



FROM UNDER MY BRIM

THE PONDEROSA

the PINE RIDGE ASSOCIATION

NEWS LETTER

JANUARY 1981

**RAPTORS:** Recently I watched a golden eagle flying over Miller Field. It was being dived upon repeatedly by a large crow. The eagle paid no attention to the attacks as it flew slowly off. Their size, power, speed and beauty of flight makes them truly the most majestic animal in the sky. Their beauty in flight can best be appreciated if you are lucky enough to watch their aerobatic courtship display. Golden eagles feed on small mammals, preferring rabbits, but are not above eating carrion as I witnessed a few weeks ago outside of the park when I saw four eagles feeding on an elk carcass. This habit has gained them a bad reputation with ranchers. When they see eagles feeding on young livestock, such as lambs, they assume the eagle killed it which may not be the case. Good points to look for in identification are the eagle's uniform dark brown color and their large size (wingspread to 7 1/2 feet; note that the wings are much longer though not much wider than those of a red-tail or vulture). Young have varying amounts of white at the base of the tail and on the middle of each wing. They gradually lose the white until it is completely gone at age four.

Turkey Vultures are the most commonly seen raptor in the area, however they leave the park, migrating south to the lowlands around October and return around January or February. Their meals of carrion are often far apart, however they are well adapted to handle this. They fly effortlessly, expending little energy. They seldom flap their wings and never fight the air currents but use them to their advantage. Unlike other raptors, their muscles are at rest when their wings are extended. This is why vultures are occasionally seen perched with their wings outstretched. Their wingspan is almost that of the eagle's, but they weigh only a quarter of what an eagle weighs. Identification is fairly easy. Vultures have a consistently dark color but unlike other soaring raptors, they hold their wings in a noticeable "V" shape. They also can be seen to tilt from side to side.

The most common hawk seen here is the Red-tailed Hawk. Their broad wings are an adaptation for soaring. As they glide high on rising air currents, they use their good eyesight to spot small mammals on open ground; their eyesight is equivalent to 8 power binoculars. They go into a dive using their speed to capture the surprised prey. This is the normal method, however I once saw a red-tail hop off a low limb onto an unsuspecting mouse.

The American Kestrel or Sparrow Hawk is a true falcon. Their wings are built for speed. They depend less on their speed for feeding than the larger falcons, but they occasionally can be seen to dive at unbelievable speeds in "play". In

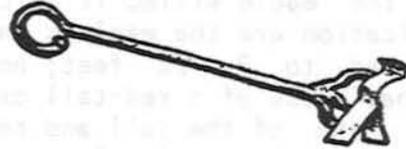
feeding they often hover or perch on a high limb before diving. They eat large insects, small rodents, and occasionally small birds. Their rusty colored back and tail make identification easy.

The Cooper's and Sharp-shinned hawks are usually only seen for a moment as they fly off into the trees. Their short broad wings are an adaptation for maneuvering quickly through the trees where they pursue their prey consisting mostly of birds. I once saw a Sharp-shin fly through a dense manzanita forest. It would pull in one wing, extend it then pull in the other wing, then extend it. With this "one wing at a time" technique it would glide through narrow spots without having to pull in both wings. In identification look for the squared off (or notched) tail of the pigeon sized Sharp-shinned hawk and the rounded end of the crow sized Cooper's hawk.

The hawk of the night is the great horned owl. Their large yellow eyes are an adaptation for seeing in low light conditions, but their well developed hearing plays as much a role in capturing their prey. Great horned owls do not depend on speed as do many of the hawks, rather they glide silently up to their prey. This silent flight is aided by soft feathers on the wing edge. They prey on medium sized mammals, mostly jack rabbits but occasionally take a skunk or even a badger. They are able to capture these thick skinned animals because of their sharp, strong talons. A friend once approached what looked like a dazed great horned owl. He was wearing a heavy leather glove. As the owl flew at him, he put up his hand and one of the owl's claws went through the glove and all the way through the fleshy part of his hand at the base of his index finger and thumb.

If you are interested in raptors and would like to learn more about them, you might be interested in a book sold by the association. It is called "Raptors of California" and is put out by the Dept. of Fish and Game. The price, in these days of inflation, is a pleasant \$.70.

