

Valley Wilds

Volume 26 | Issue 5

A publication of the LARPD Open Space Unit

Bald Eagles

In the past few weeks, I have had many people come up to me and say they saw a bald eagle. To that I say, "That's great news!" Bald eagles are a rare sight to see in Sycamore Grove, but always an incredible one. This impressive predator weighs in at 6.6 to 13.9 lbs. and has a wingspan of 5.9 to 7.5

feet. These symbols of our country are nothing to be trifled with. They are slightly larger than the golden eagles often seen in the area.

Bald eagles get their name from their plumage. They have an evenly dark brown body and a white head and tail. The tail is moderately long and has a bit of a wedge shape to it. Their beaks, feet, and irises are bright yellow. The legs are feather-free, and at the end have a highly developed talon with a hind toe. The males and females look almost identical. The main differences are that the

females are almost 25% larger than the males.

Bald eagles will nest during breeding season in almost any kind of American wetland. These habitats range from sea coasts and rivers to large lakes or marshes— anywhere with a large expanse of water and an abundance of fish. When nesting, the Bald Eagle typically tries to settle in mature stands of coniferous or hardwood trees, which are perfect for perching, roosting, and nesting. They prefer trees that are at least 60 feet tall. The nests are often very large due to the fact that the birds themselves are large! The biggest nest found was in Florida in 1963. It measured approximately 10 feet wide and 20 feet deep. The type of tree chosen for nesting is less important than the vantage point of the tree. In swamplands, Bald eagles will roost and nest much lower due to their prey being more hidden than in a big open body of water.

The main meal of bald eagles is fish. However, they are opportunistic eaters. That means

By Ranger Danny Haberman



Photo by Glen Florey

Banner Photo by Matt Gallagher

they will eat whatever they can get their talons on, whether it be small mammals or other birds. If they can catch it, they will eat it. They hunt by swooping down at incredible speeds reaching almost 80 miles per hour and catching their prey in their mighty talons.

Their talons have a special adaptation similar to those of ospreys (another fish-eating bird in Sycamore Grove, seen more commonly here than bald eagles). These adaptations are little bumps on the surface of the toes called spicules. Spicules allow the birds to grasp slippery creatures like fish and hold them still while the back talon pierces vital organs. The bird can then shred the flesh of their prey with their powerful beak or their other foot.

Continued on Page 6

IN THIS

Issue

- Bald Eagles
- This Month's Ranger-Led Programs and Activities
- Farewell to Spring

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 \$7 parking fee is charged at Sycamore Grove Park.

May Programs



Quick Look:

Spiders and Their Kin	Sunday, May 7	10:00 am
Native Garden (Drop-in)	Sunday, May 7	1 pm - 3 pm
Road Less Traveled *70*	Saturday, May 13	1:00 pm
Heron Nest Viewing	Sunday, May 14	9:00 am
Spring Springtown Birds	Saturday, May 20	8:00 am
Mtn. Bike Ride *70*	Sunday, May 21	3:00 pm
Evening Blooms *70*	Sunday, May 21	7:00 pm
Ponding USA!	Saturday, May 27	2:00 pm

Spiders and Their Kin

Sunday, May 7 10:00am

They creep, they crawl, and they give many folks the heebie jeebies. They are the eight-legged animals of our world – spiders (and their relatives). Join me today to find out about these wonderful creatures. We will learn about some of the different types around the world and learn which are considered dangerous. There will be a few live specimens for us to look at.

Ranger Dawn Soles Sycamore Grove Park, Arroyo Road Entrance (5049 Arroyo Road)

Flowers in the Native Garden (Drop-in)

Sunday, May 7 1 – 3 pm

Stop by the native garden (a few hundred feet from the Wetmore Entrance) to take a quick tour and see plants native to our area. You can also follow the tracks in the paths and make art featuring the animals that “made” them. We may need strong little arms to help us pump water to water the plants!

