

**BIG SUR**  
**LAND TRUST**  
For the lands you love

# *Marks Ranch*

## **HIKING GUIDE**



*Marks Ranch is a nature preserve near Salinas that is reminiscent of John Steinbeck's Pastures of Heaven. Portions of Nisene Marks' original egg-production ranch are now part of Toro County Park. The areas of this historic property that burned during the River Fire in 2020 are continuing to recover.*

## Preserve Hours

Monday through Sunday: 8:00 am – 5:00 pm

## Directions to Marks Ranch

### ► From Monterey/Carmel:

Take **CA-1 North**.

Take **CA-68 East exit toward Salinas**. Continue on 68 for approximately **15 miles**. Take the **Portola Road exit** (towards Toro Park).

Go **straight at the stop sign**, then **veer left onto 117<sup>th</sup> Drive** (Toro Park entrance will be on your right).

**Continue on 117<sup>th</sup> Drive approximately 100 yards**. The entrance to Marks Ranch will be on your right.

*Please park in the dirt turn-out outside the main entrance. In order to protect the health of the tree, please avoid parking under it.*

### ► From Salinas:

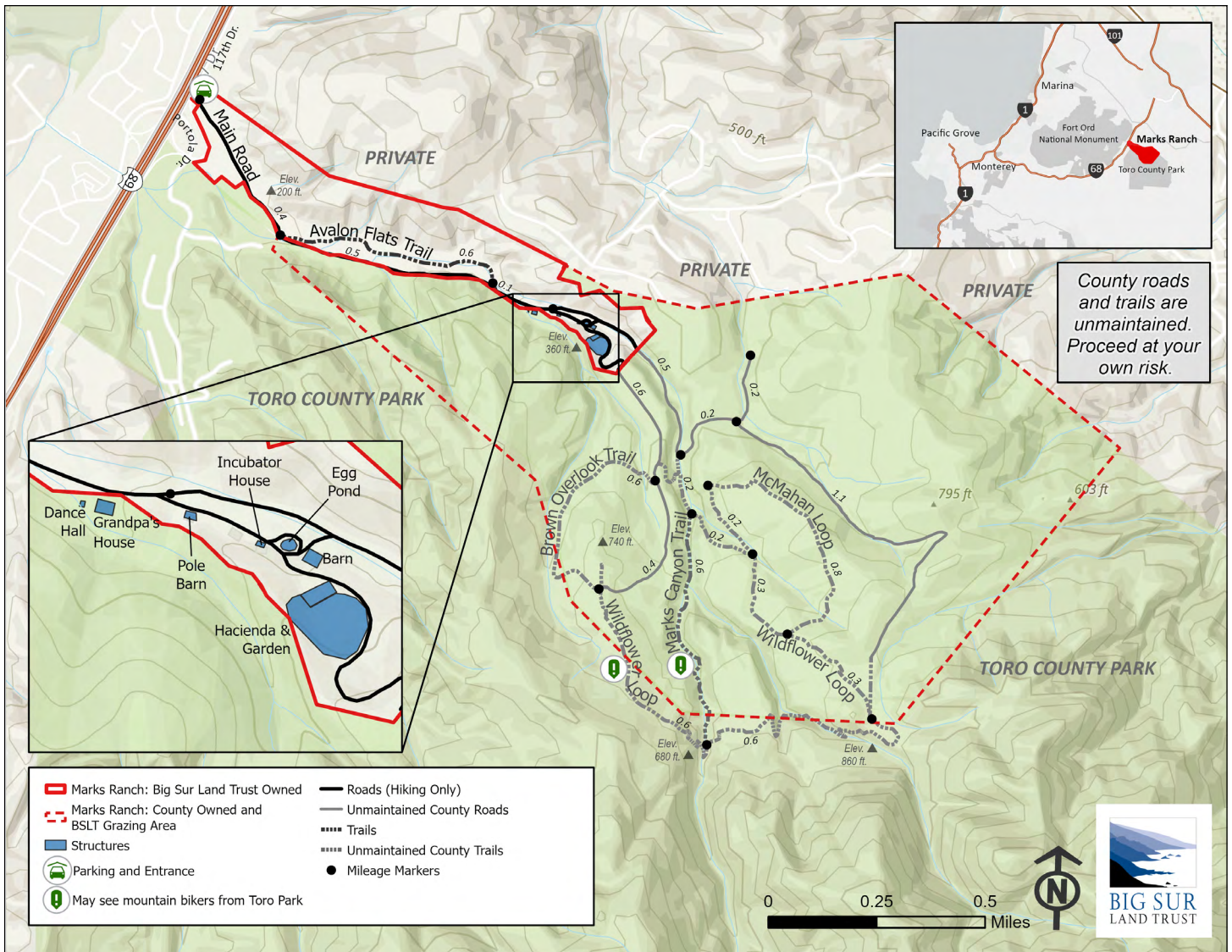
Take **CA-68 West** towards Monterey.

