



Livermore Area
Recreation & Park District
An independent special district

VALLEY WILDS

June 2010

4444 East Avenue, Livermore, CA 94550-5053 (925)960-2400

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Interpretive programs at Sycamore Grove Park, Veterans Park, Ravenswood Historic Site and Brushy Peak Regional Preserve

Soaproot

by Ranger Amy Wolitzer

So you're walking your usual route in Sycamore Grove Park, but today you got a later start than most days, and it's coming up on six o'clock. The evening is beginning to cool after a hot day, and there's a gentle breeze. As you approach a spot you've walked past a million times, something strange catches your eye. Over there, on the side of the trail, about 4 feet off the ground there appear to be delicate, white ghostly flowers floating in the air!

As you veer off the trail to take a closer look, you hear buzzing, and a big fat bumble bee zooms right by your ear and lands on one of the flowers. It sways under his weight, and you notice there are dozens of bees going busily from flower to flower paying no attention to you. On closer examination, you see that these flowers are attached to long stalks growing out of a leafy green plant you had noticed but never really thought much about. You have just discovered the secret of the soaproot!

At the beginning of each rainy season the soaproot bulb that has been lying dormant under ground begins to produce long, wavy green leaves. In April a stalk that looks strangely like asparagus begins to grow out of the middle of the rosette of leaves. Over the next two months the stalk loses its resemblance to the vegetable and grows to be as tall as six feet (although most only make it to three or four). Flower buds form a few inches apart starting a foot or so above the ground.



photo by Amy Wolitzer ©LAPRD

Each evening, after the day begins to cool, two of the flower buds will suddenly spring open. They will be open that evening, offering anthers generously heaped with pollen and pistils glistening with sticky nectar to hungry insects whose former food sources have ceased to bloom. Bees feast and pack pollen sacks full, for they know by morning these blooms will close never to open again. But the next night the two flower buds above will be open for business for one night only. If you examine the stalk, you will see below the open flowers the ones that came before - withered with a bulging ovary forming at the base as the seeds develop. And above

tonight's featured flowers you can count the buds to see how many nights you and the bees have left to enjoy the beautiful blooms.

Even if soaproot did not put on this incredible show each spring, it is noteworthy for its usefulness. Soaproot is rich in saponins and when mashed and agitated makes a rich lather that was used by many California Indians for washing, bathing and shampooing. High concentrations of saponins will also stun fish. If there was a quiet pool or small section of creek that could be dammed off and loaded with crushed soaproot bulbs, the fish would rise to the top and could be easily collected. But if the bulbs are cooked in a pit oven for a long time, the saponins break down, and they can be eaten as a starchy carb-rich food. Lastly, the outside of soaproot bulbs are protected by strong bristly fibers. A bulb could be harvested, the fibers stripped and

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June Programs

Evening Tea Amongst the Blooms

**Saturday, June 5
6:30 p.m.**

Join us for an enchanted evening amongst the soaproot blooms. These beautiful flowers don't open until late afternoon. As the evening comes in so do the bees, flying from flower to flower gathering all the pollen they can. The bees are too busy to pay any attention to us so we will be able to sit and watch them as we sip our tea. We will be walking only about a mile round trip so this walk is great for those who have young children or are not up for a long hike. We recommend bringing some sweets to enjoy with your tea.

Ranger Amy Wolitzer

*Sycamore Grove Park
Wetmore Road Entrance*



photo by Amy Wolitzer ©LAPRD

Ants

Sunday, June 13

10:00 a.m.

Their strength is legendary, as is their ability to ruin a picnic or raid the kitchen pantry. Ants are amazing insects that are found all over the world. Some are hunters. Some are gatherers, and some are farmers. Join us today to look into the life of these little critters and explore some of the different species found around the world.

Ranger Dawn Soles

Veterans Park

Return of the Summer Birds

Sunday, June 20

6:00 p.m.

They're baaack. You've heard of the boys of summer; well, we've got the birds of summer. From flycatchers to tanagers, we'll look for our returning feathered friends in a variety of habitats in the early evening instead of early morning. Bring binoculars and field guides. There will be some binoculars to lend for the program.