Ranger Amy Wolitzer Sycamore Grove Park, Wetmore Road Entrance (1051 Wetmore Road)

The Road Less Traveled

Saturday, May 13 1:00 pm

Come to Sycamore Grove for a 5-mile hike along some of the single-track trails. Learn alternate routes so you can avoid the paved path on busy weekend days. We will hike rain or shine!

Ranger Danny Haberman Sycamore Grove Park, Wetmore Rd. Entrance (1051 Wetmore Rd.)

Heron Nest Viewing

Sunday, May 14 9:00 am

Come join us to take a close look at Great Blue Heron nests. This is a great opportunity to view herons and their chicks. We will learn a little about these birds and then take a short walk to an area where we can observe them. We will have a spotting scope available to use, as well as binoculars. All ages welcome. Please RSVP by calling (925) 960-2400 or emailing valleywilds@larpd.org.

Ranger Vickie Eggert Sycamore Grove Park, Reservable Picnic Area (Directions provided upon RSVP)



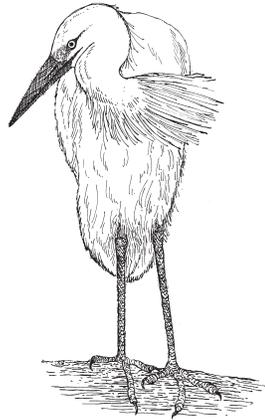
Continued on Page 3

Nature Programs (continued)

Spring Springtown Birds Saturday, May 20 8:00 am

Once again it's time for our migration to the north side of the valley. We may see wading birds and ducks in breeding plumage, signs of nesting, and raptors soaring. This is an easy walk on an asphalt path, appropriate for all ages and levels of birding experience. Contact Ranger Patti Cole (pcole@larpd.org) if you have questions or need directions.

Ranger Patti Cole
Marlin Pound Park (2010 Bluebell Drive)



Beginner Mountain Bike Ride Sunday May 21, 3:00 - 5:00 PM

This fun ride will be a five mile climb into the hills for beginner to intermediate riders. Participants need to have a fat-tire bike with gears and hand brakes. Ages 7 and up. Helmet required. Heavy rain will cancel. Participants will earn 5 miles towards the 70 mile challenge.

Naturalist Heather Day
Sycamore Grove Park,
1051 Wetmore Road

Evening Blooms Sunday May 21 7:00 pm

Lace up your boots and join Ranger Amy for a moderately strenuous 5-mile round-trip hike. In addition to clarkia, mariposa lilies, and other May Bloomers, we may catch a glimpse of soaproot in bloom – the flowers don't open until evening! Bring a jacket; it can be cold up in the hills when the sun goes down.

Ranger Amy Wolitzer
Sycamore Grove Park,
1051 Wetmore Road

Ponding USA! Saturday, May 27 2:00 pm

Forget surfing. The place to be is in the pond. After a short introduction to some local inhabitants, we will arm ourselves with nets and dive in and see what we can find. Ages 5 and up. Bring water, a towel, and closed-toe shoes that can get wet – old sneakers work fine. Please RSVP by calling (925) 960 2400 or emailing dsegur@larpd.org.

Ranger Darren Segur Sycamore Grove Park
Arroyo Road Entrance (5049 Arroyo Road)

Summer Nature Camps!

Do you know a child who loves nature, being outdoors, doing crafts and playing games? Register them for our extremely popular Tadpole Camp (ages 4 - 6), Explorer Camp (ages 7 - 9) or Ohlone Camp (ages 10 - 13).

See open sessions and register by going to <https://apm.activecommunities.com/larpd/> and searching for "Tadpole," "Explorer" or "Ohlone." Registration is also available by calling the LARPD office at (925) 373 5700.



