

# Valley Wilds

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A publication of the LARPD Open Space Unit

## Hunters of the Night

There are over 150 species of owl in the world, present on every continent except Antarctica. Most owls are active at or after dusk and have special adaptations that allow them to hunt in the dark, including keen eye sight. Unlike most birds, owls have binocular vision, meaning their eyes face straight ahead much like ours.

However, their eyes cannot move in their sockets, so they must swivel their entire head to follow moving objects. To allow for this, owls have fourteen bones in their neck, which enable them to turn their head up to 270° degrees in either direction. Owls also rely on their excellent hearing when hunting. Most have asymmetrical ears which allow them to hone in on their meal with exceptional accuracy. They are also noiseless in flight due to their soft, fluffy feathers which muffle the sound of their wings, meaning they can sneak up on their prey without being noticed.

The largest owl in the world is the great gray owl, also known as the great gray ghost. It stands over two feet tall with up to a five foot wingspan. It calls the coniferous forests of Canada, the northern United States, Europe and Asia home. It hunts mostly rodents, with hearing so sharp it is said to be able to plunge into the snow and capture voles as they scurry about hidden in their vast network of tunnels. Unlike most owls, great gray owls hunt mostly during early morning or late afternoon, especially during the winter months.

On the other side of the spectrum is the elf owl, the smallest owl on Earth. It is no bigger than a sparrow, weighing an average of 1.1 ounces. It calls both desert and woodland home, oftentimes making its nest in woodpecker cavities in cacti or deciduous trees. It primarily eats insects, which it finds on tree branches and the ground.

Here in Livermore, we enjoy the company of the diminutive western screech owl, the common barn owl, and the aggressive great horned owl, among others. The

By Ranger Jamie Greco



Photo by Amy Wolitzer




great horned owl has the most varied diet of any owl, with over 253 species documented as prey. These include raccoons, snakes, swans, squirrels, scorpions, armadillos, bats, great blue herons, porcupines, domestic cats and dogs, shrews, crows, young alligators, and other owls. The great horned owl will even kill and eat skunks!

Throughout history, humans across the earth have recognized that owls are exceptional animals. Some cultures revered them while others regarded them with fear. In Europe, William Shakespeare wrote about witches consorting with owls and using them in potions. In fact, it was fairly common for healers to prescribe owl parts for various problems. Owl hearts were given to warriors to offer strength in battle. They were also placed on the left breast

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### Livermore Area Recreation and Park District

4444 East Ave. Livermore, CA 94550  
[www.larpd.dst.ca.us](http://www.larpd.dst.ca.us)  
 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 \$2 donation is requested. A \$5 parking fee is charged at both park entrances.

## February Programs



### Mushroom Madness!

**Sunday, February 5**

**1:00 p.m.**

Join Ranger Amy and Debbie Veiss of the Bay Area Mycological Society for our annual 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. Last year there were more than 25! Wear clothes that can get dirty. Please be aware that mushrooms may not be removed from the park – you can take lots of photos but the fungi we find need to remain in their habitat. Call (925) 960 2400 if you need directions to the reserved picnic area.

*Ranger Amy Wolitzer*

*Sycamore Grove Park  
Reserved Picnic Area*



### Cats

**Saturday, February 11th**

**10:00 a.m.**

North America is home to a surprising number of cats - and I don't mean "Fluffy" the pet kitty. Join me today to learn about the different types of wild cats that share this continent with us. We will pay particular attention to the wild cats of our local area.

*Ranger Dawn Soles*

*Sycamore Grove Park  
Arroyo Road Entrance*



### Red Planet Rising

**Saturday, February 18th**

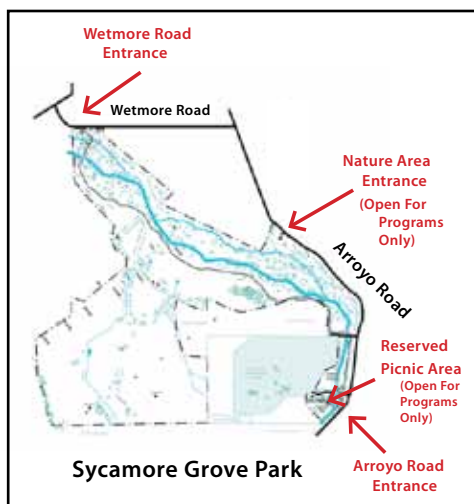
**6:30 p.m.**

In two weeks Mars will be at opposition. This means it is as close as it ever gets to Earth and is the time when it shines most brightly in the night sky. Come out to Sycamore Grove for a walk into the hills to watch Mars rise in the eastern sky after sunset. Please dress warmly and wear comfortable walking shoes. The hike will be approximately two miles. Cancelled if raining.