Take **Portola Road exit** (towards Toro Park). Follow the road to stop sign. Take a **right at the stop sign**.

Take a **left at the next stop sign** then **veer left onto 117<sup>th</sup> Drive** (Toro Park entrance will be on your right).

**Continue on 117<sup>th</sup> Drive approximately 100 yards**. The entrance to Marks Ranch will be on your right.

*Please park in the dirt turn-out outside the main entrance. In order to protect the health of the tree, please avoid parking under it.*



This map was created from a combination of information from various sources and is intended as a general representation only. The Big Sur Land Trust makes no representation or warranty as to the accuracy, completeness, and/or timeliness of the information represented and shall assume no liability for errors, omissions, or inaccuracies.

## Property Rules

Welcome! We invite you to:

- Enjoy this amazing place conserved and cared for by the generous donors and funders of Big Sur Land Trust.
- Experience all that nature has to offer, safely and respectfully.

In order to keep this beautiful place open and thriving, please follow these simple rules:

- No dogs allowed.
- No bikes allowed. Mountain bikes can be very damaging to the environment. This causes plant destruction, animal habitat disruption, and erosion.
- Drone flights are prohibited on Big Sur Land Trust properties.
- Leave no trace. Pack it in – pack it out. There are no garbage cans on the trails. Please dispose of waste (including dog waste) properly outside of the preserve.

## Please Report Trail Maintenance Issues

Please get in touch with us if you notice any of our trails have an issue that needs our attention. For example, if there is a tree down across a trail, repairs needed on signs or facilities, or anything else that may improve our guests' experience we appreciate you letting us know. Please email your observations to [hiking@bigsurlandtrust.org](mailto:hiking@bigsurlandtrust.org) with the subject **"Report Trail Maintenance,"** date, property, trail name, and nearest landmark.

## Hike Logistics

- There is a portalet next to the barn.