Farewell to Spring

By Ranger Amy Wolitzer

Last May, as the grasses turned from green to golden, the squirrels that live near the Wetmore Entrance to Sycamore Grove Park made a tremendous discovery. I like to imagine that one of the bolder squirrels (we'll call him Simon¹) was taking a shortcut through the native garden. Perhaps he heard the call of red-shouldered hawk flying overhead and, fearing the aerial predator, Simon took shelter under one of the clarkia plants in the native garden.

It being late May, the clarkia's bountiful pink, white, and purple flowers created a splendid display that delighted the garden's human visitors but didn't strike the squirrels as being of much interest. But on this day, as he sought shelter from the hawk, Simon pressed against the reddish stem of the clarkia plant and a shower of tiny round seeds fell down upon him from the flowers that had finished blooming. A few landed right on Simon's clenched paw and without even thinking about it, he brought his paw to his mouth and tasted them. And they were delicious! Pretty soon, he'd forgotten all about the call of the hawk, and he was breaking the flower stems, ripping open seed pods, and filling his cheek pouches with hundreds and hundreds of tiny brown seeds.



Wild clarkia blooming along Wagon Road Loop

1 You can read more about "Sycamore Simon" the Squirrel and his adventures in our new interpretive flipbook! You can find it on the east side of the Wetmore Kiosk.



Clarkia grown from seed in the native garden

With his cheeks packed to the max, Simon raced to the squirrel burrow and slipped down the entry hole to announce his discovery.

Spitting seeds everywhere, he exclaimed, "GUYS YOU WILL NOT BELIEVE WHAT I FOUND!" His subterranean pals skeptically sampled the wet masses of seeds he pulled out of his cheeks, but they had to agree they were very tasty.

Simon mounted an expedition to the garden and showed his friends how and where to harvest their own seeds. Within a week, every single Clarkia stem in the native garden had been broken off at squirrel height (some had been over three-feet tall!). The seedpods were emptied, the seeds devoured. To the park staff and volunteers who had been carefully tending the garden, this was somewhat upsetting! But they knew that Simon the Squirrel had discovered one of his kind's ancestral food plants and that squirrels reaping the bounty was just the natural order of things.

A few hundred years ago, the May hillsides around Livermore probably would have been pink with clarkia blooming in between clumps of still-green native bunch grasses. Even today, there are some hillsides in Upper Sycamore Grove Park that have nice blooms of clarkia, and some species can even be found blooming here and there in the lower part of the park, even along the paved path. Back before Europeans came and brought annual grasses

Farewell to Spring (continued)

and weeds, native wildflowers did not have the competition they have today and were much more prolific. If you've seen photos of the "superblooms" that occur in places like Carizzo plains think of a scene like that, but all over California. But that's a whole other story we'll only touch on here...

The genus clarkia is in the evening primrose family (*onagraceae*). It contains more than 40 species found in California. All are annuals, meaning that they grow from a seed during the wet season, flower in spring or summer and form seeds, and die by late summer. The original plants will not regrow, but they tend to reseed themselves readily. At least four species of clarkia are found in Sycamore Grove Park. The species that did so well in the grant-funded native garden last year was Elegant Clarkia (*Clarkia unguiculata*). Also found here are winecup clarkia (*Clarkia purpurea*), Small Clarkia (*Clarkia affinis*), and Farewell to Spring (*Clarkia gracilis*). The flowers seem to be a hot item to both European honey bees and native bumble bees. I have seen butterflies and hummingbirds nectaring from them as well. Each of these clarkias has a distinct-looking flower but they all make a long, grooved seed capsules. Inside the capsule from a single flower are four chambers, each containing seeds. I estimate there are easily upwards of 50 seeds in a capsule. The seed capsules are green at first, but turn brown as they dry out. When they are thoroughly dry, they will sometimes explode if the plant is jostled (this is how I like to imagine the squirrel "discovering" this ancestral food source).



