine Trail:



Looking west, towards where the ocean might be visible on a clear day (I'm not sure):



Just past the join with the Sky Trail is the junction with the Meadow Trail. From here, we turned left and headed back towards the main Bear Valley trail:



These plants with orange flowers are a common sight along the trails in the Bear Valley Area; I'm not sure what they are called:



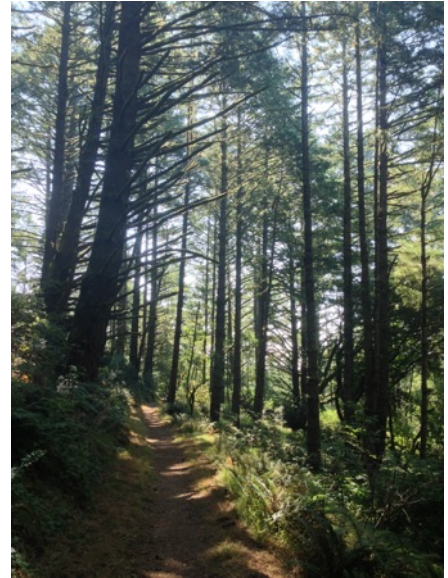
Taking one last look at the Sky Trail heading into the trees and fog:



We noticed some vines climbing one of the trees in the distance:



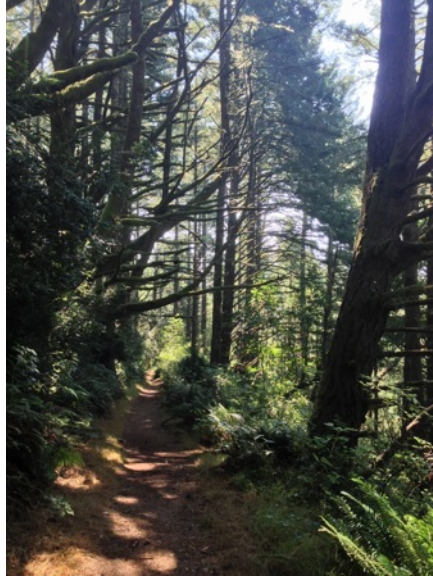
The next three photos show the beginning of our descent down the Meadow Trail. The fog is starting to clear, and we had clear sky for the hike down:



Looking down the hillside and through the trees alongside the trail:



Notice all the tall trees alongside this straight stretch of trail:



Here we have entered what some guidebooks call "Huckleberry Lane," where huckleberry bushes are growing on both sides of the trail:



There seem to be more of these orange flowers alongside the Meadow Trail than along any other trail I've hiked in this area:



Looking over at a large patch of these plants just off the trail:



Here we are approaching the large open area on this trail, which is visible from Google Earth, and is a good way to identify where the trail goes from aerial imagery. I think this is the meadow for which this trail is named; I'm not sure whether this meadow has good flowers in the spring, as it's always been dry grass when I've hiked through it:



At the other end of the meadow, the trail enters the trees again and descends relatively sharply:



Notice how the lowest branch of this tree has been bent; this may be an old indian trail marker, but I'm not sure:



Continuing down the trail, we begin to encounter more ferns again:



Here are two close-up photos of these orange flowers; the sunlight filtering through the trees was good for photography, though there was a slight breeze so many of the photos turned out blurry:



The walk down this trail was very pleasant, though it felt much shorter than the hike up the Mt. Wittenburg trail (which is only 0.2 mile longer):



Looking up towards the tops of these tall trees, now that the fog is gone:



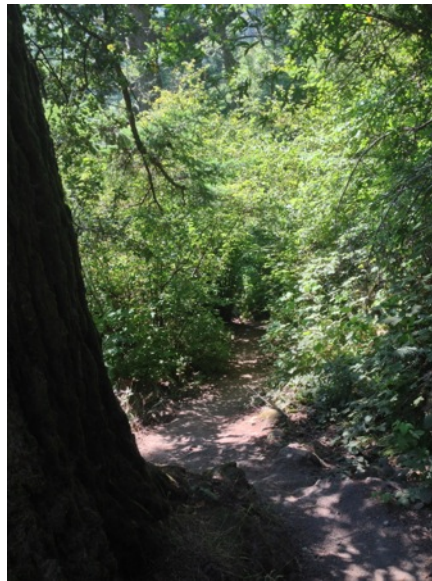
As we start to approach where the Meadow Trail reaches the main Bear Valley Trail, the trail gets noticeably steeper :



The trail then levels off for a short distance, and it travels through some partially sunny areas:



Then, the trail makes one last steep descent to the main trail:



Here is where the Meadow Trail meets the Bear Valley Trail. It appears that hiking up the Meadow Trail is more popular than hiking up the Mt. Wittenburg trail:



This bridge crosses the creek at the start of the Meadow Trail:



There are quite a few of these plants growing alongside the Bear Valley Trail; I'm not sure what they are called (the one in this photo is unfortunately rather dusty, however, due to the amount of foot traffic along the trail):



Looking over towards Black Mountain from near the Bear Valley parking area; the burn scar is from a recent fire:

