

Creek Viewing in the Lower Watershed

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2013

In the last two editions of Creek Chronicles I have written about some creek viewing locations in the middle and upper reaches of the Corte Madera Creek watershed. This piece describes some choice locations in the remaining portions of the watershed: primarily Larkspur Creek, tidal salt marshes, and the bay shore. The lower boundaries of the watershed are less distinct than in the uplands, but following the bay shore embraced by the peninsulas on either side of the creek mouth takes us from Point San Quentin all the way to Raccoon Strait between Tiburon and Angel Island.

Benoit Mandelbrot, a mathematician of the last century, in trying to explain fractals once asked, ‘How long exactly is this, our coast line?’ His point being that the closer you look, the longer it becomes. We have many miles of marsh margins and tidal channels along the shores, but most are extremely difficult to access or to move through.

However, there is a network of multi-use paths that broadly parallel this entire shoreline. These paths—for use by walkers, runners, and cyclists—provide a good frontage for peeking into adjacent natural communities. When you have some free time, get on your bike and try to connect some of the following points.



Hal Brown Park at Creekside, in a panoramic view from a path behind Marin Catholic High School. Photo by Gary Leo

1. The Ecology Study Area and Creekside Park

The upstream end of the tidal salt marshes, at the lower end of the concrete channel, offers a number of wild nooks to explore. Friends of Corte Madera Creek is working on two different restoration projects on the north side of the estuary. College of Marin’s Ecology Study Area is a peninsula between the creek and a tidal slough. An area of fill created with spoils from work on Corte Madera Creek in the 1960s has been replanted by Friends with native trees and vegetation after being overrun with eucalyptus and acacia.

A little farther east, Creekside Marsh borders the new playground at Hal Brown Park. From here one can get magnificent views of Mt. Tamalpais and into the marsh, and often hear clapper rails. The forms of tidal sloughs are maintained by the daily pulses of water that fill and scour their channels. At Creekside Marsh these flows are restricted by the aging culverts under the bike path. By increasing the culvert diameter there, as is being planned, the natural physical processes which support the native ecological communities will be restored.

2. Upper Larkspur Creek–Baltimore Canyon

Larkspur Creek is one of the larger tributaries to Corte Madera Creek although the confluence is in the estuary, and often overlooked. In the creek’s wild uplands, between Blithedale Ridge and King Mountain, one can hike along the banks as it winds down a canyon



Unseen by travelers on Highway 101 overhead, life on Corte Madera Creek unfolds as a slower pace. Here a tule-reed boat has an encounter with a mechanized crane during work on the flyovers in 1997. Photo by Charles Kennard

of redwoods. From the end of Madrone Avenue the trail upstream begins flat and forested, but then leads up steeply towards Dawn Falls and several connecting trails. The canyon stays quiet and cool in the summer, but come back in the winter to see the waterfalls in action.

3. Lower Larkspur Creek

The last half-mile of Larkspur Creek, where it becomes tidal and meets Corte Madera Creek, has a very different feel from Baltimore Canyon. A multi-use path follows the creek upstream of Doherty Drive, alongside a Friends habitat restoration project begun in 1996. A new housing development on the west side of the creek will include 85 residences and a new location for the town library. Downstream of the bridge is Piper Park with playing fields,

playgrounds, and a dock right at the confluence. Keep an eye out for river otters in this area!



Marta's Marsh in the early morning, at the southern end of the Corte Madera Creek estuary, with Mt. Tamalpais in the background. Photo by Charles Kennard

4. Redwood High School Marsh

Another good place to look for otters is on the other side of Redwood High School, where a series of flood control gates along Doherty Drive marks entrances to an 11-acre diked salt marsh. In the mid 1980s the marsh's channels were made larger in an attempt to improve circulation and fish habitat.