Ranger Patti Cole

Veterans Park

Summer Star Stories

Wednesday, June 9

8:30 p.m.

Join us for an evening under the stars. As the light fades, we will venture out into the park to enjoy the dark, nearly moonless sky and hear stories from around the world of the stars and constellations. Please wear comfortable walking shoes and dress in layers as it will get cooler as the evening progresses. No "Hoot Owl" groups please.

Ranger Glen Florey

*Sycamore Grove Park
Wetmore Road Entrance*

Family Picnic in the Park

Wednesday, June 23

6:00 p.m.

Bring the food and family out for a summer picnic dinner in the park. Lemonade will be provided. Following dinner we'll take an easy, leisurely hike to look for critters moving about as they day cools down. And, maybe, the ranger will bring a special guest or two as well.

Ranger Patti Cole

*Sycamore Grove Park
Wetmore Road Entrance*

About the programs...

Unless otherwise noted, weekend programs are 1-2 hours in length.

A donation of \$2 is requested.

A \$4 parking fee is charged at Sycamore Grove and Veterans Park. Annual passes are also available and provide a substantial savings for repeat park visitors.

Contact Information

For more information on the parks, ranger-led programs or other LARPD programs or facilities check our website or call one of the numbers below.

www.larpd.dst.ca.us

Telephone numbers

Ranger Office (925) 960-2400
LARPD Office (925) 373-5700

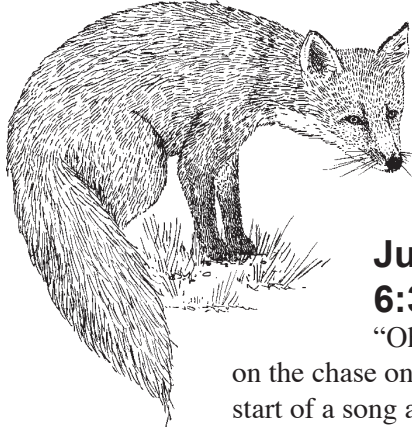
More June Programs

The History of Veterans Park Saturday, June 26 10:00 a.m.

For such a little park, Vets has a whole lot of history! From the Ohlone to the Padres, the Californios to the 49ers, the vintners to the V.A., the bikers and finally, LARPD. Join us as we sift through the past on a slow paced, one mile tour. Bring a camera if you like. You may see some things you weren't expecting.

Ranger Darren Segur

Veterans Park



Fox Tales Wednesday, June 30 6:30 p.m.

“Oh the fox went out on the chase one night...” is the start of a song about this wild

canine. You may also have heard the story of an unlucky gingerbread man who met a clever fox. Join us for an evening featuring the fox. We'll look at the starring role fox has played in song and story, and we'll sort out fact from fiction as we learn about the foxes that live around here.

Naturalist Sharon Peterson

*Sycamore Grove
Wetmore Road Entrance*

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then bound into a bunch with some twine made from milkweed or dogbane. A few coats of a glue made from the mashed bulb hardened to form the handle of a brush that could be used for tasks like brushing acorn flour into a basket.

Who would guess that such a small, inconspicuous plant could be so beautiful and versatile? Look for soaproot on your next visit to the park. Even if you aren't here in the evening to see the blooms, you now know that there is much more to its wavy leaves than meets the eye.

Join us on June 5th at 6:30 p.m. for a one mile walk to visit a patch of soaproot. We will sit amongst the blooms and watch the bees go about their business while we sip some tea. See page 2 for more information on this program.

Special Programs

Preregistration is required. You may register on-line at larpd.dst.ca.us or by phone at (925) 373-5707, or in person at 4444 East Avenue.

