

Gwin Canyon to Sibley: North Oakland's Hidden Trails

Length: 7.6 miles

Time: 3½ to 4 hours

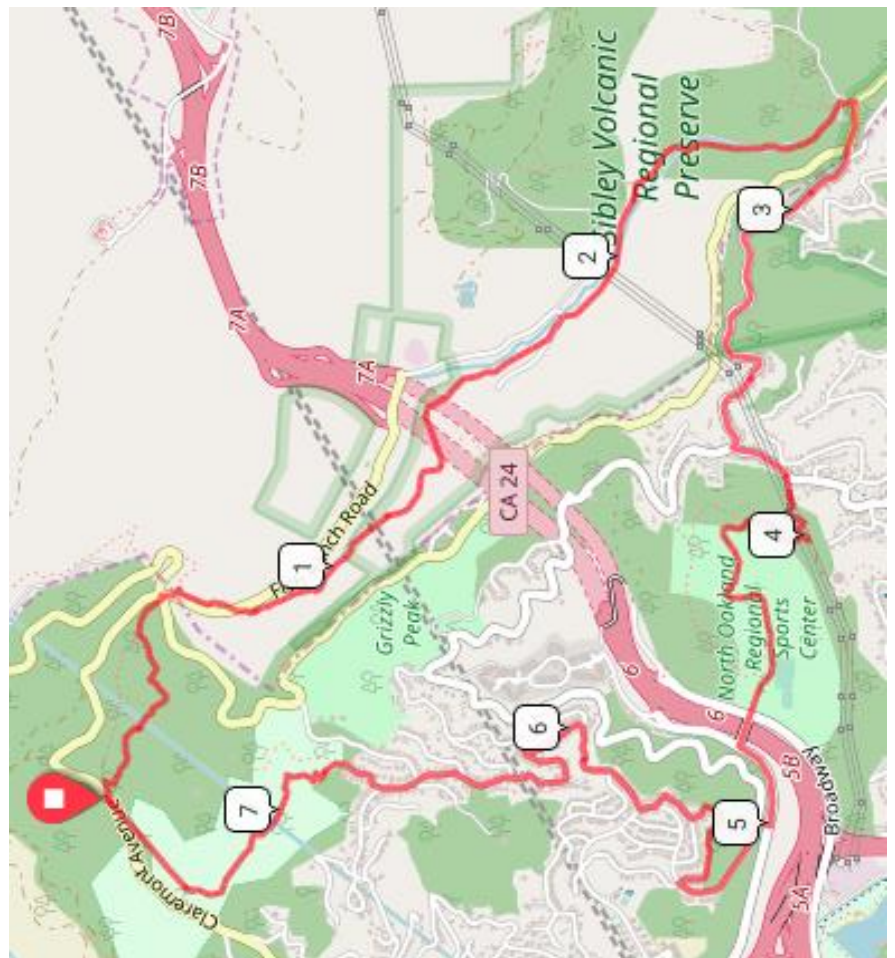
Difficulty: 4+

Elevation Gain: 1550 feet

Starting Point: Signpost 29 on Claremont Ave. (0.6 miles below Grizzly Peak, 1.2 miles above the Claremont Hotel)

Transportation:

The bus for this one is unfortunately a bit of a nuisance. AC transit lines 79, 80, 81 and E all stop on Tunnel Rd. at or just above Domingo. From there, you can walk up the north side of Tunnel about a mile to join the walk at the five mile mark, then do the loop as described, just starting and ending from that point. Parking is also available at the start on Claremont.



Overview:

The majority of this scenic walk is on quiet trails, many of them with fantastic views of Oakland and the Bay below you. Beginning from the busy Claremont Ave, you'll plunge immediately into the trees, passing through a small redwood grove on the little-used Willow Trail as you climb toward Sibley. From here, the walk picks up the Skyline Trail through Sibley, passing a car wreck and a huge variety of plants and trees. From the top of Sibley, you'll descend Skyline Blvd, then leave it for the quieter (and steeper!) wide, dirt Caldecott Fire Trail. Crossing over Highway 24, you'll then begin the climb back into the hills, first along Hiller, one of Oakland's steepest roads, and then on a small trail parallel to it. A mile on quiet, winding streets brings you to the entrance to Gwin Canyon, the trail through which was completed in 2017. You'll follow this narrow track as it winds through the canyon, returning you in another mile exactly to your starting point.

Directions and pictures:

Begin the walk at Signpost 29 (easily and unsurprisingly recognized by its large, black 29) on Claremont Ave, where there is a small, dirt parking strip. Head down the short flight of steps to the southwest, then turn left immediately to take the Willow Trail east. Climbing through

a small redwood grove, the little-used Willow Trail seems to be in no rush, at times ascending steeply, at others turning and heading downhill briefly as it winds through the trees.