BARRY



THAT'S INCREDIBLE (OR AT LEAST UNUSUAL)

Mountain Lions are seldom seen, at least that's what you hear. The park has been keeping records of sightings and signs such as tracks, kills and scratches since May of 1978. Out of a total of 59 entries, 22 are actual sightings, 11 just in the past year. About half of these were seen below the park on the road. Other unusual sightings along Steely Road (known as E. Dunn to many) include a flock of 50 wild turkeys seen by a number of people; a roadrunner; and a first for the area, a ringtail seen on New Years Eve by John. (It should be noted that John was not given a breathalyzer test after this sighting.) The Ringtail is a cat-like relative of the racoon and would also be expected to be found in the park. Twice now in recent days when we have had the hay barn open we have found Bobcat scats, with their characteristic scratch marks, buried just inside the barn door. A Marsh Hawk has repeatedly been seen in the Arnold Field and Docent Lee Sims saw a Prairie Falcon above China Hole on a semi-official Audobon Christmas bird count on Dec. 28th. A Yellow-breasted sapsucker (red-breasted) was seen earlier this month. Gray squirrels seemed to be completely gone from the area since the 1970's. John saw one at Upper Camp a couple of years ago and in the past few months two have been seen just below the park and one at Manzanita Point. Hopefully they are coming back.

## ANNUAL MEMBERSHIP MEETING

The annual member meeting was held at Dave Hildebrands on Dec. 16. Due to colds and flu there was not a quorum of directors present so no business was conducted. Otherwise it was a pleasant discussion of issues and problems facing the park. On Jan. 6, 1981, the directors met again. Dave Hildebrand was elected Chairman of the Board of Directors, Mandy Escebedo was elected Treasurer and the spring meeting was set for May 3. This meeting has been one of the most popular of the year. As last year, we will have a picnic at Manzanita Point. Each family should bring meat to bar-b-que and a salad or desert to share. Barry says he will make sure we have a fire for the meat.

### LET'S MAINTAIN !

In mid December plans were approved and work was started on a new camp at Manzanita Point. This new camp will provide a place for horse-packers who need to take a vehicle along for support. As with all other camps at Manzanita Point one vehicle per group will be allowed into the area.

At this stage a short access road and parking area have been put in. I have also put in a campfire circle and a rough trail; down to Bass Pond. What we need to do to complete the project is to install some hitching posts and improve the trail.

I say "we" because as you may have guessed, this is going to be our first volunteer project for 1981.

Weather permitting, Sunday Feb. 1 will be the work day. Plan to bring old work clothes and your lunch. (no alcohol during the work day) The state will provide tools, materials, and transportation to and from Manzanita Point. We will meet under the Museum at 9AM sharp for a brief training session and then go to work. This will be an all day project.

If you are interested in this project please let me know as soon as possible so I will know how many people to expect. Let's get 1981 off to a good start with a big turnout!

JOHN

### 1981 DOCENT PROGRAM

We would like to remind everyone the 1981 docent program will be starting in February. As mentioned in the last news letter, if you would like to learn more about the park, assist the park visitor, and can spare 8 hours a month (weekends), then you might consider becoming a docent.

If you would like more information, call Barry at the park (779-2728).

GARY

ALONG THE NORTHWEST BOUNDARY OF THE PARK  
BLUE RIDGE FIRE TRAIL AND TRAIL TO HAT ROCK VIA BLACK OAK SPRING

Although this stretch of trail is lovely any time of year, it is particularly beautiful on a clear day in mid winter. The deciduous trees - mostly oaks - are bare, permitting broad views impossible in summer; there may be crunchy snow under foot; and one has a vista through the clear air which includes the distant Santa Lucia mountains south of Monterey, Loma Prieta and Mt. Umunhum in the Santa Cruz Mountains, Ben Lomond just south of Big basin, and Black Mountain over Los Gatos. In places one's glance can swing from sparkling Monterey bay south to Cone Peak in the Santa Lucia's, across Fremont Peak (below the mountains but unmistakable) above San Juan Bautista, and finally over the interior ridges of the Coast Ranges eastward to the sparkling chain of snow-capped Sierra. Unless you are an unusually strong hiker, you should reserve this territory for a day hike from one of the closer backpack camps - Deer Horn Springs, Upper Camp, Skeels meadow, or Black Oak Spring.

The portion of the Blue Ridge Fire Road covered by this description is almost entirely above 3,000 feet in elevation save for a short dip just northwest of the Short Cut Road. From the northernmost point, just at the park boundary, it is a series of gentle ups and downs with alternating and occasionally simultaneous views south to east and north to west. The trail starts in a mixture of oak, digger pine and ponderosa pine, the latter showing signs of recent drought stress with numerous dead trees. Beneath are low but unusually lush manzanita along with other chapparal plants such as chamise. The Sierra are almost continually in view through the trees to the East and Monterey Bay across the chapparal to the south. As the trail begins to drop for its brief sojourn below 3000 feet, there is an unusual stand of toyon, the masses of bright red berries spectacular to photograph against a deep blue winter sky. In December 1980, there was clear evidence in the form of two oval patches of turf removed and numerous tracks indicating that a male mountain lion had marked the region as his territory.