Clarkia Affinis

Once upon a time, clarkia was not only food for squirrels. Indians in California were known to use the seeds of many wildflowers to make seed cakes, bread, or flour. Clarkia was a favorite of many tribes. At an ancient cremation site in Pleasanton,

researchers found "tens of thousands of charred Clarkia seeds... and hundreds of cleaned acorn kernels as offerings"². There are stories of early visitors to the Bay Area being gifted 20 pound baskets full of clarkia seed from local Indian tribes. These days, it would take a lot of work to gather 20 pounds of clarkia seed, but it is thought that back then meadows were so full of clarkia, that an Ohlone woman could walk through with a seed-collecting basket at the right time of year and knock thousands upon thousands of seeds into her basket with little effort. Indian tribes in our area were not known to practice traditional agriculture but it is thought that they instead "tended the wild" by many methods. This included executing carefully-timed and well-managed fires to optimize conditions for their favorite food plants, especially in meadows where edible seeds like clarkia grew. As Europeans began to settle in California, Indians were not allowed to burn areas as they once did. Many meadows lost ground to forest and woodland, and invasive annual grasses filled most of the meadows that remained.



Clarkia unguiculata

Back to the present day, there isn't nearly as much clarkia in our native garden this year as last year. I don't think we can blame that on the squirrels. Clarkia seems to do best in drought conditions. During the months of December, January, and February this year, we put out fresh seed in the native garden during rain storm, hoping to replace the masses the squirrels ate (though I'm sure they dropped plenty). We saw many tiny two-leaved seedlings sprout, but not many survived the extremely wet weather. At my home, the situation

² Wohlgemuth as quoted in *Tending the Wild* by M. Kat Anderson

Articles (continued)

Bald Eagles (cont.)



*Bald Eagle over Sycamore Grove Park
Photo by Carol Edson*

The bald eagle became the American symbol on the Great Seal of the United States in 1782 – a few years after the Declaration of Independence was signed. The design went through a few adaptations before the iconic bald eagle symbol we see today was chosen – the eagle with 13 arrows in one talon and an olive branch in the other. The 13 arrows represent the 13 original colonies and the olive branch is said to represent peace and freedom.

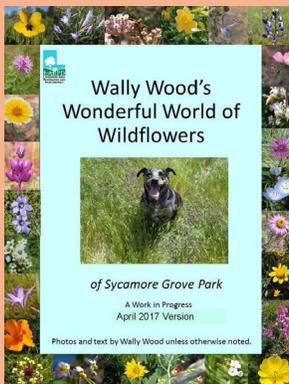
So, during the next several months while you're walking through the park, keep your eyes and ears open and look up. Though the bald eagles probably nest up at Lake Del Valle, you may see them fly over Sycamore Grove Park. Perhaps they are on their way to Shadow Cliffs or looking for an easy, opportunistic meal here, or maybe they are looking for a new place to call home!

Farewell to Spring (cont.)

is the same. During my first winter there seven years ago, I scattered a handful of native wildflower seed mix on either side of the front porch steps. The clarkia did the best, blooming successfully that year and even more vigorously in subsequent years despite my cutting many flowers and harvesting great quantities of seed. The past two years, clarkia was everywhere – even coming up in cracks in the sidewalk. This year though, the number of seedlings that survive in my yard is disproportionately low. It seems clarkia has evolved to be at its most successful in the driest times – a smart move in California where you know that sooner or later, drought will come!



Ranger Amy in her clarkia-filled backyard in 2013



Learn More!

Learn more about clarkia and other wildflowers in the amazing wildflower guide created by Open Space Volunteer Wally Wood. The second edition has page numbers and indices! http://www.larpd.org/open_space/documents/SGP_Wildflowers.pdf

Do you want a garden full of clarkia? Visit this page and scroll down to find a list of nurseries that may carry seed: [http://calscape.org/Clarkia-unguiculata-\(Elegant-Clarkia\)](http://calscape.org/Clarkia-unguiculata-(Elegant-Clarkia))