



# TOMALES POINT:

## A FOG SHROUDED MYSTERY

By Meade Fischer

The five mile hike to the end of Tomales Point at Point Reyes National Seashore is a delight almost any time, but in midsummer, when the fog blows in from the ocean in roiling billows, it can be almost mystical.

That was how it was my first time.

Once on the Point Reyes peninsula, the road branches, and the majority of people head south toward the lighthouse. I headed north toward McClure's Beach. Just past the beach the road ends at the Historic Pierce Point Ranch, well preserved, and interesting in its own way. However, the magic begins behind the ranch, on the seaward side, where the trail departs.

That day, with hot weather inland, a 20 knot wind was blowing waves of fog over the point. I stepped out, and within a few yards, the ranch had disappeared. Visibility was in feet and yards. Every couple of minutes the fog would clear for just a moment, revealing some piece of brilliant scenery. Captured as if by a strobe light, it was printed like a photo on the eyes and the brain. I could see faint traces, like the pencil lines barely visible under a watercolor, and then suddenly the scene emerged in bright sunlight for just a moment before closing off again and opening in some other direction a minute later. Sometimes it would be the ocean side, steep cliffs and a thundering sea, while at other times it would be the gentle hills rolling down to placid Tomales Bay and the village of Marshall across the water.

This constant shifting of views, this juxtaposition of the wild shore and the placid shore, made this more than just a hike. It made it more like an excursion into the nature of the human thinking process. We think in opposites: night and day, right and wrong, poor and rich, civilized and wild. One view was of one of the wildest pieces of coast, the other of rolling hills and boats bobbing on a bay. I was lost in the constant interplay, always trying to guess what scene would appear next.

Once as the fog cleared, I passed a herd of grazing tule elk. This is a reserve for these splendid animals. As I crested a hill, I saw, just off the trail, something waving in the wind. Something that did not look like the low shrubs and grasses that cover most of the point. I stepped off the trail for a closer look, and emerging from the fog was a very large skunk, waving its tail excitedly at me. It was warning me that he was there and prepared to ruin my day. Then I realized that it was downwind on a blustering day, and I would have had to walk around him to get sprayed. I stepped within 10 feet of the nervous animal before I backed off, not from fear, but from respect for a creature whose home I was invading.

There was a deeply eroded canyon just off the trail, a small creek trickling down it, undoubtedly ending at the unseen beach. I stepped off the trail and to the edge, thinking I could go no further. Then, another short stretch of trail appeared, and I went to the next "dead end". It only opened to another piece of trail. Before long, I was almost on the beach, having spiraled down into what seemed like a fractal. The complexity of the scenery was growing as I worked my way down. Finally, the dark indentations I noticed from above were now above me, and they were deep caves. These caves were large enough to be home for the mountain lions and coyotes that live in the area.

The trail runs along the spine of the point and drops into the only grove of trees. This is at a low spot with standing water about three miles out. Beyond this, the trail rises to Tomales Bluff and turns to sand. The trail actually separates into several trails that meander out toward the end of the bluff.

At one clearing, Bird Rock flashed into view, vivid in the summer sun. The birds were caught in mid flight, the bright greens and oranges of the lichen and ice plant visible along the broken cliff, and brilliant white waves exploded on the rocks. Then it was gone, and the town of Dillon Beach, with the RV campgrounds rose from beyond Tomales Bay and beyond the tan summer grasses that sloped gently down to the bay. By this time, I was fascinated with the constant shifting between opposites, and then I remembered that this was the place where the Pacific tectonic plate meets the North American. This point was the last finger of land, the leading edge of thousands of miles of plate, including southern California and all of Baja. It resembled the prow of a massive lithic ship, steaming north at two inches per year, bound for a union with Alaska several million years from now.

As my imagination played with this idea, and as the scenes alternated, I started to wonder how this hike would resolve itself. Would I end on some bay side beach or scrambling down a steep cliff to a wave-swept cove? Curiosity made me quicken my step. The vegetation had changed on the final section of the trail. Once in sand, I was walking through dune habitat in soft sand. I was getting so close to the end that when the fog cleared, I could see both sides of the point without turning my head.

Then, suddenly, the trail split, the right fork descended a few yards to the bay side. The left split to a steep drop towards wave-washed rocks. Straight ahead of me Bodega Head drifted faintly in and out of the fog, and just below me the bluff ended at a huge slab of rock. It was just above the water line, rivulets of white water running off it after