*Ranger Glen Florey*

*Sycamore Grove Park  
Wetmore Road Entrance*

(Programs continued on page 3)



#### Quick Look:

|                                 |                                |                 |
|---------------------------------|--------------------------------|-----------------|
| <b>Mushroom Madness!</b>        | <b>Sunday, February 5th</b>    | <b>1:00 pm</b>  |
| <b>Cats</b>                     | <b>Saturday, February 11th</b> | <b>10:00 am</b> |
| <b>Red Planet Rising</b>        | <b>Saturday, February 18th</b> | <b>6:30 pm</b>  |
| <b>Hike to the Cattail Pond</b> | <b>Sunday, February 26th</b>   | <b>1:00 pm</b>  |

# Hunters of the Night (Continued)

of sleeping women to make them divulge secrets. Owl feet were burned with graphite to form a mixture that protected the wearer from serpents. In the Roman Empire, dead owls were nailed to the front door to divert hail and lightning. In ancient Greece, owl egg soup was believed to cure epilepsy if consumed during a waning moon.

In southern India, the number of owl hoots heard in a row signified what would happen to you in the near future. One hoot meant impending death. Two hoots signified success in a new activity. Three hoots indicated that a woman in the family would be marrying soon. Four hoots alerted of an upcoming disturbance. Five hoots foretold travel. Six hoots implied guests would soon come for a visit. Seven hoots suggested a future mental distress. Eight hoots warned of sudden death. Nine hoots predicted good fortune.

Though most of these superstitions have faded, owls still startle and amaze at night. Though some of our owls are seen fairly commonly, the most common way to experience them is through the sounds that they make - a few of which can be hair raising! Here in Livermore we only have one true "hooter"; the great horned owl actually makes a "hoot hoot" sound. Our other common owls, the barn owl and screech owl, have calls that don't

## February Programs (Continued)

### Hike to the Cattail Pond

Sunday, February 26

1:00 p.m.

A lot of work has been going on in upper Sycamore Grove Park over the past several months. A wetlands area has been restored, a new section of trail has been completed, and the previously cattail-choked pond has been rebuilt. A very different scene now exists here. It will be fun to watch it change as plants develop, critters return and the associated habitats and ecosystems flourish over time. The hike to the Cattail Pond is approximately 3 miles round trip with a couple of moderately strenuous, but short, hills. Bring drinking water, binoculars, and dress for the weather. Cancelled if raining.

*Ranger Patti Cole*

*Sycamore Grove Park*

*Wetmore Road Entrance*

sound like a "classic" hoot. Strangely enough, the barn owl screeches while the screech owl doesn't- instead it has a low, repetitive melodic call. Click on the photos below to hear some of their calls.

So, the next time you are out at night keep your ears tuned for one of our owls - whether it hoots or not!

Click on the owl to be linked to the Cornell Lab of Ornithology page where you can hear the sounds each makes!

[Barn Owl](#)



Photo by Peter Trimming

[Western Screech Owl](#)



Photo by Dawn Soles

[Great Horned Owl](#)



Photo by Amy Wolitzer

# Powers of Observation

What color shirt is your spouse or significant other wearing today? How did your daughter style her hair for school? How many families on your street have more than two vehicles?

While these may seem like silly questions, they can highlight the level of your observational awareness.

If you enjoy nature, being outdoors, watching wildlife and the like, you definitely want to hone your powers of observation. Through the observation exercises I've learned over the years associated with animal tracking, I have come to realize I really see so much more in nature than just animals. I notice many of the obscure signs that various animals leave behind as they pass through an area. I can often predict what an animal is about to do because I have studied previous situational behaviors. These skills, I have found, noticeably enhance my enjoyment of nature. I think you'll find the same to be true for you.

So, what's the best way to improve your powers of observation? Practice, of course. And to help you get started, here is a little exercise you can do while hiking in Sycamore Grove Park. Below are four photographs recently taken in the park of some rather unique things. If you are a regular park visitor, you might know where a couple of these are

By Ranger Patti Cole  
located. If you are a novice park visitor, this exercise might make your walk in the park a bit more fun. In either case, see if you can locate where these photos were taken. I'll give you one clue: three are from the lower section of the park with a fourth one in the upper section. The answers will be printed in a future *Valley Wilds* issue.

Good luck!

*If you'd like to learn more about Nature Observation and Tracking you may want to check out these books:*  
[Nature Observation and Tracking by Tom Brown Jr.](#)  
[Mammal Tracks and Sign by Mark Elbroch](#)

**Can you find where these photos were taken?**



Photo #1



Photo #2



Photo #3



Photo #4