

## The Wildcat Loop

Length: 14.6 miles

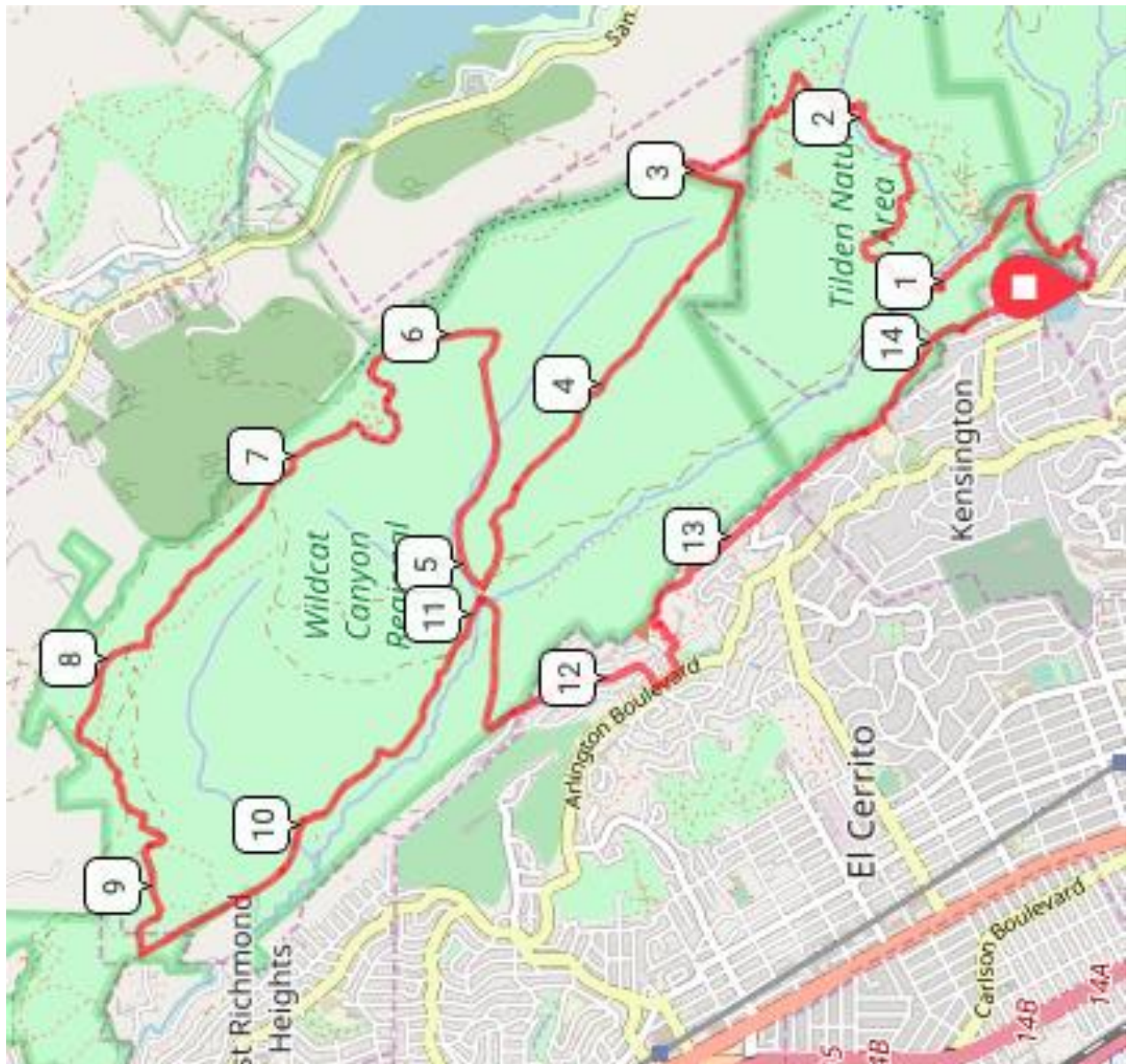
Time: 5-6 hours

Difficulty: 5

Elevation Gain: 2,500 feet

Starting Point: Spruce St. and Grizzly Peak Blvd.

