The Changing Meadow

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The UCSC East Meadow. Two images made while descending the bike path.

These photos were taken on a walk through the East Meadow one morning in late November.

Right now, the fields are passing through one of their many transitions--perhaps the most dramatic, from brown to green. It's a change that happens fast, after the first rains. If you're not paying attention it's easy to miss the subtle stages.

Tiny new grasses are beginning to make their presence felt. Soon they'll dominate, but currently they make a lovely wash of pale color under the summer's tangled stems and leaves. For someone like me from the Eastern USA, where four seasons follow a well-defined sequence, California's complex transitions between green and brown can be confusing. We're at the end of November: short days, deciduous trees going bare, Winter arriving. But down among the dead leaves, blades of new grass…

Out in the meadow, bare ground, low light; things feel dormant, and underfoot, Spring is here! Meanwhile the sky and the light are as dramatic and mobile as ever. Clouds and shadows on the move. The vast Bay, with its many moods, a constant presence. At least half the landscape is in the sky.

Birds inhabit this enormous room. Hawks look down from above; and as I approach one stretch of uncut grass, scores of small birds suddenly rise up, veering away. (My camera and photographic skills aren't up to the challenge.)

You can see Loma Prieta to the East. An unexpected sinkhole reminds you of the karst caverns below. A university hides uphill in the dark fringe of trees. If you return later in the day, or tomorrow, or in a week, a month… everything will look different.

There are those who, when thinking of the grasslands, confuse open space with empty space. Nothing but real estate, a cow patch. a convenient building-site. They should walk out into the East Meadow, away from the roads, keeping all their senses open. When I wandered there recently, the non-stop morning traffic flowing up and down Hagar Drive faded to a distant hum. The meadow's stillness welcomed many small sounds.

In a month, with the Earth tipping back toward the sun, the green will become intense, grasses will move with the wind, deer will be grazing.

The East Meadow is beautiful at every time of the year. But now, the slope sweeping up from the Hagar-Coolidge intersection is particularly moving. Walk there if you can. It may be the last chance to experience this place, with its dramatic change of season, undisturbed.

The University still plans to bring in the bulldozers, early summer.