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News > [Environment & Science](#) • News

New redwood park opening 15 miles from downtown San Jose

Bear Creek Redwoods Open Space Preserve, site of a former Jesuit college, opens Saturday

35



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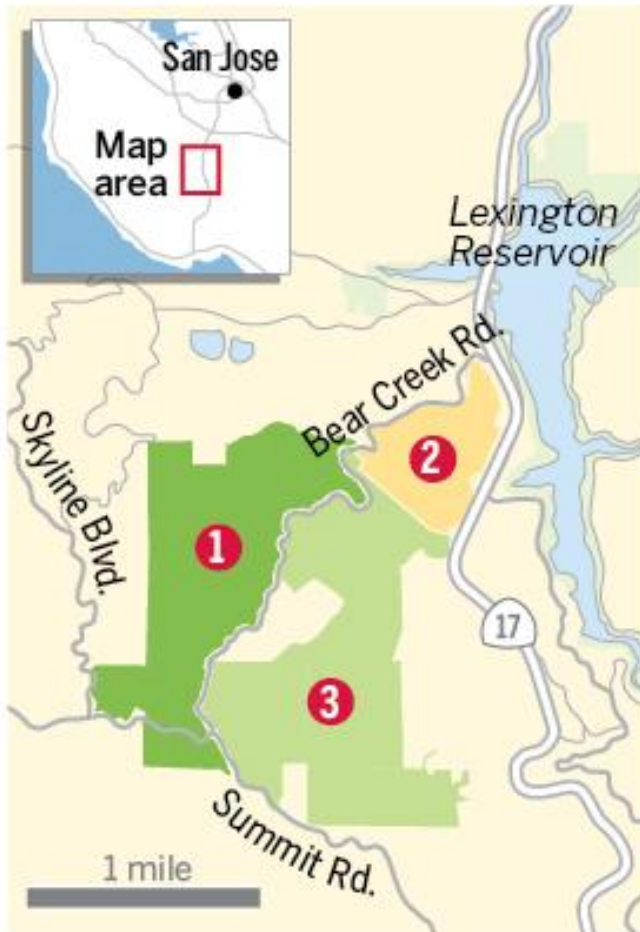
On the eve of its opening to the public, docents for the Bear Creek Redwoods Open Space Preserve take a tour around Upper Lake, Thursday, June 6, 2019, in Los Gatos, Calif. (Karl Mondon/Bay Area News Group)

For more than 30 years, students studying to be Jesuit priests, in contemplation or in prayer, walked through the rolling hills and redwood forests just south of Los Gatos, across Highway 17 from the Lexington Reservoir.

Beginning Saturday, the property, once the site of Alma College, and more recently a battleground between developers and environmentalists, will take on a new chapter, as Silicon Valley's newest public park.

BEAR CREEK REDWOODS

On Saturday, a 1,432-acre property near Los Gatos, long closed to the public, is being opened for hiking, horse riding and, eventually, mountain biking.



1 Phase 1 will open Saturday to hikers and horseback riders.

2 Phase 2 will open between 2020 and 2026 to bicyclists, horseback riders and hikers after the old college buildings are demolished, improvements are made to the horse stables and new trails are constructed.

3 Phase 3 will open in 2026 after new trails and parking lots are built.

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Known as Bear Creek Redwoods Open Space Preserve, the 1,432-acre landscape will open at 7 a.m. Saturday to hikers and horse riders, free of charge. The park includes six miles of trails, a parking lot for 52 cars, new restrooms and signs.

Although the land was logged multiple times back to the 1850s, it contains thousands of redwoods more than 100 feet high, and a few surviving old-growth redwoods believed to be 600 to 800-years-old that are more than 200 feet tall.

Unlike more famous redwood parks such as, Big Basin or Muir Woods, Bear Creek is 15 miles from downtown San Jose, on the doorstep of Silicon Valley.

“This is going to be life-changing for some people,” said Ana Maria Ruiz, general manager of the Midpeninsula Regional Open Space District, which owns the property.

“There’s no other experience like hiking under a redwood canopy, hearing the gurgling of the creek and seeing the sunlight come through the canopy of the trees,” she said. “For kids and adults, it really gives you a close connection with nature.”



Ranger Anthony Correia and Ana Ruiz, general manager of the Midpeninsula Regional Open Space District, stand on the newly-constructed bridge over Webb Creek on Thursday June 6, 2019, in the Bear Creek Redwoods Open Space Preserve near Los Gatos, Calif. (Sofie Bates/Bay Area News Group)

The land has had a colorful history. In 1906, Harry Tevis, heir to a vast San Francisco mining fortune, built a 50-room mansion in the hills there, with a huge Roman-style swimming pool, a palatial library, horse stables and 43 full-time gardeners who grew prize-winning dahlias, lilies and roses. When Tevis died in 1931, the land was purchased by the Sacred Heart Novitiate, a Jesuit order that had operated a center in the Los Gatos hills nearby since 1886.

