

The Signpost

September-October, 2013

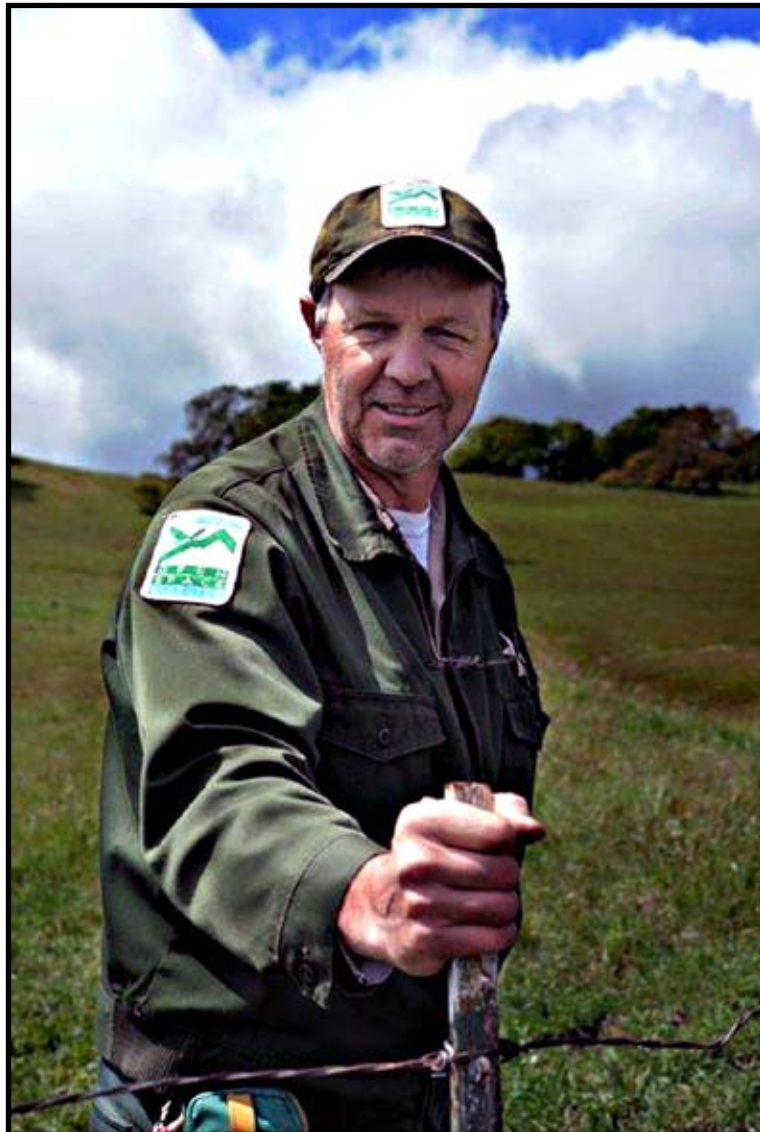


Happy Trails

Long time Marin County Open Space Supervising Ranger Richard Gibson retired at the end of June. During his 29 year tenure, he took pride in every job he did. Leading nature hikes, volunteer days, maintaining fire roads and trails, educating the public, helping to monitor our grazing operations, removing non-native species and handling public complaint calls all made his job diverse, exciting and rewarding all at the same time.

He was honored by our Board of Supervisors for helping citizens during the floods of 2005-06 and then in the late 80's for helping save the life of a PG&E worker whose truck plunged off a ridge-top fire road. He was admired by our many volunteers who he went out of his way to help in the field on projects and teach about our environment.

We all thank Rich for his hard work and dedication and wish him well in his retirement.



NOT my Favorite Insect

By Ranger Amy Wolitzer (Livermore Area Recreation & Park District)

My Park District operates a campground in South Lake Tahoe. I take a “working vacation” there for three weeks each summer, giving me a cherished respite from the heat of Livermore (in the Eastern-most East Bay). This summer, my stay has been unfortunately tinged with fear. Here’s why: Last August I was shoveling ash out of a firepit when I felt a sudden and intense pain in the back of my neck, like someone had stuck a red hot needle into my flesh. And then I felt a similar burning pain on my eyelid. I knew what this was so I ran. As I ran I felt another sting on my ankle and—to add insult to injury—one went up my shorts and got my rear end.

I had just experienced the misfortune of disturbing a yellow jacket nest that was hidden underneath the rocks circling the firepit. I headed back to camp and got some ice packs and took a Benedryl. After a few minutes, it became clear my face was swelling at an alarming rate and we realized that what was happening was not a normal reaction to yellow jacket stings. My husband and I got in the car and headed to the emergency room at high speed.

Before I tell you the rest of the story (don’t worry, I lived to tell the tale) let me give you a little background on one of the few creatures I have come to fear...

