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JOURNEYS

JOURNEYS; Ah, the Pastoral Beauty of Oakland (Wait, Did You Say Oakland?)

By PATRICIA LEIGH BROWN

THERE is the Oakland of the popular imagination: the home of ferocious silver-helmeted football players and out-of-control fans; the Oakland with the high murder rate, the disintegrating public schools and the balding, once-spacy Zen mayor who lives in a loft. But there is a secret Oakland, a wild Oakland, an Oakland that truly lives up to its name. For those of us who live in this California city of 400,000 people, the proximity to miles of wild, even remote country within a 15-minute drive of downtown is the thing that makes Oakland life miraculously different from life in, say, Houston, New York or Chicago. Utterly devoid of cachet -- unlike nearby San Francisco or Marin County or even Berkeley -- the Oakland wilderness is un-touristed, known only to those seeking solace and silence and the clarity that natural places can bring.

The other week, feeling the need for refuge from Accuweather forecasts of Iraqi sandstorms and a tragedy involving a young friend, I set out for the wilderness of Oakland, a drive that took no more than 10 minutes.

The wilderness smells good. If I were ever to look back on my life in the Bay Area (where I have lived for three years), the thing I would miss most might be the smell. The heady California aroma of earth, pine, eucalyptus and wild sage is in full glory in Redwood Regional Park, especially at dusk or after a rain, when the scents of nature's Chanel No. 5 unfurl. Situated in the Oakland hills and covering 2,074 acres, Redwood is one of about 60 parks and preserves in the East Bay Regional Park District, which is spread out over two counties. The public park agency was founded in 1934, during the middle of the Depression, to preserve the Oakland-Berkeley hills. Parts of Redwood are so quiet that it is possible to hear only a stream. When Europeans first saw these hills in the 1700's, the land that is now Redwood was populated by vast herds of prong-horned antelope, bald eagles and grizzlies fishing for coho and steelhead in pristine creeks. (A historic marker beside Redwood Creek commemorates the christening of the rainbow trout species there in the 19th century.)

But these groves of redwoods are the tree equivalents of taciturn teenagers, centuries away from their full maturity. Their ancestors towered over the hills, so tall that ships entering San Francisco Bay before the days of lighthouses and buoys used trees to help navigate treacherous rocks and

shoals. The dense ancient forests were first cut in the mid 19th century, then logged again to rebuild San Francisco after the 1906 earthquake. Today, when one walks through the trees' enveloping embrace, their tortured history melts away. The Tres Sendas trail, an old logging road, meanders through cliffs lush with cascading sword ferns and the occasional hemlock.

Dead leaves and needles form a soft nest for the feet. The late environmentalist David Brower, who founded Friends of the Earth and who grew up in Berkeley, used to guide his mother, Mary, who had lost her senses of sight and smell, through these forests, honing his powerful sense of observation. "In the East Bay," observed Malcolm Margolin, a Berkeley naturalist, author and publisher who arrived from Boston in 1968 in a Volkswagen van with flowered curtains, "nature is integrated with being a citizen."

In contrast to Redwood, where you are cosseted in forest glades, Sibley Volcanic Regional Preserve feels like Scotland, only instead of heather there are pointillist hillsides of blue lupine and California poppies (in full bloom until early May). The 660-acre preserve has the nerdy distinction of being a 10-million-year-old geological nirvana. Long the province of generations of University of California, Berkeley, geology students, Sibley is essentially an extinct volcano tipped on its side. Years of quarrying have revealed old lava flows, fault lines, vents, cinder piles and rock folded, tilted, crumpled and pummeled by millions of years of earthquakes.

While moonlike basalt sets geologists' hearts atwitter, what I love about Sibley is its openness, the big sky animated by wind. Despite human incursions like power lines and radio towers, Sibley feels wild and mysterious, especially on foggy mornings. Some trails seem to inspire solitude and introspection, but Sibley's wide-open landscape encourages perspective, taking a long view of things. Sometimes that view is literal: on an unusually clear morning recently, I was astonished to see the snow-capped Sierras, more than 200 miles away.

