

## Mt. Tamalpais State Park



## East Peak: Plank Walk Trail



*Experience miraculous views of Marin County and get to know a little more about the natural life and history of Mt. Tamalpais!*

Welcome to the Mt. Tamalpais Plank Walk located on the East Peak!

**Start:** The Plank Walk Trail sign to the left of the restrooms.

**Distance:** .3 mi

**Difficulty:** Moderate (rocky terrain)

As you walk across the parking lot towards the Plank Walk trailhead, notice the area to the right of the restrooms. This was the location of the historical **Tavern of**



Tavern and engine. Photo by Mabel Fuller around 1900, courtesy of Joseph A. Baird Jr.

**Tamalpais.** This Tavern consisted of a restaurant, hotel and dance pavilion, a first class destination for visitors. Before 1896, the primary way to get to East Peak was by hiking. From 1896 to 1930, however, this mountain top was served by the Mill Valley and **Mt. Tamalpais**

**Scenic Railway**, renamed the **Mt. Tamalpais and Muir Woods Railway** in 1913. "The Crookedest Railroad in the World"



began in Mill Valley, and climbed 8.2 miles through 281 turns in just under an hour.

As you begin your ascend up the peak, notice the beautiful plant life that surrounds you. Virtually all the shrub growth on the hillside is **chaparral**. This plant community is made up of several small-leafed drought-resistant plants. Here, manzanita is dominant. **Manzanita** is a red barked shrub with small, round green

leaves. The bloom is white to pink and results normally in a small fruit resembling a tiny apple. The **madrone** tree is also common. This is an evergreen tree with distinctive red bark similar to the Manzanita with large green, waxy leaves. These trees shed their outer layer of bark to protect against pathogens.

**Monkey flower**, a medium-size plant with yellow-orange flowers and **chamise**, a green shrub with tiny leaves, are also very common on the mountain. Take a look up in the sky! If you see soaring birds, they are likely to be **turkey vultures**.



**Chamise**

As you continue the Plank Walk, to the left, you will see three small, man-made lakes in the distance: **Bon Tempe, Alpine Lake, and Lagunitas Lake**. These and four other lakes provide 65-75% of MMWD's water resources, filled by runoff from its 21,000-acre watershed. Lagunitas creek, a 20 mile stream, stretches through this land and feeds into the reservoirs, supplying water and providing a rich habitat for endangered Coho salmon.

As you ascend toward the Gardiner Lookout, you will begin to see miraculous views of the entire county. When coming up the rocky terrain on the Eastern Slope of the mountain, look toward your left and you will see the **Richmond Bridge** above the San Pablo Bay. Continue to look straight out beyond the bridge and you will see **Mt. Diablo**, a peak of 3,849 feet and 35 miles away. If the air is very

clear, such as after a storm, you might get a glimpse of the snow-capped Sierras, 140 miles to the east. On this side of the mountain, you will also notice **Eldridge grade**, a fire road that leads up to East Peak, commonly used by mountain bikers.

As you continue along the rocky terrain, you will notice many boulders and rock formations. Mt. Tamalpais, like most of the Bay Area, is part of the **Franciscan Assemblage**, a mélange of rocks scraped off the top of a subducting (diving) Pacific Plate. The exposed hard rock around the peak is an unusual metamorphic rock extremely resistant to weathering. It is the only place on the mountain where this precise type of rock occurs. **Rock climbing** on East Peak became extremely popular in 1934 and has said to be some of the best climbing in Marin County, suitable for beginners *and* advanced climbers.

By now, you are very close to the top of East Peak and most likely very curious about the wood and stone structure standing before you. This is **Gardiner Lookout!**

East Peak's Gardiner Lookout affords arguably the best view of the bay area in Marin County. Few know that the current lookout was not the first attempt at an observatory at the peak. In **1901**, William Randolph Hearst's San Francisco Examiner built the first lookout, which was called the "Marine Exchange



The Marine Exchange Observatory . 1901 Martin/Jennings Collection.

Observatory". It was initially constructed as a lookout for reporting incoming ships in the San Francisco Bay.

Due to the use of wireless ship-to-shore radio, the lookout was rendered obsolete and then abandoned in 1919. The same lookout was employed in 1921 by the **Tamalpais Forest Fire District** as a fire lookout for the region.

The Gardiner Fire lookout, which stands before you today, was built in 1936 by the Civilian Conservation Corps to replace the old lookout. It was constructed from local materials which were hauled to the peak using a 1'000 foot long aerial tramway. The lookout was dedicated to **Edwin B. Gardiner** in 1937, the first Chief Warden of the Tamalpais Forest Fire District. The lookout is equipped with electricity, hot and cold water, telephone, and, at the time, was acclaimed the "Deluxe lookout station of California".



New Lookout. 1936. Courtesy: Pete Martin

Gardiner Lookout has a visibility of 270 degrees and was designed to withstand winds in excess of 115 miles an hour. East peak is **2,571 feet above sea level**, and the lookout floor level is 2,586 feet above sea level. During the high fire season, the fire tower is staffed 24 hours with volunteers. The volunteers use high-powered binoculars to scan the bay area for fires, and relay any fire sightings to Marin County fire headquarters. If you are interested in staffing the lookout, contact the Marin County Fire Department for details.

In the southerly direction, you can see San Francisco and the San Francisco Bay, the **Marin Headlands, Alcatraz Island, the Bay Bridge, Tiburon Peninsula, Angel Island**, and the top of the **Golden Gate Bridge**. Toward the west, the Pacific Ocean is shining bright and on a clear day, the **Farallone Islands** are visible. On the horizon, note two parallel ridges running north-south direction. The far one is Inverness Ridge in **Point Reyes National Seashore**; the near one is **Bolinas Ridge**. Between the two ridges lies the **San Andreas Fault**. The Pacific Plate to the West of the fault is apparently no longer diving but is moving to the northwest at a rate of nearly two inches per year.

We hope you've enjoyed your self-guided tour. Come back soon for another look – the flora is ever changing. You may keep this guide if you would like. If not, please return it so that others may use it.

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415-388-2070

[www.parks.ca.gov/mttam](http://www.parks.ca.gov/mttam)

This brochure was developed with the help of a nonprofit volunteer group that helps park visitors explore and enjoy Mt. Tamalpais. For more information, please visit [www.friendsofmontam.org](http://www.friendsofmontam.org) or call 415.258.2410