At the bottom of the dip is a stand of ponderosa pine beneath which, are an unusual number of ponderosa seedlings. Evidence that these pines, obviously close to their environmental limit, are reproducing to any significant extent is pretty scant elsewhere along Blue Ridge. Apparently the water supply during dry years is exceptionally good (for these high ridges, at least) in the dip. Indeed half a mile back, and in a few hundred feet below the trail is reputed to be a good spring.

The trail then climbs back above 3,000 feet, first steeply, and then more gently, to the junction with the Short Cut Road coming up from the right. This spot is well known to any hiker who has struggled up to Blue Ridge that way! From the start, you now have come about 2 miles. The trail then continues, gently undulating with more ups than downs through open oak with occasional steep meadows to the southwest - for a while, little chapparal is in evidence. Although the views are still much less obstructed to the southwest, one can see the Thomas Ranch, recently acquired by the state for addition to Henry Coe State Park, over the prominent private lake in the valley northeast of Blue Ridge. Shortly after the Short Cut Road, one passes a road to the left heading down to toward this private property. (It looks downhill, viewless and uninteresting.) The trail then continues gradually upwards through mixed digger pine, ponderosa pine, and oak (with the usual dearth of ponderosa seedlings) and about one fourth mile before reaching the high point of Blue Ridge, Mt. Sizer, and passes a second spur road to the left. Unlike the first spur, this one is well worth the side trip. It drops down briefly and then climbs back up to a lateral spur covered only by chapparal. The rounded summit, still just within the park boundary, yields one of the finest and most sweeping panoramas of the interior coast ranges and the Sierra beyond. It is only about one tenth of a mile from the main ridge trail.

After the just-mentioned side trip, Mt. Sizer itself is actually a little disappointing. The summit, on yet a third road to the left, is both lightly wooded and outside the park. The best views do not come before one has actually begun to descend somewhat, though the trip is worth it to study the upper end of Rockhouse Ridge. In the sharp angle between the main trail and the fork to Mt. Sizer there

stands an unusually large and symmetrical clump of giant manzanita, well worth a brief pause for inspection.

From Mt. Sizer the trail descends by a series of short steps with several hundred yards of relatively level going between them. At first there is open forest to the left with a few scattered ponderosa pines, mostly looking stressed by drought, and more digger pine and manzanita. To the right are once again found open meadows.

These steep meadows are worthy of special comment. In the late spring, before the wildflowers have vanished, these meadows take on an almost sensuous quality. When the grasses are headed with seed and the stems still moist and flexible, the wind does remarkable things. As it sweeps up from the southwest the grasses bow in sweeping waves, damped into slow motion by the weight of the millions of mature seeds. One could easily become hypnotized, but can break the spell by remembering that the principle grasses, wild oat and foxtail, are both introduced Mediterranean weeds!

Along the second plateau the forest to the left is replaced by chapparel and for the first time one has sweeping views simultaneously from both sides of the ridge. After yet a third drop, one comes upon a lovely grove of HEALTHY ponderosa pine, and then very shortly upon the trail down to Black Oak Spring. The total distance you have traveled along the fire road at this point is now about four miles.

The trail to Black Oak Spring (now truly a trail) sweeps down through forest almost immediately crossing the 3,000 foot contour and dropping about 600 feet to the camp. Surprisingly ponderosa pine persists almost the entire distance to the camp. Shortly before the camp, a trail branches right to the spring, rejoining the camp trail below the campsite. Just before reaching the campsite, there are a number of giant manzanitas, with their winter bark appearing like polished mahogany. Through the forest, one can see the meadowed slopes of Rockhouse Ridge ascending beyond Rockhouse Canyon.

Beyond the campsite itself, a small level shoulder, the trail is a bit obscure, but eventually reaches the creek. Departure from the camp leaves the last of the ponderosas, and crossing the creek abruptly replaces forest with meadow. The high point ahead is Hat Rock about 2600 feet, and the trail sweeps first broadly to the left, and then back to the right in front of this landmark. Eventually, the trail climbs past it to the right and intersects the Rockhouse Ridge trail itself, about two miles from Blue Ridge, or six miles in all.

Hat Rock itself is worth a brief side trip. It is so well fortified by giant digger pines and a few tangled bay trees that the Mexican hat on top is scarcely visible from most angles. The northeast face is a short but serious rock climb, and should be avoided by the inexperienced. However, the southwest face is well broken by a series of ledges, and the summit can be reached by a scramble. One is now level with or above the tops of the digger pines. Sitting on top of the Hat, one has a remarkable sensation of isolation, remoteness, and beauty. If you are heading home this same evening, you should not tarry long. It is 9.6 miles to headquarters.

Winslow Briggs