### Avalon Flats Trail

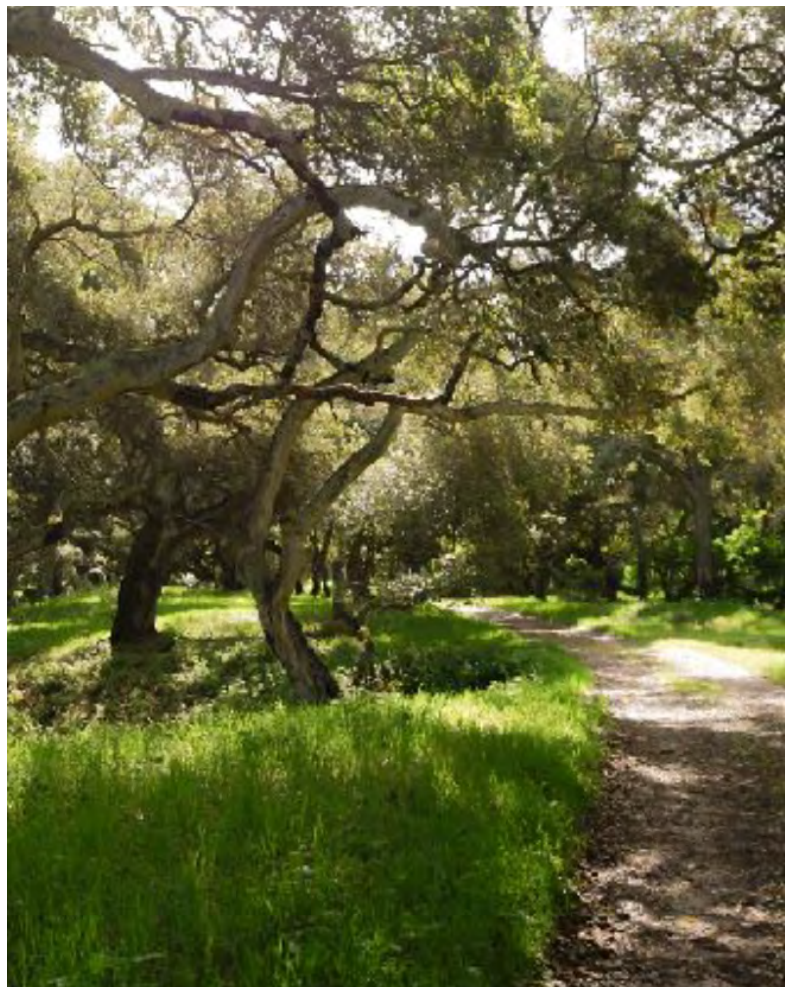
- Moderate

Avalon Flats Trail is a nearly 2-mile flat round-trip winding through pastoral oak woodlands and meadows. A stroll through this wildlife corridor in Spring will immerse you in wildflowers!

## History

Salinas Valley pioneers, Benjamin and Nisene (pronounced Niss-een) Marks, settled in the area in 1890 after purchasing Rancho El Toro. Together with their four children—Alice, Agnes, Andrew, and Herman—the Marks family built a small house and intended to farm the land. However, Benjamin passed away in 1893, shortly after the family settled Rancho El Toro, leaving 33-year-old Nisene with small children and no farming operation in place.

According to family friends, Nisene found a pamphlet published by the U.S.D.A that touted the benefits of raising chickens. Potential profits of \$1 per chicken per year motivated her to make an initial investment in a small flock of chickens. Nisene's investment quickly paid off and the family was soon traveling into town by buggy twice a week to sell eggs.



Marks Ranch grew to be one of the largest egg ranches operating in California during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. During World War I, the family contracted with the federal government to provide powdered eggs for U.S. troops. Remnants of the egg ranching days that are still standing at Marks Ranch include old farming equipment, the concrete foundations of large chicken coops, and the original egg incubators and hatchers. By the time Nisene passed away in 1956, the family had amassed a significant fortune that included property throughout Monterey and Santa Cruz counties.

Along with a profound respect and appreciation for the natural world, Nisene imparted her philanthropic values to her children. Herman, the youngest son, became a self-trained botanist with a passion for exotic cacti and palms which he collected and nurtured in the backyard of The Hacienda, which was the Marks home. Shortly after their mother's death, the children made a plan to give back to the community that had provided their family so much prosperity and happiness.

The Marks family left an amazing legacy of parkland for our community. The family's largest land donation—10,000 acres for the Forest of Nisene Marks State Park in Santa Cruz County—initiated a series of significant land gifts throughout the region, including nearly 120 acres to expand Point Lobos State Park and protect the rare Gowan Cypress; 1,200 acres to create Toro County Park; and brokering a deal between eight other landowners and the County to purchase the additional 3,500 acres adjacent to the Marks property that comprise the rest of Toro Park.

The family homestead is the last segment of the Marks family legacy. When Herman Marks passed away in 1982, he donated the 816-acre ranch to St. John's College based in Annapolis, Maryland, to open a west coast campus. After accepting the property, St. John's discovered that the site was not practical for a college. In 2000, the college signed a 28-year option with a development company which planned to build over 550 home sites at Marks Ranch, contingent upon a zoning designation change. Pressure from local community groups, however, caused St. John's to reconsider.



