

Valley Wilds

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The Secret Lives of Tiger Salamanders By Ranger Danny Haberman

*After the first big El Niño rainstorm we began to see some of our most elusive friends here in Sycamore Grove Park. The California Tiger Salamander (*Ambystoma californiense*) is a vulnerable amphibian native to California. They are at risk of becoming endangered unless circumstances that*

threaten their survival change. Populations in other areas of California, such as Santa Barbara, are identified as federally endangered. The salamander might get its name from the coloring of its skin: dark black with bright yellow spots. This creature can grow to a typical length of about 6 to 8 inches. Some individuals reach up to 14 inches! It has a stocky body and big round nose.

These slippery amphibians are a type of mole salamander. Mole salamanders are endemic to North America, and the most

famous one in the bunch is the tiger salamander. As adults, they spend most of their life underground. They typically find a burrow a ground squirrel or gopher has abandoned and take up residence. Tiger salamanders spend most of their time in their burrows during the summer. This phase of their life is referred to as estivation, which is essentially the summer equivalent of hibernation. During this time the salamander rarely leaves its burrow. It will spend most of its energy foraging for food underground. The main course on their menu is creatures like earth worms, snails and insects. However when it's time for the salamander to come out of the ground they will eat bigger meals like field mice or other small mammals. When they get to the water they can even eat a fish.

After the first big rain in late fall or early winter they start to move towards the nearest pond. This adventure may be as long as 1.3 miles and can take these little guys a few days to travel it! Once it is time for the females to lay eggs they do so in small



Photo by Amy Wolitzer

clusters. The eggs hatch after 10 – 14 days. The larval period lasts for about 3-6 months. In this time the creature is mainly aquatic. They spend these months in the pond they were hatched in feeding on small invertebrates, even tadpoles. As the pond dries up these amazing creatures lose their gills and develop lungs. After this metamorphosis the salamander will leave its pond and try to find a burrow of its own to start its own adventure in life.

A major threat to California tiger salamanders is loss of habitat. Their ideal breeding areas are vernal pools, where water accumulates seasonally. Many of the meadows and wetlands where vernal pools once formed have been developed. When the Pleasanton Ruby Hill neighborhood was built, the developers were required to mitigate for tiger salamander habitat that was lost to development. They installed two

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Livermore Area Recreation and Park District

4444 East Ave. Livermore, CA 94550
www.larpd.org
Ranger Office: 925.960.2400

Ranger-led Programs

Experience nature and history in a special way. Programs are generally 1 - 2 hours in length. A \$3 donation is requested. A \$5 parking fee is charged at Sycamore Grove Park.

February Programs



Quick Look:

Cold Skies, Good Times	Saturday, February 6	6:00 pm
Mountain Bike Ride	Sunday, February 7	2:00 pm
Olivina	Saturday, February 13	10:00 am
Livermore's Alkali Sink (RSVP)	Sunday, February 20	9:00 am
First Flowers	Sunday, February 21	10:00 am
Edible Plants (RSVP)	Sunday, February 28	2:00 pm

Cold Skies, Good Times

Saturday, February 6

6:00 pm

Winter has some of my favorite constellations. The sun sets early so it is a great time for a night hike without staying out late. We hope to see satellites whiz by and listen to the calls of great horned owls. Hike will be approximately 3 miles on paved and unpaved trails. Cancelled if raining.

Ranger Glen Florey

Sycamore Grove Park, Wetmore Rd. Entrance

Beginner Mountain Bike Ride

Sunday, February 7

2:00 pm

Join us for a five-mile round trip mountain bike ride to the Cattail Pond. Appropriate for beginner to intermediate riders on fat tire bikes with gears and hand brakes. Children are welcome if accompanied by an adult on a mountain bike. Tough adults with kids on trail-a-bikes are also welcome. Optional: Join us at 1:30 pm for help with basic bike maintenance. We will have a tire pump and some tools for adjusting brakes and shifting as needed. All riders must wear helmets. Cancelled if raining.

Ranger / Naturalist Heather Day

Sycamore Grove Park, Wetmore Rd. Entrance

Olivina

Saturday, February 13

10:00 am

What do the old ruins in the middle of the park, the stone arch at the corner of Wetmore and Arroyo Road and the walnut lanes between them have in common? Find out as we look at the life and times of Julius Paul Smith and his estate. This will be a slow paced, one mile walk. If you would like to save yourself the half-mile walk to and from the start of the tour call (925) 960-2400 to reserve a seat in the van. Cancelled if raining.

Ranger Darren Segur

Sycamore Grove Park, Wetmore Road Entrance

Livermore's Alkali Sink: An Introduction to a Complex Ecosystem

Saturday, February 20

9:00 am

There is a highly misunderstood ecosystem that can be found on the north side of 580. Words like "Birds Beak," "alkali sink," and even "wasteland" are sometimes used when talking about this area. Join us for an introduction to the saline-alkali ecosystem, with a focus on what makes this area an unique gem for Livermore. Please e-mail (pcole@larpd.org) in advance if you plan on coming.

