

Valley Wilds

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Christmas Berry

During the holiday season many decorations are used. Sprigs of mistletoe, Christmas trees, bells, angels, snowflakes, wreaths, reindeer, candy canes, and, of course, boughs of holly (fa la la la la la la la la). Holly is ubiquitous throughout the season and is used in table decorations, wreaths, and garlands as well as on holiday

cards and other décor. When most people picture holly, they picture a plant with shiny green, spiky leaves and bright red berries – the archetype of which is the European holly. However, we do not have European Holly here. We do have something that looks a little like it though.

Toyon (*Heteromeles arbutifolia*) is an evergreen shrub with toothy leaves. It blooms from late spring to summer. But it really comes into its own during late fall into

winter when the berries form. The bright red “berries” aren’t really berries at all. As toyon is a member of the rose family, its berries are officially known as pomes (as is the apple). Toyon is native from northern Baja California north up into Oregon, where it grows in coastal scrub, oak woodland, and chaparral plant communities that range from sea level to around 4,000 feet in elevation.

Toyon bears a resemblance to the holly from Europe and is the only member of the genus *Heteromeles*. The name of the genus is from the Greek words “heter” meaning “different” and “malus” meaning apple. It is often referred to as California holly and Christmas berry. The common name of toyon is a Spanish alteration of “totcon,” the word used for the plant by the Ohlone Indians of the central and northern California coast.

Averaging between 6 to 15 feet high (with rare specimens reaching 30 feet), Toyon is a

By Ranger Dawn Soles



Photos by Ranger Glen Florey

vibrant member of the California landscape. Toyon is a popular plant with wildlife. Its berries are a favored food for a wide variety of rodents and birds including cedar waxwings, California quail, towhees, western bluebirds, robins, mockingbirds, band-tailed pigeons, sapsuckers, thrashers and wren-tits.

People can also eat the berries – with caution. Toyon berries are acidic and astringent and contain a small amount of cyanogenic glycosides, which break down into hydrocyanic acid during digestion. Eaten raw, this can cause stomach and intestinal upset.

However, when processed and cooked properly they are edible and have been used for medicine and eaten by native peoples for thousands of years. Toyon berries were gathered by many tribes including Chumash, Tongva,

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



Quick Look:

HPHP: Tex Spruiell Park	Saturday, Dec. 2	11:00 am
Beginners Birding	Sunday, Dec. 3	8:30 am
Winter Wander *70*	Sunday, Dec. 10	1:00 pm
Happy Holidays Campfire	Sunday, Dec. 10	4:00 pm
Bright Winter Stars *70*	Saturday, Dec. 16	6:00 pm
Yule Log Hunt	Sunday, Dec. 17	2:00 pm
Sprucing up the Park	Saturday, Dec. 30	10:00 am
Last Hike of the Year! *70*	Sunday, Dec. 31	10:00 am

Healthy Parks, Healthy People: Tex Spruiell Park

Saturday, December 2 11:00 am

All are welcome to join Rangers Danny and Kyle for some light exercise in Tex Spruiell park! We'll walk a few laps on the paved path that circles the park and those who are interested can try some of the recommended exercises along the way. No RSVP required. Meet the rangers near the basketball court. We'll be there rain or shine!

Rangers Danny Haberman and Kyle Kline Tex Spruiell Park (5411 Felicia Ave)

Beginners Birding

Sunday, December 3 8:30 am

Can you recognize the song of a white-crowned sparrow? The migratory pattern of a cliff swallow? The winter plumage of a wood duck? Me neither, but we'll give a shot anyway! We'll hike through Sycamore Grove and try to identify winged creatures we see. Binoculars/field guides provided! We'll go rain or shine.

Ranger Eric Whiteside Sycamore Grove Park, Arroyo Road Entrance (5049 Arroyo Road)

Winter Wander (70 Miles Challenge)

Sunday, December 10 1:00 pm



Join us for a slow-paced, five-mile walk where we will look for the wonders of winter from green grass to fungi to mistletoe. Children are welcome, but we will be on dirt trails so strollers may not be appropriate. Cancelled if raining heavily, we'll hike if it is sprinkling.

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

Happy Holidays Campfire (RSVP)

Sunday, December 10 4:00 pm

The Holidays are fast approaching. Join me to make a personalized ornament. If you'd like to cook your dinner on the BBQ, please bring it – the BBQ will be hot and ready. After dinner we'll go to the campfire area to enjoy hot cocoa and s'mores, and sing some holiday carols. There are no seats in the campfire area, so bring a chair or blanket to sit on. Reservations required by calling (925) 960-2400. An \$8 per person donation is requested. Cancelled if raining.