Transportation: AC Transit Lines 65 and 67. Some parking is available on Spruce or side streets.



## Overview:

This strenuous walk traverses almost all of Wildcat Canyon Regional Park, crossing the park in all four directions. Almost entirely on trails, this walk includes open hillsides with grazing cows, high ridges with far reaching views, steep hills, creek fords, forested canyons, and the occasional residential neighborhood. This loop is somewhat similar to a longer version of our Havey Canyon and Surrounding Trails walk. You'll begin by descending into Tilden and then climbing to San Pablo Ridge, but waste no time heading back down into Wildcat Canyon. This gives you the opportunity to climb again through the trees to the ridge, then follow it north with spectacular views before descending once again on the Belgum Trail. You'll get a few-mile respite on the mostly flat, shady Wildcat Creek Trail before ascending out of the park to return to the start on trails and streets along the ridge above Arlington.



*Left: Coauthor Zeke Gerwein preparing to bike up one of the infamous hills on the San Pablo Ridge Trail (to be encountered in in the eighth mile of the walk)*

## Directions and pictures:

Begin at the reservoir at the top of Spruce St, where it intersects Grizzly Peak Blvd. From here, walk east onto Wildcat Canyon Rd. Once you reach a grassy turnout, turn left onto the Selby Trail, then make your first left onto the Memory Trail to begin the descent through the trees into Tilden. Cross Cañon Rd. and continue as the trail winds its way down. Stay left to continue onto the Upper Packrat Trail, which descends gently through the forest. Turn left on the Lower Packrat Trail at the bottom, walking along the western shore of Jewel Lake, which is often not much more than a large puddle. After crossing Wildcat Creek on a bridge, make a left on the Wildcat Creek Trail and the first right up the Jewel Lake Trail. Leaving Jewel Lake behind, the Jewel Lake Trail needs a new name, and continuing straight, it becomes the Sylvan Trail (do not turn right to continue on the Jewel Lake Trail). True to its name, the Sylvan Trail heads through

dense forest abundant with ferns, pine trees, and oaks as it climbs toward Wildcat Peak. At the intersection with the Peak Trail, though, continue right on the Sylvan Trail to descend gradually to Loop Road. Make a left, then another left shortly after to climb the thickly forested Laurel

Canyon Trail, which runs from just after the turnoff for Laurel Canyon Road. The trail winds its way upwards, with various small creek crossing. Stay left where it forks with itself to climb up to Laurel Canyon Road, then make a right and continue upwards a short way before turning left again, up a narrow shortcut trail to the foot of Wildcat Peak. Make a right at the top of the trail, then an immediate left onto the paved Nimitz Way, which is mostly flat and offers excellent views both west into the canyon and east down to the San Pablo Reservoir and El Sobrante. Pretty soon, you'll enter Wildcat Canyon Regional Park, the northernmost in a chain of parks that reaches the length of the East Bay Hills from Castro Valley to Richmond. (The East Bay National Skyline Trail follows the ridge through these parks. From north to south they are: Chabot, Redwood, Huckleberry, Sibley, EBMUD land, Tilden, and Wildcat.)

Soon after crossing into Wildcat Canyon, turn left up the gravel Conlon Trail, steeply climbing to the crest of San Pablo Ridge (for a shortcut alternate route, continue on Nimitz Way for 1.8 miles, rejoining the route at Nimitz Way and Havey Canyon Trail. This alternate cuts 3 miles off of the walk). Upon reaching the ridge, the Conlon Trail briefly follows it northward



before plunging west into the canyon. After a mile and a half of downhill on the sunny Conlon Trail, you'll stay left where the trail forks to reach the bottom of the canyon at the Wildcat Creek Trail. Make a right to descend one more hill to the intersection with the Havey Canyon Trail. If you're feeling tired here, there's an option to turn this walk into two separate loops.