Brushy Peak: Gardens of Stone Saturday, June 19

Here's your chance to explore a pristine natural area of Brushy Peak Regional Preserve that is not open to the public. Hikes include a trip to the top of Brushy Peak for fabulous views of the Livermore Valley and the Great Central Valley and are approximately 4 miles round trip including a moderately difficult climb. Due to the sensitive nature of the site and the fact that it is closed to the public, all participants must stay with the group at all times. For specific information on these hikes, call the ranger office at 960-2400. This trip is approximately 9 a.m.-2 p.m. Participants under age 18 must be accompanied by parent. **Since this is a group tour, there will be no refunds.** Fee: \$25

Bay Area Adventures: Santa Cruz Redwoods Wednesday, June 30

If you are 10-13 years of age, join us for an adventure along the coast. We will start the day with a hike through the majestic coastal redwoods of Henry Cowell State Park. Under the cool shade of these giants it should be a nice break from the summer heat. After that, we'll head to the beach at Natural Bridges State Beach for an afternoon of exploring along the edge of the water. This trip is approximately 8 a.m.-5 p.m. Transportation is provided. **Since this is a group tour, there will be no refunds.** Fee \$45.

Ranger Glen Florey

Nature Camp Tadpole Camp, Ages 4 - 6

A few spaces remain in July and August for the youngest age group of this popular camp. Sign up now! All other sessions have already filled. Campers will use their five senses to learn about the plants and animals of Veterans Park. Activities will include exploration, crafts and games. Camp meets from 9 a.m. to 1:30 p.m., Monday through Friday. Fee: \$132.

On the Bank of the Stream

by Naturalist Sharon Peterson

On warm days we are drawn to where the water is. In Sycamore Grove that is the Arroyo del Valle. As you walk over the bridge that crosses the creek or along the path, you may hear squeals and splashes that express the excitement of kids who have waded into the water in search of tadpoles, frogs, fish and crayfish. Fortunately for these aquatic creatures, many of them are quick enough to make their escape. As a matter of fact, rushing into the water is not the best way to discover all of the wonders of the stream. If you would really like to know what lives in and around the stream, have a seat.

A warm summer day is the perfect time to find a shady spot near the stream where you can sit quietly and catch a glimpse of this busy world. At first you will probably notice reflections on the water, hear the



burble of water tumbling over rocks and the sound of the breeze in the trees above you. Next you might spy a bright red-orange dragonfly zipping over the water as it tries to catch other insects in midair. Its smaller, more slender cousin the damselfly folds its wings together neatly over its back when it lands near you on a rock. At the water's edge bees are landing and taking off again as they stop for a quick drink.

As your eyes adjust to looking at the water, you may notice movement below the surface. Close to shore small insects such as water boatman (not much bigger than a grain of rice and propelling themselves

with their longest pair of legs) dart about. Farther out, almost invisible against the background of the stream bottom until it moves, a fish swims slowly by.

If you stay long enough, more animals may begin to ignore you and go on with their normal business. A black phoebe may perch on a nearby branch, dart out and flit back to its perch. This handsome little bird with black plumage on its head, back, chest and wings, and a white belly performs its aerial acrobatics to catch its flying insect prey. Perhaps you will also catch a glimpse of a mallard or wood duck as it swims out from the cover of the cattail and tule plants. If you are very lucky and very quiet, you might even see a pond turtle crawl out of the water onto a sunny log.

Not all of the action is in and over the water. Along the banks butterflies flutter by to visit flowers. In the nearby trees and shrubs you can spot birds such as sparrows, scrub jays, red-shouldered hawks, and woodpeckers. Their calls are part of the natural symphony you hear as the various members sing beautiful melodies, scold, screech and laugh. On a warm rock a western fence lizard suns and seems to be getting in some exercise by doing push ups. Out from the bushes comes a mother quail with her chicks following behind. Perched on a tall stump nearby her mate keeps lookout for any signs of danger.

These are just a few of the creatures that you might observe. Each time you linger by the water you may see and hear a different cast of characters.

On your next visit to the park consider spending some time on the bank of the stream. Once you have stayed long enough to feel like you have become an accepted part of the scenery, it may be hard to break the spell by standing up to walk away.

Park News

Parking fee increase

Beginning July 1 the daily parking fee will change from \$4 to \$5. Next month plan to bring an extra dollar with you to pay for parking at Sycamore Grove and Veterans Parks. Remember that you will need correct change (bills or coins) for the fee machine. The machines do not make change or accept credit or debit cards.