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# THE SIGNPOST

Second Quarter, 2020



Dear Members and Supporters of the Park Rangers Association of California,

Please enjoy this issue of *The Signpost*. Use the hyperlinks below to jump to a specific article, or scroll through and read the whole newsletter whenever and wherever is convenient for you.

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## PRAC News and Updates

- ONE MORE ROUND OF THANKS: We want to start out by giving one more shout out to **Andy Brown** and his colleagues from **Washoe County Parks** for hosting a great conference back in March! Many of us will hold good memories of this conference as the last time things felt fun and normal - we got to travel and make new friends and do things that now seem impossible.

- NEW REGION 4 DIRECTOR" Please join the PRAC board in welcoming a new director for region 4: **Mason Gannaway**! Mason has been with Orange County Parks for 9 years, starting as park maintenance in 2011. He became a Park Ranger and graduated the OC Parks Ranger academy in 2017. He is currently assigned to the coastal operations division, patrolling 7 miles of Southern California coastline and serves as a field training officer for the department. We would like to thank outgoing 4 director **Candi Hubert** for her years of service on the PRAC board and her help during this transition. Mason can be reached at [region4@calranger.org](mailto:region4@calranger.org). (Curious about PRAC regions? Check the map here: [http://calranger.org/download/region\\_map2019.jpg](http://calranger.org/download/region_map2019.jpg))
- NEW PRAC LIFETIME MEMBERSHIP: At the conference a lifetime membership to PRAC was proposed and adopted with **Mike and Patsy Lynch** handing over a check for their lifetime membership dues on the spot.



- RANGER DIRECTORY: The new directory premiered at the PRAC Conference and was provided to attendees on a PRAC usb drive. A big thank you to **Mike Warner** for all his work on this! See below for details and a link to view or download.
- 2021 PRAC CONFERENCE: Due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic that is impacting all of us planning for the 2021 conference has been put on hold until

further notice. We are still hoping to hold it near the Santa Monica Mountains in Southern California. We hope to know more by mid-summer and will keep the membership informed as we move forward.

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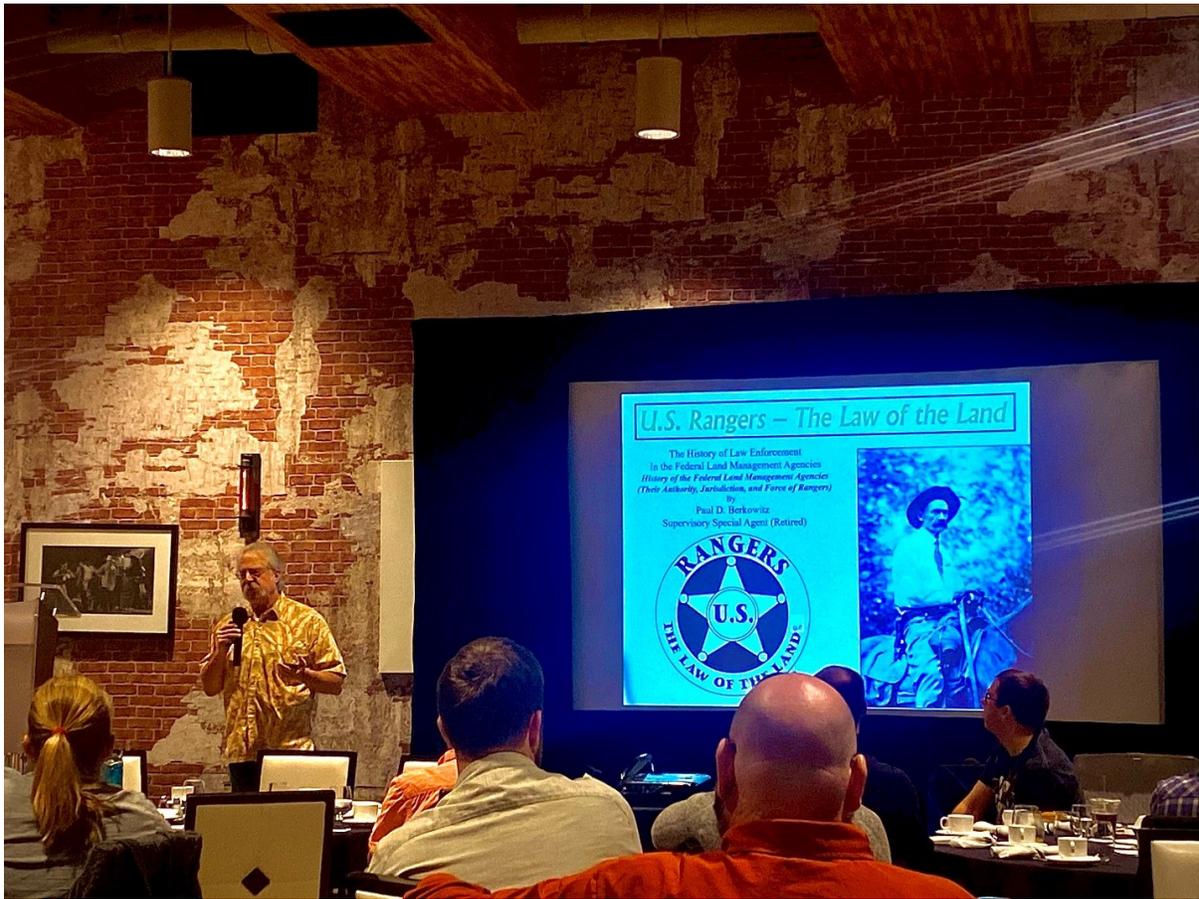
## **Under the Flat Hat By Matt Cerkel**