*Left: The bottom of the dry Conlon Trail with views up toward the ridge and the sky*

To complete the southern loop, simply turn left up the Rifle Range Trail at the bottom of the hill and meet up with the main route there (skipping two paragraphs). Another day, you could come back for the northern loop, which starts at Arlington and Rifle Range, follows Rifle Range

Rd. and the Rifle Range Trail to the Wildcat Creek Trail, then turns right to meet the main route at the Havey Canyon Trail. Either loop is about 6 miles shorter than the main route.

Assuming you're up for the challenge of the entire walk, turn right onto the Havey Canyon Trail part way down the steep hill on the Wildcat Creek Trail and leave the open hills for the shaded forest surrounding Havey Creek. The trail is singletrack and covered in scattered leaves. It is a moderately popular route for mountain bikers, so stay alert as you climb. You'll cross the creek on a bridge (new as of 2017) then continue to climb, eventually emerging into an open meadow where the trail levels and cows graze freely. At the end of the 1.5-mile trail, turn left onto Nimitz Way to climb its final hill (nothing compared to what you have just done), then continue straight where the pavement ends onto the dirt San Pablo Ridge Trail. The view north and east from here is superb, reaching out over Briones, El Sobrante, Hercules, and the San Pablo Bay.

You'll pass through a metal gate, intended to contain the wandering cows, and continue along the dirt San Pablo Ridge Trail, climbing and descending small—and not-so-small—hills and admiring the stupendous view, which now reaches west to Richmond and Mount Tamalpais. Soon you'll reach two forks in quick succession. Take the left fork at first and the right fork next to stay on the San Pablo Ridge Trail. The trail continues to roll over many hills along the panoramic ridge. Stay right at future trail junctions to continue on the Ridge Trail, which you'll follow for a total of 1.5 miles. With a final *very* steep plunge, which some people prefer to slide rather than walk down, the trail reaches a junction with the Belgum Trail. Turn left on Belgum, which climbs gradually over grassy hills. Stay on Belgum past the intersections with the Clark-Boas Trail and the Monte Creste Trail, both of which make nice alternate hikes. You'll begin to descend steeply, reaching a junction with the paved end of the Wildcat Creek Trail one mile after turning onto Belgum.

*Right: The view from the Belgum descent*

Turn left here, walking along this former road, whose pavement now seems out of place in the midst of the park. After 1.8 miles of relatively gentle walking, much of it on dirt, you'll reach the



junction with the Rifle Range Trail. Turn right to climb steeply out of Wildcat Canyon to the western ridgeline at El Cerrito. At the end of the 0.6-mile, gravelly Rifle Range Trail continue south on the paved Rifle Range Rd. another half mile to Arlington Avenue (the start and end of the shorter northern loop we suggested earlier as alternate). Turn left on Arlington and immediately left again on Thors Bay Rd. Turn right shortly after onto James Place and follow the dirt trail to your left, which climbs toward the ridge. From the top, you'll have expansive views east to Wildcat Canyon and San Pablo Ridge, where you can picture your previous self, still full of energy, just setting out on the walk. After summiting, the trail begins to go gradually downhill. Turn left onto a narrower side trail, then continue south onto Ivy Court where the trail ends. Stay right onto Leneve Pl, then jog left on Terrace and continue south on Kensington Rd. Continue straight onto Kensington Ct. after a long block, and where this street dead-ends, continue down a driveway and south onto Ye Olde School Trail, which descends to Kensington Hilltop School (perhaps known alternately as "Ye Olde" School), then climbs gradually through the trees on padded ground along the rim of the canyon. Stay left at all forks to follow the main trail to where it ends at Grizzly Peak Boulevard and Kenyon Ave. Continue south onto Grizzly Peak, and two blocks will return you to your starting point, having successfully completed this epic walk.