

# Valley Wilds

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## California Thrasher

*Several years ago, back when I was just starting to learn about birds and their strange ways, I was driving the ranger truck through Dry Creek when I saw a medium-sized bird with an extra-large, curved bill. It was one of the first times I had seen a new bird and known for sure that it wasn't one that I recognized, and I rushed back to*

the office to grab Sibley's Guide to Birds and figure it out. I wasn't disappointed to learn I had seen my first California thrasher, a bird with a cool name and a big bill to go with it.

Unlike some bird adaptations that exist only to help find a mate, the distinctive bill on the thrasher is there for a practical purpose - to help it find food. While they will eat berries off native shrubs, what a thrasher really wants in life is a big pile of leaves to dig through

(or thrash, as the case may be) to look for the insects and other invertebrates that live off the decaying leaves.

While the thrashers I have seen have all been in Sycamore Grove, they are known to make appearances in backyards. If you want to attract them, skip the bird feeder. Instead, put the rake away and let the leaves build up to provide insects for the thrashers to eat (as well as to mulch your plants and save some water). If that isn't enough, they also enjoy the berries from toyon and golden currant bushes.

If you would prefer to see a thrasher in Sycamore Grove Park, you are going to need to be patient, as they are here in relatively low numbers. However, since they don't migrate, any time of year will do. The most common places to spot a thrasher in the park are along the Sycamore and Dry Creek trails, especially in areas where the rocky soil drains quickly, allowing plants like California sagebrush to grow.

By Ranger Glen Florey



Photos by Glen Florey

One of the best ways to spot one is to learn to recognize their [call](#), which is similar to that of their closest relative, the mockingbird, but a little less repetitive and a bit harsher. Like mockingbirds, thrashers can mimic the songs of other birds in addition to their own call, varying from a chirp-like call to elaborate songs. Keep your eyes and ears open, and maybe you will spot one of these beautiful birds the next time you are in the park!



Christmas Bird Count Results:  
52 species seen in Sycamore Grove  
138 total seen in E. Alameda County

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**Livermore Area Recreation and Park District**

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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:

<b>Play Like an Animal</b>	<b>Thursday, Jan. 3</b>	<b>10:00 am</b>
<b>Winter Birding</b>	<b>Sunday, Jan. 6</b>	<b>9:00 am</b>
<b>Tree Time (RSVP)</b>	<b>Saturday, Jan. 12</b>	<b>10:00 am</b>
<b>Winter Campfire (RSVP)</b>	<b>Sunday, Jan 13</b>	<b>4:30 pm</b>
<b>Wed. Morn. Birding (RSVP)</b>	<b>Wed. Jan 16</b>	<b>9:00 am</b>
<b>Mushroom Madness</b>	<b>Sunday, Jan. 20</b>	<b>1:00 pm</b>
<b>Eclipse Viewing (drop-in)</b>	<b>Sunday, Jan. 20</b>	<b>7 - 9 pm</b>

## Winter Break - Play Like an Animal!

**Thursday, January 3 10 am**

Keep your kids from bouncing off the walls over winter break and get them bouncing through Sycamore Grove Park instead. This program is geared toward elementary-aged kids (though all ages are welcome) with an accompanying adult. They can have fun and learn about animal sounds and communication in the process. This program will be a combination of a sit-down talk and games on the field. Program will be held at the Reservable Picnic Area. Cancelled if raining heavily.

*Naturalist Heather Day*

*Sycamore Grove Park, Reservable Picnic Area*

*(look for signs on the road that goes up to the Veterans Hospital)*

## Winter Birding

**Sunday, January 6 9:00 am**

Head out to the park for a mild walk and vigorous bird watching! Now that the sycamores have dropped their leaves, we should have an excellent chance of spotting anyone perching in the canopy. Binoculars will be available to borrow. Cancelled if raining heavily.

*Ranger Eric Whiteside*

*Sycamore Grove Park, Wetmore Road Entrance (1051 Wetmore Road)*

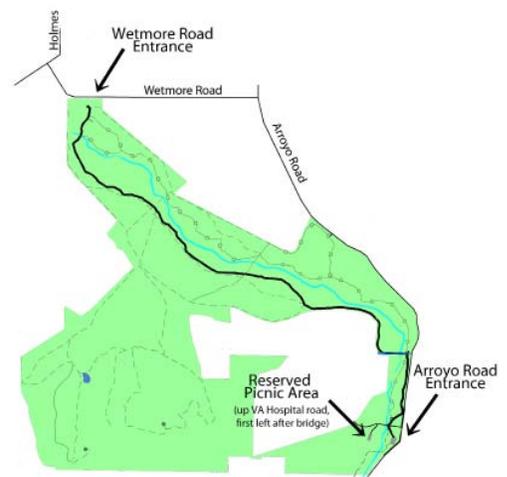
## Tree Time

**Saturday, January 12 10:00 am**

Sycamore Grove has several sites where the rangers have planted native trees and shrubs and it's time to give them some attention. They need some weeding, replanting, cage repair, and mulching. If you would like to help, then this program is for you. Bring proper footwear, water, and gloves if you have them (we have some to loan). Sign up by calling (925) 960-2400. Program will last 1 ½ to 2 hours and may involve a short walk to the sites. Cancelled if raining.