Among young hikers, Sibley is best known for its set of labyrinths that children are convinced were built by space aliens (the largest was built by the local artist Alex Champion 15 years ago). Circular paths of rocks and dirt culminate in a makeshift shrine at the center where the offerings left by visitors change constantly (some months there are love letters; this month, plastic Easter eggs).

In moments of inner turbulence, the sight of two hawks courting can guide the spirit to smoother air. The other day, Sharol Nelson-Embry, the supervising naturalist for the park district, and I stood transfixed as a male red-tailed hawk, talons soulfully dangling, deftly romanced a female before they locked talons and tumble through the air together. Even hawks love foreplay.

At the nearby 235-acre Huckleberry Botanical Preserve, bird song resounds in stereo. Blessed with a climate of its own and home to numerous uncommon plant species, Huckleberry features a narrow trail that winds its way through thickets of live oak and bay laurel, making the place feel like a fairy habitat. Spring arrives at Christmastime, and this month, heartbreakingly delicate flowers are out in Easter profusion: blue forget-me-nots, flowering currants with dangling pink blooms and bell-like huckleberry blossoms. Even the local criminal, poison oak, is outfitted in a

come-hither sheen.

Around the city -- a strange moniker -- residents are banding together to rescue and restore dozens of local Huckleberrys tucked away in unlikely neighborhoods with hidden canyons and gnarled roads. Among them is Butters Canyon, where neighbors have recently formed a land trust to preserve a deep green canyon rimmed with live oaks, their long sinuous branches as expressive as a ballerina's port de bras.

Tina Fort Williams, a massage therapist for horses, can often be spotted leading her horse Gracie up the narrow, steep winding road. Her neighbors include Amy Evans McClure, a sculptor, and her husband, the Beat poet Michael McClure, who, to his chagrin, may be best known for co-writing "Oh Lord, Won't You Buy Me a Mercedes Benz." He often composes haikus inspired by the Oakland wilderness, like this from his collection "Rain Mirror" (New Directions, 2000):

The Butterfly

In

Sunlight

!

Ah

Light shows

At

The

Fillmore.

Early one recent Sunday, I set out for Arrowhead Marsh near the Oakland Airport with Mr. Margolin as my guide. Like other swatches of wilderness on the industrial margins -- Jamaica Bay Wildlife Refuge near Kennedy Airport in New York City springs to mind -- the charm of Arrowhead, part of the Martin Luther King Jr. Regional Shoreline, lies in the contrasts: the delicacy of the marsh, a place at once liquid and solid, framed by the seemingly indestructible landscape of airplanes, Federal Express trucks and nondescript office parks. Like many urban fringes, the marsh feels slightly melancholy, which may explain why it seems conducive to truthful conversation.

Unlike much of the bay around the port of Oakland, which has been filled, dredged and deepened for shipping, Arrowhead looks the way the bay looked 150 years ago, when the demarcation between land and bay was ambiguous. In his 1974 book "East Bay Out," Mr. Margolin wrote, "Our current civilization hates indeterminate states and unclear boundaries; it prefers straight lines and

sharp distinctions."

The mere presence of marshes is cause for hope: the adjoining marsh, once dubbed Mount Trashmore, has been recently restored after a 10-year legal battle between environmental groups and the Port of Oakland. We sat on a concrete dock at low tide for what seemed like hours, watching a California clapper rail, an endangered species, poke its long beak in the mud. Soon it became aware of our presence and disappeared behind the cordgrass, a winged celebrity fleeing the paparazzi.

I soaked it all in, gaining strength from the balm of wildness as we followed the trail through the grasses. In troubled times and in the midst of chaos, there is perhaps nothing more comforting than a path.

Photos: URBAN PARADISE -- The poppies are in bloom at Sibley Volcanic Preserve, a vast stretch of wilderness partly within the city of Oakland, Calif.; AT BAY'S EDGE -- 50-acre Arrowhead Marsh. (Photographs by Kim Kulish for The New York Times)(pg. F1); TIMELESS -- Sibley Preserve is a 10-million-year-old geological nirvana.; ANOTHER AIRPORT, OF A KIND -- American avocets at Arrowhead Marsh, in San Leandro Bay, near Oakland International Airport. (Photographs by Kim Kulish for The New York Times)(pg. F3) Map of California highlighting Oakland and surrounding areas. (pg. F3)