

THE SEA RANCH AUDIO WALKING TOUR: ARCHITECTURE, LANDSCAPE, INTENTIONS

Written and Narrated by Donlyn Lyndon

SEGMENT B: Sea Ranch Lodge, Black Point Beach Access Stairs and the Hedgerow Houses

The second segment of this walk will extend north from the ocean side of the Lodge to the Public Access Stairs that descend to Black Point Beach. It includes a fine view up the coast and another set of the first buildings of The Sea Ranch: the Hedgerow Demonstration Houses.

As you leave the Lodge and head towards the ocean, there are two buildings remaining from earlier settlements, B1. The larger is a handsome barn made of timber framing and redwood siding, which offered us lessons in building with materials to be found on or nearby the site, and embodying traditional ranch construction experience; the smaller is a shepherd's shed. The two forms together illustrate two aspects that we considered important to architecture for this place: big simple forms that settle on the land and smaller tight structures, that reflect human size.



B1 Barn and shed on Bihler Point

The passage north from the Lodge is marked by a path and "grape-stake" sheep fence B2 that runs alongside it in a direct straight line across the open fields towards the gully descending to Black Point Beach.



B2 Trail to Black Point Beach Access

Rural fences like this, which run almost continuously along the western edge of Highway 1, are a telling characteristic of The Sea Ranch, remnants and recall of the agricultural uses of the land. Here, the long straight line is to be noted, a small but decisive measure of the land and the scope of the fields. It's akin to the decisive formation of the early planting of hedgerows that marked out the land. These were ranchers claiming their territory and protecting their herds.

Now the fence and path channel human movement across this stretch, protecting the landscape from random intrusion that would damage vegetation.

On the ocean side of the fence there are long clusters of myrtles that form a quite beautiful edge for the outlook as their silhouette undulates with the gentle rise and fall of the land and the deforming pressure of the wind. These stands of brush are important places of

habitat for birds and animals. There is a smaller alternate path that the Sea Ranch Lodge maintains over the brow of this formation that offers markings for various kinds of wild plants for guests who explore the area of Black Point. Farther up in the fields there are also extensive amounts of wetlands designated for protection, as they support various forms of vegetation and wildlife that are important to the ecology of the area.

The land through which this trail passes is owned by the Sea Ranch Lodge, and at various times there have been plans for expansion of the Lodge into this area while maintaining views from Highway 1 across the meadows to Black Point and the ocean.

From the main trail looking inland, you can sense the scope of Black Point Prairie, reaching up to the hillside with a few houses visible at the top of the rise behind the Lodge. From the Lodge site north, the slopes are mostly covered with trees. Beyond Moonraker Road, the forest front comes right down to the highway and in places across it. The forest reaches back the depth of The Sea Ranch and on through lumbering territory beyond. Within the Sea Ranch forest there are many houses set carefully on beautiful sites surrounded by trees, often on the edge of ravines or around a few clearings and on the upper reaches of the slope. The many aspects of the forest are another of the many diverse types of places that make up the rich territory of The Sea Ranch.

As you approach the knob of Black Point and the bluff itself, the trail is joined by the Public Access Trail, which comes down across the fields. Near where the trails join, there's a place where you can see many of the most important aspects of The Sea Ranch landscape and its heritage of planning and building, **B3**.



B3 Head of Public Access Stair at Black Point Beach

The most obvious natural feature, of course, is the long sweep of Black Point Beach, arguably the grandest beach at The Sea Ranch (and right at hand are the well constructed steps the County has built descending in stages to the beach). Beyond it you can see, on a clear day, all the way along the coast to Gualala Point at the far end of The Sea Ranch, close to where the Gualala River bends out from behind the forested ridges to join the Pacific.

You can also note that the coast proceeds as bluffs along a series of coves and points, with hedgerows and related houses appearing at intervals along the stretch, but with no continuous line of development along the ocean front.

Directly to the right is the Black Point Hedgerow, one of the Signature Hedgerows planted by early ranchers, and some related secondary growth of Monterey Cypress that it spawned.

Enmeshed within the hedgerow and backed up to it on either side are the Hedgerow Houses designed by Joseph Esherick and Associates as the first Demonstration Houses, **B4**.



B4 Hedgerow Demonstration Houses by Joseph Esherick and Associates

These were built by Oceanic Properties at the same time as the Sea Ranch Store and Condominium One (all completed in 1965-67) and built by Matthew Sylvia. These were intended to show how individual houses could be made into clusters directly related to each other and to the land and its vegetation, so that they would become an integral part of the larger landscape.

An historic photo **B5H** shows these buildings from the air, when they were first built, and the meadow we now call Sea Ranch Meadow that lies between them and the next hedgerow, first in a succession of hedgerows that form large “rooms” in the landscape stretching up the coast.



B5H Aerial view of Black Point Beach and the Esherick Hedgerow Houses. (c. 1968) Photo by Lisa Trumpler

Move to a position before the plank bridge crosses the gully that has been formed by a stream gathering water from the fields and slopes above. It is possible to see in one place the formations of the layered earth and rocks, the different forms of vegetation seeking the wet and the dry and the forms of the shingled Esherick houses, with their single sloped roofs repeatedly pitching down into the coastal winds coming from the northwest, picking up towards the sun coming from the south and sheltering fenced gardens behind them. Even those fences have been made to serve their special purpose in this location. Their stretches of vertical redwood boards and posts are topped by horizontal members angled like tipped shelves to flutter and diminish the winds that pass over them. Several structures housing additional rooms have been added to the original ones, but all work within the character of the ensemble and the abundant growth of their gardens has overtopped the protecting fences.

They are a marvelously coherent, yet individualized group, so successfully tethered to their environment and the continued growth of the landscape that they are now hardly visible as independent constructions. Nor need they be; they inhabit an extraordinary place which they have helped to form.

This completes Segment B of the Audio Tour. Signs note that this is the beginning of private Sea Ranch Trails reserved for Members and guests, which will be included in Segment C.

Visitors who are not guests or accompanied by a docent, may choose to follow the Public Access Trail back through Black Point Prairie to the beginning of Segment D, which starts at the gate joining the Lodge properties with Sea Ranch commons and the private Moonraker Road to the north.

On the way, the Public Access Trail runs uphill along the creek and those hedgerow houses that are on the south side of the Black Point Hedgerow. It ascends towards the hills through vegetation that characterizes areas that are wet and includes stands of Douglas Iris, which are a wonderful blue in the spring, as well as tall growing shrubs like coffeeberry that take root in areas that are no longer grazed.

As you walk up along the edge of the meadow you can imagine it as like the coves that are so characteristic of this coast. In this case, as in the Sea Ranch Meadow on the other side of the hedgerow, the houses and trees define one side of a "cove" of grasslands while the Lodge structures and related hedgerow define the other, the large open space between backed by the slopes above.

Continue on the trails until you come to the gate, at the top of Black Point Hedgerow and Moonraker Road. Join the tour at the beginning of Segment D and continue the tour at D1H returning through Black Point Prairie.