The Jesuits built classrooms, dormitories and a chapel. From 1934 to 1969, the land was the site of Alma College. For years, Jesuit priests-in-training studied the Bible and meditated in rustic classroom buildings amid the forest.

The property is home to mountain lions, black-tailed deer, coyotes, bobcats, song sparrows, mallard ducks, bullfrogs and dozens of other species.

A lake near the parking lot, located one mile up Bear Creek Road from Highway 17, features a quarter-mile interpretive trail with sandstone rocks used by Ohlone Indians centuries ago for grinding acorns and grass seeds into bread and porridge, as well as a former Jesuit shrine to St. Joseph, and wild blackberry bushes.

Most of the now dilapidated dozen or so buildings left from Alma College are off limits, hidden behind the district's fencing. They are scheduled to be demolished next year, except for the chapel and library, in a second phase of work from 2020 to 2026. Horse stables dating back to 1916 also will undergo renovations, after the district's board dropped an earlier plan that could have resulted in their closure.

"They voted to fix things and mostly keep it running. That was excellent news. We were thrilled," said Pam Ashford, barn manager at Bear Creek Stables, which boards 72 horses for families from around the South Bay.



A building on the Alma College site in the Bear Creek Redwoods Open Space Preserve run by the Midpeninsula Regional Open Space District in Los Gatos, Calif., on Tuesday, Sept. 20, 2016. (Nhat V. Meyer/Bay Area News Group)

One occasional visitor to Alma College in the 1950s was a young student based a mile away at Sacred Heart, who was considering a career in the priesthood, future California Gov. Jerry Brown.

Brown entered Sacred Heart at age 18 in 1956 and studied at the novitiate for three years before leaving to enroll at UC Berkeley. He said in 2016 that he visited Alma College several times and found it “very beautiful.”

“The Jesuits should have never sold it,” he said.

But the Jesuits closed Alma College and moved to Berkeley in 1969. They sold the property in 1989 to Stanley Ho, a Hong Kong casino billionaire who hoped to build luxury homes there. The property sat quietly until Los Gatos developer Pete Denevi applied to build a golf course on the site. But he was turned down in 1996 by Santa Clara County supervisors after environmentalists mounted a fierce challenge, saying the course would harm the rural character of the area.

“It was a bit of a cliffhanger,” said former Los Gatos Mayor Pete Siemens, now a board member of the Midpeninsula Regional Open Space District. “The developers owned the property. Fortunately, their project was flawed and the county turned it down.”

Finally in 1999, after the land had passed to an Oregon owner, the Arlie Land and Cattle Company, the open space district and the Peninsula Open Space Trust, a non-profit group based in Palo Alto, bought most of it for \$25 million.



A 1937 photograph of the Alma College Campus looking south towards the Santa Cruz Mountains. Foreground: Upper Lake. Buildings: dormitories (no longer standing), classroom building, library, and Tevis mansion. (Courtesy California Jesuit Archives, Los Gatos)

The land sat largely dormant for the last 20 years, however, because the open space district did not have the money to renovate and staff it.

In 2014, that changed, when voters in Santa Clara and San Mateo counties approved Measure AA, a \$300 million bond for the district.

“The voters said this was important,” Ruiz said. “They made the difference.”

So far the district has spent \$5 million building the trails, parking lot, restrooms, retaining walls, bridges and culverts. Roughly one-third of the property, about 500 acres of redwood forest — an area similar in size to Muir Woods in Marin County — is opening Saturday. The other two sections will open in two phases: the former college site, with mountain bike access, between 2020 and 2026, and a final piece on the southeast side abutting Summit Road after 2026, when the district builds parking lots and trails. Total cost for all three phases: \$35 million.

The property is the third major new open space preserve the district has opened in the last two years using the voter-approved funding. In 2017, it opened the summit of Mount Umunhum, a former 1950s era Air Force radar station with sweeping views of San Francisco Bay and Monterey Bay, and La Honda Creek Open Space Preserve, a 6,142-acre expanse in rural San Mateo County filled with bucolic meadows and vistas of the Pacific Ocean.

The redwoods in the new preserve are considered some of the best anywhere in Santa Clara County.

“We’ve been looking at this property since the open space district was formed in the 1970s,” said Siemens. “This is like the Southern Muir Woods.”



Paul Rogers has covered a wide range of issues for The Mercury News since 1989, including water, oceans, energy, logging, parks, endangered species, toxics and climate change. He also works as managing editor of the Science team at KQED, the PBS and NPR station in San Francisco, and has taught science writing at UC Berkeley and UC Santa Cruz.

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