With everything that has happened it's hard to believe the 2020 California Parks Training Conference in Reno was just last month. The conference, which was a great success, was the calm before the storm of the COVID-19 Pandemic which has impacted us all!

Our keynote speaker, Phil Gaines, inspired us with his "Ranger First" presentation:



The next morning, we learned about the actual history of the law enforcement role of National Park Rangers from Paul Berkowitz. It is a history that is often forgotten or ignored and is one that impacts the safety of all Park Rangers who perform law enforcement duties.



We saw old friends and met new ones. In the background we were talking about Coronavirus, since it was in the news and the epidemic was worsening.



Less than two weeks after the conference, the figurative bottom fell out and the Coronavirus outbreak was declared a worldwide pandemic. The SF Bay Area and, a short time later, the entire state went into a Shelter-in-Place order to slow the spread of the virus and “Flatten-the-Curve.” Social distancing became the new norm, non-essential businesses closed and all but essential

employees stayed home. With that parks statewide saw huge increases in use from a worried, stressed and scared public. By March 21st, the first weekend of the statewide Shelter-in-Place order, parks were overwhelmed by record levels of use and social distancing was widely ignored!

In the aftermath of the Coronavirus and the weekend of March 21-22, agencies and County Health Officers have issued both hard and soft park closures. From small

local parks to “Crown Jewel” parks like Yosemite many parks are now completely closed to the public. In parks under soft closures, many visitor facilities are now closed.

We Park Rangers are working on the frontlines of the crisis. We continue to perform our duties, including EMS, and offer a measure of stability to our park visitors. Our visitors view the parks as a place to de-stress and decompress in a world turned upside down by the virus. They have largely been appreciative for the parks that remain open. Many are not regulars to our parks, but have turned to them, since besides shopping for essentials, parks remain as one of the public spaces still available to them. A small minority of park visitors are behaving in a selfish and entitled manner. Here in Marin County parks have seen four active cases of illegal trail building in the past two weeks.

California State Parks has developed some great media to help educate and inform park visitors in these difficult times. [https://www.parks.ca.gov/?page\\_id=30350](https://www.parks.ca.gov/?page_id=30350) and [https://www.parks.ca.gov/?page\\_id=30351](https://www.parks.ca.gov/?page_id=30351)

I modified one of the graphics to remind the public to provide social distancing during interaction with park employees when employees are in their trucks:



Please be safe and stay healthy.

Matt Cerkel

President

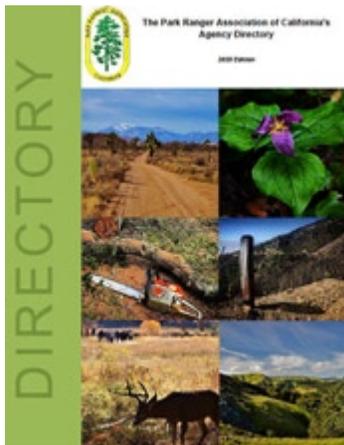
## Park Rangers Association of California



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### **New Ranger Directory** **By Mike Warner, 2020 Directory Editor**

View or download the Ranger Directory at <http://calranger.org/ranger-directory.html>



**How to Use It:** The California Ranger Agency Directory has been organized by geographic membership region. Take a moment to view the map on Page 3 to determine the approximate area you are interested in viewing. Then use the table of contents to locate the page number where that region begins within the directory.

