



2018 Winner

Mount Umunhum

Submitted by: Midpeninsula Regional Open Space District

Mount Umunhum, located within the 18,000 acre Sierra Azul Open Space Preserve in Santa Clara County, is one of the highest peaks in the Santa Cruz mountain range at 3,486 feet. One of the tallest, most prominent peaks in the San Francisco Bay Area, Mount Umunhum is recognizable throughout the region by the concrete tower on its summit. From its spectacular summit, visitors can experience 360-degree views from the Pacific to the Sierra Nevada! This new Open Space destination also offers a rich nature experience that is accessible to visitors of all abilities, as well as unique opportunities to:

- Learn about Mount Umunhum's significance to the Native American community, and the opportunity to connect to the mountain at the summit Ceremonial Space;
- Discover the Radar Tower, once a key part of the west coast's missile defense system, up close;
- Find a favorite spot in Silicon Valley from the Summit Shelter and Viewpoint;
- Ascend to the peak on one of the mountain's many accessible paths and enjoy the East Summit Viewpoint; and
- Watch as the mountain's incredible biodiversity, from tiny rock garden flowers to towering grey pines, recovers on the restored landscape.

The Midpeninsula Regional Open Space District (Midpen) purchased the mountaintop from the federal government in 1986, and restored and opened Mount Umunhum, inviting the public to visit this prominent mountain for the first time in centuries with a historic grand opening in September 2017. Nearly 1,200 community members attended these grand opening events.



Midpen sees the opening of Mount Umunhum as a gift to the people of the San Francisco Bay Area for generations to come. The mountain gives them not only new views and perspectives on

their community, but also opportunities to gather and make personal connections to nature and culture. Anyone can drive to the summit of Mount Umunhum and easily access spaces for solitude and quiet contemplation in the fresh air thousands of feet above the hustle and bustle of Silicon Valley. The new trails provide opportunities for exploration to everyone from ADA-accessible paths at the summit to gently sloping singletrack. Hikers, bicyclists and equestrians can traverse the mountain's diverse habitats and beyond through regional trail connections.

In the late 1950s, the United States government procured Mount Umunhum to build the Almaden Air Force Station. The five-story concrete tower at the summit was once the base for a large radar dish that was part of a network of radar stations used to keep watch over the United States airspace during the Cold War. The Almaden Air Force Station permanently closed in 1980 when satellite technology made the radar station here obsolete.

In 1986, Midpen acquired the property, and, in 2009, federal funding allowed for the deconstruction of about 80 Air Force Station buildings. Nearly all of the 13,680 tons of concrete, asphalt, wood and other materials were recycled or reused. Midpen also removed 3,000 cubic yards of hazardous materials from the site. The radar tower remains at the summit as point of significant visual and historic interest to the public.

In 2014, the passage of Measure AA provided approximately \$15.8 million to support improvements to the summit, including road and trail improvements, parking areas, weather shelters and other trail amenities. The Bay Area Ridge Trail Council and the California Coastal Conservancy worked in partnership with Midpen, and provided \$1 million dollars in funding toward public access improvements.



As much as possible, the summit has been restored to its original contours. Expansive views of the Pacific Ocean, Midpen preserves, the regional greenbelt, Mount Hamilton, Loma Prieta, ancient redwoods, Santa Cruz and even the Monterey Peninsula can be seen on a clear day. Visitors can bike, hike or horseback ride up the mountain using the Mount Umunhum trail, or drive up the newly reconstructed road to the summit. Highlights of Summit design features include:

- Ceremonial Circle: honoring the site's Native American history and the return of local tribes to the mountain, this is a place to reflect on and renew connections with nature.

- Radar tower: The radar tower was part of a system of 23 similar radar stations in California, and one of hundreds across the country that fed radar signals into the Semi-Automatic Ground Environment (SAGE) defense system. This tower was in operation as part of the Almaden Air Force Station from 1957 to 1980.
- Summit Shelter and Viewpoint: A shaded area for visitors to rest. A cantilevered deck extends over the hillside, providing an amazing vantage point of the Santa Clara Valley. Inside, interpretive panels highlight the site's unique cultural, military and natural histories.
- East Summit Viewpoint: From here, the high point of Mount Umunhum, Mount Diablo, and Mount Tamalpais can be seen as well as the valley below.

Since the region's earliest records, this mountain has been called "Umunhum" which contains the root word for hummingbird in five different Ohlone languages. Mount Umunhum is often referred to as "the resting place of Hummingbird."

People have been drawn to Mount Umunhum for thousands of years, and new visitors have the opportunity to learn about its cultural history rich in stories about Native Californians and the Cold War, as well as its abundant natural history with a geology and diversity of plants and animals unique to the Santa Cruz Mountains.

The first people to visit Mount Umunhum thousands of years ago were the native people of California for whom this mountain was sacred. Their descendants requested a place where they could return to Mount Umunhum for the first time in nearly 200 years to pray and dance where they feel closer to their creator, just like their ancestors did. The ceremonial circle at the summit provides just such a place.

In December 2017, Midpen approved a cultural conservation easement granting the Amah Mutsun Tribal Band permanent rights to help steward Mount Umunhum's summit. The easement allows the tribe to perform hands-on indigenous plant management techniques and share centuries of cultural knowledge with the public through activities like traditional ceremonies. And they, along with Midpen, invite all people to visit this special place and find their own personal healing and meaningful connections.



Mount Umunhum's rocky, exposed summit experiences extreme weather. The high elevation and exposure means it can be baking hot or bitterly cold. Winds can reach 100 miles per hour, and it's not unusual to see snow in the winter or for up to ten inches of rain to fall in a single day. But as visitors will discover, the peak is surprisingly rich with life. After being restored to its

natural state, the mountain's community of plants and animals continue revealing themselves to the delight of staff and visitors.

The Mt Umunhum Trail, approximately 3.7 miles to the summit, passes through dense mixed chaparral scrub, Knobcone pine woodland, and Coastal Woodlands habitat. Most of the trail is enjoyed under the cool canopy of these trees. While adventuring on the trail, visitors will cross three steel bridges over Guadalupe Creek and its tributaries. Visitors can also stop at the Guadalupe Creek Overlook, a vista point that sits high on a serpentine rock outcrop and showcases the Santa Clara and Coyote Valleys, with views of the Diablo Range including Mount Diablo and Mount Hamilton. Eventually the trail emerges near the top onto steep terrain dominated by cliffs and rocky outcrops. This new trail is now the highest point of the Bay Area Ridge Trail.

The mountain's namesake hummingbirds buzz around the summit all year. A pair of nesting golden eagles return annually, and raptors often soar above the peak. Whiptail lizards dart across the paths while dragonflies and hilltopping butterflies perform colorful aerial dances. Purple martins, thought to no longer nest in Santa Clara County, were found to have been breeding for decades atop Mount Umunhum. Wildlife cameras near the mountain's many springs have revealed bobcats, gray foxes, mountain lions and more.

Mount Umunhum's plant community includes rare and endemic species adapted to survive the summit's harsh conditions and nutrient-poor serpentine soil. These include colorful Venus thistle, scarlet beardtongue and canyon liveforever. Midpen worked with local native plant nurseries to carefully propagate about 1,000 native plants that were installed at the summit by hundreds of volunteers.

Mount Umunhum is a wonderful place for visitors to acquire a new awareness of how their urban communities are connected to adjacent open spaces. Carefully placed trails, bridges, viewpoints and interpretive information encourage visitors to explore new natural areas and contemplate the role of open space in their lives.