Ranger Dawn Soles

Sycamore Grove Park, Reservable Picnic Area

Ranger-led Programs (continued)

Bright Winter Stars (70 Miles Challenge)

Saturday, December 16 6:00 pm



Come out to the park to enjoy the night sky while the moon is not up to wash out the stars. We may see some late Geminid meteors along with the usual evening satellites. Participants will earn 2.5 miles towards the "70 Miles Challenge". If it is too cloudy to see stars, we will hike a bit farther and try to look for owls, but the hike will be cancelled if raining.

Ranger Glen Florey Sycamore Grove Park, Wetmore Entrance (1051 Wetmore Road)

The Great Yule Log Hunt

Sunday, December 17 2:00 pm

Grab your silliest holiday hats, and join us for the 23rd annual hunt for the fabled Yule Log. We'll prepare for the hunt with games, merriment, and tales of ancient Yule celebrations. Then we'll be off on an old-fashioned hunt for that elusive log. After the hunt we'll gather around the fire and make our own Yule logs to take home. Call if you need directions to the Reservable Picnic Area. Cancelled if raining.

Chief Ranger Pat Sotelo and his Ranger Elves Sycamore Grove Park, Reservable Picnic Area

Sprucing Up the Park (RSVP)

Saturday, December 30 10:00 am

An area near the Arroyo Entrance to Sycamore Grove Park is in need of a makeover. Weeding, spreading wood chip, a whole lot of trimming and maybe a little planting are on the agenda. If you are interested in helping to spruce it up please RSVP by calling (925) 960 2400. Please wear shoes that can get dirty and bring gardening gloves if you have them. Cancelled if raining.

Ranger Darren Segur Arroyo Road Entrance, 5049 Arroyo Road

Last Hike of the Year! (70 Miles Challenge)

Sunday, December 31 10:00 am



Here's your last chance to earn miles towards the "70 Miles Challenge"! We will hike about 5 miles. We may go up some steep hills, but we'll take it slow and talk about whatever flora and fauna we see along the way. This hike will happen rain or shine so please come prepared!

Ranger Claire Girling Arroyo Road Entrance, 5049 Arroyo Road

70 Miles Challenge Ends December 31st!

We'd like to thank all our 70 Miles Challenge participants. This year, we offered 102.5 miles of qualifying hikes and an additional 25 miles of bike rides. If you have 50 miles or more recorded on your card, submit it during any of our December *70* hikes to claim your prize (or mail your card to: LARPD ATTN: Ranger Amy / 4444 East Avenue / Livermore CA 94550)

Prizes

- 50+ Miles - One free SGP 2018 calendar
- 70+ Miles - Calendar and one free SGP Annual Pass
- Grand Prize for top mileage earner - above plus two free spots on a Brushy Peak Tour!

Please include your phone number on the card. We'll contact the grand prize winner in January to register them on a regularly scheduled Brushy Peak Tour!



Oh Deer!

By Ranger Danny Haberman

Sycamore Grove Park is known for its variety of wildlife, and park visitors enjoy seeing everything from turkeys to bobcats to snakes, as well as the most popular of all -- the deer.



While the park is home to many creatures, deer are one of the boldest and easiest for people to spot. They also give visitors the sense that they are really out in the wild.

There are many types of deer in the world. The ones in Sycamore Grove are black-tailed deer, a subspecies of mule deer that can be found throughout the Pacific Northwest. Because the deep forest does not provide much of the underbrush which black-tailed deer browse for food, they tend to live on the forest's outskirts. However, these deer need a habitat in which they can find cover when the weather gets harsh, meaning Sycamore Grove Park is a perfect location for them.

The deer in Sycamore Grove can often be found eating grass in open fields or nibbling on any oak leaves that they can reach. They are a huge help in clearing the park of some of the poison oak plants that cause most people who touch them to develop a nasty rash. Despite the irritant in poison oak, the deer find it to be a perfectly tasty treat.