The college worked with Big Sur Land Trust in 2004 to craft a three-year purchase option for Marks Ranch. The purchase price was \$4.75 million. In 2010 and 2012, BSLT partnered with Monterey County Parks to secure state grant funds that supported the sale and transfer of the back country of the property (624 acres) to facilitate trail connections with Toro Park. BSLT continues to own 79 acres of the original property.

## Current Programs

### Youth Outdoor Program

We believe access to the health benefits of being out in green open spaces is a human right. Though Monterey County is endowed with great natural beauty, opportunities to access these spaces are not equitably distributed across communities. Big Sur Land Trust's Youth Outdoor Programs support equitable access to positive and meaningful outdoor experiences for Monterey County youth. Positive community-building experiences in nature spaces boost personal resilience, build confidence, nurture in youth an enduring bond to the natural world, and deepen a sense of belonging in outdoor recreation spaces and among peers. Big Sur Land Trust's youth outdoor day camps are held at Marks Ranch throughout the year.



### Sustainable Grazing Program

Over the years, Big Sur Land Trust has also maintained a successful sustainable conservation grazing program by maintaining cattle on the ranch to keep invasive weeds down, facilitate amazing wildflower displays, and decrease fire hazards posed by dry grasslands.

### Healthy Soils Program

During the Soberanes Fire in 2016 and most recently with the River Fire in 2020, Marks Ranch served as part of the incident command center for several fire-fighting groups. The impacts of equipment and personnel were significant. In our recovery efforts, we have partnered with the Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary as part of the Healthy Soils Program run through the California Department of Food and Agriculture. Recognizing that the health of the Marine Sanctuary is tied directly to the health of the land, this program helps working ranches and farmlands improve soil health and promote the ability to sequester carbon, which can exacerbate ocean acidification and warming.

To further the science around this initiative, the program implements healthy soil practices on private property while monitoring and evaluating their effectiveness for sequestering carbon in the soil, increasing groundwater infiltration, improving drought resilience, increasing native plant diversity, improving forage for cattle grazing, reducing runoff, and many other possible benefits. Practice sites also serve as demonstration areas for ranchers, farmers, and other land managers throughout California.

Started in December 2020, Big Sur Land Trust's three-year project is applying experimental treatments across a series of plots on the lower pasture of Marks Ranch. We will drill-seed native bunch grasses and forbs (herbaceous flowering plants). We will also add a thin layer of compost to some of the plots to encourage more carbon sequestration while potentially increasing plant vigor, diversity, and coverage. In a complementary vegetation study, UCSC Botany graduate student Justin Luong will monitor pre- and post-conditions to evaluate both the native and invasive species response to the various treatments in the Healthy Soils project.

## Conservation Value

Protecting Marks Ranch is critical to preserving habitats and wildlife linkages between the Santa Lucia Range, the Sierra de Salinas Mountains, and Fort Ord protected areas. Wildlife corridors between these mountain ranges have become increasingly constrained by densely developed neighborhoods along Highway 68 and San Benancio Road. Most of Marks Ranch falls within the Toro Creek watershed, however, a portion of the central and northern reaches of the property drains through Las Palmas directly into the Salinas River.

## Flora and Fauna

The ranch features rare expanses of grasslands, oak woodlands, sycamore alluvial woodlands (another rare and declining habitat in California), and several associations of chaparral. More than 90 species of wildflowers flourish on Marks Ranch. Deer and small mammals, badgers, coyotes, mountain lions, bobcat, and small raptors inhabit the property.

