

7 (hidden) wonders of the West

A tropical retreat, a desert oasis, and maybe the most beautiful mountain in the world ... follow us to these saved natural treasures



[Coming soon: 5 more treasures »](#)

1. LUSHEST TROPICAL HIDEAWAY

Moanalua Valley, HI

The dense vegetation, the glimpses of the Ko'olau

Mountains wrapped in mist, even the odd petroglyph — yeah, it does feel like you've been transported to the island in *Lost*. But this new 3,716-acre preserve (purchased by the Trust for Public Land and now owned by the state) is just minutes from downtown Honolulu. A short hike takes you into the gorgeous valley; if you're feeling more ambitious, continue up the ridge for stirring views of windward Oahu.

Where it is: At the end of Ala Aolani St., off I-H1 highway at exit 2, Honolulu.

When to go: Anytime.

INFO: tpl.org

—Peter Fish

2. BEST PLACE TO SEE WHERE ANTELOPE PLAY

American Prairie Reserve, MT

With wide-open vistas and lumbering bison, the Great Plains grasslands exemplify the West. Now the American Prairie Foundation has begun to buy Montana ranchlands to stitch together federally protected land. The goal is to create a 5,000-square-mile preserve, 1 million acres bigger than Yellowstone, where not just buffalo roam but pronghorn antelope and elk bound, black-footed ferrets scamper, and hundreds of bird species swirl overhead. According to Sean Gerrity, president of the foundation, "We've got a chance to preserve an entire ecosystem. It's like protecting our own Serengeti." Rent something with four-wheel-drive, and experience the spectacle on a new, free self-guided tour.

Where it is: Off U.S. 191, 40 miles south of Malta, MT.

When to go: May and June to avoid early spring's muddy roads.

INFO: americanprairie.org or 406/585-4600.

–Harriot Manley

3. MOST UNEXPECTED WILDERNESS

Wind Wolves Preserve, Kern County, CA

The San Joaquin Valley is California's most utilitarian landscape: flat farm fields divided by Interstate 5. But the [Wildland's Conservancy's](#) Wind Wolves Preserve shows what this world was like before agribusiness and SUVs. The 97,000-acre preserve runs from the valley into the Transverse Ranges, offering amazing views and refuge for animals like the San Joaquin kit fox. New this year: a visitor center and campgrounds.

Where it is: Off State 166 near Maricopa, CA.

When to go: Spring and fall are best.

INFO: Open Sat–Sun only; 661/858-1115.

–P.F.

4. BEST VIEW

Sperling Preserve, Goleta, CA

Entertainment types regularly pay millions for Santa Barbara blufftop views like this one. But at Ellwood Mesa's Sperling Preserve, you get the Pacific vista for free. Not that getting the preserve set aside was easy — it took Goleta residents (eventually aided by the [Trust for Public Land](#) and other local groups) three decades and about \$20 million to acquire the land. "It's an extraordinary piece of property," says Cynthia Brock, former Goleta mayor. "Once you know it, you just love it."

Where it is: Hollister Ave., Goleta, CA.

When to go: Now, for vernal pools and the last of the preserve's monarch butterflies (they come back in November).

INFO: 805/961-7500.

–MacKenzie Geidt

5. GREENEST HILLSIDES

**Lynch
Canyon
Open
Space,**

 [ENLARGE IMAGE](#)

Solano County, CA

In March,
Irish-green
hillsides rule
this new
preserve
between
San
Francisco
and
Sacramento.



Thanks to
the [Solano](#) Thomas J. Story
[Land Trust](#), Lynch Canyon Open Space, Solano County, CA
Lynch
Canyon

Open Space escaped a miserable fate as a landfill; now its 1,000 acres are open to the public. What's here? The aforementioned green rolling hills spackled with California poppies and Johnny-jump-ups, golden eagles and other raptors soaring overhead, and panoramic views of Mt. Tamalpais and the Golden Gate. A good way to introduce yourself to this remarkable place is by taking one of the land trust's guided hikes.

Where it is: McGary Rd., off I-80 between Vallejo and Fairfield, CA.

When to go: Now through June for wildflowers.

INFO: Closed Mon–Tue; \$5 per vehicle; free guided hikes on the fourth Sat of each month; 707/432-0150 ext. 200.

–M.G.

6. MOST GLAMOROUS DESERT OASIS

Las Vegas Springs Preserve, NV

Every Vegas lounge act owes a debt to [Las Vegas Springs](#): The city was founded because of these burbling waters. A multimillion-dollar restoration has given the springs a little natural Vegas glamour, with 8 acres of desert gardens, high-tech exhibits in the Origen Experience (devoted to Las Vegas culture and history), and the sustainably built and green-focused Desert Living Center.

Where it is: 333 S. Valley View Blvd., Las Vegas.

