

exploring

A Hidden Treasure

Coal Mine Ridge Nature Preserve

Neil Wiley

Forty years ago, I was exploring the Bay Area in my new white Mustang convertible. My map showed me a road up to Skyline Blvd called Alpine. I was nearing the summit when my car sunk a wheel into a deep hole. It took some digging, but the Mustang and I reached the ridge.

In March of 2026, I drove up Alpine again. This time I was driving up the same road to discover a place to hike. I turned left from Highway 280 just north of Arastradero road to the Alpine Road exit. I turned left to take a relatively smooth Alpine Road about 3.6 miles to roadside parking located just before Willowbrook Drive. (If you are using a GPS, the street address is 4860 Alpine Road.) Across the road is the main entrance to Coal Mine Ridge Nature Preserve of Portola Valley Ranch.

From this entrance, you can walk over 10 miles of trails in more than 425 acres of open space. Most of the hiking loops include a combination of Toyon, Coalmine, and Old Spanish trails. Toyon and Old Spanish connect at several points, but also run parallel for almost the entire length of the preserve. They connect the Preserve of Portola Valley Ranch with the Open Space of Blue Oaks.

Signage marking the intersections are helpful, but a map and compass could help avoid confusion. You may use mapping on your cell phone, but it doesn't always work.

Paper maps are usually available at the entrance, but you can get one online at www.cmrnp.org.



On my hike, I followed the three main trails. My favorite was the return walk on Old Spanish. Although all paths are single width, much of Old Spanish is wider, downhill, and with more views to the east that display San Francisco Bay and Mount Diablo. Other trails offer views to the southwest, including the hills of the neighboring Midpen's Windy Hill Open Space Preserve.

The trails I took offered mild climbs on shaded single-tracks. Maples and oaks provided excellent shade and soft, leafy paths. It was a pleasant and comfortable environment with some occasional views. By the way, don't look for coal. The mine was buried in a major landslide in 1890. Even with no coal, I hope to see more of Coal Mine Ridge Nature Preserve.

There are some minor negatives. No water fountains or bathrooms are available. You can't bring dogs or bicycles. Some trails are closed seasonally to horses. And you are asked to not take flora or fauna home.

One more thing. Don't wander off trails. You could get lost.

I was sure to not violate these rules or go farther on Alpine. (The road is closed past the Coal Mine Ridge entrance.) Instead, I extended my trip with a drive down Alpine and north to Highway 84 (Woodside Road) and up to Alice's Restaurant on Skyline Blvd. for a hamburger and a visit with the owner. He told me that more than 20 percent of his business is from hikers. I also discovered a large map of mountain parks bordered by brief descriptions at Alice's.

Do you have a favorite park or trail near Skyline? Leave a message for me at 408-353-1546.

Happy exploring!

