Discover Black Diamond

Year opened: 1976
Acreage: 8,349
Highlights: Hiking, biking, horseback riding; mining museum and mine tours; birdwatching; wildflowers.

Did you know? From 1855 until 1949, nearly 4 million tons of coal and 1.8 million tons of sand were extracted from the mines.

NATIVE AMERICANS Three Bay Miwok-speaking tribes inhabited parts of today’s Black Diamond Mines: Ompin (southern), Volvon (northwest) and Julpum (northeast). With the arrival of Spanish, Mexican, and American settlers after 1722, the Bay Miwok way of life was rapidly transformed. However, in spite of pressure to the contrary, many of them continue to work for the preservation of the cultural landscapes and sites.

COAL MINING From the 1850s to the early 1900s, the coal mining towns of Nortonville, Somersville, Stewartville, West Hartley, and Judsonville thrived in the Black Diamond area. Nearly 4 million tons of coal (“black diamonds”) were mined by over 900 miners, some as young as 8 years old. At the peak of operations the coalfield was reported to have been the population center of Contra Costa County. By the time operations ceased due to rising production costs and new energy sources, much of California’s economy had been transformed from a rural to an industrial base.

SAND MINING In the 1920s underground sand mining began near the deserted Nortonville and Somersville townsites. The Somersville mine supplied sand used by the Hazel-Atlas Glass Company in Oakland, while the Nortonville mine supplied the Columbia Steel Works in Pittsburg with foundry sand. Competition from Belgian glass sand and the closing of the steel foundry ended the sand mining by the late 1940s.

RANCHING Until the discovery of coal, cattle ranching was the major industry in this area. After the mines closed, some miners turned to ranching. Abandoned buildings became barns, railroad ties were used as fence posts, and boilers were converted into water troughs. Descendants of original mining families still graze cattle in the Preserve.

A REGIONAL PRESERVE The Park District began acquiring land for this Preserve in 1973. Today, most of the former mining district lies within the Preserve. The area is an ideal location for hiking, picnicking, and observing nature. Naturalists conduct a variety of programs related to the Preserve’s natural and historic resources. The Sidney Flat and Greathouse visitor centers will provide more information, and house photographs, videos, displays, and artifacts from the parkland’s nineteenth- and twentieth-century past.

VEGETATION The Preserve’s 60+ miles of trails traverse areas of grassland, foothill woodland, mixed evergreen forest, chaparral, stream vegetation, and exotic plantings. Notable among the latter are several tree species introduced by the coal miners, including black locust, pepper tree, almond, eucalyptus, and tree of heaven.

Black Diamond is noted as the northernmost location of Coulter pine, black sage, desert olive, and dudleya. In addition, several species that are restricted to the Mount Diablo area occur here, including the Mount Diablo globe lily, Mount Diablo helianthella, and Mount Diablo manzanilla. The hills are covered with stunning springtime wildflower displays.

WILDLIFE Observant hikers may see the tracks of raccoons, skunks, opossums, rabbits, and deer. Mountain lions, bobcats, foxes, and coyotes are occasionally spotted, while birds of prey soar overhead. Over 100 species of birds have been observed, from the meadowlark to the rare golden eagle. Several rare animal species have been found here, including the white-tailed kite, the Alameda striped racer, the red-legged frog, and the California tiger salamander.

ROSE HILL CEMETERY A historic cemetery serves as a monument to the lives of the former residents. Although more than 10 nationalities resided in the mining area, Rose Hill was a Protestant cemetery that served as the burial ground for many of the Welsh residents. Buried here are children who died in epidemics, women who died in childbirth, and men who died in mining disasters.

WON’T YOU HELP US? Over the years, vandalism has taken its toll on the cemetery, which the Park District is attempting to restore. If you have information concerning people buried here, or the locations of missing gravestones, please call the Black Diamond office at 1-888-EBPARKS, option 3, ext. 4506.