Left: The shaded Willow Trail

After just under half a mile, the trail merges with the Summit House Trail, its northern neighbor, and ends suddenly at the intersection of Grizzly Peak, Claremont, and Fish Ranch Rd. Cross both ways, and proceed down the small hillside on a narrow trail which quickly joins the East Bay National Skyline Trail. Turn right to follow this thirty-mile trail toward Sibley, crossing Fish Ranch Rd. again and continuing through the trees on a narrow and gradual descent. After 0.8 miles, you'll hear the faint sounds of traffic underneath you, coming from the Caldecott Tunnel, which the trail crosses over. Talk about an easy way to cross a freeway! Continue on the Skyline Trail across Old Tunnel Rd, jogging left and beginning the climb back up toward the ridgeline. There's

a creek crossing, which could easily go unnoticed in summer, but in winter there is some good rock-hopping potential, and an opportunity (with which we have personal experience) to unintentionally get your feet very wet. The trail climbs more steeply after this, and you may notice the old car wreck off to the right in a creek bed. One wonders how a car ended up there, since it is nowhere near any present roads. By the state of it, it does not seem an advisable feat to replicate. At the top of the hill, 0.9 miles past Old Tunnel Rd, you'll reach Sibley Staging Area, a good water and bathroom stop.

Make a right at the Staging Area to exit the park through the parking lot, then another right on Skyline Blvd. Continue a mile north on Skyline, staying left at the intersection with Grizzly Peak. Though Skyline can be busy, there is a shoulder to walk on, the grade is a gentle downhill, and there are fabulous views of the Bay, Oakland, and Highway 24, which seems from this height to be populated by tiny toy cars, each speeding off into the Caldecott Tunnel to some

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unknown destination. Turn left down Broadway Terrace when you reach it, and, after one block, make a right down a steep and narrow trail opposite Pine Needle Dr. You'll have to step over a metal guard rail at the edge of the road before continuing down the hillside, to where the small trail joins a much wider and more traveled one. Turn right here, onto what we call the Caldecott Fire Trail, though it appears on maps only as "PG&E Access Rd." To your left, the trail dead-ends at a rather mysterious couch, an unusual appearance on a fire road. Assuming you do not want to visit a dead end for a nap on the sketchy couch, take the fire trail to the right, as it traverses a ridge, then stay left to head down the hill to Broadway, passing a large sports field at the bottom of the trail.

Right: The Caldecott Fire Trail

At the traffic light where you exit the sports field parking lot, continue straight, to cross over Highway 24 on a flyover, getting a much closer view of the traffic than you did on the previous crossing, in Sibley on the Skyline Trail. Turn left on Caldecott Ln, which, though slightly unpleasant, only lasts a block, then right on Tunnel Rd. and immediately left up Hiller.

Here, at the five-mile mark of the walk, you'll leave traffic behind as you head for the hills—in quite an extreme way. The four percent grade of Tunnel Rd. will be replaced by the twenty-three percent grade of Hiller Dr, one of Oakland's steepest roads, which will take you in minutes from the highway to the hills, into the fancy Hiller Highlands neighborhood. Make your first right off Hiller onto Hawk's Hill Ct, which quickly dead ends. Continue here down



a few steps onto a small neighborhood trail, which, though at points it is little more than a concrete water pipe, affords a spectacular view of the Bay and the city. The trail ends with some more steps back up to another dead-end road. Continue along this, then turn right on Starview Dr, and right again on Hiller, then right a third time on Charing Cross Rd. Perhaps at this point you are tiring of turning right, so turn left up Sherwick Dr. after two blocks, left again on Bristol, and, after it loops around past more good view-getting opportunities, left a third time up Norfolk

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Rd. Continue 0.4 miles to where Norfolk dead-ends, staying right at the intersection with Strathmoor. Stay slightly left here, to begin on the very narrow dirt trail into Gwin Canyon. This trail forks, and the main way stays left. The right trail dead-ends, so don't take this, especially since there is no couch. Winding through a sort of tree tunnel and into the canyon, your trail descends gradually, then turns eventually toward the right and begins to climb a bit, paralleling Claremont up the hill. At this point, the trail used to end (which would be a shame for you at this point in the walk), but the Claremont Canyon Conservancy extended it in 2017 to reach Claremont Ave. Take it this final stretch to where it hits the bottom of the Willow Trail, and climb the few steps to your left back to signpost 29 and the parking spot. Or, if you don't want to climb

the stairs, turn right on the Willow Trail and do the loop again!



Left: The view from the quiet unnamed trail off of Hiller