*Ranger Darren Segur*

*Sycamore Grove Park,  
Wetmore Road Entrance (1051 Wetmore Road)*



# Ranger-led Programs (continued)

## Winter Campfire (RSVP)

**Sunday, January 13 4:30 pm**

Winter, with its crisp evenings, is a beautiful time here in the park. Join us tonight to enjoy one of our winter evenings while sitting by a crackling campfire. We'll enjoy some hot cocoa (provided) while learning a little about some of our nocturnal park residents. There are no seats in the campfire area so please bring a chair or blanket to sit on. Feel free to bring a hot dog or marshmallows to cook over the fire. Cancelled if raining. RSVP required by calling 925 960 2400.

*Ranger Dawn Soles Sycamore Grove Park,  
Reservable Picnic Area (call for directions)*

## Wednesday Morning Birding (RSVP)

**Wednesday, January 16 9am**

Weekends can be busy for all of us! Sycamore Grove can be a bustling hive of activity on weekends... Much of the wildlife steers clear of the increased traffic. If you are lucky enough to have a flexible Wednesday morning, please join me for a stroll through the quiet weekday trails. Hopefully we will see some of our more timid residents. Please RSVP by calling (925) 960 2400. Cancelled if raining.

*Ranger Eric Whiteside Sycamore Grove Park,  
Wetmore Road Entrance (1051 Wetmore Road)*

## Mushroom Madness

**Sunday, January 20 1:00 pm**

Join Ranger Amy and the Bay Area Mycological Society for our annual Sycamore Grove Park mushroom hunt! We will crawl around under trees, wander through meadows, and look at rotting logs to see how many different types of fungi we can find. Please be aware this is not a foray for edibles – all mushrooms need to stay in the park. This event will happen rain or shine!



*Ranger Amy Wolitzer Sycamore Grove Park,  
Reservable Picnic Area (call for directions)*

## Lunar Eclipse Viewing

**Sunday, January 20 7:00 pm - 9:00 pm**

Sycamore Grove is the perfect location to watch the first lunar eclipse of the year! The moon will start turning red just after sunset. It will continue to dim until the peak of the eclipse at about 9 pm. The Wetmore Road Entrance will be open after-hours for this special program. Park in the lot and follow signs to the gathering area where Ranger Glen will have a toasty fire going. Drop-in anytime during the eclipse. Cancelled if raining.

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

## 2019 Park Hours



<i>Jan. 1 - Jan. 27</i>	<i>7 am - 5:30 pm</i>
<i>Jan. 28 - Feb. 24</i>	<i>7 am - 6:00 pm</i>
<i>Feb. 25 - Mar. 9</i>	<i>7am - 6:30 pm</i>
<i>Mar. 10- - Mar. 31</i>	<i>7 am - 7:30 pm</i>
<i>Apr. 1 - Apr. 28</i>	<i>7 am - 8:00 pm</i>
<i>Apr. 29 - Aug. 18</i>	<i>7 am - 8:30 pm</i>
<i>Aug. 19- Sep. 8</i>	<i>7 am - 8:00 pm</i>
<i>Sep. 9 - Sep. 30</i>	<i>7 am - 7:30 pm</i>
<i>Oct 1. - Oct. 20</i>	<i>7 am - 7:00 pm</i>
<i>Oct. 21 - Nov. 2</i>	<i>7 am - 6:30 pm</i>
<i>Nov. 3 - Dec. 31</i>	<i>7 am - 5:30 pm</i>

# Crawdads in Sycamore Grove?

By Volunteers Polly Krauter  
and Wally Wood

When you think of crawdads, does a local band –Crawdad Republic – come to mind? Here at the park, we have a crustacean commonly known as crawdad, or mudbug, crawfish, but, most correctly, the crayfish. Cajuns named the crustacean “crayfish,” which comes from the Old French word *escrevisse*. Freshwater crayfish live in ponds, lakes, streams, and rivers found throughout the United States. They resemble little lobsters.

The crayfish that we find in the stream at Sycamore Grove is the Red Swamp crayfish (*Procambarus clarkii*). It is native to southern central states and northeastern Mexico. It was transported up from the south to rice fields in the California Delta and Central Valley for the purpose of growing crayfish to sell in fish markets. The Red Swamp crayfish is a non-native, invasive species that was intentionally introduced for agricultural purposes, as well as the aquarium trade, bait industry (largemouth bass love crayfish), and teaching and research laboratories. The crayfish we find in Sycamore Grove streams possibly came from crayfish used as bait for bass fishing in Lake Del Valle.