Yellow jackets are a type of wasp and have many similarities with honeybees. They are close relatives, both in the order Hymenoptera. They are social insects, with female workers that will sting to defend a hive/nest. There are differences in where they build their homes, what they eat and their propensity to attack.

Unlike bees, which have a barbed stinger that usually detaches after stinging a human, yellow jackets have a lance-like stinger with smaller barbs that allow them to pull out and sting multiple times. They can also bite. Both yellow jackets and bees are generally not a problem away from their home base; they may land on a person but usually go on their way peaceably when they discover there is no food to be had. Both will defend their homes if they feel threatened but the difference is bee hives are generally easy to spot and easy to avoid. Yellow jacket nests are better hidden and can be found in surprising places, like campfire pits.

The yellow jackets we have in Tahoe generally nest underground. In the spring, a queen that has overwintered will find a suitable location and build a nest. The nest is made from a paper-like pulp she makes from chewing up wood fibers. Her initial nest will consist of 30 to 50 brood cells. They look much like the honeycomb of bees but appear to be made of gray paper. The queen will lay eggs in it and search for bits of meat and fruit to feed the larvae that hatch. After 18 to 20 days the larvae will pupate and mature, emerging as infertile female workers. These workers will gather material to enlarge the nest and food for the additional larvae the queen will brood. A colony can reach

4,000 to 5,000 workers and consist of 10,000 to 15,000 cells by late summer. At this time the queen will lay eggs that will hatch into male drones and future queens. The males will die soon after mating but the fertilized queens will overwinter and start their own colonies the next spring.

Another difference between yellow jackets and bees is that, unlike the nectar/pollen purist bees, yellow jackets find a perfect smorgasbord at our picnics. Our sodas and sweets provide quick sugars to fuel the workers and our burgers and hot dogs provide protein rich food to chew up and bring back to the developing larvae. Soda isn’t the only sweet treat the workers enjoy—the larvae secrete a sugary material the workers gobble up. When summer is drawing to an end and there are fewer larvae providing sweet secretions in the nests, the adults rely even more on us for their sugar fix.

Back to my story... Although I did not go into full anaphylaxis (where the throat swells and breathing is inhibited) I did experience what the ER called a “severe acute allergic reaction and urticaria.” After two hours of close observation and IV corticosteroids and anti-histamines, I was released with a prescription for prednisone, an epi-pen and strict instructions to stay clear of yellow jackets. Since then, I saw an allergist and testing revealed an allergy to yellow jackets (duh!) but thankfully not to bees or wasps other than yellow jackets. For six months I was injected once a week with gradually increasing quantities of yellow jacket venom. In June I reached a dose equivalent to the venom of two yellow jacket stings with only a small bit of swelling. For the next two years, I will get injections at that dose once a month.

Most people will not have as severe a reaction to yellow jackets as I did. General advice on how to treat a sting is to clean the stung area with soap and water and apply a towel-wrapped ice pack. Most people experience itching where the sting occurred for three or more days. There are many home remedies out there including ammonia, baking soda, and mud but I would recommend good ol’ fashioned itch relief cream from the drug store. Always monitor someone who has been stung for a severe allergic reaction and call 911 if they begin having difficulty breathing or experience serious swelling of the face, mouth or neck.

If there are yellow jackets in your campground or picnic area, think carefully before setting up traps. Traps are most effective when put out in early spring to catch the queens. Late in the season they will just attract the yellow jackets to the trap and, as a nest can support 5,000 yellow jackets, there is a practically endless supply who will be attracted to the bait. Nests need to be located and sprayed with wasp killer at night or in the early morning when it is too cold for them to fly. For best results, spray thoroughly, dig up the area and spray again. Some Vector Control agencies will remove them for you if you call and request it.

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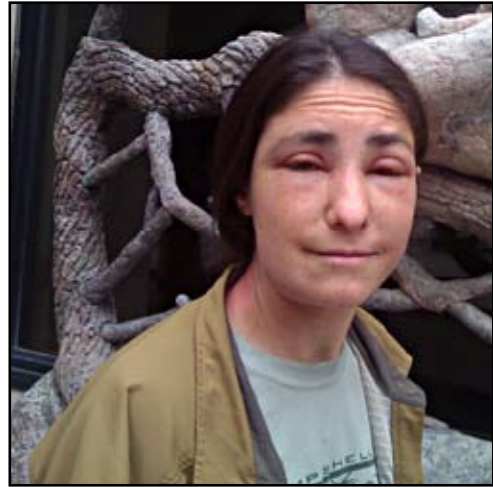
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As I write this, I am again working at the campground, hoping not to put my allergy shots to the test. I face my least favorite insect at every water spigot and many picnic tables. I know they are unlikely to sting me unless I threaten a nest but I carry my epi-pen at all times just in case!