**Locations:** If you are unsure of an agency's location, you can also locate it by checking each region's cover page or by viewing a list in the index of the directory.

**Origins:** This directory is assembled on volunteer time on behalf of the Board of Directors of the Park Ranger Association of California and other willing parties who wish to see this document completed.

Need help or have suggestions: If you wish to edit any entry or have comments and questions, please contact me at [mjwarner007@gmail.com](mailto:mjwarner007@gmail.com) . We intend to update the Directory annually every February.

*The PRAC board would like to thank **Mike Warner** for all the time and effort he put into creating this impressive resource!*

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## A Tale of Two Squirrels

### By Ranger Amy Wolitzer, Director Region 1

*In these stressful times, we thought it might be nice to provide you with some musings and meditations about squirrels written in a simpler time. We hope you enjoy and maybe learn something new.*



As I biked slowly past the ruins of a historic winery, I heard a commotion in the walnut trees on the right hand side of the trail. I looked up to see the black and white wings of a family of acorn woodpeckers as they dive-bombed a squirrel on a branch midway up the tree. The squirrel had gotten too close to their granary of acorns. The woodpeckers had spent too many hours carefully storing and maintaining their granary to let this invader cash in on their hard work.

As I watched the beleaguered squirrel's long, lithe form gracefully leap from branch to branch, I was distracted by a high-pitched alarm call coming from the ruins of an old distillery ahead and to my left. I strained my eyes, and saw a chubby, thick-bodied ground squirrel standing atop the rubble. He was up on his hind legs, and every three seconds he let out an impressive, high-pitched chirp. Other ground squirrels who had been lazily foraging along the edges of the trail froze, and then ran for cover. I turned around to see a bobcat disappearing into the brush on the hill.

As I continued my bike patrol and watched ground squirrels run across my path, I found myself wondering about the invader in the tree. Surely, the reddish-furred, bushy-tailed creature that leapt from branch to branch like a monkey was a different animal than these little furry tanks that are everywhere. Are both these species native to our area? Do they eat the same foods? Do the tree squirrels heed the alarm calls of the ground squirrels? Time for a little research!

First let's explore the familiar. California ground squirrels (*Otospermophilus beecheyi*) are ubiquitous in many parts of California. In Northern California grassland/Oak woodland you can pretty much count on seeing at least one of these furry little creatures scurrying across a trail during any outing. California ground squirrels are found throughout California and in the adjoining states as well. They are found in grasslands, deserts, and wetlands, from sea level to the mountains (up to 11,000 feet). They are particularly adaptable to disturbed areas and can eke out a living almost anywhere.



If you have ever been on a trail and heard a noise like a smoke alarm when it signals low battery (but louder and even more insistent), it was likely a ground squirrel sentry signaling the presence of a potential predator. If you look around, you may see the squirrel, standing atop a mound or fallen log for a better view. I have been told that ground squirrels have different alarm calls that communicate whether the potential predator is in the air or in the grass, but I am still not fluent in “squirrel” and can’t tell the difference.

Ground squirrels are omnivorous, meaning they can and will eat all types of food. Some of their regular go-to meals include grasses, leaves of various plants, roots, bulbs, fruits, seeds, nuts, and fungi. They will also snack on dead animals, insects, and bird eggs if they happen upon them. Like the classroom hamster, they use cheek pouches when they are foraging to collect more food than their stomachs can hold. They are known to store food underground for later consumption. Ground squirrels need very little water to survive.

Ground squirrels often live in large family groups. They build elaborate burrows, sometimes with six to 20 entrances. Some sources say that each squirrel in a colony will have a designated entry hole. When you see a squirrel disappear down a hole have you ever wondered how far that tunnel goes? According to California Department of Fish and Wildlife information, their tunnels average 35 feet in length! One tunnel in their studies was 138 feet long! Usually squirrels do not travel further than 450 feet from their burrow above ground.