There are hundreds of crayfish species in the United States, but only a couple of native species remain in California – the Shasta Crayfish (*Pacifastacus fortis*) and the Klamath Signal Crayfish (*Pacifastacus leniusculus klamathensis*). The Shasta Crayfish is critically endangered and is listed under the US Endangered Species Act. The Klamath Signal Crayfish is not endangered. All other crayfish species in California have been artificially introduced.



Photo by Tat Lim

The Red Swamp Crayfish is dark red in color with raised spots along the body and a black stripe across the back. Adults vary in length between two and five inches. Freshwater crayfish have short life expectancies – most live for no more than two years. Crayfish breathe through specialized gills and can live out of water for several days under proper conditions (they are able to survive as long as their gills are wet). They are found anywhere there is calm fresh water with low pollution levels. Crayfish are considered an indicator species because they thrive only in unpolluted waters.



Crayfish are nocturnal – they wait until nighttime before leaving their shelter to hunt and scavenge food. Since they are omnivores (animals that eat both plants and other animals), they eat whatever they can get their claws on – anything from rotting leaves and twigs to animal flesh (both rotting and alive). Bottom-feeders such as the crayfish consume otherwise useless and lost food, and they are usually considered important contributors to the maintenance of the stream health. (In some areas, however, crayfish have contributed to the decline of native amphibians and fish and are considered a problem.) Crayfish check the overabundance of detritus, freshwater organisms, and aquatic plants living on the bottom of the stream. Juvenile crayfish eat mostly aquatic insects, while adult crayfish incorporate more plant material into their diets. The Red Swamp Crayfish also eats tadpoles and fish eggs and consumes plants that line the bottoms of lakes and streams. Its activity can make clear bodies of water more turbid and cause stream-bank erosion.

The life cycle of a crayfish starts with an oocyte (egg). The female holds hundreds of eggs under her long swimmeretes, which are appendages adapted for swimming and carrying eggs on the female crawfish. Once they've hatched from eggs, larvae will quickly grow to resemble a small crayfish. This takes 15 days, by which point they are only

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## Crawdads (continued)

0.5 inches in length. The larvae stay under their mother's tail and feed on small pieces of floating food. After the larval stages, young Crayfish look just like miniature adults.

The Crayfish's hard exoskeleton could be considered a blessing and a curse. It is highly protective, with joints that allow for movement, however, because the exoskeleton does not grow, crayfish must molt (shed) their old exoskeletons through a process called ecdysis. Immediately after they molt, crayfish are soft, and very vulnerable to attack by other crayfish or predator fish, and it can take a couple of days for the new shell to fully harden. Crayfish usually eat their old skeletons in order to recover the calcium and phosphates it contains. Juveniles can molt every week or so. Molting occurs six to 10 times during the first year of rapid growth, but less frequently during the second year. Adults may only molt a couple times a year, and only under the right conditions. Crayfish can regenerate their limbs if they are broken off, but regenerated legs and claws are often smaller or misshapen when compared to the originals.

Crayfish are known to burrow as a means of coping with environmental stress. The burrows are used as refuge to avoid predation and dehydration, and as nests. Young crayfish usually remain in the mother's burrow until they molt three times.

When the stream goes dry, crayfish retreat to their burrows, which they must dig in order to be able to submerge in water beneath the water table. If the burrows remain moist, crayfish can survive at least until the next season, possibly longer. As the crayfish digs its burrow, it has to do something with the mud. If it takes the mud outside the burrow and crosses the ground to dispose of it, it will be vulnerable to predators. To avoid that, crayfish learned to build chimneys. If the crayfish uses a chimney to dispose of mud, it can avoid leaving the entrance of the burrow. If you ever approach a chimney and the crayfish is visible, you will see how quickly it can fall/scurry back down the tunnel. Crayfish are capable of traveling three to 36 feet in a day.

One benefit of having crayfish in our stream is that they are a food source for many park residents. Herons and egrets are seen silently stalking crayfish in the stream and spearing them with great agility. Crayfish may be part of the reason there have been frequent sightings of California river otters for the last year and a half. Otters enjoy the quiet recesses of our stream and its pools and easily-obtainable food, including crayfish. See the [August Valley Wilds](#) for more about otters.

Are we happy that there are Red Swamp Crayfish in our local streams? Not really – they are a non-native, invasive species with an impressive ability to colonize a wide range of environments. They compete with native predators, and will feed on larvae and juveniles of native fish and amphibians. Fortunately, our environment seems to have adapted to the crayfish. As long as egrets, herons, raccoons, otters, and other predators keep the crayfish population in check, we can maintain a robust stream habitat. However, it is very important not to release any animal–fish, turtle, frog, cat, plant or animal, great or small, in Sycamore Grove Park. No one wants to release an invasive species that might prove to out-compete our native species. Next time you are in the park stand very still on one of the bridges and gaze into the water. You may catch a glimpse of a crawdad on the bottom of the stream. If you don't see one there, you can always head downtown and find out when Crawdad Republic is playing their next show!



*Crawdad Republic (the band)*