5. The Greenbrae Interchange and Public Boat Launch

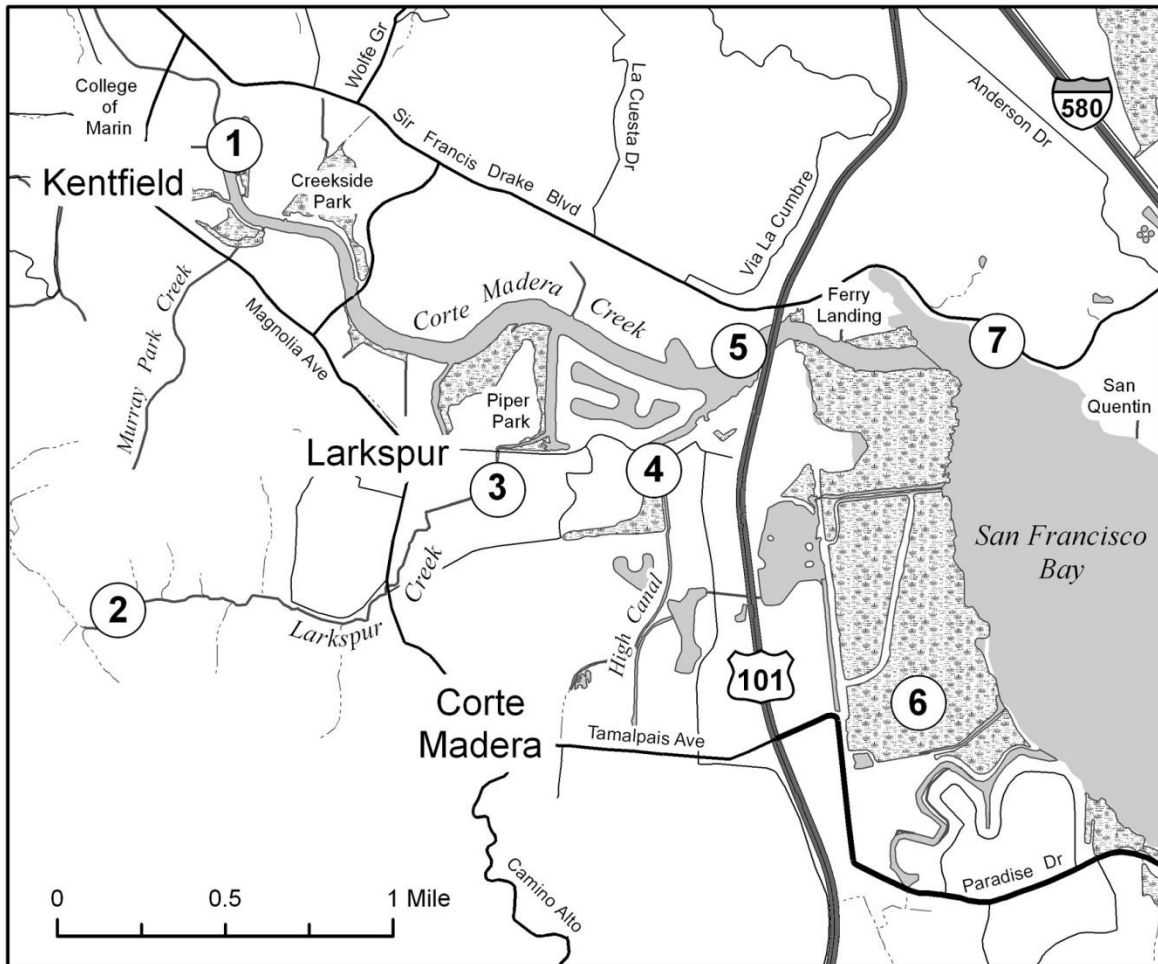
The Greenbrae Interchange—where the freeway crosses Corte Madera Creek—has been in the news recently because Caltrans released plans to reconfigure the fly-overs and ramps, but the area under the bridge is much more pleasant. A path following the water behind Bon Air Shopping Center is a great place to see black-necked stilts and American avocets. Next to the Marin Rowing Association boathouse is a small public dock for launching paddle boards and kayaks. Boating is a great way to view the watershed, and if you don't have a boat, rentals are available at the shop just before the Ferry Terminal.

6. Muzzi Marsh

The largest tidal wetland in the watershed is directly along the bay shore, east of The Village Shopping Center. Muzzi Marsh was restored to mitigate for the impacts of construction of the Larkspur Ferry terminal and channel dredging in the 1970s. Phyllis Faber has been conducting monitoring surveys of the channels since then and has observed the evolution of the channels as they come to equilibrium with the forces of tides and waves. Full vegetation of the marsh took approximately 25 years and continues to evolve with sediment deposition, which influences plant species distribution. A peninsula with a ring of trails extends north into the marsh from the end of Tamalpais Drive.

7. Remillard Park

The northern shoreline, along San Quentin Point, is rocky and exposed. The bike route ends at Larkspur's Remillard Park, at the east end of which is a place frequented by local windsurfers. If you walk along the shoreline at low tide, you might see black oystercatchers prying mussels off the rocks.



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