When to go: Now through May, then again in fall and winter.

INFO: \$19 (\$15 for Nevada residents); 702/822-7700.

–P.F.

7. IT TAKES A VILLAGE ... TO SAVE A MOUNTAIN

Want to preserve your own beautiful bit of the West? Learn from the people who rescued Washington's Turtleback Mountain

The moment you see it, you know how it got its name: With its distinctive, tortoise-shaped hump, Turtleback Mountain looms over Washington's San Juan Islands as one of the archipelago's most visible places. For a while, the peak on Orcas Island was one of the San Juans' most vulnerable treasures too. But today, the 1,578-acre [Turtleback Mountain Preserve](#), which opened to the public for the first time last year, is not only protected from development but also it's considered an almost unprecedented conservation success.

More natural wonders

- [Yosemite in winter](#)
- [Top 10 waterfalls](#)
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Generations of San Juan Islanders knew Turtleback as the privileged retreat of Weyerhaeuser timber baron Norton Clapp. When Clapp passed away in 1995, the undeveloped land was turned over to the Medina Foundation, a charity he founded. Although Turtleback was the foundation's most valuable asset,

it was also expensive to maintain. The Medina Foundation decided to offer Turtleback to the highest bidder in order to raise money to further its philanthropic mission — giving millions of dollars each year to Puget Sound–area educational and social-service programs.

When the specter was raised that Turtleback could be sold and developed, local conservation organizations sprang to action, knowing they had to pull out all the stops. "I got a phone call on a Thursday night, and the property was advertised on Friday — we had 30 days to come back with an offer," says Tim Seifert, executive director of the San Juan Preservation Trust. "It took six months to reach an agreement." Six months of no sleep, he adds: "The entire community was freaked out."

During that time, a developer submitted an \$18.5 million bid to buy the mountain and put in at least 40 home sites. Local conservation groups, scrambling madly, managed to meet the bid. "We had bake sales, we had Girl Scouts in front of the grocery store, we had the largest community gathering ever in the San Juans at the foot of Turtleback," Seifert says. "We even had Gary Larson do a cartoon for save turtleback mountain T-shirts. People who'd never given to causes in the past are now walking around in those shirts."

In the end, \$18.5 million was raised to save Turtleback. More than 2,000 people pitched in, with gifts ranging from 75 cents to \$1 million. Three conservation organizations — the San Juan

Preservation Trust, the San Juan County Land Bank, and the Trust for Public Land — partnered to make it happen. "Islanders have always revered Turtleback," says Lincoln Bormann, director of the San Juan County Land Bank, which contributed \$10 million. "Since many of the islands have been carved up into 5- and 10-acre parcels, to be able to preserve something of Turtleback's scale was a rare opportunity."

For decades, islanders had trespassed to reach the top of Turtleback by night and take in its expansive vistas. Now you can pull into a small dirt parking lot and, in broad daylight, follow Turtleback's old road as it curves up through a forest of fir and rare Garry oaks. Although the current trail system is rudimentary, the road soon clears the trees, emerges around a bend, and opens onto a high, west-facing meadow with expansive views of the Sound.

Continue up and you'll soon reach Ship Peak, a 931-foot overlook offering what everyone agrees is the quintessential Turtleback view: out over Orcas Island's Crow Valley, a lush expanse of farmland sewn together by stands of fir. From here you can proceed even higher, although with the trails still in their beginning stages, you may not always know where you're going.

"Yeah, we've had a few people phone us from the top of Turtleback," Bormann admits. "When they ask us which way to go, we just tell them: 'Down.' "

Where it is: West side of Orcas Island, WA.

When to go: Now through fall.

INFO: 360/378-4402.

—Kimberly Brown Seely

COMING SOON: 5 MORE TREASURES

1. FOSSIL CREEK, AZ

Near Payson, Arizona, this lovely spring-fed creek will flow free after a \$13 million restoration. Next up: designating it a National Wild and Scenic River. INFO: nature.org/arizona or americanrivers.org.

2. KAWA BAY, HI

On the Big Island, 550 acres surrounding a popular surfing beach offer a haven for the endangered Hawaiian hawksbill sea turtle. INFO: tpl.org or 808/524-8560.

3. MCCARRAN RANCH, NV

Just east of Reno, a major project to restore 305 acres of the Truckee River and surrounding wetlands is nearly complete. INFO: nature.org/nevada or 775/322-4990.

4. PERAZZO MEADOW, CA

North of Truckee, the Trust for Public Land is working to protect one of the Sierra Nevada's most pristine meadows. INFO: tpl.org or 415/495-5660.

5. VENTANA WILD RIVERS, CA

The goal: Wild and Scenic status for the Arroyo Seco and eight more rivers in the Santa Lucia Mountains near Big Sur. INFO: friendsoftheriver.org/centralcoast.

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