

Docent Circle: Field Notes Week of May 1, 2006

Now that the rain is slowing and temperatures are warming up the earth, many snakes are coming out of winter hibernation. They are found in open pastures/upland areas where gophers and mice are abundant. **Gopher snakes** are perhaps the most commonly seen. They will make a hissing sound and coil up if threatened. They have a brown and black diamond pattern on their backs. Does this sound like anyone else we know? Snakes rarely threaten humans and will move away if approached. The flicking tongue is actually *tasting* molecules of air to determine the presence of prey!



Tiger Salamanders Revisited. A cache of petrified salamander remains has recorded the gradual warming trend in Yellowstone National Park. Elizabeth Hadly of Stanford University, California, and colleagues analyzed more than 3,000 tiger salamander vertebrae from Lamar Cave, located in the Wyoming portion of the park. The vertebrae were plucked from 15 layers of sediments that accumulated in the cave over the last 3,000 years. Young tiger salamanders make an unusual choice during their development. They can either metamorphose into land-dwellers or remain adapted for water. The scientists found that the vertebrae of land-dwellers in the cave increased markedly in size over time. The largest of the bunch are about 1,150 to 650 years old, a period when other climate indicate Yosemite was warmest. A wealth of food from warmer weather probably fueled the amphibian's growth spurt. Their aquatic brethren, by contrast, remained the same size. In water, colder conditions ups the availability of food.



Rangers are puzzling over **a convention of jackrabbits** in the Morgan Horse pasture at the Pt. Reyes Nat'l. Seashore. Three or four of the large, long eared rabbits may be seen sitting quietly under a tree at the edge of the pasture, horses and deer passing them by with no change in behavior. The long ears help them thermo-regulate; in summer they will keep the ears up to release heat and in winter keep them close to the body to retain heat. Generally, they are most active in late afternoons. Males will sometimes box, male to male head butting and paw slapping - when a female rabbit is present. The term 'mad as a March hare' rises from this combat!



Ten Ways to Recognize Who is Singing:

1. Start at home: learn your backyard birds. Listen for the birds who will repeat their songs the most.
2. Learn common birds first: Robin, Northern Mockingbird, Titmice, Phoebe, Red-winged blackbird, Song Sparrow, Northern Oriole, Western Bluebirds.
3. Watch the singer: go outside, find the singing bird and watch.
4. Target birds of the Laguna: select a few common birds of the Laguna and use a tape or CD to learn their songs. Listen when you are out.
5. Use word phrases to help you remember: Phoebe says "*fee bee, fee bee*" Our little Brown Creeper says "*Tree, tree, beautiful tree!*" Often your field guide will list other phrases to listen for that can assist identification.
6. Whistle the bird's song: Try to make a judgment about the pitch (high or low), and try to imitate it. Hint: human whistle is about mid-pitch for bird songs.
7. Put sounds into words: Use words that describe the quality of the song such as buzzy, harsh, long, short, high or thin.
8. Compare new songs to old favorites: use songs you know well as benchmarks to compare. For example, the Black Headed Grosbeak is a "drunken Robin." It sounds like a Robin, but keeps on going and going.
9. Listen for songs of ancestors: As you listen to many bird songs, you will get a feel for what families of birds sound like. After identifying many flycatchers, you will notice that the family has similar qualities to their song.
10. "Tune up for warblers:" The warblers are the prettiest, most colorful birds to return in the Spring. They also are the most challenging to identify by song. Use your tape or CD to listen and prepare for their return.

Keep a green tree in your heart and maybe the singing bird will come. Chinese Proverb