Contrary to what you might think based on the numbers you see, ground squirrels typically give birth only once a year. Females will mate with multiple males, usually in early spring. After one month gestation the mother squirrel will give birth to five to eleven tiny, helpless young in a nest she has made deep in a burrow, lined with grass. It will be five weeks before the babies open their eyes. The mother may move them from burrow to burrow during this time to avoid predation. Soon after the young open their eyes, they begin exploring outside the burrow, and they are weaned between six and eight weeks of age. At eight weeks, they can dig their own burrows. They do not mate until they are a year old. It is estimated they usually live about six years in the wild, if they are not picked off by one of their copious predators.

While many consider ground squirrels to be a nuisance, they are also important habitat enhancers. Those same holes that might turn your ankle if you don’t watch your step house numerous other species, including the endangered California Tiger Salamander. It is thought that ground squirrels play an important role in seed distribution. Countless plants can sprout from their forgotten caches! Another way they are important to the ecosystem is they are an ample

food source for the predators many are thrilled to see – bobcats, coyotes, hawks, eagles, and snakes – as well as the secretive, rarely seen predators such as weasels, badgers, and mountain lions. Our wildlife photographers often benefit from our vigilant squirrels – they've learned to stop and look closely when they hear a squirrel sounding its alarm call. There is very likely something interesting happening nearby.

On to the invader. The reddish squirrel in the walnut tree was a fox squirrel, also known as the eastern fox squirrel, Bryant's fox squirrel, or *Sciurus niger*. These tree squirrels were brought to California from the Eastern United States, and they have become well established near cities. (There is a native tree squirrel in California – the western gray squirrel – but it lives in forests with conifers and will not be detailed in this article.) While I see fox squirrels regularly in certain open space areas where I see them in abundance is in my parents' backyard, where they run along the fences, taunt the cats, and attempt to raid the bird feeder.

In the wild, fox squirrels are less omnivorous than ground squirrels. They prefer nuts, fruits, and seeds to other foods. Unlike the ground squirrels, they seek safety high in a tree, not underground. Although they get almost all their water from eating plants, drought years can be tough on them because they can't switch over to plants, roots, and insects like the groundies can.

When it comes to numbers, the fox squirrels don't come close to the population levels of ground squirrels. A few fox squirrels per acre is what is typically seen in California, even though it is not uncommon for them to have two litters a year. Females build nests in a tree cavity or the crotch of a tree. After 45 days of gestation they have an average of three babies. Females will defend their nest area and cover babies with nesting material when they go out to forage. Like the ground squirrels, fox squirrel young are underdeveloped and need lots of care. They are weaned by 9 weeks of age, but are not self-sufficient until they reach 12 weeks. In the fall of their first year, young fox squirrels are driven out of the area where they were born. Male squirrels are forced to disperse farther than females, and have a high mortality in that first year. The life span of squirrels that survive their first year is similar to that of ground squirrels in the wild – about six years.

Fox squirrels are far less likely to be a meal item for a predator than ground squirrels – they are much harder to catch! In our area, the scarcity of suitable food and drought conditions seems to keep fox squirrel populations small. Their populations are larger in the LA area, and they can represent serious competition in areas with the western gray squirrel. Fox squirrels in California seem to be dependent on humans. They thrive in neighborhoods and orchards, but are unlikely to be seen colonizing remote areas. How did they come to my main open space park in Livermore? It's hard to say for sure but Sycamore Grove's history gives clues to why they came here. In the past, there was a lot more agriculture in Sycamore Grove than there is today. Perhaps the fox squirrels can persist in this "wilderness" because of the remnants of orchards from the 1880s. The almond orchard is still easy to see, as are the historic walnut lanes and the grand walnut trees by the winery ruins. The hill above the winery is thick with olive trees, and if

you know where to look, you'll find a few stunted pear trees here and there, though not enough to sustain a squirrel with an appetite for fruit.

So, our tale of two squirrels ends (for now) with the conclusion that our native ground squirrels are clearly winning the numbers game - although they are more likely to be a snack for a predator. I wonder what the imported fox squirrels think of their low-to-the-ground cousins when they run and sound their alarm calls. I imagine the fox squirrels may wish they could eat as voraciously as the ground squirrels but mostly are content to stay in the safety of their walnut trees.

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Thanks for reading! Please [let us know](#) if you have ideas for what you would like to see in future issues of *The Signpost*.



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