

Ranch acquisitions add 5 square miles to Black Diamond Mines Preserve

Denis Cuff, Bay Area News Group, 8-4-11

PITTSBURG -- Immigrant coal miners flocked to the hills here in the 1860s to hack their "black diamonds" from the earth.

They founded five bustling towns that boomed, then busted by turn of that century. To earn a living, some miners turned to cattle ranching.

Now the days of the cattle ranches have largely gone by and a new era of public access and parklands is blooming with a massive expansion of the Black Diamond Mines Regional Preserve.

In just three years, the East Bay Regional Park District has spent \$15.7 million to buy more than five square miles of ridge land, grassy valleys and oak forests to expand the preserve.

Now the second biggest park in the park system, Black Diamond Mines covers some 7,900 acres, or 12.3 square miles -- more than a fourth of the size of San Francisco and nearly a fifth the land mass of Oakland.

The purchases -- which together mark the largest park district expansion in 77 years -- are important not just for their size, but also for the strategic way they link together public lands for trails, recreation and wildlife habitat, park officials said.

"This was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity," said Bob Doyle, the general manager of the park district, which oversees 110,362 acres in Contra Costa and Alameda counties.

For the first time, the regional park district owns a continuous swath of public land from Pittsburg and Antioch into Clayton Ranch Open Space and Mt. Diablo State Park, which also connects to other natural parks around the mountain.

That opens the door to create new park entrances, picnic areas, and new trails. One trail envisioned by park planners would allow multiday hikes with overnight stays at back country camps, as is done in 9,700-acre Ohlone Regional Wilderness south of Livermore, the largest regional park.

"Imagine a 40-mile route that will take people, not only south through Black Diamond and into Mount Diablo, but would allow them to do a tour to Morgan Territory and Round Valley Preserve near Brentwood," said Nancy Wenninger, the park district assistant general manager for land acquisitions.

Earlier this year Wenninger led a tour to the new lands, including the 1,904-foot-tall Kreiger Peak.

From atop the peak, Wenninger pointed below to the mosaic of grasslands, forests, rocky outcrops, ponds and chaparral thickets on areas the park district has bought. Hawks soared below on blustery winds.

On clear days, visitors to Kreiger Peak can see much of the Bay Area, the Delta, the Sierra and large swaths of the San Joaquin Valley.

"It is spectacular scenery and give people a sense of what this place was like 100 years ago," Wenninger said.

Park officials, however, said they don't know when they can open the new lands for visitors because they can't afford to pay for staff to patrol and maintain the area for recreation use.

For the time being, the land will remain in land bank status. The land is leased out for grazing, a practice likely to continue as a way to lower wild grass levels and wild fire risks.

Park officials said they didn't expect to acquire so much land so fast.

But illnesses and deaths in some ranch families and the bleak market for development resulted in several properties coming on the market.

At the same time, the park district could afford to buy with money from bonds approved by East Bay voters in 2008 and large state and federal grants acquired by the East Contra Costa Habitat Conservancy, a key partner in expanding Black Diamond.

Nearly half of the newly acquired 3,393 acres of park land was purchased from heirs of the late Wayne Thomas and Maxine Barron, a brother and sister who were cattle ranchers and grew up on a family ranch there. Their Welsh grandfather worked in Contra Costa coal mines in the 1860s and then starting buying land near Nortonville, one of the five mining towns that once collectively had thousands of residents.

The towns disappeared when the local coal industry collapsed due to competition from higher grade coal elsewhere. Thomas, a tough but affable former bull rider, refused to sell his land to developers to keep his ranching way of life, friends and relatives said.

The new park lands have a small family memorial to Wayne Thomas: a metal sculpture of a cowboy kneeling while holding the reins of his horse. "This is my church," reads the plaque.

The Black Diamond hills are an extension of Mount Diablo and share its plants, wildlife and geology, said Seth Adams, land programs director of Save Mount Diablo, a conservation group.

Both were formed by geological forces thrusting upward over eons, creating unusual habitat to foster rare plants, and pushing up veins of coal within the reach of miners.

Save Mount Diablo helped start the momentum to link Mount Diablo State Park and Black Diamond Preserve.

In 1994, the conservation group acquired the 333-acre Chaparral Springs property along Marsh Creek Road, creating a foothold for the other open space purchases to follow.

"Chaparral Springs wasn't connected to anything back then, but it was a start," Adams said. "More than 15 years later, with the park district doing the heavy lifting, and the habitat conservancy coming up with a lot of money, we have a public open space corridor connecting Black Diamond Preserve with Mount Diablo."

For the ranching families, selling the land was a necessity tinged with sadness, said Reesa Vogt, daughter of the late Maxine Barron.

"They loved the land, they loved raising cattle, they loved the thought of continuing what the elder members of their family started," Vogt said in an email sent from her Shasta County home.

She said her mother and uncle didn't want the land developed so selling it for public open space was "what had

to be done."

Vogt added, "Now can our family continue to go see the property and walk around, but everyone else can too and see how beautiful and peaceful it is. A little slice of heaven."