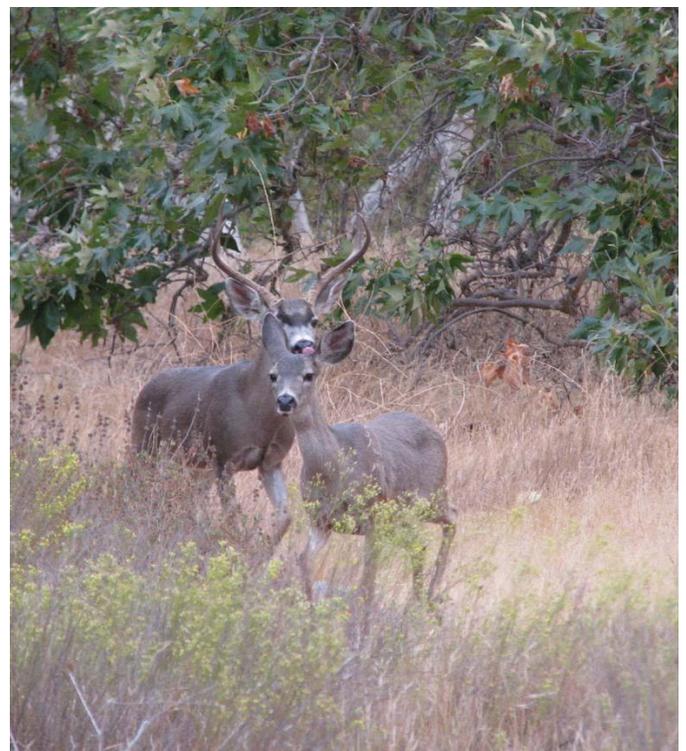
Right now is a terrific time to be watching deer. From early November through early December, the deer go through a mating process called rutting. You may see male deer, or bucks, use several strategies to try to find a mate. They may rub their antlers against trees to alert females they are around and to let other males know of their presence. The males often fight with each other by ramming their antlers together to impress the doe.

This process strains the bucks, as they barely sleep

or eat during their ardent search for a female. By the end of this period, the males are extremely tired. They then hide and rest to recover from broken antlers or sometimes extreme weight loss. Come January, the bucks drop their antlers, which grow back in April through August. You may occasionally see dropped antlers, which provide calcium for other animals in the park.

The rutting period ends in mating, and the female deer usually have their young six to seven months later, around late May or early June. They normally have twins, but sometimes a single or triple birth occurs. The fawns weight about 6 to 8 lbs. at birth and are born with no scent. This allows the mother deer to leave her young (well-hidden, of course) when she goes off to forage for food. More often than not, when you see a fawn alone, its mother is out foraging.

Next time you are in Sycamore Grove Park, keep your eyes peeled for a sight of a black-tailed deer running, feeding, or playing. The park has an abundance of these wonderful creatures, and we are lucky to be able to see them in their natural habitat.



Rutting Deer

Photos by Ranger Amy Wolitzer

Christmas Berry (continued)



Tataviam, Salinan, Maidu, Karok, Sierra Miwok, Pomo, Luiseno, Hupa, Wappo, and Yuki. How native Californians processed toyon berries varied from group to group.

Inland Miwok cooked berries on hot rocks until they bubbled, then mashed them with their hands and ate them. They also boiled the berries, then baked them in a deep, narrow earth oven.

Closer to the coast, the Kashaya Pomo, who lived north of the bay, picked the berries and then wilted them in hot ashes before winnowing them in a basket plate and eating them without further cooking.

The berries were not the only part of the plant collected by native peoples. The Yuki made the leaves and bark into a decoction for medicinal use in treating aches and pains. The Cahuilla and Costanoan tribes used an infusion of Toyon bark

and leaves to treat infected wounds.

Nowadays people are not attracted to Toyon as a food or medicine source but as a decoration. During the holiday season, which coincides with toyon berry time, people are drawn to toyon due to its bright color and resemblance to the European holly. In the 1920's, collecting Toyon branches for Christmas decoration became so popular that the State of California passed a law forbidding collecting on public land or on any land not owned by the person picking any plant without the landowner's written permission (CA Penal Code §384a).

If you visit Sycamore Grove Park this time of year you can see Toyon in its full glory. The berries are dripping on the branches and the wildlife is feasting on them.



Cedar Waxwing Photo by Ranger Glen Florey

2018 Parking Passes and calendars!

Sycamore Grove Parking Passes and Calendars make great gifts! Purchase from Rangers or Open Space Volunteers in Sycamore Grove, at the Robert Livermore Community Center at 4444 East Avenue, or by calling (925) 373-5700.

2018 Pass for Livermore Residents
\$60 (Seniors age 60+ price is \$30)

2018 Pass for Non-residents
\$90 (Seniors age 60+ price is \$60)