A version of this article originally appeared in the [Valley Wilds](#), a monthly publication of the Livermore Area Recreation and Park District's Open Space Unit. If you would like to receive it, email valleywilds@larpd.dst.ca.us and ask to be added to our mailing list.



Five minutes after insect encounter



Three hours after insect encounter

“Involvement with these issues means you are involved with the good people. The people with the live hearts... the live eyes... the live heads.... Think of the people in your lives. Who are the people you surround yourself with? Who are the people that make your life worthwhile? Usually they are the people who are committed to something. So in the final analysis commitment in and of itself whether you win or not, is something that truly makes your life worthwhile”

Harry Chapin on Pete Seeger

Park Heritage



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The Camping Evolution or The End of Camping as We Knew It

Patrick Boyle Region 1

It was announced earlier this summer that Americans are no longer the biggest nation when it comes to size. However I think we still hold the title when it comes to camping. Camping is a multimillion dollar business here in California. Between outdoor gear, gas, food, and park fees, it generates quite a boost for the economy. There are over 145,000 campsites here in California, 53,000 of these are operated by government agencies. The average camper spends 1 to 6 days camping per year and spends on average \$600 + per trip. These numbers are taken from the Dean Runyun Associates Study on camping in California done in 2000. So we need to adjust these numbers accordingly.

The economic capitalists have seized on this nugget of information. When I was a kid we spent two weeks camping every year. Dad would get the 5 of us and all our gear into the family station wagon and hit the road. We had our tents, sleeping bags, ice chests and Coleman stove and lantern. Now I see a family of 5 roll in with two SUV's loaded to the hilt, and usually towing a trailer. This is not even counting the additional toys like boats, jet skis, bikes, and off road vehicles.

Instead of a tent, people bring out a 3 room tenting cabin and a tent for the dog. The Coleman stove has been upgraded to a three burner self-standing unit, they also have entire kitchen set ups, air mattresses, shower units, anti-gravity chairs, and portable propane ovens. Even trailers and motorhomes now have slide outs and pop outs to expand our camping space. Electronic

entertainment has also made the leap into the campground with inverters. I have actually had to ask people to turn down their TV's in the campground and have also had folks set up screens and bring out their projectors for big screen outdoor movies while camping.

While some of this can be considered progress in the comforts of camping, it takes away some of what us traditionalists call the outdoor experience. I still work in an area that has no cell service so folks actually get a chance to at least partially unplug. But there are a lot of people who spend an awful lot of time searching for a cell phone signal that does not exist. I am really beginning to think the next step in evolution will be a third eye in the middle of our forehead so we can see where we are going while we text and stare at our electronic devices. (Or at least someone needs to invent an app that will tell people to take two steps forward because the line has moved.) I get asked at least twice a day to charge someone's camera, computer, I something, or electronic game. Maybe we should put in charging stations with keys like the old bus lockers.

Where am I going with all this? Well maybe we, parks, need to adjust a bit to keep up with all

the new technology and additional space required for this new age camping experience. Maybe we need to make our campsites a little larger, give folks a little more space. It seems like many campgrounds are more like campgrounds. Campsites spaces more like a parking lots with no vegetation screens between sites, where



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The Camping Evolution or The End of Camping as We Knew It

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you can watch your neighbor all weekend. (Yosemite Valley I am talking to you among others) It seems like we are trying to squeeze as many people into our campgrounds as possible. I know we are all under the gun to get as much revenue as we can during our short season but maybe we need to change our perspective a bit. Maybe we need to develop sites that will accommodate these larger items and even establish some sites for multiple families or more group areas. They are going to show up anyway. (The above cited study showed that over 50% of campers were joining other family members.) We might as well try and get in front of the curve.

I actually rented a virtual ranger in Death Valley. It was a GPS enabled device that spoke about different things from geology, vegetation, animals, and history as we roamed through the park. I was totally turned off by the idea at first but at the end of the day I actually found myself warming up to the device. It did give a lot of insight into

the park, but it was not the ranger experience I prefer. However, it made me think of trying a geo ranger type of interpretive trail in my park. Maybe something where we guide people to spots where interpretive boards are located, or a geo cache type game using their gps or smart phone where they can get some more information about the park. I get a lot of people telling me things in my park were not on the website, both good and bad. It seems this is where most people are getting their info now. If anyone out there is planning on upgrading campgrounds or bringing in more technology to their parks let me know. Or give a quick post on the PRAC Net. Are we just going to keep trying to squeeze these folks in and hope for the best? We always talk about adaptation and evolution during our interpretive programs maybe we are the ones that need to evolve a bit.

To see the complete report by Dean Runyun Associates click here...[CampersinCalifornia.pdf](#)



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