- Coast live oak (*Quercus agrifolia*): This tree typically reaches a mature height of 10-25 meters and may live over 250 years. The trunk, particularly of older trees may be massive and gnarled. The oval, dark green leaves have spiny-toothed edges with sharp thistly fibers that extend from the lateral leaf veins. The outer layers of leaves are designed for maximum solar absorption, containing two to three layers of photosynthetic cells. Flowers are produced in early-to-mid spring, and slender reddish-brown acorns mature about 8 months after pollination (most red oak acorns take 18 months to mature).
- Sky lupine (*Lupinus nanus*): The sky lupine is a species in the Fabaceae (*Legume*) family native to the western United States. It grows abundantly in chaparral clearings and along slopes in California, Nevada, and eastern Oregon. In California it is most common in the Coast Ranges and Sierra foothills. It supports pollinators such as the gray hairstreak and the painted lady butterflies.
- Acorn woodpecker (*Melanerpes formicivorus*): They are among the most cooperative birds, living in matriarchal colonies of 3 to 10 birds. As a result, they can store enough acorns to feed themselves for several months through the winter. Females lay from 4 to 6 white eggs, laid in cavities excavated 12 to 60 feet above ground in dead oaks or other trees. Incubation lasts around 14 days and the whole group helps. Because woodpecker colonies are built on an economy of acorns, they can run into hard times if the acorn crop fails one year.

- American badger (*Taxidea taxus*): Badgers are primarily solitary, although breeding pairs and family groups are sometimes observed. Adult badgers are nearly 2.5 feet in length. Badgers are excellent diggers, using their claws to excavate dens for protection, sleeping sites, food storage, places to give birth, and as focal areas for foraging. Their dens generally have a sideways “D-shaped” entrance with excavated soil piled outside. Badgers are carnivores and are well-adapted to preying on burrowing rodents, including ground squirrels, but they also prey on other non-burrowing mammals. **The California Department of Fish and Wildlife is interested in hearing about your badger sightings. Report your sightings here: <https://wildlife.ca.gov/Conservation/Mammals/Badger/Sighting-Report>**
- Pacific gopher snake (*Pituophis catenifer catenifer*): This species of nonvenomous snake is often mistaken for a diamondback rattlesnake, but can be easily distinguished from a rattlesnake by the **lack of black and white banding on its tail** and by the narrower shape of its head. Adults can reach up to seven feet but are usually smaller (4.5-5 feet). When threatened, gopher snakes flatten their heads, hiss loudly, and shake their tails to imitate a rattlesnake.



Coast live oak (*Quercus agrifolia*)

*Photo by Morro Bay National Estuary Program*



Sky lupine (*Lupinus nanus*)

*Photo provided by BSLT*



Acorn woodpecker  
(*Melanerpes formicivorus*)



American badger (*Taxidea taxus*)

*Photo by Tom Koerner, USFWS*



Pacific gopher snake  
(*Pituophis catenifer catenifer*)

## Be an iNaturalist for the lands you love!

Please join us in recording the amazing biodiversity found on our preserves by downloading and using the iNaturalist app whenever you visit.

By taking photos in iNaturalist (and making sure to upload them when you get home) you will be contributing to a powerful biodiversity dataset.

iNaturalist can also instantly suggest identifications of the flora and fauna you photograph, thereby serving as a handy pocket field guide and powerful educational tool.

To use iNaturalist:

- Download the iNaturalist app to your mobile device.
- Create your iNaturalist account.
- Under “Community,” select “Projects” and search for Big Sur Land Trust. On the Big Sur Land Trust project page, click “Join.”
- In the iNaturalist app, take photographs of the biology and evidence thereof that you encounter on Big Sur Land Trust’s preserves. This can be plants, animals, fungi – or even just evidence of them (scat, feathers). Optional: After taking the photo, click “What did you see? View suggestions” for identification suggestions. (You can also save this step for later.)
- Click SHARE.
- When you get home, confirm that your observations have been uploaded.

## Marks Ranch is now an eBird hotspot!

eBird hotspots allow multiple birders to enter data into the same shared location, creating aggregated results available through [eBird’s “Explore” tools](#). Next time your visit includes birding activities, be sure to select the hotspot affiliated with the Big Sur Land Trust preserve or property you are visiting. Recording checklists while you are birding is not only fun, but the data you submit will contribute to our understanding of the lands we all love, the winged critters that love them too, and best practices for conserving both.



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