Ranger Patti Cole

Robert Livermore Community Center, 4444 East Avenue

Salamanders (con.)

Photo by Glen Florey



mitigation ponds in Sycamore Grove in the 1990s. Since then an additional pond was installed in the upper

portion of Sycamore Grove and two old "stock ponds" have been improved to provide habitat for various threatened amphibians. Rangers and volunteers carefully monitor these ponds and have documented tiger salamander larvae in at least three of them!

So if you are lucky enough to see one of these salamanders out in the park or in the creek behind your house, it's safe and fun to observe them. However, don't pick them up with the intention of helping them move to water. These creatures have been doing this for a long time and somehow seem to know where to go. With our help and awareness of them – and protection of their breeding areas - we may be able to catch a glimpse into their secret lives for many years to come.

Nature Programs (Con.)

First Flowers

Sunday, February 21 10:00 am

Spring begins early in California! Join Ranger Amy for a five mile round-trip hike to see what's blooming. We are likely to find blue dicks, buttercups, johnny jump-ups and more. You'll learn how to identify these as well as the new growth of other plants that have yet to bloom.

Ranger Amy Wolitzer

Sycamore Grove Park, Wetmore Road Entrance



Edible Plants

Sunday, February 28 2:00 pm

There is a surprising variety of plants that grow in our area that have been used for food in the past. Some are still eaten regularly today. Join me today for a walk and talk about some of our edible plants. At the end of our program we will enjoy a salad made from items collected here in the park. Participants must RSVP by Sunday February 21.

Ranger Dawn Soles

Sycamore Grove Park, Arroyo Road Entrance

The Great Backyard Bird Count

The Great Backyard Bird Count (GBBC) is a partnership between Audubon, the Cornell Lab of Ornithology and Bird Studies Canada. The GBBC is a four-day international bird count open to birders of all ages and abilities. The citizen science data that the GBBC collects gives researchers information about the location and size of bird populations each February.

Participants are asked to count birds for as little as 15 minutes (or as long as they wish) on one or more days of the event and report their sightings online at www.birdcount.org. Anyone can take part in the Great Backyard Bird Count, from beginning bird watchers to experts. Find out more [here](#).

How many birds will you find?

19th Annual Great Backyard Bird Count
February 12-15, 2016



Join in! Count birds in your backyard, local park, or wherever you spot a bird, and submit your observations online.

birdcount.org

White-breasted Nuthatch
Photo: Nick Saunders/GBBC

Trivia

With Love in the air...

With love being in the air it's time for some animal Valentine's trivia!!

Kissing Bugs like to give people kisses because they love us. True or False?

False. Kissing Bugs are blood suckers who are attracted to the carbon dioxide that we exhale. That is why they often feed near our mouths. In areas of Central and South America their bites can lead to a rare parasitic infection called Chagas disease which can lead to serious cardiac disorders. The good news is that within the United States, kissing bugs are found mostly in the southern states and



Photo from <http://research.tamu.edu>

none of our rangers have ever seen one in our area! Note: "Milkweed Bugs" are found in SGP and look superficially similar to the kissing bug. Don't worry, they only suck the juices out of plants!

The loving Cupid Cichlid has cousins named Green Terror, Jack Dempsey, Convict, and Black Belt. True or False?

True. The Cupid Cichlid is not as loving as its name may appear. It was named after the river where it was found, the Cupido River in Surinam. Aquarium enthusiasts are cautioned to only put cichlids in tanks with fish on equal or larger size as these carnivorous fish will eat anything smaller than them!

"Bleeding Heart" is both, the name of a fish and a plant, True or False?

True. The Bleeding Heart Tetra is a freshwater tropical fish from the Amazon that has a colorful red stripe marking leading from a red colored dot on its midsection down its length to its tail, thus its beautiful name. The Bleeding Heart plant is a stunning plant native to Siberia, Korea, China, and Japan. This plant has beautiful heart shaped flowers that give it its signature name.

By Ranger Doug Sousa



"Kirschflecksalm-M"
via Wikimedia Commons



Photo from flowerinfo.org

In February, garden snails are often seen cuddling next to one another as part of their courtship. True or False?

False. Garden snails do not cuddle in courtship. Like Cupid, they are archers of love. Snails have "love darts" which they shoot when trying to initiate mating. The darts do not inseminate the other snail but release hormones that increase fertility. Snails have both male and female characteristics, but do not self-fertilize. Snails will be seen (slowly of course) circling each other trying to make a shot. Eventually, the snails exchange sperm. If a snail was shot with a "love dart" its partner's sperm will have better access to its eggs. Read more about this process [here](#).



Photo by Jangle1969
via Wikimedia Commons

Here is hoping your Valentine's day has lots of romance and not so much blood sucking, heart disease or getting shot by darts.